

## BOOK REVIEW

**Democracy: a life**, by Paul Cartledge, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, 383 pp., index, £20.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-969767-0

Paul Cartledge, an Emeritus Professor of Greek Culture at Cambridge University, has written a very engaging and detailed, but not forbiddingly technical, description of “people power” from Ancient Greece to the present. In keeping with the author’s expertise, if biography is the narrative trope of *Democracy: A Life*, then it is most definitely a *Bildungsroman*: more than two-thirds of the book cover events in Greece up to 322/1 BC; contemporary events since the “first wave” of democratization are merely alluded to in the epilogue. The “modern” version of democracy Cartledge juxtaposes to his Ancient models is thus still that of Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill.

The fact that the emphasis of the treatment is so skewed towards the Ancient *polis* somewhat lessens the methodological concerns that any trans-historical treatment of a political concept arouses, as we have been taught to recognize by Cartledge’s colleagues of the Cambridge School. However, the reader more versed in modern than in ancient political thought will find the final chapters on the rebirth of democracy in the Age of Revolutions and the nineteenth century a tad schematic, a portrait gallery of major thinkers that mostly skirts the controversial interpretive topics.

Still, while this is largely a book about Ancient democracy, it is not of merely antiquarian interest. The dedication of the volume to Josiah Ober, the Stanford classicist who throughout his career has stressed the contemporary social-scientific relevance of Ancient Greek democracy, is itself indicative of the intent of Cartledge’s argument. From an ideological point of view, his stated polemical target is the movement, spear-headed by Amartya Sen, aiming to “provincialize” the Greek experience by assimilating it to several other premodern non-European instances of democratic governance. According to Cartledge, such denial of the uniqueness of Ancient democracy as a peculiarly Greek achievement is unacceptable: in the same way the *polis* is qualitatively different from the myriad examples of city-states across the ages, so is the assumption of power by the citizens of the *polis* different from generic cases of rationalist debate on public policy, benign government enjoying the consent of the governed, and other such vague notions. As befits a disciple of the late G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, Cartledge describes Greek distinctiveness by emphasizing political power, competition and contestation, and ultimately social class: for the Ancients, it was clear that democracy was a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

In analysing the waxing of democratic practice and ideology in the Greek world, Cartledge underlines two aspects that should become settled starting points even in non-specialist discourse. First, the polycentrism of democracy, which occurred in many other *poleis* than the one for which we have overwhelmingly more sources, Athens. Second, the heyday of democratic expansion, which was not in the mid-fifth century imperialist Periclean era, but rather in the following century, when the waning of Spartan hegemony allowed its erstwhile allies, such as Corinth and Thebes, to experiment with democratic government.

Cartledge's treatment of the boundaries of the political equality ushered in by democracy, namely the status of women and of slaves in the *polis*, is very detailed and thoughtful. Somewhat less satisfying, perhaps, is his treatment, or lack thereof, of the generational divide and the issue of education, which was at the centre of much political debate both practical and theoretical in Athens. Rather more surprising for a scholar whose notoriety, especially amongst a wider public, rests on his expertise on Sparta is the rather hurried treatment of its institutions: the conclusion that we lack sufficient evidence to claim a democratic aspect for the Spartan constitution leads Cartledge directly to side with Ancient historians' appraisal of it as the champion of oligarchy, opposed to Athenian democracy. But Sparta's government does not appear clearly to fit the image of an aristocracy either of birth or of wealth, much less a despotism. Thus, its preference for such forms of government in its allies would seem to speak more of a polarization among rival coteries in face-to-face societies (Athens' enemies of necessity becoming Sparta's friends) than a conscious ideological policy of reshaping Greek *poleis* in its image.

The main interpretive issue that arises from Cartledge's book appears to this reviewer to be the treatment of Greek democracy's demise. Did the experiment in self-government end simply because military technology had evolved to the point where the *polis* could no longer be the locus of independent and autonomous political life, or did the internal dynamics of this form of political life fatally unbalance it, making the recurrence of civil war (*stasis*) catastrophically frequent? While Cartledge is careful to maintain a narrative neutrality with regard to Ancient democracy, his preference is readily apparent in such litmus cases as the discussion of Socrates' trial and execution (for which he largely exonerates the Athenian judicial system). But if the problem with Ancient democracy was not a systemic, normative one (and the retelling of the modern rediscovery of the term – in which the contribution of liberalism is almost entirely absent – would seem to corroborate such a reading), it would appear that democracy was merely a victim of (military) economies of scale. If this is the case, though, the Greek style of self-government would seem to be confirmed in its intrinsic remoteness and foreignness from the modern political world, much more than Cartledge (who quotes James Fishkin and the Occupy movement) would seem to desire.

Such criticism hardly detracts from the overall worth of the book. Indeed, rather than encouraging speculation on historical parallels of limited heuristic value (“was the Athenian Empire similar to contemporary attempts at democracy promotion?”), *Democracy: A Life* will be most useful for students and non-classicist scholars in presenting an accessible exposition of the vitality and diversity of ancient Greek democracy.

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