

# The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece

## A Discussion of Josiah Ober's *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*

*The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*. By Josiah Ober. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. 464p. \$35.00.

Ancient Greece has long exercised a powerful hold on the imagination of modern political science. But until fairly recently, this influence has largely been philosophical, related to the origins of many theoretical concepts—including the concept of politics itself—in the ancient world. In *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, Josiah Ober offers a synoptic and ambitious social theoretical account of the ancient Greek world, the sources of its power, the causes of its decline, and the lessons that can be drawn from this story for contemporary social and political science. We have thus invited a range of political scientists to comment on Ober's account of classical Greece and its relevance to contemporary political inquiry.

### Federica Carugati

doi:10.1017/S1537592716003182

Can we learn something about political and economic development from ants and the ancient Greeks? In *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, Josiah Ober makes the case that we can. Drawing on new data, and applying frameworks and methodologies borrowed from the biological and social sciences, Ober formulates four interrelated arguments.

First, in the period between 500 B.C. and A.D. 200, Greece experienced levels of population growth and consumption not matched until the twentieth century. This era of “efflorescence” placed the ancient Greek economy on a par with that of several early modern states, including high-performing Holland.

Second, Greece's striking economic development was the product of a unique set of political institutions that fostered investments and innovation, leading to specialization in a decentralized political environment where people, information, goods, and services traveled smoothly from one polis to another.

Third, porous barriers to exchange benefited not only the Greeks, but also their authoritarian neighbors. Within a cheap and easy-to-scale governmental hierarchy, “opportunistic” rulers borrowed Greek financial and

military expertise, transforming loosely connected territories into powerful centralized states. The most successful of them, Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander, effectively put an end to Greece's experiment in large-scale decentralized governance.

Or did they? According to Ober, if we move beyond the macroimplications of Macedon's conquest of Greece—that is, the poleis' loss of independence—neither Philip nor Alexander and his successors brought about the *fall* of those political institutions that Ober regards as responsible for the *rise* of classical Greece. As a result, and this is Ober's fourth argument, Greece's efflorescence continued and its culture spread in the vast Hellenistic world, where it began the process of codification that would render it *immortal*.

Like ants, the Greeks established and sustained a wholly decentralized ecology. Like ants, the Greeks succeeded because of their ability to share information at low costs. Like ants, the Greeks shared information as a strategy of survival in a highly competitive world. Because mouths spread information more efficiently than antennae, the Greeks' information-sharing system produced not mere survival, but remarkable levels of prosperity and a sophisticated culture.

This book is grounded on two radical claims: First, ancient history can, and indeed ought to rely on hard data and scientific methods to build rigorous and falsifiable hypotheses about the past; and second, such hypotheses may help us rethink long-held assumptions about political-economic development in the present. Blurring disciplinary boundaries, these claims challenge both ancient historians and social scientists to take up new research questions.

---

*Federica Carugati (mfcaruga@iu.edu) is the associate director of the Ostrom Workshop and a visiting assistant professor in the Political Science Department and Maurer School of Law at Indiana University, Bloomington. Many thanks to Dan-el Padilla Peralta and Mark Pyzyk for their feedback.*

Ober collects the now overwhelming evidence of Hellas's wealth, shifting the burden of proof on those recalcitrant followers of Moses Finley for whom the economy of classical Greece was embedded in growth-constraining social structures. The digitization of the Copenhagen Polis Centre's *Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*, which Ober elegantly deploys to rule out alternative explanations of Hellas's wealth, is the second punch in the one-two combination. While some ancient historians will feel uncomfortable about Ober's use of the *Inventory* as a data set, only the rigorous application of statistical methods to the data can prove him wrong. As new scholarship turns to this task, it will raise two questions: How much do we know, exactly, about ancient Greece? And what are we missing? The answer to these questions will shape how we study Greek history.

