

Melissa Lane, *The Birth of Politics: Eight Greek and Roman Political Ideas and Why They Matter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); [published in the U.K. by Penguin, as *Greek and Roman Political Ideas: An Introduction*] ISBN:978-0-691-16647-6. U.S. \$26.95

Having written or edited many smart, serious, scholarly books about various iterations of ancient (primarily Greek) political thought – including a close reading of Plato’s *Statesman*, a study of the reception of Plato and Socrates from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, an ethical approach to climate change via (mostly) Plato, the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* as well as Plato’s *Republic* (Penguin, 2007) – and had published dozens of articles, Professor Melissa Lane (Princeton) has established herself as one of the foremost political theorists of ancient Greek political thought of her generation.

With this cultivated ground behind her, she addresses in this book the pivotal question of the meaning of ancient Greek and Roman political “concepts” in their own terms and in relation to us – a new gloss on the long-standing issue (since Hobbes, at least) of the relationship between “the Ancients” and “the Moderns.” If one has Hegelian inclinations, this is a worrisome project. For if one has to be *reminded* of why Greek and Roman political ideas *matter* when they have seeded every major project of political thought in the West since they were produced – then it’s virtually safe to say that they no longer do. But such pessimism does not drive Lane’s project. Rather, she is offering her version of how to chart the interaction between past and present, taking ancient political thought as her exemplar. This makes much sense as a project for Lane, who has been well educated in Classics and Western political theory.

It is somewhat difficult to assess this book, however, because its audience is not obvious. Although the book is published by a prestigious university press in the U.S., it was commissioned for Penguin in the U.K. And while it is firmly rooted in wide-ranging scholarship, it does not engage in scholarly debates – which suits its fast pace. So, it’s not directly addressed to Lane’s professional peers, graduate students, or undergraduates specializing in classical history or political theory. Its appeal will be greatest to those who might be teaching or taking a World History or “Western” civ course or an intelligent public looking for a very readable and historically grounded tour of ancient Greek and Roman political thought. Yet that doesn’t make it uninteresting to more skilled students of the first-order subjects she addresses, due to her wide and deep knowledge as well as her second-order interpretative approach – which reads ancient political ideas in light of current conundrums.

The book’s title (in the U.K.) or subtitle (U.S.) suggest that its contents are composed of discrete chapters on particular ideas, as if in an encyclopedia of ancient political ideas, whole units composed of different parts (rather than as semantic productions, articulations, and regulations of political practice that have blurred identities as bounded phenomena since they always have an “outside”). But Lane’s

delineation of ideas as self-contained entities is not strictly true in general or in her book, and it reads not so much as a collection of accounts of discrete ideas as a selective tour of ancient political thought from Homer to Imperial Rome. In any event, her discussions intelligently draw on various texts and sources – from poets to tragedians, historians, sophists, rhetoricians, litigants, philosophers, politicians, and practical information about their contexts, even as the most well-known thinkers still stand out (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Polybius, the early Stoics, Cicero, Seneca). The “ideas” are: “Justice,” “Constitution,” “Democracy,” “Virtue,” “Citizenship,” “Cosmopolitanism,” “Republic,” and “Sovereignty,” ideas that she seems to have chosen because of their modern resonance. The order reflects Lane’s view of when each became a major practice or subject of critical scrutiny.

One might quibble with her identification of these ideas – insofar as there was no ancient idea of “cosmopolitanism,” and some would argue that the idea of “sovereignty” is coterminous with the emergence of the modern state (hardly an ancient political idea). But my point does not hold if one, e.g., plausibly renders sovereignty (*pace* Lane) as superior political authority, tying that to the superiority of domination. The most valuable parts of Lane’s book are those in which she makes surprising individual connections between authors and across periods, offers interesting background information, or introduces novel uses of classic texts. Even if they are idiosyncratic, they educate. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to summarize even a fraction of the points she makes about each “idea.” For the reader who has prior knowledge of the texts and periods about which she writes, the payoff mostly stems from the frames in which she places her readings of history and theory, frames that reflect Lane’s distinctive interpretive style and theoretical disposition.

These frames derive from two tropes that have governed theoretical interpretations and appropriations of ancient political thought since World War II: contrasts between ancient and modern liberty and democracy. The significance of these tropes for the interpretation and appropriation of ancient political thought is not quite as straightforward as Lane presumes it to be. The meaning of what counts as “ancient” is relatively stable, at least for Westerners, namely Greek and Roman antiquity and its intellectual expressions. What counts as “modern,” however, is more labile and depends on the interpreter’s interests and perspective – for example, whether one is interested in natural science, contemporary mores, inequality, climate change, or some combination thereof, and how one identifies meaning in historical political thought.

Most odd about Lane’s deployment of the ancient/modern dichotomy (here she is hardly alone) is its use as a historical reality – as if there was antiquity and modernity, with nothing of significance in between. In other words, the contrast is self-consciously theoretical but is treated as if it has a directly historical reality, which fails to acknowledge the river of time, human activity, and the exercise of power that led from one to the other, and hence the historical rationales for modernity itself. Without such understanding, invocations of ancient political thought become

modernity's other -- a mirror before which we can refashion ourselves. Despite the stimulating value of such contrasts, the contrast itself is mostly a self-serving fiction. For it suggests that as "modern" readers in the twenty-first century, we can readily switch gears between antiquity and modernity as part of our self-education. Yes, we like our modern liberties, but we could do better with more ancient virtue to make us more moderate and self-controlled.

Those who have traded in the ancient-modern dichotomy have done so with varying degrees of self-consciousness. Popper and Strauss were very clear about which they preferred (the former, modernity; the latter, antiquity), and directly wrote to persuade the reader to adopt the values they ascribed to modernity or antiquity. They had no illusions they were making historical arguments, except insofar as their own theories intervened in contemporary history. But in the wake of M. I. Finley's *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (1972) and the rediscovery (via Isaiah Berlin) of Benjamin Constant's lecture on the liberty of the ancients and the moderns (1819), not to mention Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre's different revivals of "virtue ethics," the ancient/modern theoretical contrast has become such a fixture of intellectual discourse that it has assumed the character of a historical fact rather than its more appropriate meaning as a very rough theoretical typology and historical dichotomy. For political thought, the effect of this elision of historical development has been principally in conceptualizations of liberty and democracy – with the former harboring "ancient" (i.e., thick and public) or "modern" (individualistic and private) characteristics while the latter is either "ancient" (communal and direct) or "modern" (individualized and representative). These contrasts populate Lane's accounts – e.g., of Roman republican liberty as a source of an invigorated conception of public liberty and of Athenian democracy (leavened by the wisdom of its philosophical critics) as a compass for greater political virtue. If only politics and history were matters of choice and philosophy provided the menu for selecting our engagement with them.

That said, Lane's vision is temperate and wise, not radically unconventional. When it comes to the relationship between philosophy and politics she accepts their bifurcation into separate vocations – setting aside, as contemporary liberals do, ancient Greek *connections* between philosophy and politics as well as *logos* and *ergon*. But her temperature is complex, as she draws on the wide understanding of politics that characterizes ancient life and thought – emphasizing the importance of the rulers' obligations to their citizens; citizens' controlling their rulers, and both demonstrating the virtue of moderation or self-control. How we interpreters are to learn those lessons in a world where ethics and power already constitute our conceptions of the identities of, and relationships between, rulers and ruled is a question whose answer one must find elsewhere.

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