Review: [untitled]
Author(s): Josiah Ober
Reviewed work(s): The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken by J. Peter Euben
Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/191427
Accessed: 27/08/2008 01:26
In this original and important book, Peter Euben argues that studying classical Greek tragedy offers a fresh approach to some central issues in political theory. He is concerned with locating an Aristotelian middle term between the tyranny of globalizing explanations, essentialism, and enlightenment humanism, on one hand, and madness, fragmentation, solipsism, and deconstructive "freeplay," on the other. One might expect that in turning to the Greeks for a new vision of politics, Euben would be engaged in debate with Arendt, Popper, or Strauss, but instead his contemporary interlocutors are Michel Foucault, Martha Nussbaum, and several classical scholars (notably J.-P Vernant and Froma Zeitlin). Like some other theorists accused of "polis nostalgia," Euben sees the Greek city-state (especially democratic Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.) as an (albeit imperfect) model of political community. But for Euben, unlike other Hellenophile theorists, it is tragic theater that exemplifies the central virtue of polis life. Tragedy's value lies in its refusal to allow its audience to indulge either in totalizing, univocal explanations of human conduct or in the fantasy of human freedom that would transcend the need for community. The position of intentional uncertainty adopted by tragedy is the middle term; tragedy's embrace of community and rejection of final explanations demands the intervention of an active, participatory politics. Thus Attic tragedy is, for Euben, a model for what political theory could (and should) become.

The book is self-consciously organized in what literary critics call a ring structure around several triads: three tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides), tragedies (Oresteia, Oedipus Rex, and Bacchae), protagonists (Orestes, Oedipus, Pentheus), gods (Athena, Apollo, Dionysos), theoretical texts (Thucydides' History, Plato's Apology of Socrates, and Plato's Republic), and theoretical problems (justice, political identity, community membership and dissolution ["dismembership"]). This formalism is evidently based on the structure of the Festival of Dionysos itself; even the somewhat peculiar concluding chapter (on a novel by Thomas Pynchon) might be read as the antic "satyr play" that traditionally capped a tragic trilogy.¹ The structure leads to a certain amount of redundancy; rather than discuss each chapter, I will try to isolate Euben's major themes and assess the overall significance of his work.

Euben's central concern is the conflict between human difference and sameness and the disaster that necessarily ensues when human agents attempt
to resolve that conflict in favor of complete homogeneity or utter diversity. Justice, therefore, can exist only when agents recognize themselves both as individuals and as part of a whole larger than themselves: “To think and act justly requires acknowledging the need for a unity of difference” (p. 84). Euben argues that both the content and the dramatic form of tragedy underscore this “teaching.” Euben means teaching quite literally; he sees the dramatist as both poet and “political educator” (p. 88). Plato may appear to have challenged this position by banning poetry (and thus drama) from his utopian Republic, but Euben argues (pp. 274-75) that the Republic is in fact analogous to (and deliberately competes with) tragedy. Euben supports his tragic reading by arguing that the Republic implicitly recognizes that philosophy, which hopes for final solutions, embodies a tyrannical impulse.

