

SYMPOSIUM  
THE LIFE, THE IMAGE AND THE PROBLEMS  
OF DEMOCRACY



“PEOPLE POWER” & ITS  
DISCONTENTS:  
PAUL CARTLEDGE ON DEMOCRACY  
ANCIENT & MODERN

BY  
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# “People Power” & Its Discontents: Paul Cartledge on Democracy Ancient & Modern

James E. Miller

**D***emocracy: A Life* is the latest in a long line of modern works that have helped to restore the good name of ancient democracy, despite a still powerful tradition that remains deeply hostile to the very idea of popular self-government. As Cartledge tells us in his contribution to this symposium, he came of age in the late Sixties, when he was swept up in the radical protest movements of those years. He considers himself a friend of democracy. And because of his unabashed interest in the fate of self-government today – like the Italian philosopher Croce, he believes that “all history is contemporary history” – Cartledge deserves a prominent place alongside those Anglophone scholars who have followed in the footsteps of George Grote, the nineteenth century classicist and contemporary of John Stuart Mill who almost single handedly turned Athenian democracy from “a conservative bugbear to an argumentative resource for liberals” (Kierstead 2014, 165).

Before saying more about what I think is distinctive about Cartledge's work, it is worth pausing to note just how successful Grote's transvaluation of Athenian democracy has been. Some years ago, Jennifer Roberts wrote a very fine book entitled *Athens on Trial*, recounting the anti-democratic tradition in Western thought (Roberts, 1994). But if one were to focus only on Anglophone scholarship since Grote wrote, one might just as well title such a book *Athens Exonerated*.

For a large number of contemporary historians (including Mogens Hansen and Josiah Ober), ancient Athens now represents the gold standard for democracy, ancient and modern, both in theory and practice. Typical is the attitude of the Italian scholar Dino Piovan, who argues that his own reassessment of ancient Athenian democracy "may yet be seen to constitute a useful point of reference, at a time when the current model of democracy finds its legitimacy questioned" (Piovan, 2008, 305).

But it is precisely in this context – of essentially favorable accounts of ancient Athens – that Cartledge's worth stands out, in large part because of his mature ambivalence about the feasibility, indeed, the desirability, of "people power."

Because I share some of his ambivalence, I am grateful for the book he has written. I admire its tone of tart realism, its refusal to gloss over the manifold defects and difficulties that provoked conflicting evaluations of democracy in its first incarnation, and for over two thousand years. Reading his book was a bracing experience: it felt like somebody had thrown open the windows in a musty old seminar room, and let in some fresh air.

It now felt more possible than ever to admire the ancient Athenians and their democratic practices without pretending – as political theorists like Hannah Arendt have been wont to do – that the Attic polis was a paragon of "public freedom," and a wholly

admirable rebuke to the pseudo self-rule served up in modern societies under the false label of “democracy.”

Cartledge of course marvels at the extent of political participation in ancient Athens. But he also concedes it was sometimes onerous – “participatory democracy with a vengeance,” as he puts it (Cartledge 2016, 111). While there is something to the idea, championed by Grote, and J.S. Mill, and Arendt as well, that direct participation in politics can help forge a shared civic culture, it could also, as Cartledge’s history shows, breed conflict and polarization (what the Greeks called “*stasis*”), so that faction, sedition, even civil war were chronic threats.

In thinking about Greek democracy, one may choose to minimize such tensions and contradictions, and celebrate instead the extraordinary fact that all the citizens of Athens, at the height of its democracy, exercised virtually unfettered power, directly in the Assembly and the popular courts, and by random selection to staff up virtually all of the city’s other offices. But Cartledge refuses to gloss over the limits of what the Athenians were able to accomplish.

And in this crucial respect, I believe his work marks a real break within the vindicatory approach to ancient Athens inaugurated by Grote.

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As his essay for this symposium shows, Cartledge is similarly gimlet-eyed when he turns his attention to current affairs, and focuses on the threats posed by both Brexit and the Trump movement to pluralism, tolerance, and the civil rights of minorities.

He thinks that modern democracy, like the ancient variety, is neither “unambiguous” nor “unambivalent” (Cartledge 2019, 7).

The reason for such reservations is, I think, straightforward: Cartledge admires liberalism as well as democracy. Unlike “democracy,” the word “liberalism,” it’s useful to recall, was a relatively late addition to our political lexicon.

In Europe, the word first comes into wide usage in the nineteenth century by various political theorists and statesmen in France, Germany, and Italy, united in their horror at the bloodshed of the French Revolution, but otherwise varied in their positive views. Some focused on promoting commerce and free trade, some stressed juridical limits to state power, others on building a strong state to promote the common good, and still others, some religiously motivated, on fostering citizens who were “liberal” in the classical sense, of being unselfish and magnanimous (Rosenblatt 2018).

In the United States, liberalism was introduced even later into the jargon of American politics by a group of reformers who believed that the federal government could be a tool for positive social change; