

SYMPOSIUM  
THE LIFE, THE IMAGE AND THE PROBLEMS  
OF DEMOCRACY



WHY DEMOCRACY?

BY  
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## Why Democracy?

Kyle Harper

**R**eflecting on a spate of Athenian victories that followed hard on the democratic reforms of Cleisthenes, the historian Herodotus observed, “So Athens flourished. Now, the advantages of everyone having a voice in the political procedure are not restricted just to single instances, but are plain wherever one looks. For instance, while the Athenians were ruled by tyrants, they were no better at warfare than any of their neighbors, but once they had got rid of the tyrants they became vastly superior. This goes to show that while they were under an oppressive regime they fought below their best because they were working for a master, whereas as free men each individual wanted to achieve something for himself.” (Herod. Hist. 5.78, tr. Waterfield) Enhanced military might is not typically considered a primary virtue of democracy in our own world, where democracy is more likely to be construed as an end in itself, a context for human flourishing, or an instrument for achieving justice (Ober 2017). But as Herodotus suggests, at least some ancient Greeks perceived a direct connection between

political form and military performance. Unabashedly, military power was a justification for participatory political regimes.

In *Democracy: A Life*, Paul Cartledge has offered the single best one-volume history of ancient democracy, with an eye on its various afterlives. The book has many virtues, starting with an enviable combination of erudition and plain good sense. The strength of the book is to offer a fresh account of how “people power” really worked and how it developed over time. Cartledge emphasizes political praxis, the importance of institutions that effectively placed decision-making power in the hands of the people. The book truly is a biography focused on a certain kind of political regime, with pointillist detail that captures the various manifestations of democratic practice at different times and places. One feature of ancient democracy that emerges from this treatment – maybe familiar to specialists, but often lost in general accounts – is how varied, resilient, and adaptable “people power” was, even in classical Greece.

As a historian of Rome, I suppose it is my duty to respond to the book’s chapters on Roman democracy – or rather, Rome’s lack of democracy. In my view, that is only possible within a comparative framework, so I will use Cartledge’s book as a jumping off point to ask, Why Democracy? This is meant not in a normative sense (i.e. why might we view democracy as a legitimate form of political regime), but in a causal sense (i.e. why did democracy emerge in ancient Greece at all, and why not in other places). It is an observation, rather than a critique of a book that already does so much, to remark that Cartledge’s study does not develop strong models of explanation for *why* ancient Greece birthed such a distinct form of governance. But if we accept his punchy claims in the Prologue, that people power as it developed in ancient Greece is uniquely important, then it is crucial to account for why this happened. And, the best way to do so is inevitably

comparative. Think of democracy as a like a peacock. We can admire its feathers and consider its distinctive evolution. But we can learn more by imagining how all ground-dwelling birds evolved and what ecological factors shaped different evolutionary pathways.

Ancient Greek democracy was a species of political regime, within the genus of participatory constitutions. Democracies evolved (*avant la lettre*) in late archaic Greece, that is in Iron Age agrarian societies on either side of the Aegean (Robinson 1997). These bare facts already suggest at least some necessary, though not sufficient, conditions, for instance a certain level of technological development to support at least modest urbanization and social complexity, limited literacy to support complex ideologies, and fiscality. But since most Iron Age polities across the world did not spawn anything like Greek-style people power, the conditions that fostered democratic political development must be sought in the particular features of archaic Greece.

In an ultimate, exogenous sense, Greece's physical ecology was a conducting factor (Sallares 1991; Horden and Purcell 2000). The rugged terrain, jagged coastlines, and numerous islands fostered small-scale, fragmented polities that for centuries resisted imperial integration (Ober 2015). The environment thus promoted interstate competition. In the archaic period, the Greeks were on the geopolitical fringes, between the more advanced eastern Mediterranean littoral and Persia on one side, and the Macedonian-Thracian hinterland on the other. The Greeks exuberantly benefited from access to maritime trade routes, and economic development was precocious, creating real intensive growth (Morris 2004).

