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A More Perfect Monument

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Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens

By Josiah Ober

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How does one learn to construct and to lead a republic? Monarchies do not provoke this question, or at least not with the same urgency. When King George III took the throne in Britain in 1760, he had some thirty-three predecessors in England alone, if one goes back only to William the Conqueror, and fifty-odd predecessors if one goes back to Egbert, the first "King of All England," in the ninth century. George had all this history to consider, and also the histories of other monarchies and hierarchical structures the world over. When Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison, and their colonial friends framed and defended a Constitution for a newly united federation of American states, they, too, turned to history--but they had fewer examples on which to draw. They looked to the ancient Greek city-states, to the republics of northern Italy, to the Germanic League, and, of course, to the Roman Republic, from which they would take their greatest inspiration. They would have leapt for joy to have read Josiah Ober's new book.

As Hamilton, Jay, and Madison saw it, Greece presented little other than a cautionary tale to the eighteenthcentury architects of a new and vast republic. Hamilton was characteristically high-flown:

> It is impossible to read the history of the petty Republics of Greece and Italy, without feeling sensations of horror and disgust at the distractions with which they were continually agitated, and at the rapid succession of revolutions by which they were kept in a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy. If they exhibit occasional calms, these only serve as short-lived contrasts to the furious storms that are to succeed. If now and then intervals of felicity open themselves to view, we behold them with a mixture of regret, arising from the reflection that the pleasing scenes before us are soon to be overwhelmed by the tempestuous waves

> of sedition and party rage. If momentary rays of glory break forth from the gloom, while they dazzle us with a transient and fleeting brilliancy, they at the same time admonish us to lament that the vices of government should pervert the direction and tarnish the luster of those bright talents and exalted endowments, for which the favoured soils that produced them have been so justly celebrated.

The late eighteenth century took its view of ancient Athenian democracy primarily from its critics: Thucydides, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch. Hamilton, Jay, and Madison were espousing the standard line, which was this: although there were differences between cities--as between democratic Athens and oligarchic Sparta--all the Greek city-states were given to instability and suffered ugly demographic crises induced by revolution and war. Moreover, the so-called democracies were not really "governments by the people" at all. As Madison put it, "In the most pure democracies of Greece, many of the executive functions were performed, not by the people themselves, but by officers elected by the people, and *representing* the people in their *executive* capacity."

Even considered as a republic governed primarily by elite representatives, Athens was to be judged a failure. Its leading statesman, "the celebrated Pericles," in Hamilton's words, routinely "sacrifice[d] the national tranquility to personal advantage, or personal gratification." Most egregiously, according to Hamilton, he started the Peloponnesian War to distract the Athenian populace from efforts to prosecute him for the misuse of state funds. So pure democracy necessarily devolves into either anarchy or rule by a corrupt managerial elite--this is the theoretical claim undergirding the commentary on Athens in *The Federalist Papers* and sustaining the authors' conclusion that Athens could not be a useful model for the citizens designing a new constitution in 1787 for a set of freshly united states.

In the early twentieth century, the sociologist Robert Michels formalized this theoretical claim as the "iron law of oligarchy." Any collectivity larger than a face-to-face society of a few hundred souls must develop formal organization if it is to succeed at pursuing its collective flourishing; and the imperatives of organization, Michels argued, will inevitably drive the evolution of political forms toward oligarchies ruled by a small elite corps of expert managers. On Michels's argument, a long-lived and competitively successful participatory democracy with direct rule by the people themselves--"pure democracy," in the words of Madison--is best understood as something like a unicorn: beloved for its purity, seen only in dreams.

Josiah Ober has made it his life's work to refute Michels's law, and to prove that "participatory democracy" can meet the demands of organization by developing institutional and cultural forms that effectively provide for a group's success over the long-term. By "participatory democracy," Ober means forms of political organization in which ordinary citizens, amateurs, really do make and implement critical policy decisions as well as sustain the systems of reward and sanction that keep the whole democratic machine functioning. A genuinely participatory democracy is not,

contrary to our own regime, built around the principle of representation; but this does not mean that representative and participatory institutions are mutually exclusive forms of democratic organization, as I will suggest.

Democracy and Knowledge is the final book in an extraordinary trilogy. It follows *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People*, which appeared in 1989, and *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule*, in 1998. This third book incorporates the central conclusions of the first two, and with this volume Ober, by means of a highly original historical argument about Athens, does in fact refute Michels's famous law. How does he do so?

Ober rightly recognizes that Michels's law can be falsified by the identification of a single counter-example: a long-lived and competitively successful participatory democracy that does not devolve into oligarchic rule. Athens, he shows, was that counter-example. To prove this, Ober has to demonstrate that Athens was more successful than other city-states in ancient Greece; that its success was not dependent on external factors (for instance, on the extraction of imperial rents) but on its internal organization; that its organization rested fundamentally on participatory processes; and that the success of those participatory processes is to be explained not by factors such as the ethnic homogeneity of the citizenry or its ideological indoctrination, but by institutional design and cultural practice. In particular, Ober argues, the city's success stemmed from how Athenian institutions and culture allowed for the aggregation and the political deployment of useful knowledge.

After an introductory chapter presenting the ambition and the central ideas of his book, Ober turns to establishing Athens's competitive success within its universe of roughly a thousand city-states. This discussion is a tour de force, amply displaying the value of new technologically based tools of data aggregation and analysis. As a group, the Greek city-states had unusually high standards of living for the pre-modern era. Ober synthesizes vast amounts of research by generations of scholars to analyze relative performance of city-states in terms of aggregate material flourishing, fame, territory size, amounts of public building, international activity, and breadth of usage of coinage; and he correlates these rankings with regime type. Ober finds that within this group of a thousand city-states, those with constitutions averaging out over time to tyranny or monarchy generally performed poorly; those averaging out to oligarchy or full democracy did better; and those averaging out, as a group, to moderate oligarchy--that is, oligarchy with more democratic elements mixed in--did best. But of all the cities, Athens comes out on top. It outperforms both the other pure democracies and also the moderate oligarchies. Moreover, the correlation of the specific data capturing Athens's levels of performance with its historical chronology reveals that Athens achieved roughly equivalent levels of material flourishing after it had lost its empire to those it had achieved while it still had an empire. In fact, Ober convincingly shows that in Athens the existence of democratic political institutions did not follow growth, but preceded it.

Ober handles his data carefully--correcting for various sorts of systemic bias, even re-assessing the data in light of Thucydides's argument that future generations would overestimate Athens's power by paying too much attention to the extent of the city's public building--and his case is persuasive. Athens was exceptional, and historians need to explain its exceptionalism. While the evidence supports a political explanation, Ober cautions that "the simple fact of [Athens's] being

democratic, in the familiar majoritarian sense," does not suffice. Many cities with basic majoritarian decision-making mechanisms did not perform as Athens did. One needs to ascertain precisely which features of Athenian institutions and culture generated the city's success.

Ober lays out a range of potential solutions to the problems of collective action that any successful polity might have adopted. Michels's iron law presumes that command-and-control solutions are ultimately the only long-lived ones available in political life; but Ober broadens the range of choices by zeroing in on organizational forms that depend on team and peer relations, instead of command-and-control structures. He notices that in the work of economist Oliver E. Williamson, "Peer Group" structures win out over "Authority Relation" structures in "the area of local innovations which 'involve process improvements at individual stations.'" Drawing extensively and effectively on game theory, behavioral economics, and organizational theory, Ober makes a case that problems of collective action--ranging from prisoner's dilemmas to the tragedy of the commons--can be avoided or overcome if institutions effectively cultivate and distribute relevant bodies of knowledge.

Ober's hypothesis is that Athens's participatory institutions essentially turned the city into a knowledge-generating and knowledge-aggregating machine, and also supported the effective deployment of useful knowledge over time. Athenian institutions and culture functioned so that the right useful knowledge made it to the right people at the right time, resulting in the production of consistently better-than-average decisions. Athenian institutions and culture also functioned to provide an effective balance between innovation, on the one hand, and, on the other, learning or routinization, which brings efficiency. To overcome the problem of dispersed and latent knowledge, the Athenians used "networking and teaming." To overcome alignment problems, they built up stores of common knowledge through extensive publicity mechanisms and an emphasis on "interpresence"--frequent and large public gatherings--and "intervisibility" in public spaces, the capacity of all members of an audience to see each other as well as the speaker; and these stores of common knowledge worked particularly well to sustain systems of reward and sanction able to motivate ordinary citizens. To minimize transaction costs in areas such as trade, they standardized rules and exchanged practices and widely disseminated knowledge about them. The Athenians invested more resources than did their competitors in ensuring that their laws did not contradict each other, and in archiving and widely publishing final versions.

Ober devotes the body of his book to "reverse-engineering" Athenian decision-making practices and implementation methods to figure out what made the thing tick, and to see if the evidence emerging from actual Athenian practices supports his hypothesis. Since all this may seem very abstract and theoretical, here is a concrete example. Ober scrutinizes a decree passed by the citizen Assembly in 325-324 B.C.E., which dispatched a fleet to the Adriatic with the goal of establishing a naval station there. The purpose of the naval station was to protect Athenian and non-Athenian ships that transported grain to Athens. This "dispatching" decree, passed by some eight thousand citizens meeting together, assigns specific duties to fourteen different officials or public bodies. The central goal of the decree was to ensure that the city was equipped with the warships it needed for the job, and that all parties involved would be appropriately motivated and

held accountable.

So as to understand the operations of the Athenian polity in this instance, Ober analyzes the different ways in which the fourteen officials and public bodies named in the decree would have had the capacity to bring valuable social knowledge (say, about what effectively motivated citizens to fulfill duties of critical importance to the city) or valuable expert knowledge (about what makes the strongest and fastest warships) to bear on determining how to proceed. I cannot here review the details surrounding all fourteen areas of responsibility invoked in the decree, but in one particularly interesting passage the dispatch decree provided for a competition among wealthy citizens to see who could prepare the soundest ships the fastest. The first, second, and third place winners were to be publicly proclaimed at a major public festival, and each would receive a gold crown valued to reflect the place of the finish. As Ober puts it, "the winners [of the competition would] obviously be those trierarchs [ship producers] who can most quickly assemble the necessary team of experts for service on their ships: men capable of getting the ship properly rigged and outfitted, a full complement of expert rowers, an expert steersman, and so on... . The employment of a race points to a concern with maintaining the complex matrix of specialized knowledge that had enabled the Athenian fleet to dominate the Aegean in the fifth century."

The competition was designed to ensure that citizens would seek out the most useful expert knowledge wherever it might be. An underdog competitor could achieve victory by identifying an expert who had previously gone unnoticed. And the public celebration of the winners provided an opportunity to educate the citizenry generally on what counts as expertise in the domain of warship production. Imagine using the Oscars to award military contracts: first defense contractors would build new weapons, and do so by a deadline; then a panel of citizen judges would determine who had produced the best new weapon by that deadline, and the winner would be announced at a nationally televised black-tie affair. This would be an approach roughly equivalent to the competition used by the Athenians to generate new warships. Ober does not make this fanciful comparison, but it helps to make plain one of his fundamental points: the use of participatory structures to democratize the flow of knowledge is fully compatible with drawing on expert knowledge.

Rather than encouraging citizens to turn their backs on expert knowledge, participatory structures, rightly constructed, provide the expertise, like a jewel, with a richer setting. On Ober's argument, successful participatory structures educate the citizens in technical areas at least well enough to judge which experts are worth heeding; and ensure that the expertise relevant to any particular issue will be flushed out from wherever it may be hiding; and tap into a distinct kind of social knowledge concerning communal well-being--and criteria for assessing what counts as benefit or harm to the community; and provide more frequent reminders to experts of the limits of their own perspectives, so that their contributions too might be more usefully focused. Regimes that base their safety on secret deliberations among experts walk away from all this valuable intellectual capital.

The heart of Ober's book is given to explaining how distinct features of Athens's institutional

structure supplied Athens with the social and epistemic processes that could achieve those ends. As Ober analyzes any number of Athens's idiosyncratic features in this light, they suddenly make good sense. The very complicated structure by which citizens were assigned to ten artificial tribes, out of which lotteried assignments to major state-level governing bodies were made, ensured that the different bodies of knowledge that had developed in different parts of Attica (urban, rural, coastal) were brought together. The fact that the "theater-in-the-round" architectural design emerged in Athens indicates the self-consciousness of the citizenry about how well their meeting spaces could facilitate their learning not only from the speaker but also from each other, as they were able to watch each others' reactions to what was said. The unusual prevalence of such theaters not merely in the urban center itself but also in the countryside reflects the fact that the Athenians achieved scale by joining together small, medium, and larger social units (village, tribe, and city as a whole).

