

On the Use of Greek History for Life: Josiah Ober's Athens and Paul Rahe's Sparta

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Josiah Ober: *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. 416.)

Josiah Ober: *Demopolis: Democracy before Liberalism in Theory and Practice*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. 204.)

Paul A. Rahe: *The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta: The Persian Challenge*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015, Pp. 408.)

Paul A. Rahe: *The Spartan Regime: Its Character, Origins, and Grand Strategy*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. Pp. 212.)

Among contemporary scholars who write about classical Greece, Josiah Ober and Paul Rahe are especially adept at navigating the territory shared by history and political theory and illuminating the relevance of Greek history for our time. The historical approach each takes in the works under review does not easily fall into the categories—monumental, antiquarian, and critical history—delineated by Nietzsche in the essay to which my subtitle alludes.¹ Yet, in treating these works together, I am guided by a question that Nietzsche raises at the conclusion of his “untimely meditation” in recalling the Delphic injunction *Gnōthi seauton*, “Know thyself.” The Greeks’ cultural inheritance, he argues, was a chaos of foreign ideas—Semitic, Babylonian, Lydian, and Egyptian—and gods, and it was only when the Greeks began to organize this chaos in accordance with the Delphic injunction that they were prevented from being swamped by their own history and became the model for all civilized peoples. The works under review are extraordinarily rich, and I will not do justice to their many arguments. Rather, I organize my consideration of them by focusing on this question: What is the relation between the study of Greek history and the search for self-knowledge at the core of Greek political philosophy?

I highlight two key issues on which Ober’s and Rahe’s investigations intersect and diverge: (1) the definition of the political community and of its

¹Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

constitutive term, citizenship, and (2) the assumptions—anthropological, moral, and political—connected with this definition in each case. I take up these issues in the context of the respective foci of Ober’s and Rahe’s studies, Athens and Sparta. These preeminent Greek cities—the twin peaks of classical Greece²—fought alongside each other against the Persian imperial threat and against each other in the Peloponnesian War that saw the collapse of Athenian imperial rule. The contrasts between Ober’s Athens and Rahe’s Sparta, I seek to show, help us to see how the study of Greek history necessitates the search for self-knowledge that runs through Greek poetry and philosophy but is most identifiable with the figure of Socrates.

Despite debates that call into doubt claims of “Greek exceptionalism”—debates, for example, about the place of the Greeks in the multicultural landscape of the Aegean and Mediterranean worlds—both Ober and Rahe study classical Greece as a unique and seminal contributor to Western political development.³ For Ober, the rise and fall of Greece, with its peak in Athens, is of special interest for the ways in which “democratic Greek exceptionalism” anticipates modern democracy (RFCG, xvii). The Greek poleis, city-states, Athens foremost among them, provide case studies of a democratic form of politics that, while nonliberal, nevertheless secures principles of civic equality and liberty resonant with modern democratic values. Ober’s overarching concern rests with the institutions and practices that not only secure these principles but also make possible human flourishing. In democratic citizenship and “collective self-government” properly constituted, individuals as citizens stand as equals to one another; engage their natural capacities for reason, speech, and communal association; exercise independent choice and action; and attain civic dignity.

The first and earlier of Ober’s works, *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, traces the development of collective self-government in the “social ecology” of classical Greece (RFCG, xv). The second, *Demopolis: Democracy before Liberalism in Theory and Practice*, shows how features of this development are relevant for rethinking democracy today—a rethinking made necessary in light of recent crises of legitimation, the resistance in more traditional or less liberal societies to the distinctively liberal principles of modern democracy, the rise of populist nationalisms susceptible to demagogic authoritarianism, and, in general, a loss of faith in democratic government (D, epilogue). Ober acknowledges that many of the political and economic advances of modern democracy—individual liberty, free markets, and, in general, progressive values—are rooted in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century

²On Sparta and Athens as the peaks of classical Greece, see esp. Thucydides 1.1.1–4; 1.6.3–6; 1.10.1–2; 1.15.2–3; 1.18–19. In referring to the works under review, I will employ abbreviations of their titles and page numbers in parentheses.

³At the same time, neither Ober nor Rahe denies the obvious contributions of non-Greeks to classical Greece or the cross fertilization of “West” and “East.” See, e.g., RFCG, 41–42, 65–66, 132; GSCS, 54–55.

break with the “premodern normal” of “domination” (RFCG, xiii). He also acknowledges that he writes against certain headwinds in classical studies itself: arguments that characterize the Greeks, on the one hand, as relatively *unexceptional* against other premodern societies, and, on the other, as *so* exceptional and rooted in their historical time and place as to be analytically and analogically meaningless for ours (RFCG, xvi–xvii). Against such challenges, he aims to show the ways in which the “exceptional political conditions” of classical Greece, “from the age of Homer to the age of Aristotle,” were both unique in their own time and anticipatory of modern democracy (RFCG, xix). Indeed, he argues, some features of Greek democracy prove useful correctives for deficiencies or weaknesses of modern liberal democracy, most importantly, the extensive privatization of life and related surrender of civic authority to overweening elites, political bodies, corporations, and bureaucracies (D, see again the epilogue).