Social scientists will find Ober's claims equally challenging. Greece's decentralized yet prosperous and remarkably egalitarian ecology constitutes an existential counter to the Hobbesian/Olsonian notion that cooperation at scale requires a strong central authority. Most importantly, Ober suggests that conditions usually associated with modernity—democracy and growth—are in fact quite old. Whether social scientists will weave premodern, citizen-centered efflorescences more firmly into a comparative political-economic framework remains to be seen. To the skeptics, the author's story should at least suggest that well-documented historical cases might greatly contribute to the agenda, set by Douglass North in 1990, that seeks to understand *the process* of institutional change.

For historical cases to be of use for comparative investigations, however, we must pay attention to the terms of our inquiry. In this respect, Ober's analysis of the microfoundations of power relations raises a set of problems.

For Ober, Macedon was not "a Leviathan of the sort that would have satisfied Thomas Hobbes" (p. 301). But what exactly is the standard for a "satisfying Leviathan"? The fact that Macedon did not *constantly* employ violence against its subjects, which no ruler can ever afford to do, does not make Macedon less of a coercive power. The fact that the Greeks managed to carve out pockets of autonomy also does not make Macedon less of a coercive power. Ober tells us that the Greeks were better off than they would have been if Macedon had annihilated, enslaved, or plundered them. Those threats are the reason why the Greeks gave up their sovereignty. How is that *not Leviathan*?

A related problem emerges in the analysis of power relations between the poleis in the classical period. The *Inventory* considers the poleis as independent and autonomous units. And so does Ober. But how many of those thousand-plus poleis were under partial or total

control of superpoleis, like Athens, Sparta, Syracuse, or even Persia? Relaxing the autonomy-and-independence hypothesis, in turn, creates an omitted-variable problem. What role did power relations grounded on *unequal violence potential* play in making Hellas wealthy? The rise of Macedon indubitably presented the poleis with new challenges. *How new*, however, Ober's story does not say.

Finally, what can students of democracy and development learn from the rise and fall of Classical Greece? Ober rejects the historicist argument that because each society is "distinctive," comparison cannot but yield "false analogies." This rejection shifts the emphasis on the similarities between our modern world and the Greeks' (pp. xvii, 15). But if we focus uniquely on similarities, then Classical Greece cannot but remain "a cautionary tale" (p. 295)—the tale of the striking achievements of a civilization that, for a while, looked a lot like us but was gobbled up when opportunistic, authoritarian rulers absorbed those achievements into a cheaper governmental structure. There is more to ancient Greece than that.

To think productively about the differences between our world and the Greeks,' we need to focus as much on familiar institutions—such as markets—as on unfamiliar ones—for example, decentralized enforcement of laws and norms. The payoff of doing so will be a fuller understanding of the institutional arrangements that allow for the provision of democracy, prosperity, and justice in places where centralized state institutions typical of the developed West have proved unsustainable.

As a student of Ober's, I am admittedly partial to the arguments in this book. Readers shall therefore evaluate for themselves the strength of the claim that the classical past can help us understand, predict, and potentially even change the present. In the process, they might discern a new approach to a perennial problem—the problem of development.

**S. Sara Monoson**

doi:10.1017/S1537592716003194

Joshiah Ober's new book is the fullest expression yet of the terrific idea that has propelled his ground breaking work for years—the record of Greek antiquity can serve as a robust case study against which we can test big social science theories. He does not treat Greece as a straightforward model for us. And he does not limit Greece to a resource for tweaking our conceptual toolbox (e.g., participation, deliberation, judgment, free speech, democracy, federalism), though it is that for sure and he does some of that work. His work consistently brings the fruits of the latest methodological innovations that keep enlarging and refining our knowledge of Greek antiquity to bear on the empirical puzzles that animate political science. The trilogy of *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Power of the People* (1989), *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (1998) and *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (2008) effectively refutes Robert Michels's famous "iron law of oligarchy," as Danielle Allen observed some time ago. *Political Dissent* also seems to engage Michael Walzer's conceptualization of "connected criticism," though it does not do so explicitly. In *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (1996) Ober compellingly casts a pivotal period in Greek history usually (and blandly) referred to as "Cleisthenic reforms" as a spectacular historical example of radical political action and the constitution of a people, or *demos*, that appears to me to be informed by a notion of "the political" associated with Sheldon Wolin.

