

SYMPOSIUM
THE LIFE, THE IMAGE AND THE PROBLEMS
OF DEMOCRACY



DEMOCRACY: A LIFE
STATEMENT

BY
PAUL CARTLEDGE

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Democracy: A Life

Statement

Paul Cartledge

I

Status quaestionis

My book *Democracy: A Life* was originally published by the Oxford University Press (New York, followed by Oxford) in March/April 2016. Coincidentally – in the sense that the timing of publication had not been specifically so targeted – that fell in the middle of two crucial democratic campaigns: the EU referendum campaign in my own country (due to be held on June 23, 2016), and the US Presidential campaign.

To accompany the book's publication, and typically prompted by it, I engaged in a raft of associated publicity activities: spots on radio and tv (local as well as national), blogs, online interviews, podcasts, book festival and bookshop presentations: the usual slew – except that I do not myself use 'social media' (Facebook, Twitter, the like) and so relied on the kindness of friends who do to spread

the word (not only of the book's existence but also of the associated public events).

The book was itself based on a four-year (2009-13) series of 24 lectures delivered to Cambridge University undergraduates in their final year reading for either the Classical or the Historical Tripos degree. (Numbers fluctuated between 15 and 20, typically half Classicists, half Historians; invited lectures were delivered by generous colleagues in Politics – Gareth Stedman-Jones, David Runciman; supervisions – i.e., individual tutorials – were conducted not by me, but by Classics Faculty colleagues, postdocs and graduate students.) The pedagogic inspiration and slant were for me crucial, so I was especially pleased whenever I was invited to address undergraduate societies both inside and outside Cambridge, and indeed secondary schools. (I once, to my initial alarm, found myself unexpectedly talking about democracy with a class of 13-year-olds at a newly founded state school near Cambridge.)

Almost exactly two years after its first publication *Democracy: A Life* was reissued by Oxford University Press, the main text unchanged barring a few small corrections but afforded with what I hoped was a significant new 'Afterword.' In those three pages I was able to comment on what in less formal, oral/aural contexts I would refer to as the most extraordinary – *atopos*, the ancient Greek word, literally without or out of place, catches it precisely – period for democracy in my personal experience of it during the past half century of my active and self-conscious political life (I 'came of age' politically in March 1968, aged 21) in both the UK and Ireland. That period of almost exactly 12 months encompassed the 'Brexit' referendum (over 33 million voters), the US Presidential election (a popular vote registered by some 129 millions), the French Presidential election of 2017 and the 'snap' – i.e., out of the normal cycle – General Election called by UK Prime Minister Theresa May

in June 2017 (which to her and our consternation resulted in a ‘hung’ Parliament, no one political party having secured by itself an overall governing majority).

The subject of this Symposium could therefore hardly be more important or more topical. As I write this (April 2019), up to one million (*sic*) voters are expected to participate over several weeks in the current Indian general election. By contrast, on one fixed day in May 2019 Australians will be invited to vote in theirs, under a system in which voting is legally compulsory. At first blush one might therefore think that democracy was in a robustly healthy state, or at any rate that democracy’s glass was still at least half-full. Against that I would suggest that democracy – in the shape of our Western, indirect, representative, parliamentary versions of democracy – is surely in crisis. In the ancient Greek sense of *krisis* – a moment of decision. The crisis has several key aspects, not least the rise of what is far too vaguely and emotively labelled ‘populism’, in fact all too often a toxic compound of anti-elitism, nationalism, and racism.

