

## *After Cultural Studies:* WHEN THE STATE HAS NOT WITHERED AWAY\*

---

**Josiah Ober**  
*Stanford University*

THE TERM “CULTURE” does a lot of work in the recent scholarship of many fields, including history and political theory. But culture is a fuzzy term—it means quite different things to different people, even in the same field. The anthropologist William Sewell has sought to bring clarity to the discussion by distinguishing between two of the primary senses of culture in common use today: First, in the classical anthropology associated with Ruth Benedict, a culture is understood descriptively as constitutive of society, as “a concrete and bounded world of beliefs and practices.” We may think of this first sense of culture as a spectrum, ranging from umbrella cultures or broad cultural zones (“Hellenic culture”), through clearly defined societies or communities (“Athenian culture”), to subsocietal groups or micro-communities (“Athenian citizen culture”). Within this spectrum, contemporary political theorists have been especially concerned with the middle term, the so-called “societal culture.” The societal culture may or may not be coextensive with a sovereign state. It was defined, in an influential book by Will Kymlicka, a leading political theorist, as “a culture which provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities... encompassing both public and private spheres... territorially concentrated and based on a shared language.” Sewell’s second sense of culture is “a theoretically defined category or aspect of social life.” Sewell rightly notes that a lack of attention to the fundamental distinction between culture-as-society and culture-as-theory leads to confusion as other disciplines borrow the term from anthropology.<sup>1</sup>

---

\*This is a substantially revised and abbreviated version of a longer chapter, “Postscript: Culture, Thin Coherence, and the Persistence of Politics,” in *The Cultures within Greek Culture*, ed. Carol Dougherty and Leslie Kurke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 237–55. That earlier and longer version was reprinted in Josiah Ober, *Athenian Legacies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).



Ober, Josiah. “After Cultural Studies: When the State Has Not Withered Away.”  
*Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 1, no. 1 (May 1, 2009):  
<http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/31>.

Sewell concentrates on culture-as-theory, insisting upon its autonomy from other approaches to social analysis (e.g. politics or economics). He notes that culture-as-theory can in turn be subdivided into two primary analytic approaches. The first of these, associated with Clifford Geertz, maps readily onto Kymlicka's descriptive concept of "societal culture." The Geertzian approach emphasizes the ways in which people create and maintain a distinct "world of meaning." It assumes quite high levels of *coherence* and consequently emphasizes the connectedness of individuals who fall within a cultural sphere. While sympathetic to some aspects of the Geertzian approach, Sewell himself leans toward a second approach to culture-as-theory, associated with Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's approach deemphasizes coherence to focus on how people employ social practices for purposes of cultural *contestation*. Sewell's own definition of culture-as-theory juxtaposes meaning and practice, coherence and contestation: "a dialectic of system and practice, ... a dimension of social life autonomous from other such dimensions [e.g. politics or economics] both in its logic and in its spatial configuration... a system of symbols *possessing a real but thin coherence* that is continually put at risk in practice [by human agents] and therefore subject to transformation" (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

The "thinness" of coherence in Sewell's definition is essential to the project of reassessing ancient Greek culture, resistance, and politics. A recent collection of essays entitled *The Cultures within Greek Culture* shows that a "Sewellian thin coherence" analysis can tell us a lot about Greek culture.<sup>3</sup> This suggests in turn that theorizing predicated on an assumption that the coherence of Greek culture must in fact have been extraordinarily thick is likely to go wrong. Rousseau and Hannah Arendt are prominent examples of influential theorists who illustrated some of their arguments by reference to Greek culture imagined as being very thick indeed. But more relevant here, modern communitarians and their liberal critics have made very similar interpretive moves. The recognition that a given Greek societal culture (e.g. Athens) is best understood as only thinly coherent, continually at risk in practice, and subject to transformation, provides grounds for rejecting appropriations of "the Greeks" by theorists eager to deploy an illusory "thick-culture Greece" for illiberal and anti-modernist political projects. By the same token, "thinly coherent Greek cultures" become newly relevant to very different sorts of theoretical projects. Freed from the baggage of thick coherence, Greek historical experience is available as an intellectual resource to those who embrace modernity, yet struggle with its dilemmas. And so Greek cultures might (as I hope to show below) play a key role in contemporary debates on normative issues.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> William Sewell, "The Concept(s) of Culture," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 39. Will Kymlicka, following Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), supposes that societal cultures are unique products of modernization. But the concept of societal culture, as he uses it, applies readily to the world of the Greek poleis. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Sewell, "The Concept(s) of Culture," 52.

<sup>3</sup> Carol Dougherty and Leslie Kurke, eds., *The Cultures within Ancient Greek Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen T. Holmes, "Aristippus In and Out of Athens," *American Political Science Review* 73 (1979): 113-28, is a good example of a dedicated liberal's claim, on the grounds of the presumptive thickness of the polis and its appropriation by illiberal thinkers, that the polis is meaningless for contemporary political thinking. On communitarian fascination with the model of the polis (and their tendency to conflate Aristotle's ideal state in *Politics*, bk. 7, with Athens), see D. L. Phillips, *Looking Backward: A Critical Appraisal of Communitarian Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 122-48. On Arendt and the Greeks, see recently Peter Euben, "Arendt's

Each of the several ways of conceiving “culture” discussed by Sewell—as bounded society and bounded micro-community, as coherent system of meaning and as contestatory system of practice—helps us to better describe the world, and none of them is easily abandoned. Given the persistence of these multiple conceptions of culture, once we have identified multiple culture-worlds that coexist within any broad culture-zone—i.e. “the cultures within Greek culture”—we can assess each micro-community, each societal culture, and each cultural zone in terms of Sewell’s practice/meaning and coherence/contestation dialectic. And then we can assess the interaction *between* micro-communities, societal cultures, and culture zones in terms of the same dialectical tensions. Social analysis along multiple axes (culture-world/cultural theory; micro-community/societal culture/culture zone; practice/meaning; coherence/contestation) is analytically challenging yet normatively valuable. The normative significance of Greek culture emerges with much greater clarity after a substantial amount of hard descriptive work has been done.