In *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* Ober seeks to show that appreciation of the record of Greek antiquity can set a new research agenda in motion in political science. We live in "exceptional times," Ober states clearly at the very start of the book, because substantial measures of sustained economic growth and widespread cultural accomplishment are joined with the normalization of the idea of democracy. This is rare in history. How might it be possible to effect change that brings this condition to the lives of more people, more widely and more thoroughly, locally and globally? What gives rise to it? What sustains it? What impedes its extension? How fragile is that condition? The book presents readers with the possibility that we can address these timely questions theoretically by way of a comparative analysis of the few historical cases of political and economic exceptionalism known to us.

---

*S. Sara Monoson (s-monoson@northwestern.edu) is Professor of Political Science and Classics and Chair of the Department of Political Science at Northwestern University, and the author of Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy.*

Classical Greece, he argues in this book, is not only one such case but is a richly documented one capable of sustaining intense examination. He chooses to examine that record through the lens of problems of collective action and theories regarding the issue of cooperation at scale without the creation of a centralized authority, thereby testing the insights of institutional economics. This means he investigates the incentive structures and broad conditions under which it was possible for the city-states of Greece to sustain in practice a conjunction of an extended period of economic growth and enduring decentralized politics. What he finds is that the complexities that mark the Greek experimentation with "citizen-centered" politics explain its ability to sustain economic growth and widespread cultural achievement (a condition he refers to as "efflorescence").

There is a lot to more to say about this remarkable book. Classical historians might engage in a lively debate regarding his argument about "wealthy Hellas," that is, his view that new evidence and new analyses give us good reason to challenge the longstanding assumption that the general standard of living in the Greek city-states was poor. Others will no doubt point out that he does not at length discuss slavery, though he satisfactorily accounts for this in my view. I wish there was even more discussion of the way constant warfare structured the political economy of the city-states (but that is because I want to know more). It may be that his argument renews political science's interest in the relationship between democracy and empire in Greece given that he discusses at length the political economy of the extended networks of Greek city-states across the Mediterranean in the post-Peloponnesian War period and indeed after the rise of Alexander of Macedon. (Readers new to the fact that cutting edge research on Greece focuses on the evidence for hundreds of cities beyond Athens are directed to Edith Hall's new *Introducing the Ancient Greeks: From Bronze Age Seafarers to Navigators of the Western Mind*, W. W. Norton & Company 2014).

His interest in exploring game theoretic modeling in this book will likely puzzle some readers who admire his earlier work. It will provoke controversy in some corners. But we should not lose sight of the fact that what distinguishes this book is its extraordinary embrace of methodological pluralism. The book includes marvelous close readings of extremely influential parts of philosophical texts (most notably a brilliant discussion of Aristotle's famous language of "political animals"), appreciation of insights from scholarship seemingly far afield (e.g., evolutionary biology) as well as more obviously linked (demography), assessments of the implications of the newest forms of documentary evidence coming out of classics (e.g., M. H. Hansen and T. H. Nielsen, *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis*, Oxford 2004), the compilation of original data sets drawing on documentary evidence, statistical analyses and game theory.

---

Its analysis assumes quantitative and qualitative methods “can be conjoined in ways that are rigorous enough to pass muster as causal explanation” (p. xviii). It also delivers a stunning appreciation of Aristotle’s theoretical sensibilities. The book deserves a very broad readership in political science across subfields. It brings Greek antiquity into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Arlene W. Saxonhouse**

doi:10.1017/S1537592716003200

The anti-Leviathan looms large in Josiah Ober's study of the rise of and long-lasting "efflorescence" of the Greek world from the seventh century B.C.E. through the second century C.E., well past the conquest of Greece by Philip of Macedon. For Ober, Hobbes's Leviathan represents a centralized authority dominating the activities of the members of the community, looking to its own welfare rather than the community's. In contrast are the decentralized city-states of Greece, which eschewed any such centralized authority, that flourished economically and culturally. *Efflorescence*, a term borrowed from historical sociology, entails for Ober an "increased economic growth accompanied by a sharp uptick in cultural achievement" (p. 2). With a wide range of statistical measures and graphs, Ober argues that during the period he studies the experience of the Greeks living comfortably above subsistence level would not be matched until the late 1800s. Such material well-being also fostered, he suggests, those cultural wonders that made Greece, in the words of Lord Byron that serve as epigraphs for the first and final chapters, "Immortal, though no more" (pp. 1 and 293).

The economic exceptionalism of the ancient Greek world, according to Ober, derives from a political exceptionalism entailed in the congruence of a whole host of distinctive social and political practices, such as fair play, low transaction costs, and "limited" specialization, yet a willingness to rely on specialists, sharing of ideas, federalism, knowledge-based innovation, and more. Although information concerning the Greece about which Ober writes is often sketchy and conclusions conjectural, he takes advantage of a wealth of new resources that have been collected in the last several decades, epigraphical and archaeological, as well the *Inventory of 1,035 poleis* compiled by a research team under the leadership of Mogens Hansen (2004). These resources now enable scholars to analyze the experiences of a multitude of Greek cities. Thus, Ober can offer an extensive history of Greek cities well beyond the usual suspects (Athens and Sparta) that have dominated our understanding of ancient Greece.

To complement these new resources, Ober presents a multimedia display of scholarly methods to support his claims about the sources of Greece's efflorescence. Just to mention a few: comparative history, counterfactual imaginings, quasi-experimental history, game theory, evolutionary biology, the ecology of ants, a Kahneman "prospect theory" analysis of such famous set pieces as

the Melian Dialogue (pp. 217–19); all these and more appear at different moments in the text and the Appendices. The ecology of ant communities may take pride of place with a whole chapter, "Ants Around a Pond," devoted to analogizing the Greek cities clustered around the Mediterranean to ant colonies studied by Deborah Gordon in *Ants at Work* (1999). Greece's flourishing resulted from decentralized cooperation within and between Greek cities, Ober suggests, just like the colonies of Gordon's ants. This gathering of the latest research in Greek history, along with the array of methodological tools to argue that Greece's efflorescence could result without the Leviathan's touch, is certainly a tour de force.

Earlier in his career, Ober published an article in which he had demolished the Cleisthenes-centric reading of the founding of democracy at Athens ("The Athenian Revolution of 508/7 B.C.," in Leslie Kurke's *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece*, 1993). Previously, scholars accepted Aristotle's and Herodotus' word that Cleisthenes had "instituted" Athenian democracy in 508/7 B.C.E.; what that meant and how he did so remained unclear. Ober attacked this conventional understanding of democracy's founding, arguing that the demos, not the leader Cleisthenes, expelled the Spartans from Athens and laid down the foundations Athenian democracy. Ober the democrat insisted that the demos could act, that the demos need not rely on leaders to accomplish great things, that history needed to acknowledge the potential agency of the demos, and that therefore the story of the founding of democracy needed serious revision.

In his new book, Ober the democrat continues this argument with a centuries-long reading of Greece history. Elsewhere, rulers claimed a direct line to divinity or minted coins with their images. Among the Greeks, where the priests failed to translate religious authority into positions of social privilege and Greek elites failed to acquire military technology that would allow a few to secure domination, power was diffused. No Leviathan managed a city's affairs. No individual has pride of place in the story of the Greek efflorescence. Throughout, Ober writes as a committed democrat, and it is his distaste for Leviathan that energizes the argument about the material and cultural benefits of authority resting with a leaderless people.

Ober's goal goes beyond resuscitating the world of Greece as a model of decentralized democratic practices that might be—certainly are—impossible to implement today. Rather, he wants to suggest that the principles that marked the life of ancient Greece—the rule of law, egalitarianism, low transaction costs, reliance on specialists—need not be alien to our current aspirations. So committed is he to these principles that he even suggests that Philip's conquest of Greece may have come in part from his adherence to practices that marked the Greek world. Commenting on Philip's hiring of Aristotle to educate Alexander, Ober asks: "Why on Earth . . . would

---

*Arlene W. Saxonhouse (awsaxon@umich.edu) is the Caroline Robbins Collegiate Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies and Adjunct Professor of Classics at the University of Michigan.*



---

*Leviathan* hire *Aristotle* to tutor his prospective heir?" (p. 290).

