Applying concepts or models derived from other times and places to a specific historical situation can be a useful method of historical analysis. By highlighting the differences and similarities between the comparanda, features that otherwise would remain blurred or implicit can be brought out more clearly or interpreted in a new light. However, due to the risks of combining historically diverse, hence potentially incongruous and distorting components, the enterprise needs a crystal-clear methodology and awareness of the limitations inherent in using elements derived from one historical context to illuminate another. In her monograph, Susan Lape sets out to clarify the creation of citizen identity in classical Athens by using the modern notion ‘race’ and cognates (racialism, racial policies, etc.), a notion that she admits is controversial and that carries an enormous political and moral problematic. Since by its very nature and its terminology Lape’s project is not merely an academic exercise but also a historical evaluation with a strong ethical appeal, meeting the methodological requirements is even more urgent. Unfortunately, Lape’s book does not live up to the demands entailed in her project.

The preface introduces the caveat that the argument of the book does not depend on the term ‘racial’; ‘ethnic’ might also have done. ‘Race’, however, is more ‘specific’ and it shows the “conditions that can give rise to racial ideologies and racism” (p. x; repeated in other words on p. 3-4, 30-33, 36). Lape captures these conditions with a one-liner of Colin West (p. x, “most grand democratic projects in human history—from Athens to America—have xenophobic and imperial roots”) that as an oversimplification is plainly untrue and cannot be called in to clarify the conceptual problems at issue. Two problems emerge here: first of all, that the greater specificity and hence validity of ‘race’ over ‘ethnicity’ is not really made to work (see below) and second, that this caveat seems disingenuous: if the contentious, anachronistic and—let us not deny it—incrementing term ‘race’ is not really necessary, why use it in the first place and flag it in the title? And why apply it book-length to a wide variety of phenomena that thus acquire a highly questionable qualification? The reader is left with the impression that Lape wants to claim a moral high ground, pointing to Athens’ sin of developing a ‘narrative of race identity’, without paying the price of being responsible for the validity of the word ‘race’ in the classical Athenian context and without the willingness to engage fundamentally with the methodological complications of her project.
In chapter 1, Lape construes her conception of ‘race’ and argues how it pertains to Athenian civic identity. This is the foundation of the book, but it suffers from a lack of analytical rigour in an uncritical reliance on other historians’ work, and it shows the inadequacy of the term ‘race’ as she uses it to understand Greek citizenship. For the latter, she invokes a notion of race current in contemporary studies as “a value-neutral concept employed to characterize the beliefs of a group linked on the basis of putative hereditary features” (p. 32). Since the nineteenth century, however, race is not a value-neutral concept; it is both unscientific and ethically objectionable. Lape herself does not really believe it is value-free, either; on p. 37, we are reminded that to investigate Athenian constructions of identity is neither to validate nor to condone their claims or assumptions, a comment that is pointless unless one agrees that ‘race’ is an objectionable notion. Against ‘ethnicity’, she here prefers ‘race’ because the first term is too wide and, the reader is inclined to think, too lenient. It soon becomes clear (pp. 44, 53 and passim) that what Lape sees as the ‘race’ notion of Athenian citizenship is the fact that citizenship in Athens, as in all Greek poleis, depended on descent: one was a citizen, that is a member of the group of Athenians, because one’s parent (father) was, and after Pericles’ Law of 451/0 one’s parents were, citizens. Attached to this qualification came ideas about what it meant to be Athenian, and the myth of Athenian autochthony played a crucial role in this. Because such ideas were attached to citizenship-by-descent, we have not merely to do with imagined ethnicity, so Lape, but with racialism. With citizenship-by-descent qualified as a sign of ‘race’, however, an estimated 95% of all historical and contemporary societies are ‘racialist’, and since most societies harbour (imagined) explanations of what it means to belong to the group, things look universally rather grim on the score of ‘race’.

It turns out that Lape’s use of ‘race’ is perhaps a bit different from ‘ethnicity’ but certainly not less wide: in her view, Athenian racialism includes the ethical prescript to treat one’s parents well (p. 74, where ‘Athenian racialism’ is identified with “kinship logic that grounded ideas about civic duty and obligation”), the belief that children continue the loyalties of their parents (p. 82), legitimacy as basis of citizen participation in the polis (pp. 190, 212) and the concomitant sexual control of women (p. 89), and so on, all of them elements that Athens shares with numerous other societies, Greek and non-Greek, ancient and modern, and for which excellent historical and anthropological explanations exist but which here are marshalled to exemplify “Athenian racist policies”. Such an all-embracing meaning of ‘race’ is unable to explain anything anymore and incapable of identifying those moments in Athenian civic discourse that come