

Alex Gottesman, *Politics and the Street in Democratic Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xiii, 247. ISBN: 978-1-107-04168-4. Hardback. \$95.00.

In this expansion of a University of Chicago doctoral thesis, Alex Gottesman's *Politics and the Street in Democratic Athens* draws inspiration from theoretical and popular conceptions of the public realm as a site and metaphor for the generation and circulation of knowledge in order to offer an often persuasive analysis of the "extra-institutional" Athens, a space distinct from but engaged in productive and necessary tension with formal institutions: the Council, the Assembly, and the Law Courts.

Situating himself between competing views on the nature of Athenian politics and the impact of discursive practices on institutions,¹ Gottesman claims that his work "differs from other studies of Athenian democracy by examining the conjunctions and the disjunctions between the institutional and the non-institutional public spheres, [for while] there was more to politics than went on in the institutions [...] the institutions were singularly central to Athenian political experience. They were how Athenians made sense of themselves and their politics." (8) Most provocatively, Gottesman argues that while "we cannot address the street directly" (15) because of the elitist and fragmentary nature of the evidence, modes of communication like gossip admit the role that marginalized individuals (e.g. metics, women, slaves) could have in shaping public discourse. A core methodological assumption, then, rejects a narrow conception of citizen participation: the "production of public meaning" is for Gottesman the "central concern" of Athenian politics." (22)

Chapters 1–2 lay the groundwork for successive chapters, each of which analyzes a different view of the extra-institutional. In Chapter 1, "A tour of the Agora," Gottesman eschews divisions of the Agora into civic vs. industrial or citizen vs. non-citizen space, drawing on recent evidence for industrial activity in order to argue for mixed spheres of interaction. In Chapter 2, "Athenian social networks," Gottesman argues that citizen associations (e.g. demes, phratries) and especially what he calls "voluntary 'mixed' associations" (*thiasoi*)—those that transcended gender and status hierarchies—facilitated the success of institutions by disseminating issues among a wider public and enforcing decisions. In my view, it is certainly not incorrect to posit, if not assume, that talk across such hierarchies occurred, but the evidence for the *impact* of these associations on institutions is tenuous. For although epigraphic evidence for such groups is appears only in the 3rd century (e.g. female-led lending societies), Gottesman asserts that the late appearance of such evidence must represent consolidation and legitimization of past practice. Furthermore, when Gottesman cites the rumor-driven prosecutions of Andocides (And. 1) and Timarchus

¹ Cf., most prominently, Mogens Herman Hansen. *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*. Reprint. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991; Josiah Ober. *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

(Aes. 1) as evidence that the informal sphere did affect institutions, to what extent was Aeschines, lacking concrete evidence against Timarchus, simply drawing on the “you all know” *topos* rather than on a social reality?

In Chapter 3, “The problem of non-institutional politics,” Gottesman discusses how elite critics attack the use of non-institutional politics in formal decision-making structures (e.g. story-telling, *logopoiein*) while simultaneously employing them to their own advantage. An outgrowth of the dissertation, ritual supplication (*hiketia*) as an example of theatricality in drama and oratory figures prominently in this and the following chapter. Thus he reads Aeschylus’ *Suppliants* as “a critique of non-institutional politics” (88 n. 31) in which Pelasgus continues the theatrics of the Danaids’ supplication by using suppliant boughs to secure legislation against their Egyptian pursuers: the fact that we know the ultimate outcome of the conflict implies a negative view of theatricality. While such a reading is reasonable, his discussion of “pitiable theatrics” in oratory is on shakier ground. Gottesman rightly observes that despite criticism against appeals to pity in law court speeches, litigants never hesitated to appeal to a perceived sensibility of their jurors and to cast them as protectors (and often avengers) who could intervene in cases of wrongdoing.² But he is, I think, mistaken to view such appeals to pity as a violation of a rigidly-held norm. For instance, Gottesman claims that Demosthenes critiques supplication in favor of the rule of law when he asks his jurors not to pity Meidias when he parades his children before him (Dem. 21.186–88). But is he actually critiquing supplication or arguing that Meidias, being the brute that he is, does not deserve their pity, one construed elsewhere as an Athenian virtue? This problem is further compounded by Gottesman’s use of Thucydides, Isocrates, and Plato as contemporary critics of supplication, ones hardly representative of Athenian popular opinion. Gottesman appears to nuance his argument near the end, admitting that frequent appeals to pity suggest that “the conclusion of the speech was seen as an acceptable occasion for such displays,” and claiming that “the people who dominated the Athenian institutions did not so much seek to eliminate theatricality but to appropriate it” (99–100), but is this line of thought even necessary? It is more probable to imagine that litigants worked in and around a flexible set of social values and, despite elite critics like Thucydides, conceived of a fluid space between the Agora and the courts: Athenian jurors could be both weary and enthralled by appeals to pity and determined for themselves whether or not a litigant deserved their attention and vote.