Ober acknowledges that there are varied justifications for preferring democracy to *Leviathan*, but his focus in *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* is primarily on the language of efflorescence. We should not, however, let ourselves get lost in the impressive display of economic comforts enjoyed by the ancient Greeks and ignore the insights of the philosophers who benefited from that efflorescence. Ober calls on Aristotle's biological works to support his own analogy with ants, glossing Aristotle's statement about man as a political animal to say that "we are in behavioral terms like social insects, only more so" (p. 49). As Ober knows and acknowledges, Aristotle cared about human flourishing, the exercise of reason/speech (*logos*) whereby humans consciously pursue the good and become moral creatures distinguishing the just and unjust within the context of political life. Such human flourishing may require the material benefits of a flourishing economy, but without the concern with "the good life," one marked by the exercise of *logos* and the engagement in the mutual pursuit of a common good, the material efflorescence that Ober chronicles would leave us, in the philosopher's view, no better than ants clustered around the pond.

I am certain that Ober understands Aristotle's deeper commitments and cares for them in his diatribe against *Leviathan*. My minor worry is that the Aristotelian concern with *human* flourishing may disappear behind the attention to economic flourishing that can easily be captured by the raw numbers controlling the book's central thesis. The Greek efflorescence gave us Aristotle. We should not ignore the insights Aristotle offered about the true nature of human flourishing. The worry about *Leviathan* may lie deeper than the conditions for economic well-being; it may come from what we learn courtesy of just those philosophers who flourished during the efflorescence of ancient Greece.

**Melissa Schwartzberg**

doi:10.1017/S1537592716003212

For over 25 years, Josiah Ober's remarkable scholarship has helped us to understand the complex relationship between "mass and elite," and how and why Athens enabled ordinary citizens to participate in political decision-making. In *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, Ober seeks to explain Greek "efflorescence"—economic growth and cultural achievement—by reference to two explanatory hypotheses, which he synthesizes into one: "Fair rules and competition within a marketlike ecology of states promoted capital investment, innovation, and rational cooperation in a context of low transaction costs" (p. 103). Upon encountering the two hypotheses, a casual reader might be forgiven for reading Ober as purely celebrating market freedom, while neglecting to note his attention to the political institutions that structured and provided the preconditions for the growth of capital investments, for instance. My aim here is to highlight the significant defense of political equality underlying these hypotheses.

Ober characterizes the first hypothesis as "rule egalitarianism." On Ober's account, "fair rules (formal institutions and cultural norms) promoted capital investment (human, social, material) and lowered transaction costs" (p. 103). So one might press on the term "rule egalitarianism" to distinguish the effects of "rule" (enhancing predictability) from egalitarianism, understood as "equal high standing in respect to major institutions: e.g., to property, law, and personal security" (p. 110). Of course, predictability need not track or yield equality; entrenched rules often secure unequal distributions of resources. The enforcement of property rights against threats of expropriation may promote capital investment and economic growth while enabling the advantaged to secure their holdings against redistribution. Ober writes: "When I believe that my person, property, and standing are secure (in that I have ready institutional recourse if I am assaulted, robbed, or affronted), I am less afraid that the fruits of my efforts will be expropriated arbitrarily by those more powerful than I" (p. 111). But those who lack property, of course, fear expropriation far less than those who possess it. So why would property rights yield egalitarian results?

