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Review
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BOOK REVIEWS

The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece. KURT RAAFLAUB. Translated by RENATE FRANCISCONO; revised by the author. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xi + 420 p. Cloth $55.00.

The ancient Greeks discovered the concept of political freedom; and ever since, philosophers have wondered whether it might not have been better left in oblivion. Plato scathingly mocked the ideal of *eleutheria* or freedom for its disregard both for the good and for established custom and law.[1] Hobbes, while approving of the Greek notion of the unrestricted freedom of states, claimed that the West had mistakenly applied this notion to individuals as well. Hence, he claimed, men learned from the Greek and Latin authors "the habit of favoring tumults, and licentious controlling of their sovereigns...with the effusion of so much blood that I think I may truly say: there was never anything so dearly bought, as these western parts have bought the learning of Greek and Latin tongues."[2] Nor has opposition to Greek freedom been exclusive to monarchists. Benjamin Constant famously warned against favoring what he called "the liberty of the ancients"—or share in political power without protection from it—over the "liberty of the moderns," or freedom from collective interference in individual life.[3]

In this way, philosophers and historians of ideas have raised two sorts of questions, the first about what sort of freedom it was that the Greeks valued; and the second, whether or not that sort of freedom is a good thing. The pursuit of the first question, and through it the second, should be greatly aided by the new edition and translation from German of Kurt Raaflaub's 1985 monograph *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece. Discovery* is without question a magnificent book. It provides an exhaustive survey of the idea of freedom from Homer to the end of the fifth century B.C., as well as numerous plausible and interesting proposals for understanding its original development and its change over time. Raaflaub's careful attention to period and context gives the book a subtlety and richness of detail that match its broadness of scope. It is true that this same subtlety can

[1] *Republic* 557a–564a; *Laws* 701a–d.
[2] *Leviathan* 21.9.
[3] *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns.*

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make it difficult to find general patterns in what the Greeks thought about freedom; and in addition, those interested in philosophical issues may find themselves frustrated with Raaflaub's failure to signal emphatically key conceptual distinctions. The book's theses about the historical conditions surrounding the concept of freedom are much more clear than its theses about what the concept actually means and how its meaning changes over time. For this reason, reading the book can feel a bit like investigating the nature of an obscure projectile by tracing its path through the air. All the same, the book's lack of clarity on conceptual matters is minor when it is not superficial, and such general patterns as there are in Raaflaub's picture of Greek freedom are well worth the time and effort it takes to untangle them.

Raaflaub's general project is to explain the emergence of a specifically political concept of freedom and to trace developments in its use from the time of Homer up until the end of the fifth century and the beginnings of Greek political theory. Major conceptual changes are plausibly explained by major historical events, chiefly the Persian invasion of Greece in the early fifth century and the growth of the Athenian empire in the aftermath of the Persian wars. The ideal of freedom in these contexts is the freedom of whole city-states, not of individuals. The final stage in Raaflaub's account of the concept of freedom is the emergence of a specifically democratic conception of freedom, which he dates to the middle of the fifth century and the rivalry between Athens and Sparta. The democratic conception of freedom, Raaflaub argues, was at least in part an ideal for individuals as well. In what follows I will describe the key moments in Raaflaub's history of freedom that illustrate its collective character. Then I will discuss in detail Raaflaub's account of the democratic ideal of freedom and the freedom of individuals.

Raaflaub argues that the historical watershed that launches the concept of freedom into its central role in Greek political life is the invasion of mainland Greece by Persia early in the fifth century B.C. (chapter 3).[4] This invasion presented an unprecedented threat of foreign domination, sparking a newfound concern for the independence and self-determination of Greek city-states. At the same time, the prolonged encounter with a political culture the Greeks saw as tyrannical and slavish led them to value anew the constitutions under which they lived: structured, law-governed, and providing citizens some degree of participation in their governance. Thus the Persian

[4] In what follows I reference chapters by topic, omitting chapter 1 (on methodological issues), chapter 2 (on the concept of freedom before the Persian wars), and much of chapter 7 (summary and final considerations).

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wars inspired concern for both the independence of polises from external control (what Raaflaub calls "external freedom") as well as for internal political structures that discouraged or prevented tyranny (what Raaflaub calls "internal freedom"). The joint development of the ideal of self-determination with the ideal of freedom from tyranny was furthered by the Persian sponsorship of local tyrants and their use of them as proxies in those cities they did subjugate.