The tension in Athenian jurisprudence between occasions when the citizens chose their own judgment about justice over the law and those occasions when they insisted that they needed to subordinate their own judgment to the law reveals how they balanced innovation and authority. The *thoruboi*, or spontaneous noises of audience members during deliberations among thousands of citizens, were not evidence that Athenian mass audiences were full of ill-mannered ignoramuses, but actually contributed to collective learning. (I was sitting in the audience at a speech by Michelle Obama early in the campaign in which she remarked that her husband would help restore a commitment to the rule of law. I started clapping, alone. But very quickly the room joined me. I had started to clap because I wanted people to recognize that the issue of the "rule of law" was an important one. In joining me by extending the applause, the other audience members in the room took on board that idea. Even in non-verbal ways such as this, citizens engage with and learn from one another. This is what an "epistemic process" looks like.)

I could go on. Any number of mysteries to which individual scholars of Athenian history have devoted whole careers are addressed by Ober, and mostly successfully. This will cause some chagrin and some resistance, as those of us who have worked for years on particular problems see them suddenly, magically resolved. And Ober covers so much ground that a variety of experts are bound to quarrel with particular points (as I would do about the use to which he puts a treason prosecution in his fifth chapter). But Ober does flag controversial issues in his extensive notes, and I spotted no errors of fact, not even in the discussions of complicated Athenian legal procedures. In these chapters he synthesizes vast quantities of prior scholarship--ranging over archaeological, epigraphic, literary, historical, and legal material--to offer the most comprehensive, the most penetrating, and the most explanatory analysis of Athenian institutions to date. The non-specialist will appreciate the brief chronological synopses of Athenian history as well as the clear and analytically forceful presentation of great quantities of information. The specialist will recognize in this book a depth of learning coupled with a lively imagination such as is achieved by only the greatest historians. As for Hamilton, Jay, and Madison--if they could have read Ober's book, they would have had to revise their opinion of the relevance of the Athenian example to efforts to understand the best course available for the American republic.

Ober's careful historical work and his theoretical framework generate a convincing portrait of a flourishing participatory democracy that overcame real crises (oligarchic coups in 411 and 404-403 B.C.E.), and achieved a stable balancing of the interests of masses and wealthy elites, and

responded to collective action problems by developing institutional and cultural solutions that focused on the social distribution and the social valuation of knowledge. These solutions were effective enough to provide the citizens with unusually high levels of per capita income, with distinctively frequent opportunities for self-expression and cultural influence, with a culture that sustained and profited from great amounts of internal dissent and criticism, and with well-protected legal and political rights. The success of this model made Athens the leading destination for immigrants in ancient city-state Greece, and the city's ability to incorporate outsiders further advanced its growth. Moreover, the city used these institutions explicitly to sustain values of liberty, equality, and dignity for all citizens. Does all this sound pretty modern?

But what about slavery and patriarchy, two basic Athenian practices that made that city distinctly un-modern? Athens maintained slavery throughout its existence, and it never granted political rights to women. These two facts often disqualify from the get-go treatments that cast Athens as a source of useful lessons for modern democracies. Athens succeeded, according to one interpretation, only because the wealth extracted from chattel provided citizens with the leisure necessary to carry out their extensive citizen duties. Another view holds that Athens's compromised moral status as a patriarchal and slave society simply prohibits us from admiring it.

About the former point, Ober rightly notes that, since all Greek city-states maintained slavery and barred women from political participation, these phenomena cannot explain Athens's competitive success relative to other cities; and since we cannot explain Athenian success with reference to slavery or patriarchy, the existence in the city of these practices cannot justify dismissing Athens as a useful historical example. But on the second point, the moral one, Ober agrees--not that we should withhold all admiration from Athens, but that the city's failure to end slavery and extend the franchise to women was deplorable. And going beyond the moral question, Ober argues that these practices may have limited Athenian success: the rent-seeking practice may actually have been a drag on the city's economic growth, and the political exclusions certainly deprived the city of the knowledge resources possessed by women and slaves. Here Ober is speculating. The question of the economics of slavery remains highly vexed, and so we cannot take the last suggestion too seriously, much as it would be nice to do so, since it seems to give extra force to the moral point.

Yet the moral issue does not actually touch the heart of Ober's argument. He has offered an explanation of Athens's success that depends on neither slavery nor patriarchy, and in this regard he has indeed extracted from the city a usefully "modern," which is to say egalitarian, account of the sources of democratic strength. But whether we designate Athens as a "modern" political experiment is, I think, unimportant. What matters is that Athens is, in Ober's portrait, a useful historical example for current efforts to understand republican and democratic--and American--practice.

