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Reviews

Ancient Democracy in the Plural

Paul Cartledge, *Democracy: A Life.* Oxford University Press. 2016. xxviii + 383 pages. ISBN 9780199697670.

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Histories of democracy have their own peculiar features. One kind of history, given the origins of the word democracy, focuses on the ancient Greek world. Most of our evidence comes from classical Athens, and Athens has had a major cultural and political impact on the rest of the Greek world and consequently on the reception of classical Greek civilisation in postclassical times; given this, it is rather unsurprising that most histories of ancient Greek democracy are effectively histories of classical Athenian democracy.

Another kind of history consists of bold diachronic accounts that take the story of democracy from its purported invention in ancient Greece and bring it to its culmination in the modern world. Given that most of these histories take as axiomatic the distinction between ancient direct democracy and modern representative democracy, most of them face the problem of how to define the object whose history they study: how can we define democracy in such a way that there can be a genus that includes specimens as different as classical Athens and the United States? As a result, diachronic histories of democracy often end up becoming histories of democratic ideas, rather than histories of political systems. One version of this, particularly popular among ancient historians, is to use the reception of ancient Greece or classical Athens as a means through which to construct a diachronic history of democratic ideas.

Finally, a third kind of history emerged as a reaction to the previous two. These histories challenge what they perceive as the Eurocentric bias of traditional genealogies of democracy, which trace its discovery and origins exclusively in ancient Greece; accordingly, non-Eurocentric histories of democracy aim to restore the significance of non-Western civilisations for the history of democracy, either by exploring alternative democratic trajectories beyond ancient Greece and the West, or by stressing the significance of non-Western contributions to a global trajectory.

Paul Cartledge's new book is a fascinating attempt to engage with all three historical quests on the basis of his own particular point of view. Cartledge of-

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fers a well-argued case against the attempt of non-Eurocentric accounts to decentre ancient Greek democracy from a diachronic history of democracy. Such attempts, Cartledge argues, require a very broad definition of democracy in order to function. In many of these works, democracy becomes the equivalent of freedom of speech or reasoned debate; and while these elements are undoubtedly important for any democratic political system, what such definitions elide is the issue of power, of decision-making and government. If we stress the role of power and its exercise for our definition of democracy, the answer surely must be that the history of democracy started in ancient Greece 2 500 years ago. The democracy, whose *Life* he explores, is the idea of popular participation in decision-making and government and the system of institutions and practices through which this idea was realised. In this way he provides an answer both to non-Eurocentric historians, as well as to those who wonder how a diachronic history of democracy can be written. The narrative he constructs is structured around how this nexus of ideas, institutions and practices has fared, from its origins in late archaic Greece and its culmination in the fourth century BCE, through its gradual extinction in the Hellenistic world, the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, to its partial and problematic revival from the Renaissance onwards.

The bulk of the book is devoted to the historical emergence of democracy in late archaic Greece, and in particular with its most well-known example, that of classical Athens. Cartledge's account combines narrative history, an analysis of institutions and practices, an exploration of ideas, and finally the examination of the link between democratic ideas and practices and Athenian culture and society. While much in this is standard interpretations also found elsewhere, Cartledge's views on particular issues can often be revealing. Of particular significance is his critique of the idea that fourth-century Athens experienced a transition from popular sovereignty to the sovereignty of the law: Cartledge is right to argue that what changed is the form through which the Athenian people exercised their rule on certain issues, not the preponderance of that rule itself.

The second major feature of Cartledge's account is his refusal to reduce the study of ancient democracy to the history of classical Athens. In the last few decades three major developments in the field of ancient history have posited serious challenges to the Athenian dominance of ancient democracy. Cartledge's decision to take seriously into account these developments and to continue his account past the traditional endpoint of the late fourth century BCE is very important. Not only will it help to create bridges and dialogue between the different groups of specialists that explore different periods of ancient history, often with very little cross-pollination; even more, it provides a crucial service to scholars outside the discipline of ancient history and to general readers, who are unlikely to even be aware of these challenges and debates. Car-

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tledge's decision to pay serious attention to non-Athenian, Hellenistic and Roman democracy is perhaps the most interesting and consequential part of his book.

