BRIGANCE FORUM

Wabash College

Presented by Josiah Ober, Ph.D.
Monday, October 2, 2006
THE BRIGANCE FORUM
An Annual Public Lecture in Memory of W. Norwood Brigance

presents

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Choice, Knowledge, Commitment . . . and Democracy.

Baxter Hall 101
Wabash College
8:00 p.m.
October 2, 2006
The Brigance Forum is an annual public lecture or debate in memory of the late W. Norwood Brigance, teacher, scholar, and leader in the Speech Association of America. In his 38 years at Wabash College, “Briggie” taught generations of Wabash students how to be more effective when they spoke and, through his textbooks, he taught thousands more in American high schools and colleges. As editor of the pioneer History and Criticism of American Public Address and as editor of the Quarterly Journal of Speech, he gave direction to the scholarship of the field. As president of the Speech Association of America, he guided the profession through the expansion of the post-war years. The Brigance family, friends, former students whom he taught, and those who continued the tradition of speech and rhetoric at Wabash after him have—through their contributions—endowed this program as an ongoing memorial to W. Norwood Brigance.

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In October of 2006, Prof. Josiah Ober came to the Wabash campus through the joint efforts of the Classics and Rhetoric Departments. Students then enrolled in courses in those departments hosted him in class, attended a lunch meeting with him, and attended his lecture. Josiah Ober is the Constantine Mitsotakis Chair in the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford University. A classicist by training, Josiah Ober’s work has been widely utilized by rhetoric scholars of the classical period. In particular, both Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens (1989) and Political Dissent in Democratic Athens (1998) have been well received by those examining classical rhetoric. Prof. Ober’s work on ancient Greek democracy was extended with Athenian Legacies: Essays on the Politics of Going On Together (2005) as well as with this Brigance Forum Lecture. The intersections between ancient democracy, society, and rhetorical practice are prominent in Prof. Ober’s work and we were thrilled to have had him as a Brigance lecturer.

Choice, Knowledge, Commitment . . . and Democracy.
Josiah Ober, Ph.D., Stanford University.
Brigance Forum. Wabash College. 2 October 2006

Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right, from the frame of their nature, to knowledge. . . . The preservation of the means of knowledge among the lowest ranks, is of more importance to the public than all the property of all the rich men in the country. It is even of more consequence to the rich themselves, and to their posterity. . . . Let us tenderly and kindly cherish, therefore, the means of knowledge. Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write. Let every order and degree among the people rouse their attention and animate their resolution. Let them all become attentive to the grounds and principles of government. . . . Let us study the law of nature . . . read the histories of ancient ages; contemplate the great examples of Greece and Rome. . . . In a word, let every sluice of knowledge be opened and set a-flowing.

John Adams. “A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law” (1765)

The problem [of knowledge] which we meet here is by no means peculiar to economics but arises in connection with nearly all truly social phenomena . . . and constitutes really the central theoretical problem of all social science . . . the practical problem arises precisely because facts are never so given to a single mind, and because, in consequence, it is necessary that in the solution of the problem knowledge should be used that is dispersed among many people.


The second President of the United States and the 1974 Nobel laureate in Economics were both right; liberty does demand “a general knowledge among the people” and the use of knowledge.
“dispersed among many people” is indeed “the central theoretical problem of all social science.” If it is to preserve its liberty, a community must find a system for organizing what is known by its people. I hope to persuade you that democracy is such a system and that John Adams’ revolutionary claim is true: the preservation of the means of knowledge among the lower rank is of more importance to the public than all the property of all the rich men in the country.” Social and technical knowledge, dispersed widely among a diverse population, is of such outstanding importance because, as Friedrich Hayek realized, knowledge offers a free society a unique competitive advantage against authoritarian rivals. A willingness to “let every sluice of knowledge be opened and set a-flowing,” conjoined with a system designed to foster learning and innovation, provides democracy with its core capacity. By looking at a few aspects of government by the people in classical Athens, I will hope to show that putting knowledge into action is the original source of democracy’s strength. I believe that it remains our own best hope for the future.