One of the most key aspects, or so it seems to me from a political-theoretical as well as pragmatic viewpoint, is the relationship between the UK’s normal, that is representative, mode of doing democracy and the quite recent and frequent resort to the referendum. The latter may on the surface seem to be a mode of political decision-making that offers a useful solution to deep-seated, intractable problems of the normal mode. The latter has been developed, often painfully, since the later 17th century in Europe, and takes variant forms – including the UK’s mixed constitution (an odd combination of a ‘constitutional’ monarchy with an elected lower chamber and an unelected upper chamber, the House of Lords). But in fact, at least when it is misunderstood and mismanaged, as it conspicuously was in the UK in 2016, the referendum mode complicates or even threatens to destroy our

normal mode. It cannot simply be used as an add-on or get-out-of-jail card. Historically, (versions of) direct democracy are or rather were the normal mode not of US but of the Ancient Greeks – who of course invented it. The question that we – or most of us – have yet to resolve is whether electoral, parliamentary democracy and direct democracy are oil and water, chalk and cheese, even fire and ice – or are they rather or can they be made somehow compatible, even complementary?¹

II

Aims and Objectives: *Demokratia* and/versus Democracy

1. Being one of those historians who believe – with Benedetto Croce – that all history is contemporary history (i.e., although history-iograph-y is about the past, or rather a past or pasts, it is the historian who makes history out of such past facts as s/he believes to be authentic and credible and tells that history in a way or ways that are deemed meaningful to contemporary and ideally also future audiences), I am – and have as long as I can remember always been – concerned with ‘how to do things with history’ (the title of a wonderful collection of essays kindly edited and dedicated to me by distinguished former students and present colleagues, also published by OUP/New York, 2018). This modified, ideally nonvicious presentism is the concern underlying and informing my

¹ Already during the botched campaign for the 2016 UK ‘Brexit’ Referendum I tried to sound some notes of due caution: <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/opinion-articles/articles/referendums-ancient-and-modern> (April 26, 2016). For my more or less immediate – July 25, 2016 – and disabused reaction/reflections, see my paper in *Eidolon*: <https://eidolon.pub/brexitology-brexitography-7d644c389f4f>. (A later set of responses is here: <https://adfamiliares.classicsforall.org.uk/paul-cartledge-chews-over-the-issues-involved-in-discussing-democracy-ancient-vs-modern/>)

long-run history of democracy both ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’. Or rather, ancient (c. 500-300 BCE) as compared/contrasted with variously post-ancient and modern. (To clarify: the book’s subtitle ‘A Life’ was not actually of my own devising and should not mislead readers into supposing I think democracy to be something retrospectively analysable into an organic, let alone evolutionary life-cycle of birth, life and death. But insofar as it suggests subjective interpretation – ‘a’ life, not ‘the’ life – and conjures associations of animate, material, human activity rather than static institutional sterility, I am not entirely unhappy with it.)

2. The book had and has three main objectives:

i. to try to describe and explain how and why *demokratia* – both the word and the thing (or rather things) came into being during the 6th and 5th centuries BCE in ancient Hellas. I started therefore with and from linguistics: sociolinguistics and etymology. The English word ‘democracy’ and its contemporary equivalents (often simply a loan-word in other contemporary languages) mean something very different from the *kratos* of the ancient Greek demos. Nor was ancient Greek *demokratia* itself unambiguous or unambivalent. *Kratos* meant might, power, strength unambiguously enough, but demos could be construed in several ways: village (ward, parish in political terms), the People in the sense of the entirety of a citizen body of a polis or citizen-state, and/or ... the majority/mass of such a citizen body, i.e. the poor majority. So, for the interpretation theoretical or practical of *demokratia* an awful lot depended on one’s point of view, and that in turn – if Aristotle is to be trusted (as I believe he is) – depended essentially and chiefly on one’s socioeconomic status.

ii. to try to describe and explain how versions of *demokratia* spread and developed in the ancient world, and then all became diluted and eventually turned on their head between the 4th century BCE and the 6th century CE (when, in Christian Byzantine

