

diversity card.” He likens their condition to that of gays, bisexuals, transgendered, and others, who are often afraid of “coming out” and have been subjected to “stereotyping,” treated as “scapegoats,” and “routinely excoriated,” and who have become the target of “heinous accusations,” “sporadic blacklisting,” and widespread “intolerance.” He does not go quite as far as to suggest that Straussians should be legally defined as a protected class, but he argues that “insofar as dominant sectors of U.S. society—political, corporate, legal, medical, and academic—are rapturous in celebrating diversity, Straussians too are entitled to grouse” (p. 8). This picture is, however, hard to square with the status of Straussians in many major university departments and their prevalence in many smaller colleges. Although it is possible to find instances in which Straussians have arguably been discriminated against because of their scholarly stance, political science journals and professional meetings have by and large treated their work with respect.

The author does not, for the most part, challenge Drury’s knowledge of Strauss’s work and the Straussian literature. What he is concerned about is her extrapolations, the underlying intent she attributes to Strauss, and the practical implications she imputes to Straussianism. There have been some reasonably documented connections between Strauss and people in political power, but nothing that matches the salacious scene in Robbins’s punk satire drama. It is difficult to engage seriously Norton’s anecdotal oracular treatment, but the polemics of Drury and Xenos have attempted a more systematic textual account of Strauss as an archconservative, antiliberal, and antimodernist whose ideas were deeply influential in right-wing American politics. These claims are open to challenge, and Minowitz confronts them in detail, but one may very well wonder what is really behind this fierce and morally charged debate and what it has added to the conversation of political theory.

Despite the various ways in which Strauss may be interpreted and judged, his work directs attention to significant and persistent questions in political theory. It is worthwhile noting that Drury’s animus emanates in part from her belief that Strauss distorted the authentic meaning and promise of natural law. The concept of influence is, however, a slippery one, which sometimes amounts to little more than putting two things side by side and noting a family resemblance. Given the fact that many Straussians are, as was Strauss himself, politically conservative, it should not be surprising that either certain political actors would have been drawn to Straussian ideas or that Straussians would have been attracted to the seat of conservative power. In the United States, however, most instances of either academic intellectuals seeking political influence or politicians attempting to enact philosophical ideas primarily represent stories of unrequited hope. Talk show hosts are probably much more effective than someone such as

Strauss or the kinds of intellectuals that Mark Lilla has dubbed *Reckless Minds* (2001). The vast negative influence sometimes attributed to Strauss may, to some degree, be inspired by the same impulse that led Strauss to argue that Machiavelli was the founder of modernity. It may reflect the academic dream that relatively obscure intellectuals can aspire to world-historical significance.

The case of Strauss and Straussianism is, however, in many ways a unique, and certainly interesting, phenomenon in the American academy, and the full story, whether as fact or—in the case of Saul Bellow’s *Ravelstein* (2000)—fiction, has yet to be written. Although Strauss was especially successful in adapting to the American university, he is best understood in the context of Weimar philosophy and in the company of the émigré scholars who entered the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Eric Voegelin, and various lesser-known figures and fellow travelers confronted American politics and the American academy from perspectives formed in Europe. In their narratives of Western political thought, they claimed to have found crucial intellectual junctures where liberalism, pluralism, positivistic science, the loss of transcendental criteria of knowledge, and the idea of historical progress were all implicated in the decline of Western political philosophy, which produced an epoch of political and cultural crisis.

If we wish to understand Strauss, it is necessary to look to figures ranging from Friedrich Jacobi (the subject of his doctoral dissertation) to Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt. Strauss is a fascinating historical figure, but his rhetorical story of the classic canon, as well as his idiosyncratic interpretations of some of the thinkers who represented the *dramatis personae*, are difficult to either defend or attack. Although it is easy to find indications of unsettling ideas in his writings, one might be skeptical that this obscure, and sometimes obscurantist, corpus was a fundamental cause of the putative debasement of American politics. Many political theorists, including both Straussians and anti-Straussians, continue to find it difficult to believe that politics has its own logic.

Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens. By Josiah Ober. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. 342p. \$29.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

Free Riding. By Richard Tuck. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. 223p. \$35.00.
doi:10.1017/S1537592710001659

— Frank Lovett, *Washington University in St. Louis*

These books are both written by eminent political historians, and both represent something of a departure for their respective authors; specifically, they represent a new interest in the rational choice theory of collective action. This turn is less pronounced in Josiah Ober’s book, which

employs collective action theory relatively modestly and constructively in the service of familiar aims. In Richard Tuck's book, by contrast, a direct critical engagement with collective action theory is the central theme. While each book is exceptionally learned, engaging, and informative—and thus, emphatically worth reading—neither perfectly succeeds. In my view Ober's book, which departs less from his previous interests, succeeds considerably more.