Authoritarian threats to liberty, which seemed to disappear in the brief historical moment following the collapse of Soviet Union, have now re-emerged, most dramatically as forms of fundamentalism hostile to diversity of thought and behavior. Meanwhile, new political hybrids, that go under names like “managed democracy” and “authoritarian capitalism,” pose sharp economic challenges. Democratic nations, faced with rising economic rivals and with hostile authoritarian governments allied with well-armed non-state networks of true believers, may be tempted to imitate their non-democratic rivals. Elected leaders may seek to gain parity with emergent and dangerous forces by centralizing executive power, by establishing strict lines of command, by increasing government secrecy, and by controlling the information available to the public. They may seek to mimic their rivals’ ideological fervor by using the polarizing rhetoric of fear and fundamentalism.

But citizens of democratic states who allow their leaders to give in to these temptations risk losing not only their liberty but the source of their material flourishing. A free society can never hope to match the command and control apparatus available to tyrants, nor can a society devoted to reason equal the ideological zeal of fanatics. The bad news I offer you is that it is only by mobilizing multiple forms of knowledge, knowledge that is widely scattered among the members of a genuinely diverse community, that a free society can hope to outperform its rivals while remaining true to its own values. The good news is that by putting knowledge into action, democracy fulfills that hope.

Democracy as a field of study invites the connection of ideals and practices. Yet the project of unifying democratic theory with practice remains incomplete and John Adams’ urgent plea, that we attend to the vital role of knowledge, has been too often ignored. Much academic work on democracy still tacitly accepts Alexis de Tocqueville’s 19th century claim that “the absolute sovereignty of the will of the majority is the essence of democratic government.” Tocqueville argued trenchantly that this “tyranny of the majority” promotes mediocrity (especially in military matters), legislative and administrative instability, and a general atmosphere of unpredictability.

Working within the frame of democracy as majoritarianism, twentieth-century political scientists have updated Tocqueville’s concerns about democratic instability by identifying what appear to be fatal flaws in the structure of voting. Anthony Downs’ (1957) showed that ignorance about political issues was a rational response among voting populations, while Kenneth Arrow (1963) demonstrated that the potential for voting cycles among factions rendered the stable aggregation of diverse preferences mathematically impossible. The scientific rigor of these findings seemed a devastating rebuttal to anyone who might want to offer more than “two cheers for democracy.” In the last half-century, much of the best work on democratic politics has emphasized strategic bargaining among elites within the framework of a very imperfect voting rule. While acknowledging that there is no better alternative, political scientists offered no reason to regard democracy as more than a “least-bad,” in Winston Churchill’s famous comment, “the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

Meanwhile, however, in works of political theory, democracy is seen as much more than a majoritarian voting rule; philosophers point out that democracy furthers values of freedom, equality, and dignity along with practices of liberty as noninter-
ference and nondomination, procedural fairness, and fair distribution of power and resources. Participatory forms of democracy expand the scope for human flourishing, through the exercise of individuals’ political capacity to associate with others in public decision-making. Democratic commitment to deliberation requires decisions to be made by persuasive discourse and reciprocal reason-giving, while democratic tolerance for political dissent allows critics to expose inconsistencies between core values and current practices. Democratic culture encourages civic virtue in the form of consistent and voluntary social cooperation, yet democratic government does not depend upon the extraordinary virtuosity of its culture, citizens, or leaders to produce good results.

Churchill was right to say that democracies are inherently imperfect, but a participatory and deliberative democracy is by its nature self-correcting, and it ought to become better over time. These desirable attributes emerge from the logic of collective decision-making, follow-through, and rule-setting in a socially diverse community whose members treat one another as moral equals.

If we are going to rethink democracy along the lines suggested by Adams and Hayek, then participation and deliberation, the most promising developments in normative democratic theory, must be conjoined with rational choice and collective action, the most promising developments in positivist political science. Conjoining political theory with political science creates space for fundamental conceptual changes; it leads to the definition of democracy as the capacity of a public to do things (rather than as majority rule), to focusing on the relationship between innovation and learning (not just bargaining and voting), and to designing institutions to aggregate useful knowledge (not just preferences or interests). This sort of rethinking is hard, but the potential payoff is big: insofar as it promotes better values, better actions, and better outcomes, a participatory and deliberative democracy, grounded in knowledge, is rightly preferable to all other forms of political organization.

Yet before embracing participation and deliberation as pillars of a new solution to the problem of organizing dispersed knowledge, we need to answer a practical question: does democracy come at too high a cost in fiercely competitive environments? Given that participation and deliberation are costly processes, can government by the people (as well as of and for them) compete militarily with systems based on fundamentalism, and economically with “managed democracy” and “authoritarian capitalism”?