In the field of classics there has been a lot of attention to careful description. *The Cultures within Greek Culture* points the way to an interdisciplinary dialogue between explicitly normative political theory and implicitly normative cultural studies. That dialogue can benefit both disciplines by supplying each with a richer conceptual vocabulary. Political theorists concerned with problems of “multicultural justice,” would gain a more nuanced vocabulary for addressing “culture.” Practitioners of cultural studies in turn would gain a vocabulary for making their implicit normative critique of power and inequality clearer and more explicit.<sup>5</sup>

This is not an easy conversation to get going, given the divergent styles of argument typical of the two disciplines.<sup>6</sup> Despite the tendency of both political theory and cultural studies to privilege modernity as such, ancient Greece is a particularly good place to begin. Once we have dispensed with the fiction of the thickly coherent polis, the field of classical studies becomes an apt space for the conversation because classics, as an academic field, embraces the study of both political thought and cultural studies. It is not news to classicists that paying attention to culture is important when reading Plato (the dramatic setting of the *Republic* is Piraeus, Athens’ most multicultural deme), or that Herodotus explores problems of political theory (e.g. the “Persian Debate over Constitutions”).

The dialogue need not take place just *within* the field of classics, as I will attempt to show by juxtaposing passages from two articles—one by a prominent student of cultural studies (Sewell) and the other by a prominent political theorist (Jeremy Waldron). Although developed as arguments within the context of specific intra-disciplinary debates, each article is concerned with similar issues of culture and politics. Moreover that common concern with culture and politics is motivated by a common normative worry about the constraints associated with thick cultural coherence.

Sewell’s several definitions of culture allow us to think more clearly about large-scale culture-zones (e.g. “Hellas”). Umbrella cultures are defined by widely shared attributes—in the Greek case, a common language, an orientation toward certain sacred places and their attendant

---

Hellenism,” in *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and, in the same volume, Jeremy Waldron, “Arendt’s Constitutional Politics,” 201-19.

<sup>5</sup> I am assuming that some political theorists do embrace “nuance,” and that some cultural studies practitioners do embrace “clarity,” as desirable attributes.

<sup>6</sup> The potential for that dialogue to be fruitful, as well as the difficulties of bringing it about, were brought home to me by participation in Princeton’s University Center for Human Values Fellows’ Seminar in the academic year 2001-2, which brought together cultural studies theorists and political theorists. This essay was first presented to that Seminar, and it owes much to each of the Seminar’s participants.

rituals (Delphi), and an attachment to certain narratives and their attendant genres (Homeric epic). At the other end of the spectrum are micro-communities (e.g. professional musicians), whose members share in more arcane and specialized sets of attributes, for example the mastery of demanding and abstruse artistic techniques. In between these poles lie societal cultures, including states—communities whose members are bonded to one another by political ties: In Greece, these prominently include the *poleis*.<sup>7</sup> The demonstration that “cultural communities” are diverse in their scope and defining attributes, and that the term “culture” is *not* usefully limited to societal cultures, is normatively important because it exposes the error of robust forms of cultural *relativism*: If “Nazi officialdom” and “Doctors without Borders” (in a simple case) can both be described as “cultural communities of meaning and practice,” manifesting a certain semiotic logic and coherence, then it is patently absurd to claim that all cultural communities are equally deserving of respect or disdain.

But a second, more challenging set of evaluative questions is raised by recent work on the internal diversity of classical Greek culture: Does a vulnerable cultural community have an intrinsic right to persist, a valid collective claim to defense against hegemonic intrusion by states or intrusive umbrella cultures?<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, should we regard the potential access to “cultural variety” (that is, access to cultures and cultural products beyond those into which we are born) as a fundamental good—a basic human entitlement comparable to or part of individual freedom? If so, does free individual access to cultural variety require and deserve legal protection against hegemonic cultural demands of a particular community—whether those demands are made by a nation-state, some other societal culture, or even a micro-community seeking to maintain coherence among the meanings accepted by its members? Something like that normative position is argued by cosmopolitan liberal political theorists like Waldron, who (as an expert in constitutional law) regards formal immunities guaranteed by legislative statutes and legal arguments as especially appropriate methods for protecting free access to cultural diversity.<sup>9</sup>

For Sewell, working with the concept of culture-as-theory, it is an important proof of the autonomy of culture that “the meaning of a symbol always transcends any particular context.” Hence, meanings deployed in the social context of any particular set of relations are invariably influenced or affected by other contexts in which meanings are determined. The normative point is that this potential for “cross-appropriation”<sup>10</sup> provides for the possibility of resistance and contestation. Sewell’s example is work relations, and the “other contexts” he cites notably include statutes and legal arguments (as well as strikes, socialist tracts, and economic treatises).<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> I say “prominently include” rather than “are” in recognition of the variety of non-polis political structures, notably *koina* (“federal leagues”; see Emily Mackil, “Wandering Cities: Alternatives to Catastrophe in the Greek Polis,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 108 [2004]: 493-516) that also existed in the Greek world. Note too that some “societal cultures” may exist as “micro-communities” within states: Indeed, much of the political theoretical work on societal cultures has focused on the rights such communities can claim against the state; see below.

<sup>8</sup> This, in respect to societal cultures, is the central claim of Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*. In the Greek case, this question is probably best addressed within the context of the *koinon*, rather than the polis.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Waldron, “Minority Cultures and the Cosmopolitan Alternative,” *Journal of Law Reform* 25 (1992): 751-93; see further, below. It is important to distinguish Waldron’s cosmopolitan concern for free access to diverse cultural resources from Kymlicka’s preservationist concern for protecting existing indigenous and minority cultures from external encroachment or dilution.

