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REVIEW

Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), ISBN: 978-0521819855

This elegant and intriguing book might be called "A Tale of Two Concepts." The concepts are free speech and shame, or rather, the ancient Greek terms that are typically rendered into English as "free speech" and "shame": the first of these is *parrhêsia*, the second *aidôs*. Both are central notions in the political thought of classical Greece, and have been studied independently as representative values. Saxonhouse's contribution is to bring them together, and to treat classical *parrhêsia* precisely as indifference to *aidôs*, that is, shame in the sense of respect for tradition and public opinion, a word sometimes translated as "reverence" or even "awe." If freedom of speech is the hallmark of democracy—and it was indeed conceived as such in classical Athens—then democracy would seem to imply, on this account, a neglect of shame or the views of others, which is all very well if we are thinking of a kind of rugged individualism that speaks its mind fearlessly and has nothing to conceal. But shamelessness has also a negative side, insofar as it suggests a disregard of others' needs or interests, and may enable or excuse not just honest candour but deviousness and deceit. How Athenians managed this tension (insofar as we can judge from the texts that survive), and what it might have to teach us about free speech today—which is not exactly the same thing as *parrhêsia*—is the subject of Saxonhouse's book.

Freedom of speech, as understood in modern representative democracies, and above all in the United States, has its origins in the opposition to the powers of the state; Saxonhouse quotes James Madison's affirmation that "the great object in view is to limit and qualify the powers of Government," and the idea goes back ultimately to Milton's famous tract, *Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing*. (17) Defenses of free speech are cast in terms of checking or curbing the authorities so as to protect citizens' rights: it is a bulwark against the tyranny of the state. All this makes sense in a system of representative government, where elected individuals have great power over their fellow countrymen and the views of minorities and opposition groups need to be protected. But the ancient Athenian democracy was quite different. Saxonhouse quotes Thomas Jefferson's bold claim:

> The introduction of this principle of representative democracy has rendered useless almost everything written before on the structure of government; and in great measure, relieves our regret, if the political writings of Aristotle, or of any other ancient, have been lost, or are unfaithfully rendered or explained. (13)

In the classical Athenian democracy, the people were the government, and hence "there will be no reference to an 'oppressive government' against which the people, the *dêmos*, need to protect themselves." (23) When Barack Obama affirmed, "When our government is spoken of as some menacing, threatening foreign entity, it ignores the fact that, in our democracy, government is us," he was of course right to deny that government is necessarily an adversary of the people it represents, but wrong to assimilate the modern state to the people. What is more, Saxonhouse argues that modern attempts to distinguish between public and private speech are irrelevant to the Athenian democracy: free speech there had nothing to do with individualism or self-development or toleration of diversity, nor was it a safety valve for popular discontent or a window onto the sentiments of the lower classes; the Athenians were not interested in rights, but in equality. If democratic freedom entails a rejection of *aidôs*, it is not just shame before one's peers that is sacrificed, but respect for whatever has gone before—it is so wholesale a dismissal of inherited practices and values that Saxonhouse calls it amnesia: to create anew, one must forget the past. Democracy is a radical experiment—permanently.