Democratic citizens have a right to expect their community to compete effectively with dangerous rivals. Does seeking competitive advantage mean that strongly democratic states must compromise their core values taking most aspects of government out of the hands of the people? That question was last seriously engaged in the mid-twentieth century, when democracy’s rivals were fascist and communist regimes. Joseph Schumpeter (1947) and Walter Lippmann (1956), among others, advocated a managed system of “democratic elitism.” But John Dewey (1954), whose belief in the value of knowledge mirrored John Adams’, argued that a democratic public could find ways to overcome its own problems. So who was right? Can a highly participatory and deliberative democracy succeed?

The answer is “yes.” The case study to prove is classical Athens. In the classical era of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., Athens was the most strongly and consistently democratic of the circa 1000 Greek city-states (poleis) that were scattered around the shores of Mediterranean basis “like frogs around a pond.” The world of the ancient Greek poleis was violent and competitive; perhaps a third of all poleis were totally or partially destroyed by their rivals. Some recovered, some did not; the competitive world of the Greek poleis severely punished weak systems of organization. And so it is very notable that Athens was not only the most democratic, but also the most high-performing of all Greek poleis. Obviously, Athens was not always and consistently successful. No state has ever been consistently successful—the point is that Athens demonstrably outperformed its city-state rivals and Athenian preeminence was linked to its democratic institutions and culture.

So is “democracy as majority rule” the answer to success? No. There were other Greek democracies and they were not as successful as Athens; there was no linear relationship between “democratic poleis” and “ultra-high performance as a polis.” And
this is hardly surprising; democracy, defined simply as majority rule is not a great recipe for success—for all the reasons that Tocqueville, and Downs, and Arrow, and Lippmann and Schumpeter and others have pointed out. Democracy as majority rule is not what made Athens hyper-competitive in its ancient environment nor is it likely to make a modern state successful in our dangerous modern era. The issue, as Adams and Hayek realized is not majoritarianism, but the use of knowledge—the most important single thing we can learn from democratic Athens is how to put knowledge, dispersed across many individual minds and across all levels of society, into action.

In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., the Athenians solved the problem of putting knowledge into action by designing new and innovative institutions for collecting useful knowledge and encouraging people to share what they knew with their fellow Athenians in decision-making settings. In Athens, knowledge was transformed into action through processes that balanced the drives for innovation as generation of new solutions and learning as socialization in routines of proven value. James March and his collaborators (Levitt and March 1988) have shown in their studies of how business firms are organized, that innovation and learning are potentially contradictory drives; social learning is valuable in that routinization increases returns to effort. But the capacity for innovation, which is essential for success in changing environments, depends on people’s socialization in established routines remaining incomplete. Too much routine learning can compromise competitive advantage, as can too little. When the balance is right, whether in a firm or a political system, we may speak of good organizational design.

I have argued that ancient Athens was extremely democratic, that its democracy was characterized by processes for organizing knowledge, and that those processes balanced innovation with learning. But how could such a system possibly come about and how could it be sustained in practice? I offer a thought experiment, based on known historical facts, to answer that question.

Consider a typical village of Athens, on the eve of the democratic Athenian Revolution of 508 B.C. Prasiai was a settlement on the east coast of Attica, some 15 miles from the city of Athens as the crow flies. The total population of Prasiai was probably about 700. Of these, perhaps 180 were native adult men. After the democratic revolution of 508 the adult male Athenian residents of Prasiai became full citizens with extensive participation rights in central institutions of the polis government. They had the right to meet periodically in a local village assembly in order to vote on admitting new citizens and to decide matters of local concern.

Most residents of Prasiai had lived there for generations. As a result of their long history of social, economic, and religious interaction, they knew each other well. By reference to other small and egalitarian pre-modern rural communities, we can assume that many of the ties between the citizens of Prasiai were strong, in the sense used by theorists of social networks. That is to say, the local social network would feature a great deal of overlap and redundancy; most of a man’s friends and relations were also friends and relations of one another. As a result of this strong-tie network of social relationships, the level of mutual social knowledge was high; people for the most part knew who was technically skilled, who could be counted upon and in what circumstances, whose advice was valuable on what topics. Social norms of reciprocity were clear and dictated when it was proper to share useful information with others. Social commitments made in this context were credible because sanctions on free riders, who tried to take more from the community than they gave back, were reliable and severe.