<sup>10</sup> I borrow this term from Charles Spinosa, Fernando Flores, and Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Disclosing New Worlds: Entrepreneurship, Democratic Action, and the Cultivation of Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” 48-49.

Waldron is concerned with free access to and fair distribution of the products of culture-worlds, whereas Sewell is concerned with how the autonomy of culture-as-theory explains how agents resist the constraints of power. Yet both the cultural theorist and the normative theorist are seeking to address the moral problem of how human agents gain the capacity to successfully contest potentially burdensome social constraints. And both see “culture,” as well as legal institutions, as a key to that moral problem.

Ancient and modern history alike provide numerous examples of people enthusiastically supporting the coherence-claims of societal cultures when they are constituted as states.<sup>12</sup> This poses problems in that nationalist sentiment may serve to restrict free access to cultural diversity while simultaneously rendering it difficult for any “sub-national” societal culture to maintain its own coherence. Waldron advocates “cosmopolitanism” as an alternative to nationalist loyalties. Is there any rational and just reason for a human agent to choose the constraints of nationalism over the freedom of cosmopolitanism? That choice might be informed by the Aristotelian argument that humans are by nature “political animals.” On this view, citizenship, defined as active participation in a political community, is an end into itself, a fundamental human good that may be chosen in preference to other fundamental goods, under conditions in which disagreement about ends is seen as legitimate.<sup>13</sup>

Alternatively, someone might reject Aristotle’s natural ends line of argument and yet still choose to accept the cultural claims of a nation-state because she believes that citizenship (or even lesser forms of national membership) may be an efficient instrumental means to other desired ends, e.g. a fairer distribution of social goods such as wealth, education, or health care. Sewell notes that systems of meaning are not coextensive with national boundaries, but he also urges students of cultural studies to “pay at least as much attention to [states as] sites of concentrated cultural practice as to the dispersed sites of resistance that currently predominate in the [cultural studies] literature.”<sup>14</sup> Situating the implicit normative claims of cultural theorists for the value of contestation and resistance within the realm of state politics, between the cosmopolitan’s freedom to choose among diverse cultural options and the citizen seeking a fairer distribution of social goods, may help to clarify what is at stake in the developing enterprise of cultural studies.

The diverse reality of the Greek cultural zone, for instance, certainly breaks the bounds of Pericles’ and Isocrates’ partial and ultimately Athenocentric visions. But does it also break the bounds of the mutual implication of culture and politics that is the assumed framework for their Panhellenic sentiments? Sewell implicitly raises this mutual implication of culture and politics as

---

<sup>12</sup> For purposes of this essay, I think it is fair to consider large poleis (like Athens and Sparta) and Greek koina as in some ways similar to modern nation-states. They are, to be sure, quite different from modern nation-states (above all in the absence of a strong distinction between citizenry and government), but that fact should not blind us to the continuities: Both are political-cultural entities that make explicit demands upon their members as citizens, in terms of risks and costs, and offer explicit benefits including access to economic, political, and cultural opportunities.

<sup>13</sup> The notion that group membership is a fundamental good in itself is the starting premise of both communitarian political theory (e.g. Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], and *Liberalism and Its Critics* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1984]), and policies that seek to protect indigenous cultures from the encroachments of the nation-state (such as those advocated by Kymlicka). The liberalism advocated by Isaiah Berlin assumes disagreement over fundamental goods. Liberal perfectionists seek to show that choice-worthy fundamental goods are compatible. For an example of this view, see Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” 56.

a normative problem by noting that the constraining quality of semiotic systems must be a product of the way semiotic structures are “interlocked in practice” with other structures—including politics.<sup>15</sup> Must culture, then, be implicated in politics? I think that the answer is yes, whether we define politics broadly as the organized play of power, or somewhat more narrowly, as the enterprise of seeking answers to questions like “How is justice administered? And within what borders?” When writing about a particular “culture within Greek culture,” the dissident intellectual culture that flourished within democratic Athens,<sup>16</sup> I advanced a strong view about the relationship between politics and culture: that politics is central to any proper understanding of Greek cultural history. While rejecting the extreme position that culture can be *collapsed into* politics (or vice versa—and thus accepting Sewell’s claim for the conceptual autonomy of culture-as-theory), I continue to regard that strong view as correct.

Accepting the view that doing serious cultural history means thinking seriously about politics has obvious methodological implications. It means, for example, that if Thucydides’ Pericles seeks (as some readers have supposed he does) in the Funeral Oration to create a sphere of “the political” that is fully disengaged from either “the private” or “the cultural,” he is doomed to failure. This “separate spheres” conception proved unsustainable in the face of the messy and pragmatic conditions of lived experience—as Thucydides’ own historical narrative makes eminently clear.<sup>17</sup> But by the same token, the strong view on politics and culture also means that, as they turn to the next phase of investigating the fascinating particularities of diverse micro-communities and their specific practices, practitioners of Greek cultural studies should be paying attention to the question of how those micro-communities and specific practices are implicated in politics—in practical and normative concerns about institutions and ideology, values and interests, justice and legitimacy, which is to say: in the matters that have traditionally been addressed by political theorists.

My attachment to politics as such is not predicated upon some primordial conception of “the primacy of the political,” or on a conception of Greeks as animals that are for some mysterious reason “even more political” than other humans. Nor is it entirely based on the traditional (and correct, as far as it goes) explanation for the prominence of politics in Greek culture: i.e. because of the relatively small scale of Greek states, and thus the great number of bounded cultural communities (*poleis* and *koina*) within the Greek culture-sphere, state autonomy was both highly cherished and very difficult to preserve.<sup>18</sup> Rather, I would tend to focus my explanation for the persistence of politics in Greek culture on the fact that there were many vibrant cultures (and thus a variety of competing and compelling cultural identities) within Greek culture.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps ironically, the more squarely we face up to that multi-cultural Greek reality, the more

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>16</sup> In Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> See further Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 161-87; Josiah Ober, “Thucydides Theoretikos/Thucydides Histor: Realist Theory and the Challenge of History,” in *Democracy and War: A Comparative Study of the Korean War and the Peloponnesian War*, ed. D. R. McCann and B. S. Strauss (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 273-306.