In detailing the development of early democracy in *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, Ober writes not only as a historian and political theorist but also as a social scientist. With the aid of others working in the field,⁴ he develops extensive data on the rise of the Greek city-states, employing measures of individual and state-level competition and cooperation, investments in human capital, trade, economic specialization and exchange, mobility, transaction costs, and so forth. His study is oriented around a concept imported from sociology: “efflorescence.” Coined by Jack Goldstone, efflorescence defines “a relatively sharp, often unexpected upturn in significant demographic and economic indices, usually accompanied by political expansion and institution building and cultural synthesis and consolidation.”⁵ Ober thus brings to his study of the Greeks measures and terms that would have been largely foreign to their own perspective. But his aim in doing so is to highlight explanatory features of the “decentralized social order” and “citizen-centered politics” that emerged in Greece of the classical era (RFCG, xx). How his approach potentially distorts his historical lens is a necessary question for those seeking to understand the Greeks either on their own terms or as anticipatory of modern democracy.⁶ Still, the various

⁴The *Inventory of Archaic and Classical Greek Poleis* is central to Ober’s study, and he makes use of a variety of measures from the “new institutional economics” (4–5). See also <http://polis.stanford.edu>.

⁵Jack A. Goldstone, “Efflorescences and Economic Growth in World History: Rethinking the Rise of the West and the Industrial Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 333. See also Ober, RFCG, 1–2, 330n3.

⁶This difficulty, among others, led Kostas Vlassopoulos to pen a hard-hitting review of the book, to which Ober offered a spirited rebuttal. Cf. Vlassopoulos’s review in the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, March 4, 2016, with Ober’s response at https://www.academia.edu/22898166/Reply_to_Vlassopoulos. For examples of other social scientific terms that come into play in Ober’s analysis, see pp. 68 “social networks,” 194 “path dependence” and “escalation dominance,” and 196 “nonexcludable public

measures deployed in the book bring out the remarkable economic and political activity—the “efflorescence”—that marked this period in Greek history.

Ober’s foremost concern, furthermore, is with domestic rather than foreign matters, that is, with the practices and institutions that secure and perpetuate collective self-government. He offers, to be sure, a robust account of the geopolitical strategies of the various Greek poleis, large and small, with a view to their security, but he is primarily concerned to show the ways in which these strategies reflect the dynamics of decentralized authority and the rise of democracy. For Ober, the decentralized world of the Greek cities created the conditions for “competition, specialization, and social cooperation” (RFCG, 12), but only the conditions. As he writes, “At the heart of the mystery of classical efflorescence lies the question of how the Greeks, in an ecology of many small states, solved problems of decentralized cooperation and thereby ruled one another, as citizens—rather than being ruled as dominated subjects of centralized royal authority in a large state” (RFCG, 45). This mystery applies to relations among the Greek poleis but most importantly to relations within them. In unraveling this mystery, Ober works from a “theory of social choice” and offers a “new narrative history of Greek political and economic development” (RFCG, 6).

In the first five chapters of *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, Ober uses his data to illuminate how decentralized authority itself came into being in the Greek world in the movement out of the “premodern” condition of domination (xix, see esp. chap. 5). He highlights the role of geography—dispersed communities around the sea⁷—the diversity of population size, and the influence of climate, particularly growing conditions conducive to wheat, barley, grapes, and olives (RFCG, chap. 2). He traces the development of economic specialization, competition, and cooperation and what these led to, namely, rising levels of wealth and wealth distribution (RFCG, chap. 4).⁸ But, as important as economic developments were in the Greek efflorescence,

good.” Joseph Schumpeter’s notion of “creative destruction” is also central to Ober’s narrative (12), and Weber’s definition of the state as the legitimate “monopoly of violence” is at work in Ober’s account of political power understood as domination (see, e.g., 127, 135).

⁷To describe the world of the Greek poleis, Ober uses the expression “ants around a pond,” a reference to Socrates’s analogy in Plato’s *Phaedo* of the Greeks living around the sea, “like ants or frogs around a pond” (109b2–3). Ober takes this analogy quite far, using also the “information-sharing” of ants to explicate partially the role of information sharing among human beings.

⁸One of the important features of Ober’s narrative is his rejection of the orthodox view of classical Greece as largely poor and divided between the few wealthy and the many poor. Economic specialization, as well as trade and new forms of commercial exchange, he argues, raised the Greeks’ standard of living and made possible a fairly robust middle class during the classical era (RFCG, see chap. 4, esp. 76–98). In this

they do not explain what caused it. Ober notes early in his account that we need to explain *why* this kind of economic specialization, competition, and social cooperation arose during the classical era, along with the innovation and creative destruction that attended it (RFCG, 12).⁹ To explain in particular why, in this specialized and competitive environment, human beings would choose to cooperate, or what makes “decentralized cooperation” possible, Ober outlines a theory of social choice (RFCG, 145–46). Although a version of rational choice, social choice theory looks also to Aristotle for inspiration. While rejecting much of Aristotle’s “teleological naturalism,” Ober nonetheless signs on to what he calls Aristotle’s “basic insight about the potentially beneficial role of political institutions in sustaining high levels of social cooperation in a community of citizens” (RFCG, 53), and he further argues that as “political animals,” human beings find their full flourishing through this cooperative social activity and in the production of public goods (see esp. RFCG, chap. 3, 49–52).

According to Ober, in short, politics, not economics, is key to the Greek efflorescence, and, to begin with, “fair rules,” understood as “formal institutions and cultural norms,” and then the competition, innovation, and rational cooperation, or “competitive emulation,” that follow (RFCG, 103, 293). One of the main virtues of Ober’s study is precisely his emphasis on the rise in classical Greece of democratic institutions and practices. Most importantly for Ober, a distinctively democratic notion or norm of “citizenship” is central to the development of Greek democracy, especially in marking a break with the view of the political community as primarily hierarchical—as the domination of king over subjects. As he writes in concluding the book, his purpose in illuminating this development is “to present anew the inspiring story and cautionary tale of the rise and fall of classical Greece ... a living resource for all who aspire to end domination and to advance toward citizenship” (RFCG, 315). Sparta is not irrelevant to Ober’s narrative when it comes to the question of citizenship.¹⁰ For, along with Herodotus and Thucydides,

regard, Ober belongs firmly within the school of the new institutional economics. See especially RFCG, 77–78.