After the introductory chapters on the contrast between ancient and modern democracy, Saxonhouse proceeds to analyze a series of texts that exhibit the tensions entailed in the classical Greek conception of *parrhêsia* and the restraints on absolute freedom of speech represented by its opposite number, *aidôs*. She begins with the tale of Gyges and Candaules' wife, as told by Herodotus. The Lydian king Candaules was enamoured of his wife, and to prove how beautiful she was, he ordered his chief minister, Gyges, to conceal himself in the bedroom so as to observe her naked; as Herodotus remarks, when a woman is seen unclothed, she is stripped also of *aidôs*. The queen espied Gyges, and later, to avenge the insult, ordered him to kill Candaules, on pain of his own death should he refuse. Thus Gyges became ruler of Lydia, and his line endured to the fifth generation, when Croesus was defeated by the Medes. Saxonhouse reads this tale as a sign of Candaules' refusal to respect traditional values; as she puts it, "In many ways I see him as a precursor to Socrates, who also dies for showing what perhaps should have remained hidden, at least from the perspective of truths assumed to be discovered long ago." (59) This is a novel interpretation, which does indeed prefigure Saxonhouse's view of Socrates (on which more below), but it omits some elements in the tale that deserve consideration. To begin with, Candaules is said to be infatuated with his wife (the verb is related to *erôs*): this is a bad sign, and he goes on to treat her as though she were a courtesan rather than his legitimate spouse; if Candaules is shameless, it is under the stimulus of erotic passion. Further, it is Candaules' wife who is said to have lost her *aidôs*, that is, her respect for what is right and due, and the result is that she arranges the murder of her husband: is she too, then, a precursor of Socrates? She loses her reverence for custom after she has been deprived of due regard–it is risky to expose others, as Socrates will discover.

Is *aidôs* shame? And if so, shame in what sense? Saxonhouse provides an elegant survey of modern conceptions of shame, which embraces both retrospective shame—feeling ashamed for something one has done—and prospective shame, that is, the sense of shame that inhibits one from performing an act that one might later feel ashamed of. The distinction between the two ideas is clearer in the negation: to lack shame in the sense of shamelessness ("he is shameless") is a vice, and signifies the absence of a sense of shame; however, to be free of shame in the sense of having done nothing of which one is ashamed is the mark of a

virtuous life. Now, Aristotle, in his analysis of shame (he discusses the term *aiskhunê*, not *aidôs*), speaks of shame for past, present, and future deeds; for him, what inhibits us from committing a wrongful act is an image (*phantasia*) of the shame we will feel for having done it. Saxonhouse mentions *aiskhunê* only in passing, since her focus is on *aidôs*, but the distinction implicit in the classical Greek vocabulary is significant. Thus, when Saxonhouse remarks that "The blush, as the response to shame, reveals our unsuccessful wish to hide, but in the very process of seeking to hide ourselves, it also reveals our dependence on the opinions of others and thus our lives as a member of the social network," she would seem to be joining together *aidôs*, as regard for social propriety, and *aiskhunê*, which would be the sentiment that elicits a blush. (76) If we had no *aidôs*, we would not blush, but neither would we blush if we acted always in accord with *aidôs*: the blush is caused by *aiskhunê*. Since we would not experience the emotion of *aiskhunê* (it is a *pathos* or emotion for Aristotle) if we lacked the values that underpin *aidôs*, Saxonhouse is right to connect the two ideas, but rendering *aidôs* simply as "shame" may give a misleading impression of the way the Greeks conceived it.

Saxonhouse's main argument concerns the place of shame in a liberal democratic society. As she puts it, "The question underlying this book is: does democracy (like philosophy) ...require shame, the contextual individual, or is democracy built on a transcendence of shame, on uncovering practices that resist shame and the history that defines what is shameful?" (77) In a democracy, we believe in freedom of speech; but this freedom presupposes "a practice of openness, of a refusal to hide one's thoughts because of a shame that would bring humiliation or disapproval in the eyes of others. Respect and reverence before the judgments of others, in contrast, limit the freedom and uncovering capacities of speech and opportunities for individual choice." (78) Seen this way, the character who incarnates the spirit of democracy is Candaules, who does as he pleases without regard for what others think or have thought (and his wife too, after she has been exposed and so sheds her *aidôs*), and, after him, Socrates, the man who "exercises the democratic virtue of *parrhêsia* to its fullest...: shedding *aidôs* like the Lydian women of whom Gyges spoke, he exercises it everywhere, whether he is in the private or public spaces of Athens." (110) Always to examine one's life implies that "nothing is too sacred to remain covered by a deference to or reverence for what is." (110) Socrates' refusal to placate the jurors when he is on trial for his life is of a piece with his challenge to every kind of hierarchy, human or divine—after all, he deliberately puts the oracle of Apollo, which declared him to be the wisest of all Athenians, to the test, buttonholing everyone he meets to determine whether they might in fact have more wisdom than he, since he knows himself to possess so little. (116) The irony is that the Athenian democracy has condemned Socrates for practicing the very privilege—that of *parrhêsia*—that is constitutive of membership in a democratic *polis*. Put away any thought of an elitist Socrates, for he is the model of a democratic citizen; it is the jurors who are violating democratic principles, precisely insofar as they demand that Socrates show reverence or *aidôs* for conventional values—any values, that is, since all are subject, in a democracy, to constant interrogation. Socrates is the hero of shamelessness, unless perhaps (it occurs to me) we wish to regard the jurors who condemned him as acting shamelessly; but Saxonhouse regards them rather as bound by convention.

