

***The Phyle Project:
Revitalizing Democracy in History, Theory and Practice***

Josiah Ober

2025 Balzan Prize for Classics: Athenian Democracy Revisited

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Affiliated institution: Stanford University

Period: 2026-2028

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Project Description

The title of the project is taken from the name of a stronghold in the mountains north of Athens, from which, in the winter of 404/403 BCE, a small handful of citizens, along with resident aliens and slaves, rallied their fellow Athenians, defeated the ruling oligarchs, and restored democracy to Athens.

The Phyle Project aims to promote new academic scholarship on the question of how organized systems of citizen self-government have been (and ought to be) defended in times of crisis or restored after being overthrown. This body of new scholarship will prominently include, but will not be limited to, work by classical historians and philosophers on ancient Greek democracy (especially Athens) and republics (especially Rome). Work on antiquity will be juxtaposed with work on more recent history, contemporary political theory, and empirical political science. The new work will be done by an international cohort of younger scholars, drawn from the disciplines of classics, history, political science, and philosophy. They will be selected and advised by an academic committee of senior scholars.

Ober envisions a three-year project, beginning in January 2026 and continuing through December 2028, supporting the scholarship of twelve recent PhDs (each within ten years of receipt of the PhD at the time of appointment). Each young scholar chosen will have a proven academic record of scholarship and a coherent work plan, related to the Project, that promises the prompt publication of substantial papers and books. All publications will prominently acknowledge the Balzan Prize. While each participant will be working within a primary discipline, it is a goal of the Project to enable each young scholar to work more effectively across disciplinary lines and in collaboration with others.

Funds may be used, at the discretion of the recipient, for (e.g.) summer salary, travel, equipment, or hiring research assistants. The stipend will also enable the awardees to travel to two Phyle Project conferences (location to be decided, see below). A description of planned academic work and a short “anticipated budget” narrative will be submitted at the time of application. Each successful applicant will submit a one-year interim report of progress (listing new publications), and a final report of results. The only mandatory use of the award funds is to promote the applicant’s research in plausible ways and to travel to the two conferences.

Selection Process and Responsibilities

An interdisciplinary, international committee of senior scholars (see below), each of whom will receive an honorarium for their work on the Project, plus travel expenses for each conference they attend, will be appointed. The committee members will (1) nominate and solicit nominations of younger scholars from leading senior scholars in their networks, (2) select among those nominated for the three-year award, (3) attend one or both Project conferences. Application materials by nominees will include a statement of planned work and a letter of recommendation from a senior academic advisor. Finalists will be interviewed by members of the committee (via Zoom or similar). Awardees will prepare a publishable abstract and oral presentation of their proposed work for the first conference; an interim report on progress twelve months after the initial grant; a paper based on their work under the award and to be presented at the second conference and published in an edited volume; and a final report, list of publications and works-in-progress developed under the grant. Funds will be paid in three installments: (1) before the first conference; (2) upon receipt of a satisfactory interim report on progress; and (3) at the time of the second conference.

Conferences

The first of the two Balzan Phyle Project conferences will be in Autumn 2026. It is intended for the younger scholars to meet one another, report on preliminary progress, learn about one another's work, and interact with several invited senior scholars. Each will give a presentation of the work to be undertaken during the Project. This conference will be "by invitation only," allowing participants to try out ideas rather than perform for an audience. The abstracts of the presentations will be published on the project web site. The second conference will be in Spring 2028. It will center on presentation of papers by each recipient, based on the work that each has accomplished. It will also feature discussions among recipients about future plans, and opportunities for deepening relations among the members of the Project. This will be open to a wider scholarly community, to showcase the work of the Project.

Outcomes

The Phyle Project will result in excellent individual publications by younger scholars, work that advances our understanding of the history, theory, and practice of revitalizing democracy. It also aims to build an international and interdisciplinary cohort of young scholars. Each will be developing their own academic works for publication (single- or co-authored, books and articles). But, over the course of the project, they will also be encouraged to keep in touch with and learn from and to share their work in progress with one another. While it will not be a requirement, the Project will also encourage them to engage in public-facing work, which might take various forms (op-eds, podcasts, videos etc.). One venue for this will be the *Civic Agora* podcast series, hosted by the Stanford Civics Initiative. Communication among Project members and publicity of public-facing work will be facilitated by the Project web site. Younger scholars will also broaden their network by interaction with senior members of the Project. It is anticipated that this will help the younger scholars to advance their academic careers. Among the Project's primary outcomes will be an edited book, with the tentative title *Revitalizing Democracy: Ancient and Modern*, based on the conference papers presented by the younger scholars.

Lectures

Ober will present two public lectures under the auspices of the Balzan Prize. The first Balzan Lecture could be offered in conjunction with Ober's planned Tanner Lectures in Human Values, scheduled for academic year 2027/28 at Princeton University. The Princeton Tanner Lectures series is well-organized and will ensure that his first Balzan Lecture reaches a substantial academic audience. The planned topic is "Civil War/Civic Duty." Ober proposes that the second Balzan Lecture be presented in Athens, as part of the second Conference. Organization and publicity for the lecture will be facilitated by the Mitsotakis Foundation. The topic of the second lecture is to be decided but will be relevant to the Project.

Staffing

A part time staff person (TBA) will be appointed to help administer the selection process of grantees, conferences, lectures, interim reports, and to maintain the web site.

Proposed Senior Scholar Committee

John Ma. Professor of Classics. Columbia University. *Deputy Supervisor*
Mirko Canevaro. Professor of Greek History. University of Edinburgh
Giovanni Giorgini. Professor of the History of Political Thought. Università di Bologna
Paulin Ismard. Professeur d'histoire grecque. Aix Marseille Université
Melissa Schwartzberg. Professor of Political Science. New York University
Uwe Walter. Professor of Ancient History. Universität Bielefeld

Provisional Timeline

2026

- January: Staffing organized. Senior scholar committee appointed
- March: Nominations completed. Website development
- April: Finalists selected and interviewed
- May: Awards announced. First stipends awarded. Website is made public
- October: First Balzan Phyle Project Conference (Stanford)

2027

- January: First Supervisor's annual report to Balzan Committee
- May: Interim (twelve-month) reports from grantees are due to Director. Second stipend awarded
- Autumn: First Balzan Lecture (Princeton University)

2028

- January: Second Director's annual report to Balzan Committee
- May/June: Second Balzan Phyle Project Conference (Athens). Second Balzan Lecture (Athens). Third stipend awarded
- October: Final report from grantees to Supervisor. Decision on publication of papers from second Conference
- December: Supervisor's final report to Balzan Committee