⁹If, even in the best case, social scientific claims about causation are hard to establish, they are all the more difficult when the case studies are from the ancient past. Ober frequently notes this difficulty. As he observes, “It is not possible, given the state of our evidence, to trace in detail the actual emergence of a market-like ecology of a great many citizen-centered states in various parts of the Greek world over the half-millennium ca. 1000 to ca. 500 BCE.” In this case, Ober must resort to a model and to “hypotheticals” that conform to the evidence we do have (RFCG, 130). See also his early recognition of the difficulty at xviii.

¹⁰Along with Athens and Syracuse, Sparta is one of the three “superpoleis” of the Greek cities (RFCG, 33–44, 140). Its democratic promise largely unfulfilled, Syracuse plays a foil to Athenian democracy. A curious lacuna in Ober’s narrative, however,

Ober associates Sparta with *eunomia*, “well-ordered law,” and he defines Spartan citizenship in terms of material equality and *isonomia*, “equality under the law” (RFCG, 143). But because Sparta is distinctive among the Greek poleis in being insulated from the democratic development and creative destruction of the classical period, its importance fades in Ober’s new narrative (see also D, 45n22). The story of Athens takes pride of place in the development of the institutions and norms that embody a new and, in principle, universally democratic notion of citizenship.

Ober gives his account of this development in the narrative history of the second half of the book. Greek democracy, he argues, represents an “especially strong form of citizen-centered government” (RFCG, 157); in fact, for Ober, “citizen-centered government” and “collective self-government” are virtually definitional of democracy. In Athens, citizenship comes to be associated with certain civil protections or rights (against debt slavery, for example) and legal immunities across the different classes (RFCG, 144–55). Ober acknowledges the obvious role of elite competition for power between the Peisistratids and the Alcmaeonids in the establishment of democracy during the revolutionary period. But the key moment occurred when Cleisthenes, seeing that “the game was changing,” recognized the emerging “civic identity and aspirations of ordinary citizens” and “brought the *dēmos* in to his coalition” (RFCG, 160–61).

Ober’s history of classical Greece highlights the dynamism of the civic freedom and equality at play in Athenian democracy. In discussing Athenian imperialism, he notes what he takes to be Thucydides’s view of Athens in the age of Pericles as “a new and fascinating condition of human possibility” and argues that “the essential ingredient” of this possibility “was self-conscious human reason and leadership” (RFCG, 208). This possibility too is at the heart of Ober’s argument that the Athenian model is one of “masterless citizens” acting in “collective self-government” (RFCG, 54, 166, 233; D, xiii–xvi, 29), which is reflected in Athens’s “golden age” of empire, its successes and failures in the Peloponnesian War, and its legacy (and that of Aristotle) through the Hellenistic period to present times.¹¹

is the absence of any extended discussion of “wealthy Corinth,” one of the earliest innovators on the sea and active in commercial trade and markets, but not democratic in form (but see RFCG, 41, 210).

¹¹Ober accepts the arguably apocryphal story that Aristotle was appointed by Phillip II as tutor to Alexander, seeing Aristotle’s influence especially in Phillip’s and Alexander’s strategy of “aligning the interests of the state with those of rational men concerned with their own welfare” (RFCG, 290; see in general 288–91). Regarding the questionable status of this story, see Anton-Hermann Chroust, *Aristotle: New Light on His Life and on Some of His Lost Works*, vol. 1 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), chap. 10.

We see this democratic possibility formalized in Ober's "Demopolis," the model of collective self-government described and defended in his work of the same name. The core of the book is nicely summed up in the first lines of its preface: "Imagine a country that is secure, prosperous, and ruled by its citizens. They disagree on many things, some of them very deep and important. But they agree about the high value of collective self-government, and they are willing to pay the costs of having it. The people of this country live with freedom of speech and association, political equality, and civic dignity" (D, xiii). As his subtitle *Democracy before Liberalism in Theory and Practice* indicates, Ober looks to a democracy that predates the liberal thought of the seventeenth century, a view of democracy clearly prepared for by Ober's previous works, especially *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* (D, 5, 7). Ober frames the argument of *Demopolis* as a response to a set of questions and concerns about the grounds and aims of democratic orders, especially visions of democracy informed by negative freedom, agonistic politics, and suspicion of government. He also seeks to lay out a descriptive, rather than normative or moral, theory of "basic democracy," though one that appeals to "more or less rational, self-interested, and strategic individuals" and articulates the conditions for a human flourishing tied to civic activity (D, 5–7, xiv–xvi).

Ober's chief antagonist is ostensibly Hobbes, and the stark alternative associated with Hobbesian politics between anarchy and authoritarianism (D, 64–71; see also RFCG, 8–10, 57–60, 290–91).¹² Against these stark extremes, Ober pits the active self-government of masterless citizens that he associates with ancient Athens. *Demopolis* supplements his historical treatment of Athens with an etymological argument regarding the Greek term *dēmokratia*. He relies on a particular reading of the term *dēmos* as referring not to "the many who are poor" (or *hoi polloi*) but to "the whole of the citizenry" and of the term *kratos* as referring not to "control" or "domination" per se, but to "capability." Whatever the adequacy of his etymological argument,¹³ Ober's conclusion that *dēmokratia* originally meant "the People's capacity to do things" is crucial for his overall argument that properly constituted democracy is truly "collective" (representative of the whole polity and not simply of a part) and "self-governing" (not dependent on an absolute sovereign to avoid anarchy) (D, 22–33).