The issue of identity (of self and political community) is intimately bound up in questions of sameness and difference. Euben stresses the problem of the unique, self-created, autonomous agent versus the homogenized, socially constructed “subject.” Oedipus, in the beginning of Sophocles’ play, is the paradigmatic self-created being: He had arrived in Thebes with (he supposes) no kin, polis, or formal education but was able to gain throne and wife by solving the mystery of the Sphinx. By the play’s end, Oedipus’ uniqueness has collapsed into a horrifying, incestuous sameness and his will to knowledge has ruined himself, his family, and his community. For Euben, Oedipus’ error can be summed up in his lust for single, completely adequate, unambiguous solutions to complex questions. Because of his search for closure, because he fails to see the partiality of his own autonomy and the contingent, political nature of all solutions, Oedipus is destroyed. Like Oedipus, Socrates attempted to know himself, but unlike Oedipus, Socrates saw that ignorance is the foundation of knowledge. Euben’s Socrates is far from an apolitical philosopher whose interest in self-knowledge precluded the possibility of membership in a political community. Rather, Socrates was democratic and political, although in unconventional ways, and Socratic philosophy can be read as “an attempt to reintegrate civic and individual life by reestablishing the preconditions for political deliberations and moral discourse” (p. 205). Socrates was indeed a critic of the political community of which he was a part, but, as Euben astutely notes, Socrates’ “critical standards [and his ability to act as a critic] are derived from what he criticizes” (i.e., the democratic polis and its politics), a fact Socrates himself recognized (p. 230). Socrates is simultaneously a citizen (thus a constructed subject) and an autonomous, self-created agent. He recognized this dichotomy and wisely never really tried to resolve it, which, for Euben, unites Socrates with the lessons taught by tragedy.
The issue of membership—who may and who may not be a citizen—is closely associated with identity. And this issue is of central importance in the world of the Athenian polis, where only adult, native-born males could aspire to citizenship. Athenian citizens were alike in their political rights and collectively differentiated from all those residents of the polis who were excluded by gender or unfree or nonnative status from participation in political decision making (see esp. p. 139). Euben thus reads Euripides’ *Bacchae*, which deals in graphic and frightening terms with the breakdown of the social categories that marginalized women and foreigners, in direct reference to the situation of Athens. But, as Euben points out, the play is also about the radical instability of perception and meaning: Discontinuities between the societies of the Maenads and the Thebans culminate in bizarre and divinely ordained misperceptions on the part of Pentheus, King of Thebes, and his mother Agaue; these misperceptions lead to Pentheus’ literal dismemberment. Thucydides’ *History* suggests that semiotic chaos is possible not only within the societies of the polis (as in *Bacchae*) but within the community of the citizens and the language of politics. Euben focuses on Thucydides’ nightmarish scene of the civil war at Corcyra but does not, in the end, posit a completely pessimistic, antidemocratic Thucydides. Rather, the *History* “offers the reader membership in a community of interpreters, and it retains an implicit idea of political community within the structure of its theory” (p. 200).

There is plenty here to argue with: I would tend to read Thucydides and Plato as self-consciously resisting the claims of democracy rather than as attempting to educate democracy. The privileging of tragedy as Ur-theory is sometimes strained and many of Euben’s interpretations of specific passages in classical texts are open to question. In the final chapter, on Thomas Pynchon’s novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, Euben seemed to be overreading; Pynchon’s novel is not substantial enough to stand up under the theoretical burden Euben wants to load onto it (nothing less than restoring America).

But the main point is that Euben has made a real contribution to the revitalization of classical theory. He joins other theorists (e.g., Cynthia Farrar and Ellen Meiksins Wood) in the project of moving classical theory in new, and exciting, directions; in the process, he provides an effective answer to those critics (e.g., Stephen T. Holmes) who would reject classical theory as mere polis nostalgia (see esp. chap. 1). Euben’s approach allows him to shed new light on the “canon” debate: Classical texts are indeed centrally important for us to read, not because they reveal great and eternal truths but because they refuse to do so. And he engages seriously in the question of what political theory should do about postmodernism: The postmodern emphasis on mar-
Originality and deconstruction is valuable but only if balanced by a recognition of the necessity of individuals to act by making moral choices (which will indeed exclude other options) as members of a community (which will indeed divide the world into "them" and "us"). Refusing to embrace wholeheartedly or to reject the insights of postmodernism, Euben reasserts the need for political thinking, education, and action by men and women who must confront a world that can no longer be viewed from the perspective of membership in a polis.

**NOTE**

1. Ring structure (of chapters):
   1. Introduction
   2. Road not taken
   3. Justice — Aeschylus
   4. Identity — Sophocles
   5. Membership — Euripides
   6. Dismembership — Thucydides
   7. Political identity — Apology
   8. Justice — Republic
   9. Road home

For the self-conscious reading of the three political theory texts as a second trilogy of "tragedies," see p. 240.

—Josiah Ober
Princeton University