The second great watershed in the development of the political concept of freedom is the growth of the Athenian empire in the aftermath of the Persian wars (chapter 4). The Athenian empire influenced the development of the concept of freedom first of all by forcing more clear and specific reflection on the nature of self-determination. As a result of the Athenian allies' extended negotiations and failures to negotiate their independence, self-determination was no longer seen simply "from the outside," as freedom from external authority. Rather, a new term, *autonomia*, was coined to describe self-determination as a set of internal conditions such as sovereignty over taxation or judicial matters. Raaflaub elegantly argues that *eleutheria* and *autonomia* should be understood as different perspectives on similar conditions, the first a negative term concerning the absence of outside domination, the second a positive term indicating conditions of self-determination. In this way one can have *autonomia* while under outside rule (that is, without *eleutheria*), but the two words can also describe identical objective conditions.

The Athenian empire also changed the concept of freedom by inspiring or pressuring the Athenians to give some account of the ideal of freedom that was compatible with its subjugation of other Greek states (chapter 5). The result is what Raaflaub calls the Athenian doctrine of absolute freedom, the identification of freedom with unrestricted power. Power over others is not only a condition for freedom, but constitutive of it, an idea neatly summarized in the words of Aeschylus: "No one is free but Zeus."[5] For Raaflaub, the doctrine of absolute freedom does not only concern interstate relations, but is rather a comprehensive political concept referring to internal political conditions as well. Imperialism, for the Athenians, was thus conceptually closely tied with democracy: the Athenian *dēmos* or citizenry did not only rule itself, but also ruled over others.[6] In other words, unlimited power begins at home.

[5] *Prometheus Bound* 50, cited by Raaflaub on p. 187.

[6] The Greek word *dēmos* can refer both to the whole citizenry and to a part of that citizenry, the poor or "the many." I discuss the second, pejorative use below.

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Raaflaub's last major topic is the relation between freedom and democracy (chapter 6). By the fourth century, in Plato and Aristotle, we find freedom closely associated with democracy as opposed to other types of constitution. Raaflaub argues that the connection of freedom with democracy appears late in democracy's development. (By contrast, the concept of equality was closely tied to democracy from the beginning.) The idea that democracies are freer than other nontyrannical types of government appears first in the 430s in the writings of Herodotus and the Old Oligarch (the author of the anti-democratic tract *Constitution of the Athenians*). The association of democracy with freedom thus seems to coincide with discussions of the contrast between democracy and oligarchy, most particularly contrasts between Athens and Sparta. The specifically democratic ideal of freedom that emerged was not just freedom for the demos or citizenry as a whole (as entailed by the Athenian doctrine of absolute freedom), but it involved liberty for individuals as well.

Before I turn to the Athenian ideal of individual freedom in detail, it is worth emphasizing how surprising an ideal of individual freedom appears in this context. The most striking general pattern in the Greek concept of freedom as Raaflaub describes it is its overwhelmingly collective character. This is most obvious when the freedom in question is the freedom of a polis from Persian domination or Athenian hegemony. More surprisingly, a city's freedom from tyranny, a matter of its internal political arrangements, is also a collective form of freedom: the freedom of a whole community from domination by a single man. Likewise, even the democratic concept of *isonomia*, equal distribution of political power combined with equality under the law, is not primarily a matter of the protection of individual liberties. Rather, it is a way of securing the liberty of the whole community; as Raaflaub puts it elsewhere, "individual political rights, important though they are, count mainly as parts of a system that can represent and guarantee freedom only as a whole."[7] In other words, all are counted equally not so much to give power to each, as to give power to *all*.

On the other hand, Raaflaub argues, once democracy and oligarchy are seen as ideological rivals, the notion of democratic freedom develops and expands to include a more robust kind of individual freedom. While it is undeniable that democratic freedom for the Athenians did include freedom for individuals, I fear that Raaflaub exaggerates its importance and blurs some of its key details.

[7] "Democracy, Oligarchy, and the Concept of the 'Free Citizen' in Late Fifth-Century Athens," *Political Theory*, XI (1983): 517–44, here p. 521.