The other side of the unwillingness to live under a master, of course, is the willingness to bear the burdens of active democratic citizenship, from the

¹²But Ober is concerned to challenge also "agonists" and those who take their bearings from the thought of Carl Schmitt (D, 22, 69, and in general chap. 8).

¹³As he sometimes acknowledges, Ober's etymological argument is not definitive (see, e.g., 21, 27n4). Among other difficulties, much depends on the political commitments of the one making the claim that the *dēmos* is the "whole" of the people, as Ober's citation of a speech by Athenagoras, a Syracusan character in Thucydides who is profoundly suspicious of oligarchy, illustrates (D, 28; Thuc. 6.39.1; cf. 6.35.1–2, 38.1–4, 39.2–40.1).

time involved in civic activity to the ultimate sacrifice in defense of one's country. Why would individuals be willing to bear such burdens, particularly when the costs of shirking them are low, or of shouldering them extremely high? Ober offers two kinds of answer: first, that individuals can be led by a rational calculation of costs and benefits to be persuaded of the benefits of citizenship in this kind of community (D, 48–56); and second, that the activity of democratic citizenship allows human beings to prosper materially, exercise their capacities for speech and association, achieve distinctive goods, including importantly civic dignity, and so flourish as human beings (D, chap. 3, esp. 48). Democracy thus has both instrumental and intrinsic value (D, chap. 5, esp. 77–79, 88–100, 102–3). It is also formative of a certain kind of person: a “rational, self-interested, strategic calculator,” to be sure (see esp. D, 75), but also one who is disposed to treat others with equal dignity and possessed of the virtues needed for shouldering the burdens of civic life, from the requisite patience and open-mindedness for civic deliberation to the courage to risk life and limb in defense of fellow citizens and country (D, 51–56, chap. 4, esp. 71–76; chaps. 5–6, esp. secs. 6.5, 6.7, and 6.8).¹⁴

Seen in this light, Ober's Demopolis is a “regime” (*politeia*), a set of institutions and pedagogic practices that constitute a civic character and a common life and “flourishing” (*eudaimonia*). As such, it can be measured against the alternatives, both as a political arrangement and as the arena of human flourishing. As Ober well knows, human history is replete with alternative regimes (see, e.g., D, 35–36). It may be hard for us to believe, but for the ancient authors at least, the clearest alternative in classical Greece is Sparta. In taking Athens as his paradigm of Greek exceptionalism, Ober is obviously, as his earlier work also attests, “Athenocentric”¹⁵—the rise and fall of classical Greece is, at its dynamic core, the rise and fall of the Athenian way. In Ober's historical narrative, Sparta thus fades as Athens takes center stage. Paul Rahe's recent works, by contrast, train the spotlight on Athens's great ally and antagonist—on the other peak of classical Greece.

In *The Spartan Regime*, Rahe updates his account of Sparta in *Republics Ancient and Modern*, benefiting as he notes from an extraordinary renewal of interest in classical Sparta among classicists and ancient historians (SR, 6). *The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta: The Persian Challenge* is the first volume of a trilogy on the “grand strategy”¹⁶ that drove the rise and fall of

¹⁴Given Ober's emphasis on “strategic rationality” and “cost-benefit analysis,” one has to think that, just as for Hobbes, so for Ober, the question whether one is to sacrifice one's own life in defense of country is a particularly vexed question. Cf. *Leviathan*, Review and Conclusion, 5–7 with 21.16; see D, 48–58, 99, 106–9.

¹⁵See Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 4n3. See also D, 7.

¹⁶Now a common, if contested, term of the scholarly literature, “grand strategy” refers to the way in which states order their military, economic, and political resources with a view to their national security. Rahe notes that “grand strategy” is a notion

Sparta from archaic to late classical times. In contrast to Ober's concern with democratic politics and self-government, Rahe's focus is on the ways in which the necessities of conquest and war—foreign rather than domestic affairs—shaped the regime of classical Sparta. Nevertheless, in illuminating the Spartan *politeia*, Rahe seeks also to show how the “moral imperative” to preserve the regime in its distinctive way of life is critical to our understanding of Sparta's domestic and foreign policies (GSCS, xiii–xiv).

Rahe illuminates how strange—how exceptional—the Spartans are, both to us and to their fellow Greeks: “Classical Lacedaemon was no ordinary *pólis*. No one thought so in antiquity; no one should think so today” (SR, 7).¹⁷ That Sparta possessed *eunomia*—that it was “well-ordered” and “lawful”—was an article of faith among ancient authors, as was the fact that its *eunomia* was grounded in a reverence for the ancestral ways (SR, xv; also see, e.g., Thuc. 1.83–85.1). But the first step in the development of the Spartan regime concerned precisely the question of rule or citizenship: “Inclusion by way of exclusion—this is what defines a political community, and by the end of the eighth century, as the story of the *Partheniai*¹⁸ makes clear, Lacedaemon had achieved definition” (SR, 80). “Exclusion” had to do first and foremost with the Messenians, fellow Greeks conquered during the Dorian invasion of the Peloponnese and subsequently enslaved as the “helots” of Sparta. As the conquest and pacification of Laconia, Messenia, and other areas of the Peloponnese proceeded, “the Agiad and Eurypontid kings [the hereditary kings of the Spartans] and their Dorian followers were forced to pose to themselves a question: who is to share in the spoils, and who is to be left out? And this in turn required that they ask another question: who is to decide?” (SR, 80).