<sup>18</sup> The fourth-century B.C. Greek writer, Aeneas Tacticus, *On the Defense of Fortified Places*, gives a vivid sense of the interconnectedness between internal politics (the search for unity), the inevitability of internal division and conflict (the persistent fear of treason), under conditions of systematic external threats.

<sup>19</sup> It is related because it is possible to speak of e.g. “Athenian culture.” But it is nonidentical because cultural distinctions obviously do not map directly onto political distinctions between states.

clearly we can see why “the political” could never be forgotten by the ancient Greeks. Politics was a vehicle by which the thin coherence of the polis was maintained, and by which the constraints associated with coherence were contested.

The issue of “the politics of cultures within culture” need not necessarily be posed with primary reference to the state. As early modern European and contemporary world history shows (clearly and often tragically), the question of politics and culture transcends the physical bounds of the nation-state. We might choose to focus on the political consequences of the existence of diverse cultures within either Protestant or Sunni culture, or within France or Saudi Arabia. But that said, looking at the state as a site of strong cultural claims remains important because the mass of ordinary people cannot easily escape their physical situation within a state. In classical antiquity, as in modernity (outside highly mobile societies like the U.S.), most people have of necessity lived out their lives quite close to where they happened to be born. Some non-elite people do indeed move far from their original homeland, but all too often it is under duress: compelled by the harsh exigencies of power (war, economic change) to go where they may have a better hope of survival. Both the fact of staying at home, and the fact of mandatory migration have obvious bearing on the history of the perpetuation and diversification (as well as the evolution and hybridization) of cultures.

Of course it is not the case that everyone stays home by necessity or moves abroad only under duress. Modern cosmopolitans (market-capitalists, academics, members of international aid organizations), like some of their ancient Greek counterparts (traders, sophists, philosophers), move about the world quite freely. Some may even consider themselves to be “citizens” of a culture-sphere so expansive that it potentially encompasses the globe and all of its diverse cultures. Waldron, attacking communitarian versions of Aristotle’s claim that membership in a territorially-defined constitutive community is a fundamental human good, on the grounds that “thick” communitarian conceptions of politics and culture problematically compromise fundamental human freedoms, notes that a cosmopolitan need not necessarily be a world traveler; the key thing is that

he refuses to think of himself as *defined* by his location or his ancestry or his citizenship or his language. Through he may live in San Francisco and be of Irish ancestry, he does not take his identity to be compromised when he learns Spanish, eats Chinese, wears clothes made in Korea, listens to arias by Verdi sung by a Maori princess on Japanese equipment, follows Ukrainian politics, and practices Buddhist meditation techniques. He is a creature of modernity, conscious of living in a mixed-up world and having a mixed-up self.<sup>20</sup>

Waldron’s rejection of the “thick cultural coherence” associated with communitarianism (and by both communitarians and their critics with “the Greeks”), and his vivid description of the diverse pleasures associated with what we might call “cosmopolitanism as a cultural practice,” allows us to return to the normative question raised above: Should we regard free access to an expansive and various global culture-sphere as an ideal? If so, does that cosmopolitan ideal direct us toward a normative preference for transcending the political—at least insofar as politics implies the existence of bounded political communities with constraining cultural tendencies? Should we regard state-based politics as the undesirable and dispensable remainder of a localist

---

<sup>20</sup> Waldron, “Minority Cultures and the Cosmopolitan Alternative,” 754. Waldron later adds to this list the propensity of cosmopolitans to collect the artworks of indigenous peoples: “Their apartments are likely to be decorated with Inuit artifacts or Maori carvings” (761). Needless to say, such things are not within the means of the poor.

parochialism that has become outmoded by the diverse opportunities opened by modern cosmopolitan cultural practice? Is politics as it is practiced in bounded communities, with its constraint-producing tendency to interlock in practice with semiotic structures, a systematic threat to cultural diversity as a fundamental good?

Any answer to this normative concern is likely to depend on another question that recent work in classical cultural studies implicitly poses: Just who do we think “we” are? We (readers of this essay) may decide that not only our enjoyment of cultural variety, but also the best protection of our autonomy as individuals, entails defining “ourselves” as those who take a cosmopolitan rather than a “bounded political” view of the world. But arguably this imaginative step requires that “we” also imagine ourselves as enjoying the level of wealth, leisure, and education necessary to place ourselves easily within Waldron’s (or even, *mutatis mutandis*, Isocrates’) cosmopolitan vision. If we hope to move from the realm of thought to that of practice (if this is the world as we know it, rather than an ideal world in which everyone is well off), we will be faced with the fact that we cannot actually become practicing cosmopolitans without detaching ourselves in various ways from the less-advantaged “rooted-identity masses”—i.e. those lacking the necessary attributes and attitudes to live as cosmopolitans. In short, cosmopolitan practice, of the sort Waldron describes, remains (outside the world of ideal theory) class-specific. Many, perhaps most, of the people of the world still lack the wealth necessary to acquire Japanese stereo equipment, the leisure and education necessary to enjoy opera, understand the politics of distant places, or even to learn new languages. For them, Waldron’s vision of the cosmopolitan present must remain either an aspiration or a threat to a valuable cultural identity. Or, perhaps both at once.

To the extent to which “we” do define multicultural cosmopolitanism as our goal, and to the extent to which we succeed in achieving our desire to inhabit an open and free cosmopolitan sphere, incidentally filled with diverse multicultural pleasures, we may forget politics—at least for a while. But, in the absence of a comprehensive and reliable “apolitical world system” capable of conscientiously and consistently guaranteeing universal conditions of distributive justice, the freedom and pleasures that “we cosmopolitans” enjoy are not attained or sustained outside the play of power. And the play of power currently leaves most people within their bounded communities or forces them into the wider world as refugees. And so, whoever we think we are, we will, sooner or later, more or less tragically, be brought back to politics.