Prasiai-like villages are celebrated by communitarian political theorists, although liberal theorists point out that strong values are not necessarily good values. The key issue, from the point of view of organizational performance, is that small-scale networks based primarily on strong ties are very good at distributing information internally, but they are poor conduits for the exporting useful knowledge beyond the local network itself. As a consequence, societies based only on closed strong-tie networks tend to be relatively unproductive. The problem is a lack of “bridging ties.”

In his classic article of 1973 Mark Granovetter demonstrated that small-scale networks based on strong ties between individuals promote intensive interaction but do not allow for ex-
tensive “bridging” from one network to another. Because of this lack of a capacity for bridging, strong-tie networks tend to operate as cliques. Lacking bridges to other networks, these cliques are resistant to the free flow of information outside the local network. Thus they render large-scale cohesiveness impossible and prevent coordination across an extended social network. As a result, it is virtually impossible to aggregate knowledge or coordinate action on large-scale matters. The gains potentially reaped from extensive cooperation are strictly limited. A democratic community based only on strong tie networks would be terribly vulnerable to authoritarian rivals.

Since Prasiai was characterized primarily by strong ties, the residents of Prasiai had few bridging ties outside their local community. This “Prasiai situation” was repeated many times over in the predemocratic era, and throughout much of the territory of Athens. The low Athenian productivity characteristic of the pre-democratic period is consistent with the hypothesis that sixth-century Athenian villages and neighborhoods featured strong-tie networks. That social norm was the central problem faced by the democratic reformer Cleisthenes after the democratic Revolution of 508 B.C. Stubbornly cliquish strong-tie local networks made it difficult to achieve the kind of collective action that Cleisthenes knew would be necessary to defeat an anticipated Spartan attack—and then to sustain over time a flourishing community so that Athens’ great potential could be realized in fact.

If the social structure of “Prasiai” was a hard problem, the revolution itself pointed to a solution; Cleisthenes had been recalled to Athens after the people of Athens their potential for collective action. By acting together in a revolutionary uprising, Athenians demonstrated that they shared an Athenian identity. And that could potentially mean belonging to an extended network that included the entire population of the polis.

The organizational design opportunity that confronted Cleisthenes was building on a capacity revealed in a moment of crisis and on a shared Athenian identity. The challenge was creating institutional conditions that would enable Athenians to reap the individual and collective benefits of acting cooperatively over time. Although Cleisthenes obviously lacked the theoretical apparatus of modern social science, the solution he came up with makes sense when it is described in terms of social network theory. Cleisthenes’ devised an organizational design that employed the principles of incentives, lowering communication costs, and promoting good judgment. A key to the new system was encouraging the emergence of many bridging “weak ties” between members of local strong-tie networks.

Granovetter showed that by contrast to strong ties, weak ties (i.e. the case in which my friends are unlikely to be friends with one another) do promote bridging across extended networks. Weak ties (which must not be confused with superficial or unimportant ties) break down the claustrophobic environment of cliques by efficiently transferring information across an extended network. Weak ties are therefore an essential complement to strong-tie networks for social mobilization and for overall organizational cohesion. Granovetter’s key conclusion (1973:1376) was that “the more local bridges . . . in a community and the greater their degree, the more cohesive the community and the more capable of acting in concert.”

As Aristotle said, in reference to his democratic reforms, Cleisthenes tried to “intermix” the residents of Athenian territory. Cleisthenes accomplished this intermixing by creating ten new and blatantly artificial “tribes.” Notably, the tribes would not be territorial units; each of the ten tribes drew about a third of its membership from communities located in coastal, inland, and urbanized regions of Athenian territory.

As a result of Cleisthenes’ tribal reform, Prasiai now became one of the eleven demes—that is, towns, villages or urban neighborhoods—constituting the newly created tribe of Pandionis. Prasiai was designated a coastal deme—as were three other, nearby villages, each located near the eastern coast of Attica. These four coastal demes of the tribe Pandionis made up the coastal “third” (trittys) of the tribe. They were administratively joined to four inland demes to the west (the inland trittys), and to three city demes, neighborhoods in or near the main city of Athens (the city trittys). The citizens of the eleven demes, grouped in these three “thirds,” were now officially the tribe Pandionis. The same organizational principles were used in constituting the other nine tribes (See Figure 1).
Cleisthenes’ organizational design was both radical and practical. It was predicated on conjoining long-standing, familiar “natural” units—the existing villages and neighborhoods of Athens with new, unfamiliar, and highly artificial units—the ten new tribes. The tribes and their constituent “thirds” were the institutional bridges by which a stable and familiar local identity (“resident of Prasiai”) was linked to a desired national identity (“participatory citizen of Athens”).