The first challenge concerns the study of classical Greek democracies beyond Athens: it is only in the light of comparison with the variety of Greek democracies that we can truly understand what is general and what is peculiarly Athenian as regards the Athenian version of democracy. The second challenge attacks the conventional assumption that the Athenian defeat from Philip and Alexander at Chaeroneia in 338 BCE signalled the death of Athenian and more generally Greek democracy. The dominance of Macedonia under Philip and Alexander over the erstwhile independent Greek cities, and the subsequent dominance of the squabbling Hellenistic monarchies and the Roman Empire made the systemic requirements for the existence of democratic politics non-existent. This assumption has been strongly challenged by a number of studies, which have tried to explore various forms of Hellenistic democracies, and have claimed that democratic politics were still alive in the Hellenistic world. The third challenge concerns the case of the Roman republic. Rome was long considered a typical case of oligarchy or a mixed constitution dominated by the Senate; but ever since the 1980s the major contributions of Fergus Millar have pointed out the limits of this approach and have offered an alternative model that focuses on the fact that legislation was decided by popular assemblies in which every citizen had a vote and that plebeian interests and voices had a much more significant role in the political process than the traditional model of aristocratic domination allowed for.

Cartledge's reaction to these three challenges is a clear contribution to the debate. He argues that the study of non-Athenian classical democracies shows that it is the fourth century, rather than the traditional fifth-century Periclean age, that should be considered as the golden age of ancient Greek democracy. By looking beyond Athens, we can realise that it was only in the fourth century when a very significant number of Greek states adopted some version of democracy. If his reaction to the first challenge is positive, the same cannot be said about the other two. Cartledge argues with reason that when Hellenistic scholars describe certain Hellenistic states as democracies, they adopt definitions of democracy that are significantly different than the classical Athenian popular participation in power. Accordingly, even if we are happy to call these Hellenistic states democracies, it would be crucial to point out the significant changes from what we understand as classical Greek democracies. Finally, Cartledge makes short shrift of the attempts to stress the democratic character of the Roman Republic.

The last part of the work is devoted to tracing the afterlife of the idea of democracy as popular participation in power in the early modern and modern West. Starting from the re-emergence of the Greek vocabulary of constitutional

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forms in the Renaissance, and the decision to transliterate Greek terms like democracy and aristocracy rather than translate them with modern equivalents, Cartledge explores how the English Revolution of 1640–1660, the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789 created situations and opportunities that made many people think anew of the advantages or risks of popular participation in the exercise of power. It was only in the aftermath of the French Revolution that, in the context of a British debate about the use of ancient Greek history to illustrate the danger of modern revolutions, George Grote came to write the first modern work that explicitly aimed to vindicate Athenian democracy. Ever since, and in particular in the post-war period, this tendency has remained dominant. But the paradox that Cartledge continuously underlines is the disjuncture between the fact that most moderns have turned down the ancient democratic principle of direct participation in the exercise of power, while lauding classical Athens and using the term democracy as a positive badge to describe modern representatives systems that ancient Greeks would have clearly conceived as oligarchies.

Cartledge is in my view correct to insist that any approach to democracy that fails to place sufficient account to popular participation in the exercise of power will have misleading implications. His definition of democracy allows him to show correctly the peculiarity of ancient Greek democracy in global historical terms. He is also correct to call into account Hellenistic and Roman historians that talk of Hellenistic or Roman democracy by applying very loose and rather unhelpful definitions of democracy and creating lopsided comparisons with classical Athens; and he is right to point out the paradoxical construction of a Western genealogy of democracy that at the same time lionises a term and lauds Athens, while negating many of the fundamental aspects of that ancient idea and practice.