If this is (for modern cosmopolitan intellectuals) an all-too-familiar and depressing modern story, so, *a fortiori*, was it familiar to Greeks. The interesting thing for students of Greek politics and cultures is that Greeks (I am thinking here especially, but not uniquely, of Athens) did not necessarily find politics depressing. Greek writers remained highly attuned to both politics and culture (as something akin to Sewall’s definition of culture-as theory), and to their mutual implication. It is certainly the case that specific writers in particular moods were quite capable of consigning “politics” to a grim realm of base necessity (“the cave” of Plato’s *Republic*), or to a glorious realm fit for the sort of heroic endeavors that only seem possible once cultural diversity and the private sphere have been transcended (Pericles’ Funeral Oration again). But Greek, and especially democratic, politics embraced as exciting and meaningful the serious business of constantly building and deconstructing (through iterated public and private practices) political solidarity from within a variety of cultural communities. Far from the very thick sort of cultural coherence typically associated by political theorists with “the Greeks,” Athens provides an example of a societal culture manifesting the sort of “thin coherence” advocated (as a analytic ap-



proach) by Sewell. Rather than explaining political excitement and meaning-creation entirely in the language of constraint and hegemony, I would point to the ways in which politics and the state may be instruments whereby non-elites gain enhanced access to cultural resources that enable them to resist some forms of social power, as well as the opportunity for enhanced welfare.

While “umbrella” culture-zones cross state boundaries, diverse cultures persist within the bounds of a given state—inside the political entity that lays claim to the authority to control passage across borders, to confer citizenship, to define the terms under which justice will be administered. Greek states (like modern nation-states) sought to monopolize the legitimate use of force, i.e. to define the distinction between force and violence. But they also sought to establish standard rules governing the public (and some aspects of the private) behavior of all those who inhabited the state territory—especially in terms of their relations with other territorial residents. This sort of political work was not a simple matter in the face of persistent cultural diversity. As Kymlicka points out, the authority of “national” political/legal rules and the authority of the cultural rules binding members of societal cultures within the state territory can come into open conflict.<sup>21</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, clashes between the state and sub-state communities are familiar enough to us from Greek literature, perhaps most famously in tragedy. Is the state necessarily acting wrongly when it seeks to constrain a particular form of cultural expression? It does not take a hyper-sophisticated reading of, for example, Sophocles’ *Antigone* or Euripides’ *Bacchae*, to see why that simple formulation might be open to challenge.

The overarching authority-claims of states have traditionally been facilitated by the creation of a national identity based on (inter alia) standardized narratives (e.g. the racial myths celebrated by the Athenian institution of the Funeral Oration); a standardized civic education (e.g. the Spartan *agôgê*); and the promulgation of rules, rituals, privileges, and disabilities that differentiate citizens from noncitizens, insiders from outsiders: in brief, by the state’s claim to be isomorphic with the societal culture. States are defined physically by their borders, which may be both politically and culturally demarcated; for example the “witnesses” to the sacred oath taken by young Athenian warriors-in-training (ephebes) included the “boundary-markers of the territory” (*horoi tês chôras*).<sup>22</sup> Differential rules applying to citizens and noncitizens, insiders and outsiders, may determine who can enter the state territory and for how long (cf. the Spartan practice of periodic expulsion of foreigners: *xenêlasia*) and under what terms (cf. the Athenian head-tax on metics: resident foreigners). Moreover, differential rules will typically determine who, having entered, can successfully claim access to what immunities and what privileges in respect to political participation (ordinarily limited to native males) and cultural participation (cf. the Eleusinian mysteries, in which any Greek-speaking individual, man or woman, free or slave, might be initiated).

The success of such access claims will typically rest on the petitioner’s degree of cultural integration. Once again, the *opportunity* to integrate is seldom equally available to all and the *process* of integration (or assimilation) is never without costs for those seeking membership in the community. Modern national approaches to the integration of outsiders into the body of the citizens (i.e. those with highest level of immunity and participation rights) have ranged from denying citizenship to most immigrants, while freely offering citizenship to notional “cultural or ra-

<sup>21</sup> Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*.

<sup>22</sup> See Josiah Ober, *Athenian Legacies: Essays on the Politics of Going On Together* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 183–211.

cial insiders" who happen to live outside the national territory by accidents of history (e.g. Israel, Germany); to frankly coercive assertions of cultural hegemony (e.g. in "English language only" laws in some U.S. states); to the now highly contested American ideology of the melting pot (the myth that we have all assimilated to a cultural *mélange* that changes over time as the mix evolves).<sup>23</sup>

Cosmopolitan political theorists, embracing a universalistic conception of human rights, have sought to challenge the legitimacy claims of nation-states by pointing out that differential treatment (including, in strong versions of cosmopolitanism, differential access of citizens and noncitizens to the state territory) is hard to justify on the basis of the arbitrary contingencies of birth or cultural affinity.<sup>24</sup> For those who reject the Aristotelian notion that the bounded political community represents an intrinsic human good (and thus that the political community is worthy of protection as such), moderate versions of this argument can gain considerable purchase within ideal theory.<sup>25</sup> But, as Yael Tamir has argued, in the real world non-elites have rational instrumental reasons for actively supporting the persistence of the nation-state. While fully acknowledging the historical complicity of the nation-state in the exploitation of lower classes, and the problematic pressure the state often brings to bear on minority cultures, Tamir suggests that non-elites have also substantially benefited from membership in a nation-state.<sup>26</sup>

Athenian history shows that citizenship can indeed serve to integrate the interests of elites and non-elites, by ensuring that some risks and some opportunities are shared across class lines.<sup>27</sup> A "shared risk pool" (expressed in welfare benefits) limits the potentially catastrophic costs of risk-taking and thus allows the non-elite individual to take advantage of inherently risk-laden opportunities. So, for example, in Athens the relatively poor citizen could afford to participate in the high-risk, high-opportunity business of war because he knew that if he were killed, the state would guarantee his son's upbringing.<sup>28</sup> Among the benefits the state may offer is access to education, which once again allows the individual to engage in a wider range of activities (including cultural choice and political participation) than would otherwise be available to him. And this in turn promotes social, cultural, and physical mobility for individuals and for disadvantaged groups. Paradoxically, it may only be via the maintenance of a certain degree of rooted national-cultural identity that the non-elite can actually hope to share in the benefits of openness, change, and cultural mobility.