The conquest and enslavement of the Messenians, flux of migrations into the fertile land of the Peloponnese, and instability in early Sparta itself were the first necessities that formed the Spartan way of life. For Rahe (as for Ober), the constitution of Sparta's military—hoplite and phalanx warfare—is at the core of its *politeia*: its terms of citizenship, notions of equality and freedom, and institutional and pedagogic order (cf. SR, 87–90 and 100–106 with RFCG, 137–44). Rahe draws out the moral and political significance of

introduced by Julian Stafford Corbett in the 1920s in relation to British maritime strategy and then developed after WWI by J. F. C. Fuller in *The Reformation of War* (SR, 109n4). For a good summary of the debate over the term in contemporary IR literature, see Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy,’” *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 27–57.

¹⁷Rahe notes the debate concerning Sparta's exceptionalism (see SR, 148n1), but to quote Xenophon on the practices of the Spartans: “Everyone praises such practices, but not a single city is willing to imitate them” (*Regime of the Lacedaemonians*, 10.8).

¹⁸Literally, “sons of virgins”—a story that in its various versions is connected with the first Messenian war of the eighth century.

Sparta's military arrangements (see esp. SR, 87–90). Hoplite warfare required certain qualities of body and spirit: “stamina, grit, endurance, and courage” (SR, 88). The Spartan education (*paideia*) of its boys, taken at age six or seven to live and train with their male comrades, aimed at instilling these qualities, as well as excellence in the arts of war, especially phalanx battle. Given the regime's orientation toward war, the city of Sparta seemed an “armed camp,” and as a result of their subjugation of the helots, the citizens of Sparta necessarily lived as if under constant ambush (SR, 7, 10–11; Aristotle, *Politics* 1269a38–39). Coupled with the training for war were communal practices, such as common messes and shared goods, as well as institutional arrangements, such as land allotments, intended to promote equality by ameliorating differences in wealth. The Spartans called themselves *hoi homoioi*—the same or equal ones—and short of the radical communism of Plato's *Republic*, their institutions and practices still went very far in breaking down the walls of the *oikos* (household) and orienting citizens wholly toward the polis. These are the ways that Sparta cultivated the “intense patriotism” for which the city is generally admired (SR, 7).¹⁹

But even as the Spartan *paideia* aimed at equality and civic solidarity, it was complemented by an institutional order that managed the brute fact of internal faction. As Rahe notes, the ancient authors were uncertain as to the correct name for the Spartan regime: democratic, oligarchic, aristocratic, or monarchical. It is in fact a “mixed regime,” the first polity known to have employed a balance of powers (SR, 41, 60–61). The “common assembly” of Spartiates, democratic in its constitution, is balanced by three other institutions: a hereditary diarchic kingship, an elected *gerousia* or “senate” of twenty-eight elder Spartans, and an ephorate drawn annually by lot of five Spartiates with near tyrannical powers to punish transgressions of the laws. If, as Rahe argues with the support of ancient testimony, the Spartan regime was a *kosmos*, an order constituting “the one way of life of a whole polis,” it nonetheless required a delicate balancing of factions, a dimension of its constitution that also made the regime vulnerable to internal decay (SR, xiv and chap. 2, esp. 60–63; see also 121, GSCS, 1–2). As with so much in Sparta's pedagogic and institutional arrangements, moreover, its civic solidarity was underwritten by fear: fear of the helots; of punishment from fellow Spartiates, especially the ephors; of external conquest; and of the gods (SR, 12–13). The Spartan regime endured for a very long time, and its stability owed much to its distinctive virtues of courage, moderation, lawfulness, and piety. But there is no gainsaying the role of harshness and fear in the perpetuation of the regime.²⁰

¹⁹Rahe quotes Lord Macaulay here; see esp. SR, chap. 1, for Rahe's analysis of the Spartan *paideia*.

²⁰According to Plutarch, Sparta's laws remained unchanged for five hundred years; Machiavelli claims eight hundred years, including the centuries before Sparta's absorption by Rome (Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 29.6; Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 1.2.1). See also Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, 1.4.6.

Rahe is sensitive to the “imaginative” dimension of historical narrative: the historian’s interpretation of the available evidence and reconstruction of events and intentions (GSCS, 64, 94–95). Rahe’s narrative, moreover, is shaped by his goal of uncovering the “moral imperative” behind Sparta’s domestic and foreign actions. At times, his account seems circular: the very regime that is the imperative behind Spartan grand strategy is itself shaped by the necessities that this strategy aims at addressing (see, e.g., SR 105–6; cf. 121–22). Nevertheless, at a certain point, the various elements of the Spartan regime “fell into place” (SR 105), and, in piecing together a coherent narrative of Spartan actions as the hegemonic power in the Peloponnese and then as the leading Greek city in the early fifth century, Rahe powerfully illustrates his overarching claim that this regime determined the character and limits of Sparta’s domestic and foreign policy.

In the last chapter of *The Spartan Regime*, Rahe lays out the movement from the original “Dorian policy” of conquest and enslavement—a policy that the Spartans could not sustain given their small numbers—to a new one of attaining hegemony in the Peloponnese with alliances forged by overthrowing tyrannies and encouraging oligarchies, or *isokratia* (equality of rule) (SR, 114–20). The first volume of *The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, The Persian Challenge*, then carries the story of Sparta through the Persian wars, offering insights not only into Spartan affairs, but also into the geopolitical strategies and imperatives driving different Greek cities and the Persian empire. Rahe observes that the difficulty for the new policy of forging alliances to extend Spartan hegemony in their own backyard was that the Peloponnese was not a “world unto itself” (SR, 123). Nothing brought that fact closer to home than the expansion of the Persian empire, with its conquest of Croesus’s Lydia and of the Greek cities in Ionia. Although Sparta had good strategic reasons to style itself the defender of Greek freedom (SR, 123), it was not at all clear that the regime as constituted could live up to its claim against the Persian imperial threat.