Nevertheless, I think that while Cartledge's definition of democracy is much better than many others on offer, it is ultimately an insufficient response to our problems. Cartledge notes, but does not make much of the fact that in both Hellenistic Greece and the post-war world democracy came to be used as the sole term to describe legitimate non-monarchical forms of rule. From a more general methodological point of view, I would argue that historians should try to interpret and explain the past, as well as to evaluate it. We should try to explain why the term democracy acquired in the Hellenistic period such a wide currency, as well as evaluate how Hellenistic democracy fares in comparison with classical Greek democracy.

This leads me to my second point: as Cartledge's book demonstrates, the ancient Greeks themselves did not have a single definition of democracy, but a range of meanings and uses. Cartledge's definition of democracy as popular participation in the exercise of power was certainly one of them; so was democracy as the rule of the lower classes, tyranny of the majority, mob rule, anarchy,

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republican government, or, in Plato's terms, "aristocracy by popular approbation". The concept of the mixed constitution offered new understandings of democracy: no longer strictly linked to who had "sovereignty", but as a form of egalitarian life, or as the representation of popular interests. A historical understanding of ancient (and modern) democracy should take all these various definitions of democracy into account: after all, ancient people used these varying definitions of democracy for a reason.

The case of Hellenistic democracies offers a third reason for searching for an alternative methodology. Cartledge is correct that the novel balance of power politics in the Hellenistic world made it difficult for very many Greek states to have sufficient independence from big powers so that they could meaningfully operate democratically. But this was not a novelty of the Hellenistic world: most ancient Greek states in the late archaic and classical periods had to function in conditions in which external big-power interference was a constant factor that affected their politics and limited their ability to have popular participation in the exercise of power. The Athenian democracy was exceptional because Athens was a big power and could most of the time eschew outside interference in her affairs: whenever Athens suffered major military losses (412, 404, 323) its democracy was often overthrown or tampered with. We should not take the exceptional case of Athens and judge the rest of classical and Hellenistic democracies in comparison with it. This is perhaps difficult for American, British or French historians to understand, as their states rarely had to face outside interference: but from a modern Greek perspective of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, for example, it becomes quite obvious that democracy could function without major interference from outside powers only in the short conjuncture of circumstances between 1974–2010; before and after this limited period, different conjunctures had very different consequences. A meaningful understanding of ancient democracies would need to situate them within their system of interstate relationships and explore the complex interaction between "internal" and "external" politics as a major aspect of how we define democracies.

What would this alternative methodology look like? It would help if we thought of e.g. Athenian democracy as a conglomerate of various co-existing forms of democracy and other political elements, which were partly complementing and partly contradicting each other: direct popular participation in the exercise of power; the protection of popular interests; a series of practices that institutionalised and facilitated equality and freedom; the facilitation of elite participation, leadership and reward; a series of non-ideological institutional solutions to various problems of accountability and regionalism; a system of regulated competition between individuals, groups and classes; a system with limited enforceability and open to abuse/exploitation by various groups; a system of imperial ambitions and forms of rule. Talking of co-existing Athe-

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nian democrac*ies* and their entangled history could prove a significant advance over current approaches.

Such an approach would make it easier to incorporate the evidence for Hellenistic and Roman democracy into a long-term narrative of ancient democracies. It would also deal with the issues raised by non-Eurocentric accounts and the reception of ancient democracy in the modern world. Once we no longer reduce democracy to a single aspect, but think of democracies as conglomerates of various co-existing elements, we can both avoid Eurocentric narratives of the discovery of democracy in ancient Greece, as well as stress the peculiar conglomerate of elements we can find in ancient Greece. Thinking of ancient democracies as conglomerates of ideas, practices and institutions can better account for the paradox of the modern lionization of an idea and a term, alongside the modern rejection of much that was peculiar about ancient democracies.

It is a feature of important books that they raise major questions and stimulate answers and responses. This is a highly stimulating book written by somebody who has spent decades thinking about the subject: it deserves to be read widely by ancient and modern historians, by political scientists and amateur readers for its wealth of evidence and its rich illustration of patterns and paradoxes.

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