Constantinople, the word *demokratia* could be (ab)used to mean ‘riot’, an extreme form of popular political misbehaviour or mob-rule). Two particular ‘moments’ were deemed to be of the greatest significance to the – or at least my – (hi)story: the Hellenistic, and the Roman Republican. In the post-Classical, post-Alexander (the Great) Hellenic world of the eastern Mediterranean in the third and second centuries BCE the term *demokratia* retained all its currency of the 5th and 4th centuries. But did – to take the sharpest, Athenian example – *demokratia* in official Athenian parlance mean the same in the 270s or 170s as in the 370s? Unsurprisingly – not. But then the Athenian *demokratia* of the 370s was not by any means identical to that of the 470s (if indeed – scholarly opinions differ – one grants the existence of any sort of *demokratia* in the 470s, as I would myself insist). However, in my view *demokratia* in the 270s at Athens had already taken on the protean, less than scientifically exact, emotive tone and sense that ‘democracy’ has acquired in our own times. It signified more independence (of a territorial monarch) and republican (non-monarchical) governance rather than full-blooded People Power.

The Roman Republic is a rather different issue. It would have been mighty odd if what passed for a Late Republican (c. 150-50 BCE) Roman ‘constitution’ had in any serious way replicated the direct-rule, full-on, transparent form of actively participatory people-power practised in (infinitely smaller-scale) Greek cities of the 5th and 4th centuries, since all leading Roman Republican theorists were quite adamant that that form of citizen self-rule was an extremely bad thing, to be avoided and if possible exterminated. But the romanising Greek historian-politician Polybius of the 2nd century BCE had not scrupled to talk of a Greek-style demotic dimension to the Roman Republican mode of decision-making and governance, and his lead has been followed by several influential modern historians. It was therefore necessary for me to distinguish as sharply as I could in reasoned argument the Rome of Cicero

from the Athens of Demosthenes, politically speaking, in terms of ideology ad practice alike.

There was no Latin equivalent of *demokratia*. But roughly half the Roman imperial world was in its upper layers Greek-speaking, and *demokratia* retained a currency, albeit in ever more grossly degenerate forms. I singled out two low points: the second-century rhetor Aelius Aristides hymning the Roman empire as a ‘perfect democracy – under one man’, and John Malalas’s sixth-century branding of a riot in the Constantinopolitan hippodrome as an example of *demokratia*, meaning mob-rule. (There had always been anti-democratic critics who thought of *demokratia* in that way; it may indeed have been they who gave *demokratia* its – bad – name.).

iii. My third and final main aim was to sketch in (very broad, even crude) outline how and why, beginning in the 17th century in England, then spreading to the US and France in the late 18th, and more widely in the 19th, popular republican politics was revived and in time given the old Greek-derived label of ‘democracy’ – even though that old word was now being re-used and re-purposed in a new sense almost opposite to its original one: government of the people and ideally for the people, but emphatically not (despite Lincoln at Gettysburg) by the People. ‘People’ of course has always been a term of artfulness, never mere literal descriptiveness. What I consider to be the toxic, cancerous growth of ‘populism’ today is a lineal ideological descendant of such grossly, abusively loose usage.

III

Conclusions

To conclude on a comparativist – and cautious – note. The past is a foreign country: they did things very differently there. I mean,

they did digital democracy (voting with their hands and fingers in various ways) but not digital in our modern, IT sense, so no Facebook, no Cambridge Analytica, indeed no communication at a distance whatsoever – and no cyberwarfare of any kind in the ancient Greek world of Hellas. Hooray! Moreover, in perhaps no other area of life is the comparison or rather contrast between then and now, between ancient Greece and the contemporary world, potentially more misleading and damaging than in the sphere of ‘politics’ and ‘democracy’. Aristotle’s *Politika* meant ‘Matters to do with (the peculiar ancient Greek state-form) the polis or citizen-state’, not ‘politics’ in any of our senses. *Demokratia*, as noted above, could mean rule by the poor masses as well as government of/by/for ‘the People’.

On the other hand, I am not arguing that ancient direct democracy and modern representative democracy are at all times and in every possible way incompatible. There may even be a case for holding referendums at a national as well as at the local level, depending on circumstances and on local political history and culture. But caution – and precision – must always be the watchwords. I have hated being proved right, but it has frankly to be admitted that, following – and in the gloomy light of – the outcome of that Referendum, some palpably serious damage has been inflicted upon the already complicated and eclectically mixed UK constitutional process.