Tamir's argument was developed as an answer to cosmopolitan political theorists like Waldron, who focus explicitly on at the social constraints imposed by communities that base membership on cultural identity. But similar arguments can also serve as a challenge to the

---

<sup>23</sup> Barry S. Strauss, "The Melting Pot, the Mosaic, and the Agora," in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, ed. J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach, and Josiah Ober (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 252-64.

<sup>24</sup> I am indebted to Michael Blake for his discussion, in an unpublished paper, of this issue. See also Michael Blake, "Immigration," in *The Blackwell Companion to Applied Ethics*, ed. Christopher Wellman and R. G. Frey. (London: Blackwell, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted here to Don Moon for his discussion of "moderate cosmopolitanism."

<sup>26</sup> Yael Tamir, "Global War, Class Struggles," Moffit Lecture, Princeton University, December 13, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> In the polis war was an opportunity (as well as a risk), not only because of hope for plunder, but also because it built networks of solidarity among citizens of different statuses.

consistently pro-resistance and anti-coherence normative stance taken by many cultural theorists.<sup>29</sup> Under certain conditions some people may reasonably *prefer* that the constraints of the bounded national culture *not* be contested, because successful contestation makes it that much easier for elites to exit the shared national risk-pool in favor of the pleasant world of diverse cosmopolitan pleasures. Waldron and modern cosmopolitan theorists are deeply concerned with social justice and far from advocating this sort of abandonment. But the justice concerns of political theorists do not represent the standard elite response to the successful contestation of interlocked political/cultural constraints. The exit of each member of the elite in turn means a smaller pool of shared resources and thus reduced access to welfare benefits for those who remain behind. Of course, in ideal cosmopolitan theory there would be no nations from which to exit, and each individual would contribute fairly to a global pool which would in turn be fairly redistributed. But non-elite people make their choices in the world as they find it, not the world of ideal theory.

The interlocking of politics with national culture is a particularly fraught question today, in the context of an increasingly globalized economy and a broad acceptance of the legitimacy of fundamental human rights. If nation-states offer their relatively disadvantaged populations certain opportunities, the “nation-state centered global regime” also limits the opportunities open to people desiring to move freely between nations. Those inconvenienced will include both well-off cosmopolitans and the desperate victims of mandatory migration. Can the nation-state justify closing its borders to some or all outsiders? Can it justify offering differential access to rights and privileges to those who reside within its borders, based on the fortuitous fact of being born a citizen? There is no very tidy practical answer to these questions. But some attention to history, to the risks historically shared and cultural costs historically assumed by insiders, surely needs to be taken into account. If denying territorial access to some noncitizens is an affront to freedom of movement, it is also unfair suddenly to dilute the expected welfare benefits of those insiders who have already paid substantial costs (whether through taxes or having accepted cultural assimilation in exchange for participation rights) and have undertaken substantial risks (e.g. military service).<sup>30</sup>

When the differential access issue is framed in these historical and quasi-contractarian terms, we may find that there are ways to justify admitting or not admitting a given stranger who requests permission to dwell within our national territory. We may concede that the claim of the indigent refugee to the basic means of subsistence trumps our own legitimate “contractual” expectations as paid-up insiders, because her basic human rights cannot be exercised in the absence of a subsistence minimum. But the claim of the well-to-do cosmopolitan (who has no intention of assuming risks or paying costs) may not trump our insiders’ contractual expectation to a share of goods for which we have, in a meaningful sense, already paid.

If one accepts Tamir’s contention that the nation-state does (at least under democratic conditions) bring substantial benefits to local non-elites, it becomes easier to see why official acknow-

---

<sup>29</sup> Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” 52-55.

<sup>30</sup> The war-orphan example (above) shows how assumptions based on risk/benefit calculus cross generational lines: The father assumed risks on the assumption that his son would gain benefits. The same sort of thinking might go into an Athenian slave’s determination to do what is necessary (in terms of extra work, acceptance of cultural assimilation) to buy his freedom, and thus make it possible for his children to live as free persons. The point is that the implied “contract” between cost-paying/risk-taking persons and the benefit-and-opportunity granting state must be understood as extending backwards and forwards in time, beyond the current generation.

ledgement of deep and abiding intra-national diversity (e.g. through the special legal protection of sub-national societal cultures, as advocated by Kymlicka) may potentially impose its own substantial burdens. If the games of “preserving sub-national societal cultures v. maximizing resources for welfare” and “cultural contestation v. maintaining thin cultural coherence” are based on a zero-sum calculus, then those “less advantaged” persons within the nation, who depend upon national unity to preserve their access to desired goods and opportunities, may quite rationally and reasonably resist diversity claims—at least diversity claims of the sort that seem to pose threats to national unity. And this may in turn help us to understand why the play of power at a micro-cultural level includes the activity of willful human agents in the formation and maintenance (as well as resistance and contestation) of cultural constraints.

