

Ober, J. (2008) "The Original Meaning of 'Democracy': The Capacity to Do Things, not Majority Rule." *Constellations* 15(1): 1-9.

We should try to discover what the idea of democracy was in ancient Greece, not in order to make that idea orthodox or sacred, but in order to offer us a resource for how to think about democracy today. The idea that democracy means that the people have ruling authority, that they control constituted power, is a reductive and bad reading that we have accepted from the arguments of democracy's ancient opponents.

The root *kratos* could be understood as "the capacity to do things," "strength," "enablement," or "activated political capacity" (p. 7). This is in fact closer to what the Greeks understood *kratos* to mean when they used it in the context of the "-cracy" ending. The "-archy" ending, by contrast, typically meant access to constituted power (or "pre-existing constitutional authority" (p. 7)). *Kratos* is more about public power to do things in the public realm that further the common good. So democracy does not mean that the *demos* monopolizes pre-existing constituted power. It refers to when the *demos* becomes active and uses its collective capacity to do things in the public realm; it refers to when the *demos* is politically enabled. In fact, this is precisely the historical origin of the idea, which was born when the *demos* rose up and asserted itself politically in non-democratic polises.

The *demos*, for its part, is diverse and does not have unified desires. And so there will be issues of how to institutionalize its power so that it can endure for a time, issues of how the *demos* can act and plan collectively. But its power is, in a deep way, a power that can only exist in use, in active use. And the *demos* only exists when it asserts itself. The *demos*, and its *kratos*, cannot be, really, enshrined in a constitution. Democracy only exists when the *demos* stands itself up (Demosthenes) and enables its own power by doing things in the public realm.

Ober, J. (1994) "How to Criticize Democracy in Late Fifth- and Fourth Century Athens" in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*. P. Euben, J. Wallach, and J. Ober, eds. Cornell University Press, pp. 149-171.

Ober seeks an option other than State Socialism or liberal democracy. For Ober, democracy needs to avoid closure, totalizing culture, and remain open and diverse. In 425-300-or-so Athens, democratic culture was hegemonic, and so there were critics, Plato and Thucydides central among them. We have lots of texts from the critics, none from the democrats (though we do have a record of actual discourse). We need to read the critics not as offering foundational truths about politics, but as trying to argue against the hegemony of democracy in their particular time. Democratic hegemony was established by the political power of ordinary people. It held that: it is possible to establish political equality in the face of social inequality, decisions are made by consensus, free speech is key, there is more wisdom in collective thinking, and there is no separation between government and people. But more centrally, the people's exercise of their power is not instrumental, it is not undertaken as a way to achieve some end,

rather, it is an end in itself. The point of democracy is *not* for people to exercise their power *in order to* get some result that is favorable to them. The point of democracy is for people to exercise their power. Also key was that democratic culture assumed that knowledge and truth was defined by what the citizenry judged to be true (*edoxe toi demoi*, “it appeared right to the citizenry”). They made this judgment through politics, which meant *logos* (debate, rhetoric, argument) in the public sphere according to a set of conventions. Truth was, therefore, not transcendental, not natural, not eternal. It was conventional – decided in common, through practice, through use. Change in what is true is therefore possible and common. Resistance to truth is possible and normal.

In this context, one can see how Plato’s entire philosophy, politics, and epistemology is designed to counter the assumptions of the democratic hegemony, to insist that socially constructed truth is “mere opinion,” and that there is a *real* (eternal, objective, Formal) truth that exists as well. Those who are in the best position to know this *real* truth (i.e. philosophers) should rule, not the *demos* with their conventional truth.

But of course we should remember that Plato came up with all this bullshit because he and his kind was out of power in a society where ordinary citizens controlled common sense, ideology, government institutions, and culture. It was obvious to everyone in that society that truth was socially constructed, and that is why Plato had to insist on the Forms so loudly and at such length. So, today, we can draw on this time in Athens as a resource, as an instance in which democratic truth was common sense, democracy held sway, and the “foundational” ideas of Plato and Socrates were minority voices struggling to be heard.

Ober, J. (2003) “Conditions for Athenian Democracy” in *The Making and Unmaking of Democracy: Lessons from History and World Politics*. T. Rabb and E. Suleiman, eds. Routledge, pp. 2-22.

Democracy means the active political rule of the *demos* [more than it means particular institutions of government]. In Athens, there was no *a priori* model of democracy to follow – it was created as it was lived by Athenians (508-322BC). Democracy came about in the context of a noble/aristocratic ideal, which assumed that some were truly better (more beautiful, stronger, smarter) than others. The better should rule, of course, and the worse should not. It was assumed to be a natural order. So democracy’s idea that anyone at all can and should rule was a powerful affront to this ideal. It would have infuriated the nobles to have to govern with the *hoi polloi*. And so for democracy to have lasted so long, compromises with the elite would have had to have been made (this is A’s argument about “polity”).

Vis democracy’s *decline*, Ober argues that it was not due to the excess or irresponsibility of the *demos*, it was due to the new imperial rulers’ (Macedon) preference for dealing with the *oligoi*, rather than the *demos*.

Vis democracy’s *birth*, Solon (594BC) made an impact when he made it illegal to own Athenians as

slaves, meaning there was a sense in which all Athenians were equal. In 508BC, Athens was a republic (i.e. a broad oligarchy), and Cleisthenes loses the archonship to Isogoras, so he turns to the *demos* for support. When Isogoras overreaches, the *demos* rises up [perhaps spurred by Cleisthenes], constitutes itself as a political actor in its own right, names itself, undertakes an act of revolutionary violence through which it seizes power (rather than having it granted), and then, in the aftermath, this power is consolidated in democratic institutions. The resulting *polis* was successful economically and militarily, but that was not the measure of its success or achievement, the self-constitution and political activity of the *demos* was.