



Episode 594: Why Was Classical Greece So Successful?

Guest: Josiah Ober

WOODS: I have not discussed classical Greece ever on the show. This is Episode 594; we're finally getting to it. And I was particularly intrigued by the way you make your argument and, in fact, the very content of your argument. You're looking to try to explain the phenomenon of classical Greece, that we have this extraordinary civilization, both in terms of its cultural output and its economic prosperity. You are going after people whose view more or less was that there was really no economic growth to speak of anywhere until the modern world. That certainly is not the case. Sustained economic growth, maybe, but in the case of classical Greece, we do have, certainly by the standards of the day, a prosperous civilization and one whose cultural achievements are still being studied and imitated today.

So the question really becomes how did this come about, how is this possible, especially given that they operated on a decentralized model, whereas the modern prejudice is that progress comes from centralization. So I'm very intrigued by the way you pose the question. And it does seem like there's a prejudice against decentralization, partly because we have trouble understanding how it can work. The logic of centralization is easy to understand, but decentralization not so easy.

OBER: I think that's exactly right. We can go all the way back to Thomas Hobbes, some of the classical thinkers of the Enlightenment, and the basic bias really is against decentralization because it seems so obvious that a single, centralized authority can organize society in a way that a whole bunch of different, decentralized, disaggregated states or individuals simply could not. So it's just a hard problem.

WOODS: And I think a lot of people don't realize just the scope of classical Greece, in the sense that when we're in school we learn about Athens and Sparta, and maybe you hear about Thebes, but you don't realize that you're actually dealing with in excess of 1,100 city-states.

OBER: That's right. This is a quite remarkable civilization extending over much of the Mediterranean for hundreds of years. It's really only recently that classicists have fully been able to measure the extent of the civilization, the number of Greeks, the number of city-states. And at this point, it's just quite clear what we're dealing with is not a world with just a few great nodes like Athens, Sparta, and Thebes, but rather a

world that is genuinely dispersed across hundreds and hundreds of independent and semi-independent states.

WOODS: So you're talking about decentralization as being not an obstacle, but in some ways being an ingredient in and explanation of the Greek efflorescence, and then also you have discussion of not only the existence of specialization and exchange but the recognition of the value of these things. But before we even get into that, I just have to ask you: the Persian Wars that we get in the early 5th century B.C. seem incredibly unlikely to be Greek victories, especially, as you say, given the decentralized nature of classical Greece. And yet, they were victories for Greece. How do we account for that?

OBER: The Persian Wars really are remarkable. It would not have been possible unless the Greeks or some of the Greeks were able to cooperate via common projects under certain circumstances. Now, the key to the success in the Persian Wars is that Athens and Sparta, two of the biggest states, were able to create a coalition that was large enough to ultimately push back the Persians. But still in all that was only a small subset of the total number of Greek city-states involved, and so it really is a matter of both the cooperation among the Greek city-states under extreme circumstances and then the kind of specialization in certain forms of warfare that the Greeks had developed before the outbreak of those wars.

WOODS: You'll sometimes hear people in this case and in others try to give geographical explanations or base explanations on climate — the climate was favorable and this and that. And of course, it's not to say there's nothing to that, but in the case of Greece these things are pretty constant across the history of Greece, and yet the achievements of Greece are not constant over time, so this can't be the full explanation. You spend some time talking about institutions and saying that, even though they don't have the concept of rights articulated the way we would articulate it, still there is some sense that the government can't just arbitrarily take your things, that contracts will be honored. In other words, the institutional infrastructure necessary for market exchange is present.

OBER: Yeah, that's exactly right. When we look at the very long history of the Greek world, just at this point focusing on mainland Greece, we can show that there's really only one period of great economic efflorescence before the 21st century, and that is this classical era of the ancient period. And that is the period in which we get these distinctive institutions being developed, and those institutions are centered on what I would call citizenship or citizen-centered governments; that is, that citizens have certain rights against each other and also against any collective form of government they create together. And they also have rulers who create rules that are relatively fair, at least for citizens, so that individual Greeks were able to plan their lives in ways that were much more long term than is typical in ancient societies, because they were able to plan without fear of the confiscation of their goods, either by an intrusive government or by powerful individuals, by local big men who would extract rents.

WOODS: All right, so we have that; we have this institutional structure; we have the – and then you also talk about specialization and exchange in the sense that you have different cities that specialize in different things, and then they can exchange and grow wealthier. But tell us something about this. Presumably there's specialization and exchange in many parts of the world.