I rehearse these familiar facts because these form the contingent factors that aligned to drive what ought to be seen as the proximate cause for the emergence of democracy, the dynamics of military

competition and military mobilization. In short, Herodotus was right. Aristotle in the *Politics* (1297b15-28) also traced the evolution of participatory political regimes in terms of military evolution. He developed the first version of the hoplite theory, that the shift from cavalry to massed heavily-armored infantry warfare drove a shift from aristocratic to broad-based politics (Salmon 1977). Cartledge notes this ancient idea and its modern reception in passing. No mention is made of the theory – in some ways adumbrated already by the grumpy anti-democratic *Old Oligarch* – that there was a further connection between naval power and radical democracy, especially in Athens.

The need of small, relatively independent city-states to mobilize mass numbers of citizens for war, whether infantry or navy, was the essential context for the emergence of participatory institutions. Of course, democracy was not the only adaptive response to this need, as the mere existence of oligarchies proves. But democracy, and its attendant values like equality before the law, emerged through political bargaining around military mobilization. In a study of this phenomenon, Walter Scheidel observed (2005), rightly in my view, “‘Democratizing’ events in Athenian history may be plotted as a series of responses to military inducements.”

In short, even if this list does not exhaust all of the sufficient conditions for ancient democracy, it comprises the most important necessary conditions that contingently aligned in archaic and classical Greece to foster the development of radically participatory politics: Iron Age technology, commercial wealth, basic if limited literacy, political fragmentation and interstate competition, infantry and naval warfare requiring mass mobilization, political bargaining between elites and masses. Any answer to the question Why Democracy? would have to include this list. These are the ecological conditions that allowed the

evolution of democracy. Sometimes a peacock evolved; sometimes other plump ground-dwelling birds.

I rehearse this familiar context as a prologue to a discussion on Cartledge's treatment of Rome. The Romans do not fare well through his lens. Not only was the republican constitution undemocratic, but "in the process of empire-building Rome had of set purpose endeavored to stamp out all traces of the old Greek democratic institutions and spirit." *Democracy: A Life* introduces the argument of Fergus Millar (1998) that Rome's republican constitution had a genuinely democratic element. Cartledge critiques this view, accepting what I would regard as the strong majority consensus that Millar overstates the democratic nature of Rome's political regime (Mouritsen 2017).

Cartledge is then rather rough on the Roman Empire, which no modern scholar regards as democratic in the least. He glancingly cites the famous oration of Aelius Aristides in praise of Rome, in which the young speaker calls the regime a *demokratia*. This is a "calamitous verbal collapse" (265) of which he "should surely have been ashamed" (273), a true "nadir" (274) in the history of political thought and language! We then learn that the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of AD 212 granting citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire was merely a "token gesture." (One wonders if some of those metics would not have appreciated such a token gesture in a Greek world that was notoriously jealous of citizenship status.)

Quibbles aside, Cartledge's presentation of Roman political institutions is credible and convincing. Ancient Rome was plainly never a democracy at any point in its long political career. Once again, though, the more interesting question perhaps is Why?, or in this case, Why not? Rome too was an Iron Age polity, at first on a small scale. Not strictly coastal, it was more or less closely connected to the sea via river. Like Greece, it was for long on the edges of more advanced civilizations and enjoyed the "advantages

of backwardness” during its period of ascent (maybe the supreme example of such in all of history). And, most importantly, the Roman *res publica* achieved levels of mass military mobilization that were parallel to anything in the Greek world.

The brief scope accorded to Rome in *Democracy: A Life* does not allow much room for assessing Roman political development. It is one thing to dissect the Polybian account of Rome’s constitution to arrive at the verdict that it was not a democracy. It is another to ask why and whether it might have realistically been at any point. A comparative framework could highlight the possibility that in the very early republic, such an outcome might have been conceivable. Indeed, elements of the republican constitution can be interpreted as precisely the kind of elite-mass political bargaining that occurred across Greece. The *secessio plebis*, or at least the early instances of the practice, to the extent the sources are reliable (e.g. Livy 2.23), are models of political bargaining that resulted in constitutional concessions. Early on, the Roman state might have become more democratic. At least sociologically, it was plausible.

