

Book Review

Naomi Campa: *Freedom and Power in Classical Athens*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. xiv, 197.)

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The phrase “history is written by the victors” has many historical exceptions. One of the most obvious among them is the case of Athenian democracy. While the “Athenian revolution” of 508–507 BC resulted in the *dēmos* gaining the upper hand, the “history” of Athenian democracy was written mainly by its adversaries: members of the elite, oligarchs, and others who saw their status diminish as the *kratos* of the *dēmos* increases. This creates a familiar problem for anyone who wishes to study Athenian “democratic ideology.” How can we reconstruct Athens’s democratic ideals when so many of our sources were written by democracy’s sore losers and bitter rivals?

Nowhere is this problem more evident, perhaps, than in the discussion of Athens’s democratic “freedom.” Aristotle, for example, famously defined the democratic conception of freedom as “doing whatever one wishes” (*ho ti an boulētai*), concluding that “this is bad; for to live in conformity with the constitution ought not to be considered slavery (*douleian*) but safety (*sotērian*)” (*Pol.* 1310a30–35). For years, scholars—myself included—have treated this and other similar statements with skepticism. After all, why should we accept democracy’s critics’ definition of democratic freedom? Why should we treat it as a genuine expression of democratic ideology and not an elitist association of democracy with anarchy?

In *Freedom and Power in Classical Athens*, Naomi Campa persuasively demonstrates that we were too quick to write off these claims as mere anti-democratic rhetoric. Instead, her novel and erudite study of these concepts shows that the idea of freedom as doing “whatever one wishes” is, in fact, central to Athens’s democratic ideology and its citizens’ self-understanding of how their democratic institutions create and secure their freedom and power in the *polis*.

Campa presents this innovative interpretation through a careful and rigorous reading of a wide range of primary sources. Having outlined some of the abovementioned interpretive difficulties in the Introduction, she devotes chapter 2 to a careful and detailed reconstruction of the democratic conception of freedom as doing “whatever one wishes,” arguing that it is best understood in terms of a “thin” version of Berlin’s concept of positive freedom. Chapter 3 then dives into the corpus of fourth-century oratory to show how this principle operated in actual democratic practices in Athens.

Chapter 4 focuses on the interplay between freedom and power in democratic Athens, particularly as it appears in the question of who is *kurios* in the democratic *polis*. Finally, chapter 5 examines the case study of Apollodoros, *Against Neaira*, revealing the practical implications of Athens's democratic conception of freedom and power.

One of the many strengths and contributions of *Freedom and Power* is in its rescuing of the ideal of freedom as doing "whatever one wishes" from the hands of democracy's critics and repositioning it within Athenian democratic ideology, where Campa convincingly shows it belongs. While Campa's core claim here is carefully and expertly defended and leaves little room for dispute, her precise rendering of the meaning of this democratic notion of freedom opens up several questions, especially around the use of "positive freedom" in this context and its relationship to autonomy and power.

As noted above, Campa employs a modified version of Berlin's "positive freedom" to analyze the democratic conception of freedom as doing "whatever one wishes." According to Campa, this "thin" interpretation of positive freedom in the Athenian context means "to live according to one's own lights, whatever they may be ... being one's own master" (27). This raises the question, however, of whether such a "thin" version of positive freedom runs the risk of becoming indistinguishable from negative freedom, even in its more libertarian formulations, as in F. A. Hayek's endorsement of the "recognition of the individual as the ultimate judge of his ends, the belief that as far as possible his own views ought to govern his actions."¹ What, then, separates such a thin version of positive freedom from its negative counterpart? What is positive about the freedom of living "however one wishes"?

Another aspect of Campa's "thin" account of positive freedom that brings it closer to a "negative" conception of freedom is its tendency to appear as the individual's right *against* society: not a property of the political community but "a personal capacity for action" (15). This tendency becomes especially evident in the book's treatment of autonomy. Here, too, we find a "thin" account of this concept (indeed, the "thinnest," 25), which assumes that "recognizing oneself (the agent) as the author of one's own action [is] sufficient for authenticity" (25)—an account which thereby avoids the Berlinian worry about the political implications of viewing autonomy as controlling one's "higher," rational self over one's "lower" self.

This understanding of autonomy is original, sophisticated, and highly productive when theorizing about ancient democratic freedom. Yet, its focus on the individual agent further strengthens the impression that this freedom is best understood as the negative property of the individual *against* the community. At the same time, it also moves us away from an alternative interpretation of autonomy, in which individual autonomy is not achieved against the political community but is made possible only *within* that

¹F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 102.

community. This understanding of autonomy is also tied to a different, “thicker” interpretation of positive freedom, which emphasizes not the self-imposed rule of a “higher self” over the irrational “lower self” but rather the notion that one can be truly free and autonomous only when actively participating in legislating the laws that govern one’s life, that is, when partaking in a shared project of collective self-rule.

One of the potential difficulties with a “thin” version of positive freedom and autonomy is that it results in an unavoidable tension with the rule of law. If the freedom to live “as one wishes” is best understood as “to live according to one’s own lights, whatever they may be ... being one’s own master” (27), why should anyone limit their freedom by submitting themselves to the rule of law? Indeed, this is, according to Berlin, the central question of politics: “the question of obedience and coercion. ‘Why should I (or anyone) obey anyone else?’ ‘Why should I not live as I like?’”² Campa is well aware of this potential difficulty, brilliantly demonstrating how the Athenians solved this tension by creating a symbiotic relationship of empowerment, where “while the law may bestow power on the *dēmos*, the *dēmos* actualizes the power of the laws and protects them from losing their power” (128). But is it possible that using a “thicker” version of positive freedom and autonomy would result in a more parsimonious solution? If, for example, one is free only insofar as one is autonomous, that is, insofar as one participates in a shared activity of *collective* self-rule, couldn’t this result in an alternative answer to Berlin’s question: I should obey the law because it is *my* law?

None of these questions take away from the remarkable scholarly achievement of Campa’s *Freedom and Power*. If anything, they highlight the importance and novelty of this study, which provides a bold and fresh perspective on two of the oldest concepts in the history of political thought. *Freedom and Power* represents an enormously important contribution and is a must-read for anyone interested in ancient Athenian history and political thought and the history of freedom more generally.

–Avshalom M. Schwartz 

Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, USA

²Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 121