Rahe thus presents the Persian threat as provoking a “crisis” for Sparta (GSCS, 29–38). At this point, the Greeks as a whole, on the mainland and on the coast of Asia Minor, “had come to regard themselves as a single people,” but as distinct poleis, they also regarded the Spartans “as the natural leaders of Hellas” (GSCS, 37). But if the real Spartan imperative was “to protect the Spartan way of life” (GSCS, 74), then military ventures across the Aegean in far-flung Ionia were not in the cards, first, because of the constant threat of helot rebellion at home and second, because the farther a Spartan strayed from home, the more likely he would be corrupted by foreign ways. This twin danger, among others, made the Spartans cautious. Yet if, as Rahe argues, the imperative driving the Persian imperial order was “universal empire”—an imperative having a theological root (GSCS, 41, 62–72, 85–86, 110)—the Greeks could ill afford to ignore the march of the Persian armies, a fact driven home when the Persians crossed the Bosphorus into Europe (GSCS, 85–92).

Rahe's story of the Spartan grand strategy is almost as much a story about Persian expansion as it is about Sparta itself. Moreover, given the importance of the Athenians—in general, and at Marathon in 490 BCE, Artemisium and Salamis in 480, and Plataea and Mycale in 479—Rahe's account of the Greek resistance, even if told from a Spartan perspective (GSCS, xiii), is necessarily a polyphonic narrative of Greek history. Although Sparta was the acknowledged leader of the Greeks in the Persian wars (GSCS, 200–201), it becomes clear in the course of the war and its aftermath that the Athenians are more capable of dealing with the Persian threat. This difference has to do in part with the fact that Sparta remains an insular land power while Athens becomes a naval power able to extend its influence and defend against other naval powers that do the same. But it is also rooted more deeply in the character of their regimes.

Rahe offers detailed narratives of the major battles of the Persian wars: Marathon, Thermopylae, Artemisium, Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale. The details matter for our understanding of Sparta and Athens, but arguably the most reflective of the different Spartan and Athenian regimes are respectively Thermopylae, a battle on land, and Salamis, a battle on the seas. The Spartan sacrifice at Thermopylae underscored their willingness to die in defense of Greek freedom—"the Spartans were stalwart in defense of the liberty exemplified by their regime" (GSCS, 191)—as well as their courage, lawfulness, and devotion to the common good, all of which held them firm against overwhelming odds and over three days of fierce fighting. Yet while the Spartans' courageous stand slowed the Persian movement south and stiffened the spine of the Greeks who had not yet submitted to Persia, most pivotal to the ultimate victory over the Persians was the Athenian naval strategy and the daring and intelligence that it embodied. After Persia's failed invasion at Marathon in 490, while the Spartans tended their own house by securing against another helot revolt and reinforcing their alliances to protect the home front, the Athenians started building ships and learning how to sail them. They did so at the urging of the man who was arguably their greatest leader, Themistocles, and the architect of the two most daring moves of the war: the Athenians' abandonment of their city and the sea battle that devastated the Persian navy in the straits of Salamis. For Rahe, as for Ober and the Athenians themselves, the battle of Salamis exemplifies the qualities of Athens's democratic regime and its outstanding strategist, Themistocles: intelligence and daring, innovation and flexibility (GSCS, 257–61, 288–94; RFGC, 172–74; Thuc. 1.73.3–74.4).

With their laborious training in prescribed practices, reverence for the ancestral, and obedience to law, the Spartans are clearly the less brilliant foil to their Athenian ally and antagonist (Thuc. 2.39.1). Still, as ancient authors attest, in the face of internal faction and external threat, the Spartan regime proved extraordinarily well-ordered, free, and long-lived—all essential qualities for a political community in a world of conquest, revolution, and war and ones which held them in good stead in the war against the

Athenians fifty years after Salamis. Since Athens is not the only peak of classical Greece, Rahe thus does contemporary students of classical Greece a special service in narrating Greek history from the perspective of Sparta and in underscoring the necessities that were formative of the Spartan regime. These necessities explain Rahe's definition of political community in terms of "inclusion by way of exclusion" (SR, 80). For the Spartans, "exclusion" when it comes to who rules and who is subject or even slave is necessitated by the flux of migrations, the competition for resources, and the ineradicable tension between the individual and common goods. The constitutive term of political community, citizenship, is grounded in the equality of those who fight: those who, as Aristotle observes, can exchange harm for harm so as to stand as equals toward one another, and not as masters and slaves (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1132b33–1133a1). The competition and faction within this same class are then managed by an institutional balance of powers and legal equality of wealth, a recognition of the need for equality when it comes to citizenship.

Underlying the Spartan alternative, of course, are assumptions about the nature of human beings and political affairs: the primacy not of reason but of thumotic passion and irrational desire; the endemic presence of faction; and the fundamental fact of war and conflict. The Spartan solution—a regime oriented toward war, external and internal—may seem to us an unnecessarily radical response to the harshness of the world in which the Spartan regime emerged. But to the Spartans, and their ancient admirers, this very regime was the essence of their good order, equality, and civic freedom.

