

Paul Cartledge, (2016) *Democracy: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. xxvi + 383 pp. £20. ISBN 9780199697670 (pbk).

This is a readable, wide-ranging, and unusually high-quality introduction to the history of democracy, with a special focus on the Greeks. Cartledge is clearly driven by a sense of the vital importance of his subject, and I agree with the basic shape of his narrative about how Greek democracy died out and how our own 'democracies' came into being centuries later. But I also think the book is a missed opportunity. Cartledge has essentially re-packaged the same old story, one which focuses almost exclusively on Athens in the ancient world and on Britain, America, and France in the modern one. And it was never clear to me what Cartledge thinks real democracy is, and where he wants it to go.

But let me start with the positives. Cartledge knows how to write for a popular audience, and his chatty, flowing prose will no doubt carry non-classicists through the narrative. He also has a good habit of explaining things that non-academics won't know, and doing so in an entertaining way. He also gets the details right where so many similar books don't.<sup>1</sup> This is partly because, as a distinguished Hellenist, he knows what he's talking about when it comes to the Greeks. But the later chapters of the book would also compare well, I think, to the equivalent ones in rival works. He's rightly skeptical of recent work on 'Hellenistic democracy', both because city-states' autonomy was severely compromised in the new, post-Alexander world, and because their politics were increasingly dominated by Big Men. I agree with him that democracy in this period had 'some durability' but was ultimately in a state of 'decline from an earlier, full-blooded political mode' (p. 245). I also agree with him that it's difficult to talk about democracy in the Roman republic when the method of voting in tribes gave significantly more power to some citizens than to others (p. 261). The most important point I agree with him about – maybe the most important point of the book – is that at some stage there was a 'calamitous verbal collapse' (p. 265) which meant that the word 'democracy' stopped referring to systems of mass participation and started being used for systems that were merely constitutional or republican.

On the negative side of the ledger, the flowing prose is sometimes so loose that it's hard to read. I knew what he meant when he described Athena as 'untamed by no male'; and I wasn't seriously confused by phrases like 'the prosecution in 489 of Marathon hero Miltiades (father of Cimon) by Xanthippus

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1 Comparable introductions to the history of democracy include B. Crick, *A Very Short History of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Roger Osborne, *Of the People, By the People* (London: Bodley Head, 2012).

(father of Pericles) for failure to capture, compounded by alleged religious misdemeanours committed on, the Cycladic island of Paros' (p. 80). But the claim that the 1200 talents that Athens was taking in during Lycurgus' time 'roughly equated to the total revenue of Athens during the third quarter of the fifth century' (p. 210) is either unclear (if he means 'in any single year') or false (if he means 'over the whole quarter century'). (Athens usually took in around 1000 talents a year during the fifth century – around half of that from allied contributions alone.)<sup>2</sup> And the statement 'The hollowing out of democracy today ... is directly connected to the privatisation and individualising of the notion of liberty' (p. 292) is an interesting one, but it's never argued for.

My main criticism, though, is that the book fails to move away from a careworn narrative that sees democracy being born in Athens, lost in Rome (or the Middle Ages), and then re-born (if in a different form) in the English Civil War and in the American and French revolutions.<sup>3</sup> The traditional narrative always begins with Athens, and Cartledge duly spends the vast majority of his time discussing the city. It's true that Athens has left by far the most evidence, but as Eric Robinson has recently shown, there is a surprising amount that we can say about democracies outside of Athens.<sup>4</sup> But instead of looking carefully at the possibility that Athens was not the first democracy, Cartledge dismisses Robinson's claim that 'there existed a number of *dēmokratia*' by 550 as 'quite literally a terminological inexactitude' (p. 55). Robinson, though, has thought hard about what counts as a democracy, and looked in detail at 18 possible cases before concluding that at least 11 were probably democratic.<sup>5</sup> And he is hardly alone in thinking that there were archaic democracies outside of Athens: Hansen and Nielsen list six democracies which were around by the second half of the sixth century.<sup>6</sup>

So Cartledge's bold statement that Cleisthenes' reforms marked 'the founding moment of democracy at Athens, indeed in all Hellas' (p. 59) is very likely false. And though he is less dismissive of Robinson's work on classical democracies outside of Athens, he doesn't spend much time discussing them (pp. 150-57, 189-198).<sup>7</sup> This is a shame, since a detailed look at other Greek democracies

2 J. Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 62.

3 For this narrative, see again Crick, *Very Short Introduction*, and Osborne, *Of the People, By the People*.

4 E. Robinson, *The First Democracies* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997), and *Democracy Beyond Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

5 Robinson, *The First Democracies*.

6 M. Hansen and T. Nielsen, *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

7 Robinson, *Democracy Beyond Athens*.