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A constitution, Raaflaub reminds us, was more than just a political system for the Greeks; it entailed a comprehensive way of life, political, social, and individual. Given this, it is not surprising that we find, in the period of heightened awareness of the differences between Athens and Sparta, passages that indicate differences in lifestyle between the two cities. Most notable here is Pericles's "Funeral Oration" in Thucydides, where Pericles praises not only the freedom and power of the Athenian demos as a whole, but the freedom of their way of life as well. Pericles hence extols their tolerance for their neighbor "if he enjoys himself in his own way"[8] and boasts of their individual virtue and self-sufficiency. These passages are echoed later in the book when the general Nicias, in the face of battle, reminds his men that all in Athens "had the liberty to live their lives in their own way."[9] Thus Athenian freedom for individuals meant a free manner of life as well as a share in political power.[10]

It is an interesting question, and one that Raaflaub does not raise directly, just how wide the scope is of the free manner of life that Thucydides and others describe, or how much freedom is actually entailed in such expressions as living "in one's own way" or "as one likes." It is worth stressing that the key historical contrast here is with Sparta and its highly restrictive and austere lifestyle. So whatever the actual scope of individual freedom in Athens, the bar in these contexts has been set rather low.

Raaflaub does point out a significant and nonobvious aspect of Athenian freedom: that it provides key opportunities for social advancement and social status.[11] In this way there is at least one sense that Athenian democracy provided more options for individuals: the lower social strata faced fewer social-class-based restrictions on what they could say or do. As the Old Oligarch notes, the noncitizen slaves live more freely in Athens;[12] and Plato complains in *Republic* VIII that even the animals in a democracy do not seem to know their proper station.[13]

[8] Thucydides II.37.

[9] Thucydides VII.69.

[10] However, Pericles also means to emphasize the contribution the excellence of individuals makes to the whole; and it seems to me plausible that the whole here is of primary importance.

[11] See also Raaflaub, "Democracy, Power, and Imperialism in Fifth-Century Athens," in J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach, and Josiah Ober, eds., *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1994), pp. 103–46, especially pp. 138–46.

[12] Pseudo-Xenophon, *Constitution of the Athenians* 10–12; discussed by Raaflaub on *Discovery*, p. 222.

[13] *Republic* 562b.

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All the same, it still seems reasonable to ask, given the overwhelming emphasis on the collective and the community in Athenian life, how significant the ideal of individual freedom was. Was it a mere social side effect of the collective freedom that receives so much more emphasis? Or did it play any role in Athenian justification of democracy, as Raaflaub argues it did?

For Raaflaub, the coinage of the word *parrhēsia* (freedom of speech) in the last third of the fifth century is key to understanding the development of the democratic notion of freedom. *Parrhēsia* constitutes "the free person's unrestricted right to express his opinion" and so is required for the freeman to "achieve full self-realization" (223). As such, *parrhēsia,* "more than anything else, constituted democratic freedom" (225). Furthermore, Raaflaub suggests, it has a key individualistic component.[14]

I find Raaflaub's discussion here puzzling and problematic. It is clear that *parrhēsia* often means to "speak freely," that is, to speak frankly and without fear of reprisal. It is also true, as Raaflaub perceptively shows, that the privilege of speaking freely was identified with the status of citizenship; to be without it, as several passages in Euripides show, is to be like a slave (223). But I am not sure that it follows from these two features of the word that it constitutes an unrestricted right to express one's opinion. The freedom connected with the word seems to have quite a narrow meaning: a freedom to speak the truth without reprisal; or somewhat more broadly, the privilege of giving "good advice" to one's city.[15] This is surely narrower than the freedom to say whatever one wants.[16] Likewise, the identification of the right of *parrhēsia* with citizenship and its denial with slavery does not seem enough to draw Raaflaub's conclusions. A slave has a restricted sphere of action, but more than that, he is a foreigner, an alien. The notion of freedom of speech thus uncomfortably straddles the idea of a narrow option (speaking without reprisal) and what Raaflaub calls self-fulfillment (participation in one's community through citizenship). I do not know that separately or together they can amount to an unrestricted right to express one's opinion.

[14] As on, for example, p. 276.

[15] As in Euripides, *Suppliants* 438–41, discussed on *Discovery,* p. 228.