What then of the *least* advantaged? In Athens, this was the slave population, subject to systematic oppression, although also covered (at least in principle) by certain legal immunities. Ian Morris has drawn attention to the inability of archaeologists to discover archaeological traces of a distinctive slave culture in the Athenian industrial village of Thorikos. As an explanation for the archaeological invisibility of distinctive slave culture, Morris suggests that, “Athenian male citizen culture as a whole was unusually hegemonic, filling every corner of the conceptual landscape, allowing no space for alternatives.”<sup>31</sup> If we assume for the moment that Morris is correct in this claim, it is worthwhile asking how Athenian cultural hegemony functioned in terms of human choice. Is it possible that benefits associated with membership in the cultural community of Athens (even the small benefits and marginal membership available to slaves) served as positive incentives to acquiesce in accepting and sustaining Athenian national culture?<sup>32</sup> Rather than regarding the slave residents of Thorikos only as passive victims of hegemony, perhaps we should imagine even these most harshly disadvantaged Athenian residents as willful agents, capable of making rational (if fundamentally unsatisfactory) choices about cultural assimilation, capable of appropriating and cross-appropriating symbols (in ways that would be archaeologically invisible), even in the face of the systematic and brutal exploitation of their labor.<sup>33</sup> As the least advantaged residents of Athenian territory became more culturally Athenian (and so less materially distinguishable from poorer Athenian citizens), they were (at least marginally) more likely to be beneficiaries of legal immunities as well as gaining greater access to the resources of Athens’ diverse semiotic systems and the diverse contexts in which they were deployed.<sup>34</sup>

Obviously none of this is meant to justify the morally indefensible Athenian institution of slavery, but rather to make it possible to think about how agency may be exercised by even the most oppressed of people, and in ways that may affirm as well as contest cultural coherence. If we think of ideology as enacted through interpellation, through the social process of being “hailed into being,” under conditions in which authoritative speech is implicated in relationships of power, we might better understand why (in Althusser’s famous example) someone responds

<sup>31</sup> Ian Morris, “Remaining Invisible: The Archaeology of the Excluded in Classical Athens,” in *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture*, ed. Sheila Murnaghan and Sandra R. Joshel (New York: Routledge, 1998), 193–220.

<sup>32</sup> E. E. Cohen, *The Athenian Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), makes the case rather more strongly than I believe is warranted by the evidence.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” 48–49, on the possible options for cultural resistance open to “an impoverished worker” who must accept work from the only manufacturer in her district: a condition not far removed from slave labor.

<sup>34</sup> Or at least so critics of Athenian democracy, like Pseudo-Xenophon (1.10–12), supposed. Cf. Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*, 18–19, chap. 5.

to the policeman's "Hey you!" Her response may not be entirely involuntary. She may answer (in part) because she has the capacity to recognize her own social situation and opportunities: Even though she recognizes that it is not without a cost to her, she can see that overall it may be in her interest to sustain the cultural rules under which her opportunities (if never infinite) are enhanced and her future (if always circumscribed) may be relatively more open.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, the politics/culture game need not always be understood as zero-sum; and not all diversity claims need be regarded as threats. Although the polis-dweller's cultural choices may be limited relative to the choices open to a cosmopolitan elite, this certainly does not mean that he gained a unitary identity from just one societal culture. The contemporary "cosmopolitan v. communitarian" debate (in which Waldron's article intervenes) may obscure the fact that even the most "home-bound" polis-dweller (like his modern counterparts) participated in a spectrum of cultures.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Athenian "national culture," with its frank discursive and institutional recognition that every Athenian (whether citizen male, woman, metic, or slave) belonged to a wide variety of cultural groups (cultic, regional, kinship/fictive kinship, occupational), can be read as an acknowledgement that relatively unmanaged diversity (and its associated freedoms, of association and expression) was vital to the flourishing of the democratic state. Internal cultural variety, and the capacity of individuals to construct complex selves out of those diverse cultural resources, could and did bring substantial benefits to the political community.<sup>37</sup> But those benefits were only reaped once some assimilation-costs had been paid, which meant that some level of national unity (in Athens, expressed *inter alia* in the political language of *homonoia*: "like-mindedness") had been accepted. Athenian cultural hegemony may sometimes *seem* to be all-embracing precisely because, as K.H. Allen demonstrates Athens was *actually* so culturally diverse.<sup>38</sup>

The balance between cultural diversity and national unity within a political community is invariably a delicate one, and the balance can easily be lost. Under the pressure of real or perceived threats (e.g. enemy attack, economic change) the dangers associated with intra-state diversity may come to be perceived as too high. And this can, in the wrong circumstances, lead to reactionary attacks on the very idea of cultural diversity (e.g. ultra-nationalist movements in the U.S. and Europe), or to violent devolution of a nation into cultural/ethnic fragments (e.g. former Yugoslavia). In Greek terms, as Arlene Saxonhouse and Peter Euben have argued, an abiding "fear of diversity" was driven by a sense that an intolerably high level of diversity will inevitably lead to open civil conflict, to *stasis*.<sup>39</sup> But (as Saxonhouse and Euben also point out)

<sup>35</sup> On Althusser and agency, see further Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Waldron (in "Minority Cultures and the Cosmopolitan Alternative", 777) associates communitarians' depictions of Athens qua "small-scale community" with "the aboriginal hunting band... or the misty dawn in a Germanic village." As noted above, this misconception of Athens as a thick, intimate, and face-to-face society is a persistent error in contemporary political theory.

<sup>37</sup> This is a central argument of my book in progress on the circulation of knowledge in democratic Athens, in particular the second chapter.

<sup>38</sup> Katarzyna Hagemer Allen, "Becoming the 'Other': Attitudes and Practices at Attic Cemeteries," in *The Cultures Within Greek Cultures: Contact, Conflict, Collaboration*, ed. Carol Dougherty and Leslie Kurke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 207-36.