Tribes would now be the basis for mustering a newly created national army. The core of the army was heavy-armed infantrymen (hoplites). Roughly speaking, these were the wealthiest one-third of the Athenian population. In the aftermath of Cleisthenes’ reforms some 60 or 70 men of Prasiai might now be expected to march into battle as hoplites along with hoplite-villagers from nearby towns in the coastal district. This would not be anything new; we can guess that the big men of the central Athenian coast had been mustering their heavy-armed supporters against pirates and other local threats for generations. But now the men of Prasiai would also muster alongside members of tribe Pandionis who came from far away inland and city demes.

Much of Athenian life was restructured on a tribal basis—the residents of Prasiai would perform religious sacrifices, eat ritual meals, march in parades, and dance in ritual choruses with their fellow tribesmen of Pandionis. As a result, people with very different life-histories and different sets of social and technical knowledge frequently found themselves thrown together with people they never would otherwise have known. The system literally “mixed” Athenians from different geographic/economic zones in a variety of important and psychologically powerful activities. The experience of fighting, sacrificing, eating, dancing, and marching together in this newly “inter-mixed” grouping would, according to Cleisthenes’ plan, lead to a strengthened collective identity at the level of the polis. And the system also promoted bridge-building across the existing strong-tie networks. These bridges were essential to the process of knowledge collection.

Several key political institutions were introduced or restructured in conjunction with the new deme/tribe system. Prominent among these was the Council of 500, a linchpin institution.
that was given control of the vital agenda-setting function. The Council was charged with deciding what matters should be discussed in the full Assembly of Athenian citizens. The Council met very regularly in Athens, eventually in a special Council-House. In addition to its vital function of setting the Assembly’s agenda, the Council had considerable responsibility for the day-to-day administration of state affairs, including meeting foreign delegations and reviewing the performance of out-going Athenian magistrates.

This new Council of 500 was made up of ten 50-man teams—one from each of the ten newly created tribes. The members of each tribal team were in turn selected in a lottery at deme level. Each year every deme chose a certain number of Councilors; the size of the deme’s delegation was based on the deme’s citizen population. Prasiai annually sent three Councilors as part of Pandionis’ 50-man delegation (See Figure 2).

What choices, made by an individual member of the Council, might affect Council’s overall capacity for collective action? Lacking any detailed first-person narrative from antiquity, a thought experiment will have to suffice; so imagine a Councilor from Prasiai, let us call him Poseidippos, embarking upon a year’s service on the Council in the first year after the Council was founded. Poseidippos was probably selected by lot for service. He took up temporary quarters in the city for the year, rightly expecting to spend a great deal of time serving on the Council; in later years, at least, the Council met some 300 days each year. Let us stipulate that among the 49 other members of his tribal team Poseidippos had strong ties with his two fellow Prasieis but no bridging ties to any of his other fellow Councilors. The point is that when the year’s new group of Councilors first took up their office, many of the deme-delegations that made up the tribal delegation of 50 were already strong-tie networked, but there were relatively few bridging “weak ties” between the local deme networks. This is a microcosm, at the level of 50 men, of the large-scale problem Cleisthenes faced as he embarked upon his reform plan.

As he takes up his office, Poseidippos is friends only with his two fellow villagers, but he knows that he is going to have to work closely with 47 men with whom he has no current ties, and...
then with the other 450 Councilors from the nine other tribes. The 50-man tribal teams were responsible for much of the work of the Council—each tribe would take a leading role in directing the Council’s business for a tenth of the year (in rotation with the other nine teams). During the period when a tribe-team was exercising its presidency, some of its men were on 24-hour duty. A generation later, in the fifth century they would eat together (using vessels carefully labeled as “public property”) and sleep in a distinctive round building, located in Athens’ public square.

If, counter-factually, Poseidippos could have had the analytic resources of contemporary network theory at his disposal, he would have described the Pandionis tribal team as a network riddled with “structural holes.” That is to say, there were many gaps, bridged by few or no weak ties, between the eleven strong-tie deme networks on the 50-man team. Between deme 1 and deme 4, for example, there is only one weak tie, while there are no ties at all between demes 7 and 8 and deme 2. In one sense, these holes are an organizational design problem in that, as we have seen, they represent the absence of the sort of dense networking via weak ties that Granovetter identified as essential for effective collective action.