So how is it that in the two hundred years between *The Federalist Papers* and the present, our assessment of the success of Athens might have been so thoroughly inverted? The answer is not

that old and obtuse dead white guys got it wrong, and we with-it moderns and post-moderns have gotten it right. Rather, the entire evidential base for this discussion has changed in the last two hundred years. Ober's book succeeds so well because he stands on the shoulders of legions of scholars who have been toiling in the vineyards since the nineteenth century to achieve a better understanding of Greece in general and of Athens in particular. Their efforts have yielded genuinely transformative discoveries. Only in the late nineteenth century did scholars discover a document called the *Constitution of Athens*, which summarizes the growth of Athenian institutions from the sixth to the fourth century B.C.E. In the fourth century, Aristotle sent research assistants all around the Greek world to collect details about all the constitutions then in existence, and this text of the Constitution of Athens is the only example discovered so far. Whole poems are still being unearthed, as are political treatises; much of Antiphon's "On Truth" was first published only in the early twentieth century. Similarly, a major law concerning coinage, dating to 375-374 B.C.E. and discussed at length by Ober, was unknown until 1970. Even the archaeological remains of the theaters in the Attic countryside are relatively recent discoveries.

In *Federalist* 18, Madison wrote wistfully about the ancient Achaean league: "It is much to be regretted that such imperfect monuments remain of this curious political fabric. Could its interior structure and regular operation be ascertained, it is probable that more light would be thrown by it on the science of federal government, than by any of the like experiments with which we are acquainted." Madison was not referring to Athens, but he might have been. As each piece of new evidence has come out of the ground or emerged between the lines of a palimpsest, scholars working in the areas of Athenian legal and political history, institutional history, cultural history, and literary history have slowly made sense of particular provisions, sentences of text, or practices. Ober has synthesized the work of hundreds of scholars working in this fashion. His bibliography is thirty-eight pages long and in a small font. Building on this work, Ober has sought to ascertain something like what Madison wished for: clarity about the interior structure and regular operation of Athens. His bibliography, and the case for Athens that he has built on its back, are a fine argument for the value of sustained commitments to humanistic scholarship. Over two hundred years, the slow, hard work of humanistic research really does amount to something.

Madison correctly predicted that the fruits of such labor would throw valuable new light on the science of government. Are there, then, insights in the Athenian case, as presented by Ober, that might be useful to the effort to ensure the continued strength of democratic life? What can we know now about America by the fuller Athenian light? This is no idle question. Barack Obama's training as a constitutional lawyer makes him finely attuned to questions of institutional structure. His campaign drew much of its strength from clever, innovative institutional designs that prioritized participatory forms of organization. And Obama himself, during his campaign, more than once argued that he would increase the transparency of government and routinely involve citizens in policy-making. In particular, he stressed that he would approach health care reform differently than in the past; rather than organizing a policy-development process for experts in closed rooms, he would televise all health care hearings and otherwise work to bring the public into the process. Making good on commitments such as this will require another round of imaginative but careful institutional design.

As Ober notes, the immediate usefulness of the Athenian model pertains not directly to nation-states that are vastly larger than the city-state of Athens, with its population of approximately 250,000, but to the wide variety of smaller scale organizations that make up the sub-units of any given nation-state. To unleash the full value of participatory democracy at the level of the nation-state, a citizenry would do best to focus on tapping participatory democracy at the local level and throughout the variety of organizational types that make up modern society. Then there would be the further question of how well each of these sub-units is connected to the rest. If participatory democratic practices on a smaller scale and in various contexts do indeed increase the knowledge resources of the citizenry of a nation-state as a whole, then the structures of representative government, too, should function better. In the epigraph to his book, Ober quotes John Adams, in 1765: "Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right, from the frame of their nature, to knowledge. ... The preservation of the means of knowledge among the lowest ranks is of more importance to the public than all the property of all the rich men in the country. ... In a word, let every sluice of knowledge be opened and set a-flowing."