OBER: Yeah, that's right. Specialization is certainly a basic feature of the development of civilization. What happens in Greece is that individuals are able to specialize in what they think they're good at. Individuals are able to develop human capital, because they don't have a government or the local big shots telling them what to do, and so I think this is one of the key things, is we get a lot of local specialization with investment in human capital, in learning, in skill development that just doesn't happen in societies in which you've got everything being directed from the top, whether that's the government or the local big shots. And then we also get interdependent relationships between these many city-states, recognizing that they are able to focus on something that they can do really well and then exchange goods with other city-states with which they have ongoing trade relations.

So for example, in the western part of the Greek world in Sicily and south Italy, the conditions were very good for growing grain. In the eastern part of the Greek world, mainland Greece, they are much less desirable for growing grain but very good for growing olives and wine and also for forms of manufacturing. So at any rate, both the development of local specialization by individuals – so somebody turns out to be a good potter, someone else is a good painter of vases, someone else a poet, someone else is good at retail trade – and the specialization of particular regions and particular city-states based on various advantages that they have in terms of natural resource endowments.

WOODS: How does your discussion of these questions differ from that of other historians?

OBER: So for a long time, there was a belief among ancient historians that the Greek world was really substantially, fundamentally different from modernity. The idea was that modernity is distinctive in terms of its processes of production, which is in some ways certainly true, but also that modernity was distinctive in terms of the kind of social relations that people engage in and therefore in the kind of economic development that is possible. What I suggested, based in part because we now know so much more about what actually happened in terms of the Greek world, in terms of the development economically over time, in terms of just the levels of consumption that were going on, is that we needed to rethink the model. And when we ultimately get into looking at how the rules of the institutions, social norms of the society actually worked, it became obvious that the Greek world was in some ways rather more like at least a world of early modern Europe, say Holland or England in the 17th century, than it was like the sort of deep middle ages, which was the model that had often been used before.

WOODS: I can see how decentralization and specialization and exchange exist side by side, but what other advantages did classical Greece derive from the fact that there was no king ruling the whole thing but it was a series of independent entities?

OBER: The possibilities for diversity and experimentation in forms of political organization and then various other kinds of technological and institutional configuration of society were really very [inaudible] in the Greek world. And so instead of simply having one way of doing things – the king says this is what we'll do; we don't want to change things; the king wants to continue to deliver rents to his coalition, and therefore is going to resist change – we had a world that was really very driven by change, because if one city-state developed a new idea, a new institution, a new technology and was in rivalry with a neighboring city-state, it was a very good reason for that neighboring city-state to try to adopt what worked in terms of that institution or that technology.

And so what we see is across this really vast ecology of states is a tendency for advantageous developments, whether institutional or technological, to just sweep across, and therefore innovation gets rewarded and there's a reason for people to want to innovate and for states to reward innovators instead of crushing innovation, which is often what you get when you have a single, centralized government. Once again, the king doesn't want to change things too much. It's too disruptive to the way that the coalition works, and therefore in a lot of highly centralized societies historically there tends to be a resistance to innovation. There was every reason for the Greeks to innovate, because each of these city-states hoped to survive and flourish in a highly competitive environment.

WOODS: I want to ask you about something that's maybe a bit beyond the scope of your book but that is interesting to me. There's a famous essay, I guess it was a speech from the 19th century by Benjamin Constant on the "liberty of the ancients" versus the "liberty of the moderns," and what he was trying to say there – because I'm assuming not everybody listening has read this thing – but what he's trying to say is that the view that people had of what liberty is all about was very different in the ancient world as compared to today. Today we think of individual liberties, like the freedom of speech or the freedom of religion, things of this nature. In the ancient world, liberty was thought of as more of a collective thing. We're free because we have political freedom. We can make our decisions together in a political society without being dominated by some outside force. And so when you have that as your view of liberty, then individual liberty takes a backseat. You get institutions like Athenian ostracism, where somebody can be exiled for 10 years just because a majority of people say so. That would be something that we would consider horrifying today, whereas today in the modern world with our giant mega-states we don't have the kind of freedom that they had in the sense that, yeah, we do make our decisions in common, but when there are 100 million of us, our individual voices don't really amount to a whole lot. What do you think of Constant's thesis? Is he overstating that?

OBER: Yes. Constant was a really smart guy, and the basic structure of his argument is I think well worth attending to, but yes, he is overstating it. In fact, even Constant, if

you read him carefully, says that there are exceptions to his division in which the ancients only have this sort of positive liberty and that moderns have a conception of negative liberty. He said that Athens is an example of an ancient state that actually did understand some conception of negative liberties, that is, the liberties of the individual. So the odd thing is of course Athens is the state that we know by far the most about from the ancient world, and the question was is Athens just a wild outlier that was unlike any of the other Greek city-states or was it more like exemplary of what is most successful of the Greek city-states were like?

