
For some, classical Athens will always represent definitive proof that democracy is inherently unstable, destined to collapse into 'mob rule', anarchy and finally tyranny; but if we set aside the long anti-democratic tradition which traces its ancestry as far back as Plato, it is difficult not to marvel at the stability of the democracy, its delicate balance between social inequality and civic equality, particularly in the absence of a powerful coercive force to uphold social order. Josiah Ober has taken up the challenge of explaining this historically unique balancing act. Finding traditional explanations inadequate (such as the view that slavery provided the bond that united Athenian citizens, rich and poor), he offers an original and imaginative alternative which sheds new light on a wide range of questions about Athenian politics and culture.

The political equality of democratic citizenship in Athens, as in modern democracies, always coexisted with inequalities of class and status. But while modern 'formal' democracies, with their systems of election and representation, allow the politically ambitious among the social elite to use their advantages of class and ability to become a ruling stratum, argues Ober, in the Athenian democracy such institutional avenues of elite advancement did not exist; nor did it possess social mechanisms to promote economic mobility which might have reconciled the less privileged classes to the persistence of social inequalities. What Ober calls 'the tensions generated by simultaneously maintaining social inequality and political equality' (p. 304) were never resolved constitutionally but were negotiated on the ideological
plane. Instead of constructing rational, coherent constitutional principles for the maintenance of social order, the democracy, with its 'popular control of the ideological climate of opinion', sustained itself by means of a 'sociopolitical balance on the symbolic plane' (p. 308). The fragile equilibrium between the social power of elites and the political power of the masses was preserved by means of complex ideological transactions, in which the elite's right to social privilege was conceded in exchange for their acknowledgement of the masses' hegemony and a delicate balance was maintained between contradictory principles in Athenian political discourse: freedom and consensus, the rule of law and popular sovereignty, and so on. Athenian democracy, in short, was sustained by an ideological bargain between elites and masses.

This bargain was continually affirmed and renewed in the everyday exchanges of public life, in assemblies and courts. Its principal medium was the rhetoric of the orators, which furnishes the main material of Ober's book. The conditions of this ideological agreement, he argues, help to account for a number of apparent anomalies in Athenian oratory and many of the rhetorical conventions which have often puzzled commentators. For example, Athenian oratory is full of rich men claiming to be poor, or skilled speakers pretending to be inexperienced. While these pretences could be explained on various tactical grounds, what makes them interesting is the audience's apparent readiness to accept such transparent deceptions. For Ober, they betoken a willing suspension of disbelief by the masses in exchange for the willingness of the elite to identify with them.

In these intricate ideological games, the rhetor, of course, has a very particular role, which imposes special requirements upon him as distinct from the ordinary private citizen. As the principal mediators between mass