Ober suggests that the institutionally egalitarian feature of rule-egalitarianism arises in the creation of "public insurance institutions," which enabled the poor to take welfare-enhancing risks that might otherwise be limited to the well-off (p. 115). Among these risky investments included "literacy, numeracy, and mastery of banking

and credit instruments," and the "public insurance" institutions (especially in Athens) included grain price stabilization/subsidization, welfare provision for invalids, and state-supported upbringing of war orphans (p. 115). Ober's argument relies on a broadly Coasean framework, in which socially efficient outcomes emerge from a decentralized system of property rights accompanied by rules minimizing transaction costs. Ober argues that rule-egalitarian norms lower transaction costs by securing relatively equal access to information, and in turn generate more economically productive societies. But because the burdens of unequal information are not equally distributed, one might argue that for rule-egalitarianism itself to emerge—and for ordinary citizens to insist that transaction costs associated with unequal information required redress—the prior distribution of bargaining power would have to be relatively equal (Knight 1992; Knight and Johnson 2011). That is, the emergence of "rule egalitarianism" itself may well have depended on prior norms of "equal high standing."

Let me turn now to the second hypothesis, in which market-like competition spurred innovation, emulation, and rational cooperation. Here, Ober's model is Hayekian (as he suggests in the introduction to his wonderful previous book, *Democracy and Knowledge*), arguing that the capacity to harness dispersed information and solve collective action problems produces competitive advantages. For Hayek, the information-aggregating function of the price system rested upon equally divided knowledge: "Through [the price system] not only a division of labor but also a coordinated utilization of resources based on an equally divided knowledge has become possible" (Hayek 1945, p. 528). One possibility, then, is that the ability to innovate and solve thorny problems *itself* rests on the equal distribution of knowledge and political resources more generally. The work of Elinor Ostrom might support Ober's claim: the ability of groups to self-organize and self-govern "commons" is enhanced when the preexisting distribution of interests and resources is relatively symmetric (e.g., Ostrom 1997).

But how did the institutions of "fair rules" and "market-like competition" emerge in a way that was equality-enhancing rather than inequality-exacerbating? Here one must look carefully at Ober's own historical account to identify features that might have enhanced the bargaining power of the poor. Ober emphasizes, for instance, that cheap iron enabled the wide distribution of instruments of violence in Athens, and that alphabetic writing enabled ordinary people to become literate. But a focus on the bargaining power of ordinary citizens, measured largely in terms of citizens' capacity for violence, might seem to explain the success of both Athens and Sparta (one must note, as does Ober, that both Athens and Sparta also relied on forced labor). Whereas the Athenians were inclined to leverage their citizen power to ensure the

---

*Melissa Schwartzberg (ms268@nyu.edu) is Professor of Politics at New York University, and a Laurance S. Rockefeller Visiting Faculty Fellow at Princeton's University Center for Human Values.*

---

equal distribution of political rights, the Spartans—while “functional equals in their violence potential” and as “equal power holders and rent-seekers” (p. 143)—did not. Why Spartans failed both to redistribute the wealth of their elite families, and enact political institutions that reflected this equality, would remain a question.

One possible explanation, implied by Ober, is that they were ideologically conservative, committed to upholding the oligarchic political structure (pp. 142–143). Alternatively, one might argue the flourishing promised by “fair rules” and “market-like competition,” and the capacity to innovate to meet new challenges, emerges and endures within a *polis* only in the presence of a prior commitment to political equality: not merely the equal “lifestyle” of the Spartan *homoioi*, but the *isopsephos* (equality of the vote) and *isegoria* (equality in freedom of speech) of the Athenians.

In this light, Ober’s superb achievement is not in demonstrating that Greek efflorescence derived in the first instance from their turn to the rigorous enforcement of property rights, the reduction of transaction costs, and market-style competition. Rather, it is to subject to rigorous empirical examination his brilliant insight from *Democracy and Knowledge* that *democratic institutions*, rooted in political equality, yield efflorescence, both in the ancient world and beyond.

### References

- Hayek, F. A. “The Use of Knowledge in Society.” *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Sept. 1945), 519–30.
- Knight, Jack. *Institutions and Social Conflict*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Knight, Jack and James Johnson. *The Priority of Democracy: Political Consequences of Pragmatism*. Princeton and New York: Princeton University Press and the Russell Sage Foundation, 2011.
- Ostrom, Elinor. “A Behavioral Approach to the Rational Choice Theory of Collective Action: Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 1997.” *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 92, No. 1 (March 1998), pp. 1–22.