Athens, as presented in Ober's book, provides many very intriguing examples of specific institutional designs that tapped into the power of participatory democracy to generate increased flows of knowledge and higher levels of well-being for its citizens. It also provides analyses of why some participatory forms, such as referenda, fail to bring much good at all. Is it too much to ask that members of the Obama administration turn to a dense work of ancient history to help them make good on Obama's vision of an American state that combines the resources of representative and participatory democracy? They would take away from *Democracy and Knowledge* at least a few important general ideas.

First, they would receive an emphatic reminder that a transparent, fair, open-access, easily understandable, and non-arbitrary legal system for dispute resolution is a bedrock of republican and democratic flourishing. Second, they would learn that, even in a representative democracy, the structure and the quality of a polity's conversations, considered in relation to the citizenry as a whole, determine both the quality of its collective political decisions and their relative legitimacy as political actions. By "structure," I mean the patterns by which opinions form and ideas move both through and across informal and formal citizen networks. Informal networks are neighborhoods, communities, and other social groupings without durable form. Formal networks are institutions and organized media. One discerns the "structure" of the public sphere by mapping conversational relationships, by analyzing where and how groups or institutions or conversational communities have formed, and by tracing conversational relations among them. Are all of a polity's social groups somehow linked to each other through conversational structures? What percentage of the citizenry is so linked? Who is left out or unconnected, and why? Are there any effectively impermeable barriers to the movement of ideas from one group to another? How often are we finding expertise in unexpected quarters? How often are new ideas finding their way into conversations, or are we always hearing the same old thing? These are questions to ask in order to determine the "structure" of the public sphere.

And there are more questions that need asking. Do these conversations support the learning and the routinization of norms of fair play? Do they support the development of genuine knowledge, providing an opportunity to sort true from false, useful from useless, expert from non-expert? Do

these conversations allow for the development of critical reason and dissent, and so innovation? As democratic citizens, we also need to ask whether our public conversations are inclusive, egalitarian, autonomy-respecting, transparent with respect to interest, and maximally actualizing of individuals.

I am not suggesting, and neither is Ober, that we might improve our politics simply by tuning in to the infinity of conversations eternally buzzing away among the three hundred million or so of us who call ourselves citizens of this state, or that we might improve our politics simply by encouraging more talk. In the era of the Internet, no further incitement to loquaciousness is necessary. The idea of hearing all of what each of us has to say on every subject is probably appalling to all of us. As we begin to use new technologies that do seem to let us tune into each other in some comprehensive way, many of us do come away horrified. We see too many conversations where interlocutors have abandoned facts and logic. We see an absence of true dialogue, as communities of interest turn in on themselves and attend only to what their like-minded colleagues think. Participatory institutions are valuable not merely if they generate or multiply conversations, but if they structure conversations so as to achieve the goals for a knowledgeable democratic life. And this is easier texted than done.

The idea that something called "the public sphere" is important to the success of democracy has been with us for some time now. But analyses that convert the idea of the public sphere from a philosophical ideal into something concrete, by naming the social practices and interactive processes that actually constitute it, are few and far between. Jurgen Habermas famously offered such an analysis in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, when he traced connections in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries among cafe societies, the circulation of news through journalism, bourgeois culture, and opinion formation. Now Josiah Ober's book--when was the last time a work of ancient history seemed so, well, relevant?--identifies the concrete components of a democratic public sphere in far greater detail than any previous contribution to this literature. Moreover, it provides us with some criteria for assessing why some ways of structuring the public sphere might work better than others to educate the citizenry, to find and to deploy the knowledge of citizens, and to sustain a real connection between citizens and the policies that their government chooses in their name. As an advance in our understanding of what a public sphere properly is, this book is essential.

America is not Athens, of course. The Athenian examples worked for Athens, and while its principles are still relevant to us, its specific institutional solutions are unlikely to work here and now. But I could not read Ober's book without returning again and again to the perplexities that face us today. *Democracy and Knowledge* sheds light by teaching its readers to analyze not the workings of representative institutions, but the daily lives of ordinary citizens. To what degree do our ordinary practices and activities turn American democracy into a knowledge-generating, knowledge-aggregating entity capable of effectively organizing and deploying what we know on behalf of our collective well-being?

Josiah Ober shows us that Athens knew what the Athenians knew, because the city as a whole had devised institutions that made sure the useful knowledge of the widest possible range of individuals flowed to where it was needed. Have we fully tapped into the resources of participatory democracy to supplement our own representative structures with a citizenry within

which all the sluices of knowledge are open and have been set a-flowing? Does America know what Americans know?

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