And it turns out that Athens was more exemplary of city-states, that Sparta, which was the state that Constant took as sort of normatively completely without the exception of individual liberty, turns out to be the outlier rather than Athens as being the outlier. So it's certainly true that there is a difference between the ancient conception of liberty and a robust 20th, 21st century idea of inalienable and inherent human rights that inhere each individual, but there is also a pretty strong sense in the Greek city-states that within the structure of the law an individual should be free to pursue their own individual projects.

Now, it's also true that there are restraints on that. So for example, you mentioned ostracism. On the other hand, ostracism in Athens is used extremely occasionally. There were only 15 ostracisms in the roughly 200-year history of Athenian democracy, and so although indeed we would be horrified by creating an ostracism or holding an ostracism today – or at least most of us I suppose would – but it's not the typical way of doing business of the standard Greek city-states. They're not holding ostracisms on a regular basis, simply kicking out citizens because they don't like cut of their jib, as it were.

WOODS: I have to ask the obvious question: if we have this understanding of where the Greek success came from, this Greek efflorescence came from, then the question becomes where did it go? These ingredients that we attribute to their success, where did they all go? Now of course, after Alexander the Great it's true that the Greek city-states lose a good measure of their independence, but what's the full explanation, because they presumably still had specialization and exchange? We can account for where it all comes from, but can we also account for where it all goes?

OBER: Yeah, this was the big challenge for me in writing this book. I wanted to be able to explain both the rise and the fall of this quite remarkable world of city-states, and I think the way to think about the fall is in two stages. In the first stage, the city-states lost at least part of their independence to Alexander the Great, and the Macedonian kingdom figured out how to borrow or grab or expropriate, if you will, many of the innovations, technological and institutional, that had emerged in the city-state culture. Philip of Macedon, Alexander's father, and Alexander were great at looking to see what worked in the city-state world – military innovations, financial innovations especially – and adapting them to their own autocratic, centralized state, and putting them to work in terms of military organization. So that's what leads to the remarkable victories of Alexander the Great and then the Macedonians afterwards, and to some extent limits the independence of the Greek city-states.

But that independence doesn't really go away completely until the Roman era. The Greek city-state were simply too well fortified, well defended individually for a Hellenistic or a post-Alexander king to be able to extract all of the resources that he might want to have extracted to set the tax level so high to basically suck up all of the productive capacity from a city. It's not until we get the Roman takeover that we have a hegemonic power that is so superior in its total capacity militarily so as to defortify, demilitarize the city-states and therefore really end the period of genuine independence on the part of the city-states. And that's when we begin to see the decline of the Greek world. The Greek world becomes part of the Roman Empire, and then once the Roman Empire as a grand entity fails, so too the Greek world fails with it, and that then leads to the very long period of a very reduced level of consumption, a very poor economy that lasts in the Greek world or at least in central Greece until the 20th century.

WOODS: Now, a lot of times historians get asked what lessons can we draw. People expect history to have these neat little potted lessons that we can extract, but yet it's not entirely unreasonable that people would ask that, because perhaps there are things that the past has to say to us today. What do you think – is there anything that the period of classical Greece has to say to us today? Not the ideas of the philosophers and stuff, but their experiences as political societies – what does that have to say to us today?

OBER: I think that there are a few lessons that can be extracted. I completely agree; these sort of potted lessons can be very banal, but we ought to look at history to look at where we are and where we might be going. So the key lessons I would take away, on one hand that citizens together can create rules that are relatively fair, that both do in fact bind citizens, that establish law, that limit to some extent what you can do as an individual, and yet in the aggregate expand what you can do as an individual, because they allow you to make choices in the long run, so that collective citizen action is possible in ways that are not oppressive to individual freedom but ultimately expands individual freedom. Now, that's not an easy thing to do, getting the balance between the rules and then the freedom to act as an individual such that the rules actually push forward the potential of the society to the individual. So it's a tricky thing, but it can be done. I think another lesson that can be learned is that the kind of innovations and advances that can come in a dispersed decentralized, really oriented-towards-freedom society can be exploited by societies that don't have those values, that the developments that come up from a dispersed, diversified world like that of the Greek city-states is not the unique possession of that world, and that's I think something that we also need to attend to.

WOODS: Well, the book is *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, by Professor Ober, our guest. I appreciate your time and this wonderful book. Thank you so much.

OBER: Thank you so much, Tom, for talking.