Yet amidst the gloom there are some shafts of light. Some scholars and commentators, for example, would sensibly wish us to distinguish in regard to referendums between genuine, bottom-up direct democracy and clumsy exercises in top-down and top-heavy party-political strategizing. Others – not least those who have firsthand experience of it – would point to the current, relatively sophisticated and extensive Swiss practice of operating direct-democracy initiatives via referendums within a

representative democracy; though admittedly this is within a very young (only post-1972) full-adult-suffrage democracy, and within a nation-state of which as many as one quarter of its legal residents are not qualified as voting citizens. But do we need more referendums? Perhaps – but only if and when they are more carefully moderated and thought through in advance than was the disastrously framed and managed UK ‘Brexit’ referendum of June 23, 2016.

Recent discussions such as that on the BBC radio World Service strand ‘The Real Story’² and that in the pages of *le Monde*³ also give hope for a brighter future, whereas British parliamentary ‘debate’ in both the Lower (elected, Commons) and the Upper (unelected, Lords) Houses of Parliament very sadly does not. All, or most of us, though, would surely agree with Pierre Zémor, former President of France’s national commission on Public Debate, that “For democracy to be representative, it must be participatory”.⁴ The question is how that participatoriness is to be managed and tended in the most fruitful ways.

IV

Reaction and Counter-Reactions: the way forward

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cswkfj>

³ Marie-Anne Cohendet and Jean-Baptiste de Montvalon, “Le référendum, démocratiquement correcte ?,” *Le Monde*, also 23 Février 2019.

⁴ “Pour que la démocratie soit représentative, il faut qu’elle soit participative,” *Le Monde*, 23 Février 2019.

Reviews of the 2016 hardback of *Democracy: A Life* to date include: R. Fuller;⁵ J. Hanink;⁶ J. Kierstead;⁷ and B. Dobski.⁸ But what I hope this Symposium will do above all is take the story, the argument, forward, along parallel lines to those sketched by Brook Manville and Josh Ober in their recent *In Search of Democracy 4.0*.⁹

Were I to be writing *Democracy: A Life* now, I would be obliged to take such fresh commentary into account. Plus the work of my new best friend Paolo Bellini.¹⁰ And like Andrew Gamble and Tony Wright, co-editors of the new essay collection *Rethinking Democracy*,¹¹ I would wish to dedicate it – not only as before to John Lilburne and Josh Ober but also – to “our grandchildren, citizens of the future.”

Clare College, Cambridge

⁵ *LA Review of Books*, April 15, 2016.

⁶ “Democracy When?,” *Eidolon*, June 20, 2016. <https://eidolon.pub/democracy-when-c42cc2494faa>

⁷ *POLIS* 35 (2018): 603-6.

⁸ *Society* 55 (2018): 568-71.

⁹ “In Search of Democracy 4.0: Is Democracy as We Know It Destined to Die?,” *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* 38(1), March 2019: 32-42.

¹⁰ Such as (in English): “Good government, democracy and liberalism” (http://fqp.luiss.it/files/2018/03/PPI_01_Bellini_vol7_n3_2017-1.pdf);

“Virtualization of the Real and Citizenship: People, Power, Society, and Person”: (http://fqp.luiss.it/files/2016/11/6_Bellini_PPI_vol6_n3_2016.pdf);

“Conflict, tolerance and power legitimization”: (http://www.metabasis.it/articoli/21/21_Bellini.pdf); “The Technological imaginary of power and the myth of the saviour” (http://www.metabasis.it/articoli/12/12_Bellini.pdf).

¹¹ Andrew Gamble – Toni Wright (eds.), *Rethinking Democracy*, Wiley-Blackwell, in association with Political Quarterly, 2019.