Saxonhouse proceeds to examine the role of free speech and shame in drama (both tragedy and comedy) and Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War. Her discussion of Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, one of the more problematic tragedies that has often been criticised for its apparent shapelessness, is trenchant. Saxonhouse observes that Eteocles, one of Oedipus' sons, "through his own shameless *parrhêsia*, respectful neither of traditions nor oaths nor family affirms simply and without qualification that truth comes from power," and so determines to hold onto the throne that he had pledged to share with his brother Polyneices after Oedipus had blinded himself; shamelessness, then, is not necessarily bound up with democracy, or if it is, it is a democratic principle that may be turned against democracy itself. (142) This is a problem that is felt urgently today, as limits are placed on free speech in the ostensible service of protecting it (or, as someone once quipped, freedom of speech is a sacred right, so long as you do not exercise it). Of Oedipus, his wife Jocasta, and her brother Creon, Saxonhouse remarks: "this is a family that pursues the truth and that wants speech to reveal and uncover, but that always ends by regretting when the speech they so forcibly demand reveals the truths they would rather not hear." (144) Saxonhouse subjects Thucydides' account of the debate over the fate of the Mytileneans, whom the Athenians had determined to kill to the last man (reducing the women and children to slavery) for having withdrawn from the Athenian alliance, to a revisionist interpretation. According to Saxonhouse, the brutal Cleon, who argues that the Athenians ought not to revise their decision out of facile sentimentality, becomes, despite his brash outspokenness and apparent contempt for public opinion (he lambasts the Athenians for their fickleness), an example of undue respect for the past—that is, the harsh judgment the Athenians arrived at on the previous day: "Decisions that were made in the past (even if it was only yesterday) must hold, he claims." (154) His opponent, Diodotus, becomes the speaker who looks to the future: "Foresight, not memory, dominates the perspective of this advocate of the lost art of *parrhêsia*." (160) Perhaps so, but there is another way to see the contrast between the two arguments: Cleon maintains that the severe punishment of the Mytileneans will deter future revolts, whereas Diodotus holds that it will rather encourage any city that does rebel to fight to the finish. Both are forward looking; nevertheless, it is true that Cleon thinks more in terms of justice (what the Mytileneans deserve) while Diodotus stakes his claim on purely pragmatic grounds (what is ultimately in our best interest), which, as Aristotle observes, is the proper kind of argument in a political debate (deliberative oratory) as opposed to a courtroom (forensic oratory); and justice does involve a respect for values, though Saxonhouse does not put it this way. Saxonhouse also analyzes the debates over the expedition to Sicily, both in Athens, where Alcibiades shamelessly appealed to the martial spirit of the young while Nicias emphasized the risks involved, and in Syracuse, where the aristocratic Hermocrates urged precautions against the coming invasion while his opponent, the otherwise unknown Athenagoras (whose name, I note, translates as "spokesman for Athens"), pooh-poohs the idea that the Athenians would even contemplate such an attack. I personally believe that Athenagoras was a stooge for Athens, and expected an Athenian victory to shore up the democratic party in Syracuse: it is hard otherwise to see what the advantage would be in failing to take any advance measures to defend the city, even if knowledge of a possible Athenian assault was still based on rumour (but whence its source?). Saxonhouse takes Hermocrates as "a blind for Thucydides' own speech throughout the his-