By contrast, Ober's celebration of the Athenian possibility gives pride of place to strategic rationality and social cooperation amid competition, and assumes the compatibility of the individual and common goods in the flourishing that attends active citizenship. In eschewing Aristotle's teleological naturalism, Ober employs his historical narrative as evidence for this new democratic possibility of collective self-governance: the rise of early democracy in the social ecology of classical Greece shows that, under the right conditions, human beings will exercise their strategic rationality with a view to social cooperation and the production of public goods and attain their flourishing as free and equal citizens:²¹ not exclusion but inclusion by way of a recognition of equal freedom and civic dignity; not hierarchy and domination but rational pursuit of the good by each and all; not war and conflict but cooperation and peace.

Insofar as Ober's Athens and Rahe's Sparta present us with radically different assumptions about human beings and the political community, then, how

²¹On this question, not only is there an odd link made between history and nature, but there is also a curious tension between Ober's view that democracy is the "natural default of humans as a species" (D, 34–35) in the absence of conditions that would thwart it and that of North, Wallis, and Weingast, whom he cites and who argue that the "natural state" is "centralized state-level social order" (RFCG, 10).

are we to adjudicate the matter? To which “peak” do we look in understanding the use of Greek history for us? To begin to see just how difficult this matter is, especially for those of us deeply imbued by the Enlightenment, we can return to Ober’s argument regarding the universal character of the *dēmos* as free and equal citizens, regardless of other politically relevant differences or fundamental disagreements. This argument is intimately connected with a deeper one in *Demopolis* about civic dignity, which he calls “a fundamental condition of democracy,” having both instrumental and intrinsic value (D, 103). The simplest definition of civic dignity is the condition of being “worthy of civic participation” (D, 51). But the robust moral sense underlying this definition—the sense that makes civic dignity the cornerstone of basic democracy’s “implicit ethics” (D, 112)—involves a recognition of each individual’s mature capability for self-government: it is the “lived experience” of others’ recognition of this capability and of “immunity from the disabling burdens of humiliation and infantilization” (D, 112).

In Ober’s account of democracy, civic dignity is necessarily given or awarded: “Living with dignity involves the regard in which we are held by others, and how we are treated by them” (D, 114). This much is fundamental to a truly self-governing democracy; else “democracy is a sham” (D, 114). Civic dignity is less obviously earned or merited. At least, it seems to me, Ober struggles with this question: he recognizes that some citizens really do the work of citizenship, for example, and especially show “moral courage” in defending the civil rights and civic dignity of other citizens, guarding them against “dignitary harms” (D, 113–15). These courageous citizens are a model for the rest, and “the concept of civic dignity, as a value and as a set of practices, will be prominent in *Demopolis*’s civic education” (D, 113). It is the responsibility of the *dēmos*, the people, to be capable of self-government in this regard, but even when this capacity is not evident, we must treat every citizen as if he or she truly possessed it (see esp. D, 119–22). Ober’s *Demopolis* stands or falls by this argument about civic dignity: it is the assumption upon which everything else rests—we are neither equal nor free without the recognition of our civic dignity, and “it is meaningless to speak of democracy” (D, 112).

To offer an illustration of how Ober’s radically democratic assumption influences his reading of Athenian history, let us return to an important moment in that history.²² As both Ober and Rahe note, during the revolutionary period in Athens, the institutionalization of democratic citizenship marks a critical turning point in the political battle among elites, and between elites

²²The importance of this revolutionary period simply and to Ober’s overall historical perspective cannot be understated, especially his “de-centering Cleisthenes” in favor of a history of collective action. See especially Ober’s “The Athenian Revolution of 508/7 B.C.: Violence, Authority, and the Origin of Democracy,” in *The Athenian Revolution*, chap. 4. Cf. Rahe, *GSCS*, 96–100.

and the many (*hoi polloi*). Ober characterizes this key moment as the recognition of “the civic identity and aspirations of ordinary citizens” by leaders such as Cleisthenes and by the Athenians themselves in their collective action (RFCG, 161). Yet does this characterization wholly capture the moment? As even Ober acknowledges, Cleisthenes’s decision to draw the *dēmos* into his party was a recognition not first and foremost of their equality and liberty, but of their real (numerical) power (RFCG, 160, 162). For in the postelection conflict with Isagoras, Cleisthenes’s Peisistratid competitor, Cleisthenes, and the Athenians, confronted a distinctively political question, “who should rule?” and they effectively answered it with the most basic political calculation: those who can wield power. Ober is correct that the Athenians as a democratic assembly could act as more than a mere mob, but their initial stake in the political arena was their sheer numerical strength—a fact not irrelevant to winning elections, as Cleisthenes aimed to do, or to military prowess, as Themistocles and Pericles recognized in building Athens as a naval power. Force, then, in its rawest form, is at play in this revolutionary moment, even as Ober’s focus on the question of the civic status of “ordinary Athenians” draws our attention to the question of justice regarding citizenship.

Ober’s treatment of this revolutionary moment goes along with the overall emphasis in his history on strategic rationality, social cooperation, and collective action. In detailing the reforms that marked this revolutionary period, for example, he sheds light on the institutional order of Athenian democracy, which could rightly be characterized as a democratic distribution of powers. Yet he generally characterizes this institutional structure more as a way of aggregating knowledge than as distributing or balancing power (RFCG, 162–66; see also 213). He also tends to emphasize the deliberation and action of the Athenian assembly over the decisions, machinations, and actions of Athenian leaders: about Marathon, for example, he says not a word regarding the pivotal role of Miltiades and the polemarch Callimachos when the Greeks were wavering; about Salamis, he says nothing regarding the need for Themistocles to trick the Greeks into fighting the sea battle in the straits (cf. RFCG, 168–69 with GSCS, 257–65; see also D, 48–52). In general, moreover, Ober’s celebration of the Athenian democratic way treats gingerly or quietly passes over some of the darkest aspects of Athenian rule, especially the brutal slavery of the silver mines which added so much to Athens’s wealth and Athenian subjugation of their fellow Greeks in the growth of the empire. Ober mentions the slaves of the Athenian silver mines only in relation to their experience and expertise (205, 209, 285; cf. D, 172–73).²³ Of the Athenian subjugation of their fellow

²³The way in which the technical language of contemporary social science can obscure the real phenomenon is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Ober’s treatment of slavery in Greece. He goes so far as to describe the helots of Sparta as “in effect,

Greeks, he highlights the benefits that accrued to subject states, those that “rationally acquiesced” in Athenian rule (see especially 201, 216–17, 228–29).