[16] There are instances of *parrhēsia* in Isocrates (for example, *Areopagiticus* 20.7, *Busiris* 40.3) where it is used to say something shameful or against *nomos.* But this will not be enough to widen the scope of the relevant freedom: after all, it could be that Isocrates is describing something considered "truth" or "good advice" from another perspective. For similar reasons it seems unwise to look to democracy's critics for the scope of *eleutheria.*

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Perhaps the deeper source of my discomfort here is that Raaflaub comes close to calling *parrhēsia* a right of self-expression. But this cannot mean self-expression in our sense, as the expression of a unique and individual point of view or set of values. Athenian democracy does not seem to be based on pluralistic ideals; it does not seem to value the inclusion of a plurality of irreducibly individual perspectives or Rawlsian conceptions of the good.[17] Perhaps Raaflaub means rather that *parrhēsia,* because it is equivalent to citizenship, is means of self-fulfillment and self-development. If so, this notion of individual democratic freedom may still be what Constant thought it was: self-fulfillment by participating in a whole larger than oneself.[18] Even so, I do not see how the use of *parrhēsia* illuminates this notion of self-fulfillment, nor does Raaflaub make it clear that this is the sense of individual freedom that he means.

In summary, I am not convinced that individual freedom was a significant political ideal for the Athenians. It seems to me questionable to put much weight on the individual Athenian freedom described by Thucydides, as these passages can be more modestly explained by Athenian pride in the cultural differences between themselves and their enemy in wartime. Nor do I see a convincing case that the concept of *parrhēsia* shows the importance of individual freedom in justifying democracy. Lastly, although overly "free" social and individual behavior is prominent in anti-democratic writing from the Old Oligarch through Plato and Aristotle, this alone would not tell us how Athenian democrats conceived of such behavior. Nor is it even clear how important freedom in individual lifestyle is in the ancient critiques of democracy. It is certainly more common for the critics to challenge the idea that the ruling *dēmos* constitutes the whole city: for them, democracy is the rule of a single faction, the poor. (The word *dēmos* was used in Greek both to refer to the citizenry as a whole and to refer to a particular faction, the poor or "the rabble.")

The emphasis Plato seems to put on individual liberty in his critique of democracy in *Republic* VIII may be misleading on this point. After all, the central question of the *Republic* is the choice of lives, and individual character-types are a key part of the way that question is framed. It is true that Plato is also interested in ways in which the concept of liberty may inadvertently justify tyranny, and one key

[17] If this is right, it may also partly explain the tension Josiah Ober describes between the democratic ideal of freedom and the ideal of consensus or *homonoia* (*Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: University Press, 1989), pp. 295–99).

[18] C.f. also Isaiah Berlin's notion of positive freedom as described in *Two Concepts of Liberty* (New York: Oxford, 1958).

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step in that justification may be the application of a collective value to an individual. The simplest argument of that form may be that the Athenian doctrine of unrestricted freedom for the polis applied to individuals justifies the unconstrained rule of the strongest individual.[19] But Plato here is intentionally turning Athenian ideals inside out and trying to show that they mean something they were never intended to mean.

In Raaflaub's conclusion, he discusses the Greek idea that the relations within a polis were a microcosm of the relations between polises, as an explanation for the pervasiveness of freedom within the democratic polis as well as without. But the application of collective ideals to individuals and vice versa did not happen in an unrestricted fashion; otherwise, the "freedom as power" doctrine could have justified tyranny. Rather, for the Athenians, the collective group of citizens is the primary bearer of freedom; individuals share in this primarily by directly sharing in its power. It may well be of secondary importance to them that individuals are also free by having a less restrictive lifestyle than they might elsewhere.

I should note that these tentative critical remarks are partly influenced by the strength of Raaflaub's own account of the Greek ideal of collective freedom. By that it should be all the more clear that my criticisms are not meant diminish the accomplishment of this vast and thought-provoking book. It provides an unrivaled opportunity to better understand the most dramatic and controversial political legacy of the Greeks.

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[19] I am not sure Plato ever makes this argument explicitly, but something along these lines is clearly suggested in the *Gorgias*. Two excellent recent discussions of the connection between democratic and tyrannical ideals in the *Gorgias* are Rachel Barney, "Plato on the Two Faces of Rhetoric" (manuscript) and Rachana Kamtekar's "The Profession of Friendship: Callicles, Democratic Politics, and Rhetorical Education in Plato's *Gorgias*" (forthcoming in *Ancient Philosophy*).

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