**Daron Acemoglu, James A. Robinson and Barry R. Weingast**

doi:10.1017/S1537592716003224

Ober's *Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* represents a major restatement of our understanding of Classical Greece based on integrating the new social science studies in classics that has flourished over the past quarter of a century. The book tackles many of the major questions in modern social science: Why did an oligarchy decide to share power with the masses? Or was it forced to do so by the masses? Was Athens rich; and if so, what were the sources of its wealth? And can ancient Athens be considered an egalitarian society; and if so how is that connected to its prosperity?

In turning to these questions, many scholars of classical Greece began to realize that the traditional humanities tools of the discipline could not capture the full meaning of these questions. Hence the turn to social sciences, especially those tools developed to study these questions in the modern world. The results promise a new understanding of the Classical world, Ancient Greece in particular.

In *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, Ober gives us the first integrated view of this new understanding, using all the tools and concepts of social science. But the road Ober travels is not a one-way street of modern social science being introduced to studies of the classical world. Ober has also brought Classical Greece into the modern world of social science as a case for study in the fields of comparative politics and economic development.

There are two main reasons for modern students of development to be interested in the Classical Greek world. First, it provides a type of natural experiment where geography and culture are held constant. The Greeks shared a common language, religion and were unified by a history, for example encapsulated in the Homeric epics. They also shared a similar geography and were for the most part spread around coasts with a mountainous interior (like "ants around a pond," as Ober puts it, quoting Plato). Yet a great institutional divergence (think Athens versus Sparta) occurred between the end of the Greek Dark

Ages (around 800 BCE) and the collapse of Classic Greece with the rise of the Macedonian Empire. Second, the Greeks in this period were remarkably modern in many ways lacking dense webs of kinship or such institutions as polygamy. This means there is a great deal of external validity and hence much we can learn from this case for a broader range of cases.

How much? Consider a few examples. Modern social science is obsessed with Charles Tilly's dictum that "states made war and war made states;" yet the Greek evidence should give us reason to pause. It is not clear that warfare led to the rise of the poleis. Despite centuries of warfare and grave external threats, for example from Persia, the poleis never united into a large state. Instead they formed various "leagues" a bit like the European Union but with more emphasis on warfare.

Second, while the Greeks pioneered democracy, they realized it could be very dysfunctional and populist, as many of us do today. Ober notes (p. 234) "with no brake on the process, the dynamic of public speakers seeking influence and honors, and mass audiences eager to be entertained and willing to be flattered sometimes led to catastrophic policy mistakes." But the Greeks learned their lessons and changed institutions accordingly. For example Athens introduced a law that people who implemented policies that were "inexpedient" (i.e., retrospectively seen as rashly imprudent) could be brought to trial. All these issues resonate, for example, with the recent publication of the Chilcott Report on the British participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Finally, the natural experiment allows us to focus on the key factors that allowed the emergence of such democratic and economically successful societies. Ober emphasizes egalitarian changes in technology, such as the transition from bronze to iron; that ideology and religion were not controlled by elites; and that military technology gave society a pro-democratic impulse with the spread of hoplite warfare. The context also helps us to dramatically narrow the potential explanatory factors that lie behind institutional divergence.

Just as political economy has been enriched through study of the Glorious and French Revolutions and American Independence, Classical Greece holds the potential to be a strikingly revealing out of sample case that can illuminate many existing questions and pose new ones (a point also made by Carugati 2005). Ober's book is a major statement of how much this case can tell us.

**Reference**

- Carugati, F. 2015. "In Law We Trust (Each Other): Legal Institutions, Democratic Stability and Economic Development in Classical Athens," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation (Stanford University).

---

*Daron Acemoglu (daron@mit.edu) is the Elizabeth and James Killian Professor of Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. James A. Robinson (jamesrobinson@uchicago.edu) is the Dr. Richard L. Pearson Professor of Global Conflict Studies and University Professor at the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago, and faculty director of the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflicts. Barry R. Weingast (weingast@stanford.edu) is the Ward C. Krebs Family Professor at the Stanford University Department of Political Science, and a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution.*