Ober describes *Democracy and Knowledge* as the completion of "a trilogy on the theory and practice of politics in classical Athens" (p. 30). The previous two volumes, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (1989) and *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* (1998), established him as one of the leading scholars of classical Athenian politics. Contrasted with, say, the well-known work of Mogens Herman Hansen, these earlier works approached their subject primarily from an ideational, and not institutional, direction: Their main concern was to show how a hegemonic democratic ideology was able to sustain genuine democracy at Athens for nearly two centuries, even as it also generated a sophisticated dissenting tradition among intellectual elites. In the book under review, however, Ober moves away from ideology and turns toward institutions.

The central argument of this new book is that the specifically democratic institutions of ancient Athens enabled it to more effectively harness useful knowledge dispersed among its citizenry, and thus to significantly outperform its major rivals in a highly competitive geopolitical environment. As Ober makes clear, this is an argument about the economic and social efficiency of democracy, not a moral or ethical argument about its value; nevertheless, for those of us who believe that democracy is indeed morally superior to other forms of political organization, it is important and reassuring to learn that democracy can indeed compete on favorable terms with its rivals when necessary.

Ober's argument unfolds in three main stages. In the first stage, his aim is to establish empirically that for much of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C.E., democratic Athens not only kept pace but indeed significantly outperformed its major political and military rivals on multiple dimensions; Chapter 2 marshals considerable and compelling evidence supporting this contention. In the second stage (Chapter 3), Ober's aim is to develop a theoretical explanation for Athenian exceptionalism. Roughly speaking, the explanation advanced starts with the thought that all human communities must somehow organize the joint activities of their members in the pursuit of public aims if they are to survive competition. Joint action typically faces well-known obstacles, however: For example, there is the problem that much of the knowledge relevant for determining optimal collective aims is highly dispersed, the problem that achieving public aims often requires complex coordination, and the problem that individuals may often have incentives to free-ride on collective enterprises.

Fortunately, suitably designed democratic institutions can overcome these collective action problems: Widespread participation in political processes enables citizens to share their local knowledge, align their actions and expectations with those of other citizens, and reduce incentives for free riding.

Thus far, the argument is extremely persuasive; it is only in the third stage that some problems emerge. Ober reasons that since democratic Athens did, in fact, outperform its rivals in a highly competitive environment, it must follow that its institutions successfully overcame the usual obstacles to joint action. Chapters 4 through 6 aim to document this prediction in detail. Chapter 4, for example, examines a fourth-century assembly decree authorizing the establishment of a naval station in the Adriatic Sea. The incredible complexity and detail of this decree illustrates the extent to which dispersed knowledge had been successfully harnessed and specialized activities coordinated by the Athenians. This chapter also examines the intricate structure of the Council of 500, suggesting how service on the council might build elaborate social and informational networks. And so on. Chapters 5 and 6 follow in a similar vein, the former concentrating on examples in which institutions help align diverse actions and expectations, the latter on examples in which institutions help reduce transaction costs and thus temptations to free-ride.

While all this is very interesting, nevertheless one cannot avoid the nagging feeling that there is a problem here with selection on the dependent variable: In other words, if we start by selecting an exceptional *explanandum*, then anything we happen to find in its proximity will seem a plausible *explanans*. Did not the other city-states have their own institutional mechanisms for aggregating information, aligning actions and expectations, and so on? What were these institutions like? How, specifically, did they operate differently from the Athenian institutions? Why did the Athenian institutions perform so much better? That said, it is difficult to make comparative arguments in the absence of comparative data, and so perhaps Ober should not be faulted with the limits of the source materials available to him.

The problems with Richard Tuck's *Free Riding* are rather different, and ultimately more serious. Much like Ober, Tuck has, through his widely influential previous writings, established himself as a leading scholar in the particular domain of his expertise—namely, early modern political thought. Unlike Ober, however, Tuck in this new book departs less from his established approach than from his established domain. This book is essentially a historically minded critique of the contemporary idea—which Tuck associates especially with Mancur Olson—that it is not rational for an individual to contribute to a collective project if his or her particular contribution seems negligible, as it does in many large collective projects, such as

electing a president, contributing to public television, reducing carbon emissions, and so forth.