Ober is hardly unaware of the Athenian sins of slavery, subjugation, and imperialism; Demopolis is to be washed clean of such sins (D, 163–64). But if the historical case matters in judging the possibilities of democratic government, then should not these dimensions of the Athenian possibility be accounted for in full: even if the Athenian way is a robust form of human flourishing, perhaps the highest form (but cf. D, 92), to what degree does that flourishing necessarily depend on the coercion and subordination of others (see, e.g., D, 120–26)? To what degree, moreover, does Ober’s assumption regarding civic dignity obscure a deeper conflict regarding merit or justice in disputes over citizenship and rule—disputes that Aristotle reproduces and adjudicates in book 3 of his *Politics* regarding the contributions that different parties make to the political community? Indeed, the determination of who is a citizen itself relies on the resolution of this dispute. This determination in practice typically depends on the domination of one faction or class over another, but Aristotle shows the path to its principled resolution in adjudicating the just if partial claims regarding rule—claims that he thereby had to take seriously as possessing some justice in the first place (cf. D, 46–47 and 83 with *Politics* 3.9–12).

In highlighting the necessities, both external and internal, that were so formative of the Spartan regime, Rahe could be faulted for not emphasizing on their own terms the virtues of Sparta: Spartan piety and reverence for the ancestral, political moderation, and even concern for justice—all aspects of its regime praised by Thucydides’s Archidamus (though cf. SR, prologue, 7–10, 32–35, 121–23). Rahe is clear, for example, about the questionable historical status of Sparta’s revered “founder,” Lycurgus; inclined to call Spartan piety “superstition”; and frank about Spartan greed (see, e.g., SR, 62–63; 13; 29–32; GSCS, 6). Moreover, according to Rahe, the *moral* imperative of Sparta’s grand strategy is the preservation of its own way of life or regime, as opposed to the liberation of the Greeks or justice; it is fair to say, that is, that like the Athenians at Melos, Rahe believes that the Spartans identify justice with their own advantage (Thuc. 5.105.3–4). Yet Rahe’s Sparta raises the question whether the good order, stability, and perdurance of every political regime necessarily involve the sharp distinction between friend and foe at the core of Spartan grand strategy—inclusion by way of exclusion—as well as an internal order and balance of powers that preserve the good of the whole even at the expense of the good of individual members.

In this regard, Rahe’s Sparta stands in sharp contrast with the democratic possibility Ober associates with classical Athens and models in Demopolis.

specialists in subsistence agriculture” (RFCG, 139), even as he notes the use of terror (the *krupteia*) to keep them subjugated (RFCG, 113).

The power of Ober's narrative rests with this very possibility: a politics of self-conscious human reason in which the good of each is compatible with the good of the whole—a "democratic exceptionalism" to which he attributes, in the end, the immortality of the Greeks (RFCG, chap. 11, esp. 293–97). Yet this contrast between Ober's Athens and Rahe's Sparta raises another essential question: given the necessities that bear in political affairs, can reason attain its full "self-consciousness" in a political form, or, if every political order must address the necessities that threaten its survival, and its flourishing, must it therefore impose a kind of orthodoxy to which reason is always a potential threat? Ober is so far persuaded of the political form of self-conscious reason that he presents the conviction of Socrates as motivated not by antiphilosophical ire, or by "religious intolerance or fear of dissident intellectuals," but by "an enhanced conception of the individual's personal responsibility for the effects of his speech" (RFCG, 226). But if so, it seems that in this respect Ober's Athens is not so far from the Sparta that measured action and speech by the requirements and good of the regime.

Every historian writes from a point of view: from historiographical assumptions,²⁴ but more profoundly from fundamental assumptions about human beings and political affairs. In grappling with the twin peaks of classical Greece, the four works under review provide a rich foundation for exploring again some of these key assumptions. In so doing, moreover, they point us to the kind of self-examination—inquiry into the very assumptions that we bring to the reading of history—that history on its own cannot provide. But if Nietzsche is correct that at the heart of Greek order, the Greek *kosmos*, is the Delphic injunction Know thyself, then Greek history itself points to the search for self-knowledge distinctive of classical, and especially Athenian, poetic and philosophic works: the kind of search that issues in the hard-won revelations of an Achilles, Odysseus, and Oedipus; animates Thucydides's quest to grasp "the human"; and fuels the quarrel between the poets and the philosophers regarding who is the wisest. In this light, the use of Greek history for life, and the immortality of the Greeks, would appear to rest in their throwing all students of history back on our own assumptions, pointing us to the Delphic injunction that compelled Nietzsche's life-long wrestling with the figure of Socrates and Socrates's confrontation with his fellow Athenians—a confrontation that did indeed occur in a democracy, if a fragile one, newly restored after a brutal civil war.

²⁴See Ober's own accounting of this dimension of historiography in *The Athenian Revolution*, chaps. 1–2.