And so, we may say that the holes are a problem that Cleisthenes hoped to solve by his new organizational design. Yet, paradoxically, these same structural holes also represent real opportunities—both for the individual willing to take the effort to bridge them and for the organization as a whole. The presence of so many structural holes offered a key incentive to an ambitious and entrepreneurial Councilman.

As Ron Burt demonstrated in an influential study (1992), in a networked structure, the holes between densely linked sub-networks are points of entrepreneurial opportunity because the individuals who bridge those holes stand to gain considerable social capital. They do so simply by taking up a strategic position in respect to the flow of useful information and social knowledge; they become the conduit through which essential information passes and they reap rewards accordingly. Burt was able to show that, in modern business firms, the social capital accumulated by bridgers of structural holes translates into higher salaries—and so there is a strong incentive to identify structural holes and to build bridging ties across them. The social capital that accumulates from the act of bridging benefits all members of the network, although the original bridge-builders do best of all. Burt’s key point is that networked organizations with many structural holes also present many opportunities for entrepreneurial gain by individuals willing and capable of occupying bridge positions—and therefore there is a correlation between an organization that is “full of holes” and the development and maintenance of an entrepreneurial organizational culture.

Much of Burt’s work builds on insights that are intuitively obvious to many people—no need not know anything about formal network theory to recognize that advantages come to individuals willing to build bridges between cliquish sub-networks within an extended network of persons who are attempting to undertake some common enterprise. We have all witnessed the activities of social entrepreneurs diligently “networking.” The basic principle remains the same whether the organization is a college dorm, a business firm—or an Athenian tribal team on the Council.

Let us say that Poseidippos is the sort of person who intuitively recognizes the gains that come to a bridge-builder. He uses the frequent meetings of Pandionis’ tribal team of 50 to build bridges to men from other demes, starting on the basis of shared occupational interests and distant kinship relations. The personal interactions within the tribal delegation are intense, as its members struggle to accomplish their duties. That intensity helps to facilitate rapid tie-formation, and thus makes it easier for Poseidippos to form friendship ties to men he previously did not know.

As the year goes on, Poseidippos the bridge-builder becomes an increasingly well respected and valuable member of his tribal team. He has a handle on more and more useful information—that is, he learns what people in other demes know. He learns something, for example, about pottery manufacture from his city-deme contacts and something about olive farming from his inland contacts. He also accumulates more and more social knowledge. He knows who among the members of his Pandionis team is trustworthy and on what topics, who is friends and enemies with whom, and so on. He is therefore in a position to aggregate important items of information and social knowledge: to bring disparate knowledge together for problem-solving. The social capital
he gains is a strong incentive to reveal his own latent knowledge—that is, the expertise and experience he has gained in the course of his life—and to share his aggregated knowledge with others. The intimate conditions of service on the Council reduce the costs associated with communication. Meanwhile, Poseidippos’ growing social knowledge promotes better judgment. As a source and a conduit of useful aggregated knowledge, Poseidippos does well for himself and he helps his tribal team to get its job done. Poseidippos is not the only one to see the advantages of building bridging links across local networks; others on his team notice what he is up to and imitate his example. As a consequence the Pandioris delegation is soon densely networked by bridging weak-links—and so it becomes an integrated social and information network.

Pandioris is not special—according to Cleisthenes’ design, each of the tribes has the same composition, and each of the tribal delegations has the same makeup. Thus, the same structural hole opportunities exist in each team of 50, and on the Council of 500 as a whole. As a result, the same sort of bridge-building was going on simultaneously within each of the 10 tribal teams. Moreover, the same process went on at an extensive network level between tribal teams of the Council. If the social capital for being tribal-team level bridget of local networks was considerable, it was that much greater at the level of an inter-tribal bridge-builder in the context of the full Council. And so, over the course of the year the membership of the Council as a whole is linked by bridging weak-ties and becomes a single, extended network. The upshot is that the 500 members of the Council become more capable of working cooperatively, both at the level of the tribal teams of 50 and as a committee of the whole.