Chapter 4, “Institutionalizing theatricality in the Assembly, continues this line of argument, contending that despite “an established set of distinctions between deliberative and the theatrical” (100), Athenians incorporated theatricality into its political institutions by including formal acts of supplication in meetings of the

² Cf. Matthew R. Christ. *The Limits of Altruism in Democratic Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Ch. 3.

Assembly (cf. *AP* 43.6), ones often preserved in decrees of the mid-fourth century. Thus supplication in oratory explains in part the introduction of supplication into the Assembly and its decrees. Although supplication was not a requirement for civic honors and privileges, the fact that the epigraphic record names only prominent individuals as sponsors suggests for Gottesman that they must have gained symbolic capital from the “performance” (108) as a defender of non-citizen suppliants. The fact that Gottesman admits that his entire analysis is speculative (108 n. 26; cf. 111 n. 33) suggests that he could have relegated this investigation as an *addendum* to the previous chapter or extended footnote.

Chapter 5, “Publicity stunts in Athenian politics,” examines the nature and effectiveness of staged events “outside the civic institutions [that] could be construed as manipulative attempts to influence their work” (116). Of the case studies he considers, the trial of the Arginousai generals is the most promising, in which associates of Theramenes dressed as kinsmen of the dead in mourning during the Apaturia festival and thus encouraged the generals’ conviction and execution (*Xen. Hell.* 1.7.8); here Gottesman suggests that Xenophon fashioned the episode to illustrate how “extra-institutional pressures corrupted the political process” (139). He speculates (cf. 147) that the mutilation of the Herms before the Sicilian Expedition and the appearance of the *graphe paranomon* procedure in the late-fifth century made political stunts less appealing; logography in the fourth century even more so contributed to the decline of the political stunt because it “offered a better way to communicate with the public outside the institutions” (147). Regrettably, while Gottesman sensibly imports the modern term “political stunt” into his analysis, he does not justify or capitalize on the semantic range of the Greek word he uses for the term, *mechane*. He discusses it only in reference to Pisistratus’ staged return to Athens (*Hdt.* 1.60.3) and so, I think, misses an opportunity to provide further lexical support for his arguments. He might also have benefitted from Joseph Roisman’s *The Rhetoric of Conspiracy in Ancient Athens* (California 2006) and its study of the language of plotting, arguably a relevant manifestation of extra-institutional activity.

In Chapter 6, “Slaves in the Theseion,” Gottesman argues persuasively that slaves sought refuge at the temple of Theseus not simply to escape their owner but often to gain a modicum of agency by effecting a dramatic performance in which they encouraged competing claims to their persons in the hopes of securing a new identity. Gottesman rightly observes that status (e.g. citizen, metic, slave) in Athens often required continuous social affirmation in addition to legal statute and was thus open to contestation if a slave abandoned his owner. In this regard, he analyses evidence for the procedure of *aphairesis eis eleutherian* (“extraction into freedom”) in which claimants on the status of a slave or freedman had a physical confrontation and settled through arbitration or a trial. Fears of false citizenship articulated through scrutiny of deme registries (e.g. the *diapsephisis* of 346, cf. *Dem.* 57), furthermore, suggest that slaves (and metics) could enroll themselves as citizens through the

collusion of a deme or phratry member. With its connections to supplication, this chapter ought to have followed Chapter 4.

Chapter 7, “The Magnesian Street,” examines how Plato in his *Laws* acknowledges that informal communication ensures the success of institutions. Analyzing the presentation of the Council, the Marriage Inspectors, and the Nocturnal Council, Gottesman argues that the philosopher articulates and harnesses an idealized version of the Athenian public sphere— including citizens, metics, women, and slaves—in which members are encouraged to discuss pertinent issues and police one another in enforcing the values and laws of the Magnesian community. Although Plato’s views in the *Laws* do appear to contrast with his focus on the magistrates and distrust of the masses in the *Republic*, the fact that Gottesman often feels the need to acknowledge Plato’s authoritarianism (e.g. 194 - “Plato’s thought here would make a modern liberal cringe,” 197 - “While Plato certainly makes suggestions that would make a modern liberal cringe”) suggests that he is perhaps too optimistic in attributing an interest in free agency and open debate to one of the most hostile critics of democracy.

I wanted more from this book. Although Gottesman does an admirable job in assembling and discussing the varied evidence and has thought-provoking ideas, the public sphere is, as he himself acknowledges, a reconstruction, and thus there is just as much speculation as there is concrete argument. Perhaps this needs to happen in order to provoke new questions about social engagement in Athens. Some small details remain: there is no *index locorum* but a couple of typos: Lucurgus for Lycurgus (110–11) and λιθω for λιθω (141). On balance, Gottesman offers a stimulating, if not always persuasive study that will be of interest to historians and political theorists of classical Athens.

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