tory." (173) Perhaps so, but beyond the issue of truth and the power of free expression, one must remember that democratic and aristocratic (or oligarchic) factions were facing off in most cities, and the Athenians' support for democratic regimes (as opposed to the Spartans' elitist posture) meant that Peloponnesian War was in part waged as a proxy fight between rival political parties. In such a context, everyone had something to conceal.

Saxonhouse concludes with a discussion of Plato's *Protagoras*. In his great speech at the beginning of the dialogue, Protagoras had insisted that, whereas in most areas talent is distributed unevenly, all people have a share in *aidôs* and a sense of justice, which are the twin bases of civic society. But Protagoras himself, like the other sophists gathered in the house of Callias, is a foreigner in Athens, and so his freedom of speech or *parrhêsia* is limited. This puts him in a bind, since his teachings encourage a critical attitude toward conventional values ("man is the measure of all things"), and thus undermine the very *aidôs* that he preached in his speech. (185) The conversation in which he engages with Socrates is held indoors, in private; secrecy is needed to conduct such an inquiry. The Athenian democracy, as we have seen, is not uniformly tolerant of *parrhêsia*. Can Socrates offer a way in which a free conversation can be pursued, one that will avoid the disingenuous posturing of sophists like Protagoras, who pronounce grand rhetorical discourses that are belied by their own behaviour? Saxonhouse believes that Socrates does so, precisely by imposing his own form (*eidos*) of discussion, that is, relatively brief questions and answers: "*Eidos* replaces *aidôs*," she puns, and in this way "the freedom from *aidôs* and from the hierarchies grounded on past relations does not dissolve into the formless and bombastic rhetoric of Protagoras." (198) Saxonhouse argues further that Socrates' insistence on the unity of the virtues has as its goal "nothing less than to release the words from their bondage and to transform the way in which we speak." (204) But does the form of his cross-examinations inoculate his discourse against the danger of insincere speech?

Socratic dialectic is corrosive, challenging conventional values and distinctions, and in this regard may be characterized as license. Socrates' shamelessness is presumably justified, in contrast to Protagoras' posturing, by his relentless pursuit of the truth, as though a commitment to truth, even when it is unpopular, itself constituted a kind of restraint or reverence. But can we, as Saxonhouse suggests, distinguish between a good and bad *parrhêsia*, depending on the motives of the speaker—an honest and open discourse on the one hand, or a self-interested and deceitful *parrhêsia* that "becomes instead the practice of covering up what one truly believes in order to become foremost in the regime in which one lives?" (209) Is this not to reinstall a tyranny over the freedom of speech, inasmuch as someone—but who?—will have to be the arbiter of genuine versus false *parrhêsia*? In the conclusion, Saxonhouse describes a series of paradoxes that result from her investigation, and in the last of these she wonders aloud whether the ancient texts she has examined "point to the dangers in the too-ready dismissal of *aidôs*," and suggests the need for "a sort of 'democratic *aidôs*' to replace the democratic amnesia from which democracies emerge." (214) Is democracy then truly the realm of shamelessness, and is this version of free speech, even if it is imagined to be in the service of truth, the manifestation of democracy at its best and strongest? The lessons of antiquity seem ambiguous, and this hankering for a form of respect proper to democracy seems to undercut the radical vision of democratic *parrhêsia* that Saxonhouse was bold enough to introduce. But perhaps true freedom implies the necessity of letting all sides speak, and works less by persua-

sion than by clarification. By reminding us that free speech is predicated on a kind of shamelessness, Saxonhouse has posed the fundamental questions of democratic discourse anew, and shown how readily, and perhaps inevitably, it is compromised where power is at stake.

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