The networking process addresses the general collective action problem of knowledge collection. As weak-tie bridges link existing strong-tie local networks across regions, across kinship groups, across occupational groups, and across social classes, useful knowledge flows across the extended network with increasing speed. As the network becomes more dense and social capital grows, social knowledge is exchanged ever more freely. As they witness and experience the social capital gains that come with communication, experts are more willing to share “proprietary” information. Others realize that their tacit knowledge of people and processes, simply taken for granted as “common sense” among the members of a strong-tie network, is of special valuable within a diverse group of people possessing very different sorts of knowledge. Thus both latent specialized technical knowledge and generalized tacit knowledge becomes increasingly accessible to the deliberations of the group as a whole. As Councilors become clearer about who is good at what, and who to go to for what sort of information, they can make better recommendation and as a result the whole council becomes more capable of doing its job.

Moreover, as the Council overcomes its collective action problem and learns to work cooperatively towards common goals, the Councilors can access knowledge resources dispersed across the entire population of Athens. Because each Councilor has a network of contacts outside the Council, each Councilor is a bridge between the Council and the larger population. As a result, the Council, as a body, can make use of a good deal of the total knowledge available to everyone in the extended Athenian community. As a result, at least potentially, Athens, as a community, knew what the Athenians knew.

Finally, because Councilors serve only for a year, the Council as an institution never developed a self-serving identity or “closed institutional culture.” The rules of order remained simple and transparent enough to be learned by each year’s incoming class. As Councilors build networks and work together on problems of governance, they come to better grasp the overall governmental system of which they are just one part. Government ceases to be a black box as Councilors become expert at the work of politics. Their growing system-level expertise conjoins with the Councilors’ growing social-knowledge based judgment of people and so they are better able to judge the value of available knowledge to public purposes—and thus better able to make good decisions in the exercise of their office. As a result, better agendas are set, the government is better run day-to-day, and so Athens does better overall.

There are many other pieces that need to be added before we can hope to grasp the Athenian system in all its complexity. But I hope that my sketch of one key piece of the puzzle of “Athenian government by the people” has helped to show how participatory institutions might make possible individual success
and the success of the community—and therefore why studying ancient history might have something new to tell us about the enduring practical and moral value of government that is not only for the people and of the people, but also by the people.

Bibliography

Notes
i Tocqueville 2000 [1835], 1227-30.
iii The foundations for the sketch of democratic theory offered above can be found in Rawls 1971, 1996; Pettit, 1997; J. Cohen 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Ober forthcoming 2007.
iv On Dewey and his intellectual rivals on the topic of democracy, see further Westbrook 1991, Ryan 1995.

v The factual claims in this and the next paragraph are based on statistical data that will be presented in detail in a book tentatively entitled Democratic Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Democratic Athens.

vi On the Athenian revolution and its aftermath, see, further, Ober 1996.


viii In practice, this required a good deal of tinkering; not all “coastal” demes, for example, were located right on the coast: see Traill 1975.

ix Rhodes 1985, 17-18, favors a later date (ca. 462 B.C.) for the introduction of the tribal teams, but he notes that the scholarly communis opinio is that they were a Cleisthenic innovation. The argument for a later date is from the silence of our sources on the matter; yet given the scantiness of our sources for the early democracy, this silence is hardly surprising.

x The problems of whether there was ever a change in quotas, based on population change or whether new demes were added in the post-Cleisthenic era (and how this might have affected the deme quotas) is extremely complex and vexed; no strong scholarly consensus has yet emerged. Here I assume that the system was put into place in the immediate post-revolutionary period, and remained essentially unchanged through 322 B.C. The main lines of the argument I develop here would not be much affected by the kinds of changes that have been proposed to date, e.g. by Hansen et al. 1990.

xi This was a key insight argued by Gomme 1951.

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BRIGANCE FORUM

The Brigance Forum is an annual public lecture or debate in memory of the late W. Norwood Brigance, teacher, scholar, and leader in the Speech Association of America. In his 38 years at Wabash College, “Briggie” taught generations of Wabash students how to be more effective when they spoke and, through his textbooks, he taught thousands more in American high schools and colleges. As editor of the pioneer History and Criticism of American Public Address and as editor of the Quarterly Journal of Speech, he gave direction to the scholarship of the field. As president of the Speech Association of America, he guided the profession through the expansion of the post-war years. The Brigance family, friends, former students whom he taught, and those who continued the tradition of speech and rhetoric at Wabash after him have—through their contributions—endowed this program as an ongoing memorial to W. Norwood Brigance.

Contributions to support the Brigance Forum may be sent to:

Brigance Forum
Director of Development
Wabash College
PO Box 352
Crawfordsville, IN 47933