In order to understand what Tuck wants to argue, it is necessary to quote from Olson: “A farmer who placed the interests of other farmers above his own would not necessarily restrict his production to raise farm prices, since he would know that his sacrifice would not bring a noticeable benefit to anyone. Such a rational farmer, however unselfish, would not make such a futile and pointless sacrifice. . . . Selfless behavior that has no perceptible effect is sometimes not even considered praiseworthy. A man who tried to hold back a flood with a pail would probably be considered more of a crank than a saint, even by those he was trying to help. It is no doubt possible infinitesimally to lower the level of a river in a flood with a pail, just as it is possible for a single farmer infinitesimally to raise prices by limiting his production, but in both cases the effect is imperceptible, and those who sacrifice themselves in the interest of imperceptible improvements may not even receive the praise normally due selfless behavior” (*The Logic of Collective Action*, 1965, p. 64; quoted by Tuck, pp. 8–9). What Tuck infers from passages such as this is that Olson derives the irrationality of contributing from the negligibility of the individual contribution. In response, he offers an extended discussion of negligibility, with the aim of demonstrating that it is perfectly rational for a person to believe that even very small contributions to a collective project are causally efficacious in a meaningful sense, and thus that they are worth undertaking.

Chapter 1 poses the general problem Tuck is interested in, and Chapter 2 distinguishes this specific problem—where individual contributions seem negligible—from various other related collective-action problems, such as the prisoner’s dilemma. Chapter 3 then presents the main philosophical argument of the book: roughly that, at least provided there are a sufficient number of other contributors, it is perfectly rational for an individual to view his or her marginal contribution, however small, as having a genuine causal relationship to the relevant outcome. Provided that enough other people vote for a specific candidate, for example, I can view my additional vote as contributing to the margin of the candidate’s victory. It follows that I have a reason to vote, even on a relatively narrow understanding of rationality. This seems contrary to the conclusion of Olson and his followers.

The remaining chapters are more historical. With his characteristic thoroughness and attention to detail, Tuck traces the history of the idea of negligibility, from the ancient discussions of the “sorites paradox” to the present day (Chapter 3); the connection between this and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century debates about rule and act utilitarianism (Chapter 4); and finally, the development of the current conception of perfect markets in which individual economic actors cannot influence prices unilaterally (Chapter 5). True to the author’s usual form,

these chapters each make for fascinating and edifying reading in their own right; it is thus especially unfortunate that they labor in support of a project ultimately resting on a mistake.

The mistake can be simply put by emphasizing the word “sacrifice” in the passage from Olson just quoted. If the issue were simply the negligibility of the individual contribution to a common project, why is this word used? Obviously, because the contribution also *carries some cost for the individual contributor*. The farmer who restricts his production will thereby restrict his sales; the lone crank with the pail wastes time and effort; the individual voters must go to the trouble of informing themselves, of registering in a timely manner, of conveying themselves to the polls, and so forth. Olson’s point is that when individual contributions have a very small effect on outcomes, the marginal benefit to the individual of contributing (an infinitesimal increase in farm prices) is much more likely to be outweighed by the costs of doing so (reduced sales). What ultimately matters, however, is the balance, not the absolute smallness of one side of the equation. This is why (*pace* Tuck) the prisoner’s dilemma is essentially the same—and not a different—problem. Showing that we have a reason (great or small) to contribute does not establish the rationality of contribution, unless we can also show that this reason outweighs any countervailing reasons (great or small) we have *not* to contribute. Judging from the failure of America to reduce its carbon footprint through the well-meaning efforts of conscientious individuals, say, it seems clear that Olson was right to worry that the balance will often favor the latter over the former.

Despite the objections canvassed here (relatively major in the case of Tuck, much less so in the case of Ober), let me reiterate that these are both books very much worth reading, if for no other reason than for the extremely rich and interesting historical detail to be found in each. In this respect, both authors live up to their justly earned reputations as great political historians. Rational choice theory is here to stay, and it is commendable that political theorists of all stripes are increasingly engaging with it in a serious manner.

American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture. By George Shulman. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 320p. \$ 75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1537592710001660

— Keally McBride, *University of San Francisco*

A number of years back I had a student who, after spending a few weeks studying Marx and Gramsci, decided to see if she could have one day without any participation in the capitalist economic system. She wrote an account of her efforts, which became increasingly far-fetched and humorous, yet she was also clearly pained by her inability