The Greek parallels urge us to consider how the Romans were able to maintain both constitutional legitimacy and military mobilization on such a mass scale (Scheidel 2005). Cartledge is right to highlight similarities between Rome and Greek oligarchies. But there is a crucial difference. Very early on, Rome became a conquest society (Hin 2013). A militaristic culture developed which solidified the legitimacy of the state. Sharing the benefits of predation became as important in Rome as sharing the benefits of political decision-making in Greek democracies. As a conquest state, Rome’s history is more closely paralleled in the rise of Macedon, with the obvious exception that the Romans were ideologically and constitutionally committed to non-monarchy (i.e. republicanism). As Cartledge notes, imperial expansion made genuinely participatory decision-making impractical or impossible.



The Roman citizenry was too far-flung by the middle republic to constitute a real *demos* in the Athenian sense. So, while there may have been a brief window when democratic possibilities were truly conceivable, it quickly closed, and Rome became something else altogether, a kind of oligarchic-controlled conquest state.

This conquest state had various and complex ways of maintaining its legitimacy beyond the kind of bargaining represented by struggles over the share of the spoils. Some of these mechanisms were cultural and religious, including fanatically patriotic ideologies. Some were institutional, such as the reverence for the ancestral constitution and the growing body of Roman law (Schiavone 2012). In comparative perspective, one of the truly fascinating feats of Roman political development was the transition from a predatory, extractive imperial regime to something else, a form of imperial governance that sought to legitimate itself even in territories it had conquered. This transition largely started under Augustus. What mattered most was legitimation among provincial elites, the remnants of local oligarchies. But one part of this process was the gradual and piecemeal conversion of subjects into citizens. The *Constitutio Antoniniana* was the consummation of this process and perhaps not quite as trivial as Cartledge suggests (Kulikowski 2016, 100).

None of this is to argue in the slightest that Rome was a democracy at any point under the republic or the empire. But historians of Rome have taken seriously the ways in which the imperial regime transitioned to normative governance and sought to legitimate itself among its subjects (Ando 2013; Noreña 2011). We can remain clear-eyed about this. Sheer power, convertible to violence when necessary, remained the essential basis of the imperial regime. But naked power does not really explain the longevity or the nature of the Roman imperial regime. And it is within the constellation of ideas and norms that the empire used

to communicate with its citizens and subjects that we might find a very young Greek provincial on the make giving a sycophantic speech to a Roman Emperor and flattering him as the bulwark of “democracy.” A shameful verbal collapse, maybe, but one that could be read within the history of Roman political development.

The contingent circumstances that aligned to give rise to participatory democracy in archaic and classical Greece were gone within a few centuries. It is ultimately neither surprising nor especially profound to discover that Rome was not a democracy. Peacocks are not turkeys. But we can understand both peacocks and turkeys better by comparing them and considering their similarities *and* their differences. Rome was an Iron Age state that achieved mass military mobilization due to an array of legitimating mechanisms, including ideological and constitutional ones. The ideal of republicanism – based on non-monarchy and a mix of constitutional organs – was not democratic, but it was born in broadly similar ecological conditions. The Roman case does accentuate the true radicalism of Greek people-power.

Trying to account for the causes of democracy’s emergence and success might have relevance for other parts of Cartledge’s argument, including his passing critique of scholarship that seeks non-western historical precedents for democracy. It would also allow further questions about modern democracy. As he notes, popular sovereignty instantiated in representative institutions has become a foundation-stone of political legitimacy in the modern, western, liberal order. The role of ideology is perhaps more dominant in the modern context. But to what extent have interstate competition and political bargaining to support military mobilization contributed to modern popular governance? One final set of questions seems also prompted by Cartledge’s sweeping study. To what extent might federal systems, as envisioned by Madison, or non-state associations, as envisioned by Tocqueville,

allow for genuinely participatory decision-making on the ancient Greek model? Must participatory decision-making concern *ta politika* in the sense of the highest matters of state sovereignty, such as justice and war?

Cartledge is to be thanked for giving us a lucid history of democracy that sets on a firm foundation our understanding of how it really worked, where it existed, and how it changed over time. Any inquiry into *why* things were the way they were must operate from a sound understanding of how things actually were. His study encourages us to come back to the crucial question of *Why Democracy?* I will close by quoting with approval Cartledge's own reflections on ancient Greek historiography. "True history properly so called is about causation and causality" (253).

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