<sup>39</sup> Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

this conviction is not the *inevitable* default position of all Greek political thought. Moreover, the sense that it is indeed possible for the diversity-unity equation to fall out of balance may at times have been driven by rational welfare concerns and attention to real social costs. The fear of excessive diversity is not invariably driven by an atavistic horror of “otherness.” As soon as we recognize that capacity to contest coherence and gain access to diversity are not the *only* good things that people might reasonably seek, that thin (yet resilient) cultural coherence may be valued because it allows people to go on together (whether or not that is regarded as a good in itself), we also recognize why politics must remain central to thinking about culture.<sup>40</sup>

Civil war (Greek: *stasis*) was a terror that perpetually stalked the Greek political. Nicole Loraux has argued, with special reference to Athens, that *stasis* was an ontological condition of the ancient Greek state. She points out that some of Athens’ multiple micro-cultures—defined especially along the lines of class and gender—existed in a steady condition of conflict.<sup>41</sup> Loraux’s point is undeniable in one sense, but it is essential to keep in mind the distinction between endemic low-level conflict, and the hot conflict that was ordinarily called *stasis* by the Greeks. Aristotle (like other Greek writers) argued that *stasis* was most readily provoked by the perception of injustice: the conviction that the benefits of communal life were not being distributed on an equitable basis.<sup>42</sup> Given the diverse range of cultural communities within any given political community, and the multiplicity of possible ways a community might define the conditions of equity (if justice is “to each according to his *x*”—then what is *x*?), the potential for *stasis* within the state remained high.

Politics, seen from this perspective, is the attempt to manage, through imposing a standard system for the administration of justice, the dangers associated with diversity. Politics sought to keep disputes, which invariably arose in the culturally diverse state, from escalating into full-blown *stasis*. That, I think, is the central point of much ancient Greek political theory and practice. But to use an umbrella term like “Greek theory and practice” is akin to speaking of “Greek culture”; a more fine-grained analysis reveals that Greek political theories and practices were (like the cultures within Greek culture) very diverse. Quasi-aristocratic regimes (real: Sparta, and imagined: Aristotle’s “polis of our prayers” of *Politics*, book 7) found it necessary to deny the presence of meaningful diversity within the ruling body and sought to control the effects of persistent diversity within the state territory by the distribution of people with different social attributes into naturalized status and function groups (Aristotle’s “natural slaves”) or rigid castes (Spartan helots).

A democratic regime (such as Athens) was quite different. Even while emphasizing the value of *homonoia*, it allowed for the existence of considerable diversity within the citizen body, based on individual choice and micro-cultural identity. And it left the boundary between citizens and non-citizens much hazier (at least in certain respects) than aristocratic regimes could toler-

---

<sup>40</sup> The question of whether cultural-community rootedness is a good in itself is the point at issue in the debate between liberal and communitarian theorists. My point here is that we need not take a position on the matter of community as a final good in order to see why it might be a cherished possession.

<sup>41</sup> Terror of *stasis*: see Ober, “Political Conflicts, Political Debates, and Political Thought,” in *The Shorter Oxford History of Europe I: Classical Greece*, ed. R. Osborne (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 111-38; Nicole Loraux, *La cité divisée: l’oubli dans la mémoire d’Athènes* (Paris: Payot, 1997).

<sup>42</sup> See, on this general point, Ryan K. Balot, *Greedy and Injustice in Classical Athens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

ate.<sup>43</sup> In lieu of fixed castes, democracies developed standard (even hegemonic) institutional and ideological means whereby diverse persons and groups found common ground for resolving disputes, and whereby an internally diverse citizenship body could make binding decisions about state policy. This is a practical example of Sewell's "interlocking" of semiotic and political structures. What was produced was no doubt constraint. But this constraint was not based on thick coherence; it preserved the possibility of contestation, while offering at least some benefit for most (if not all) residents. The borders were clearly defined, but remained relatively open to immigrants. Democratic Athens continued to distinguish citizens from non-citizens, men from women, free from slave—but certain immunities were extended to all residents of the national territory, and there was at least some possibility for assimilated outsiders to join the body of the citizens. The cultural resources for public contestation (e.g. theater and dissident political theory) were quite rich.

Sometimes "politics as diversity management" failed, and in the wake of failure *stasis* erupted. Is it possible to make a normative judgment about when the resort to *stasis* should be regarded as a reasonable response to the injustices that inevitably arose within multi-cultural communities? We cannot ignore the day-to-day suffering that injustice in respect to distribution inflicted upon the disadvantaged of even the most democratic of Greek states. Yet the damage caused by *stasis* might well be worse. Overt *stasis* resulted in extreme material deprivation conditions: in widespread death, exile, destruction of property, and theft. *Stasis* meant hunger, loss of shelter, and constant fear of arbitrary physical violence. Violent civil conflict (an extreme form of contestation) is surely justifiable when an existing regime institutionalizes extreme deprivation conditions and reasonable when there is a possibility that engaging in *stasis* will replace a systematically violent regime with a regime that allows the disadvantaged enhanced opportunity to ameliorate their condition.<sup>44</sup> This calculus explains the periodic helot uprisings against the Spartan regime.<sup>45</sup> And it explains the well-documented democratic Athenian resistance to the "Thirty Tyrants" in the *stasis* of 404/3 B.C.

After the democracy had been restored, the Athenians performed various community-wide rituals and developed new legal and ideological means to encourage official forgetfulness about the stark divisions that had been revealed in the course of the civil conflict.<sup>46</sup> The hegemonic cultural instruments of the state once again sought, with considerable success, to reassert a level of political unity adequate simultaneously to disguise cultural variety and to allow for its perpetuation, simultaneously to preserve cultural coherence and provide space for cultural resistance.<sup>47</sup> This is exemplary not only of the cultural work that democratic politics can do, but of the work it should do—because it pushes, if only in fits and starts, towards a better and more just social order. [A]

<sup>43</sup> The lack of boundary distinctions is especially clear in terms of work, since citizens and non-citizens engaged in many identical forms of labor.

<sup>44</sup> I do not claim that these are the only conditions in which civil conflict is justified.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Cartledge, *Spartan Reflections* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 127-52.

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Wolpert, *Democracy Restored: Defeat, Civil War, and Reconciliation in Athenian Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Sewell, "The Concept(s) of Culture," 54, on cultural consensus as a difficult achievement, necessarily hiding conflicts; and 57, on the task of cultural analysts as explaining coherence as well as resistance.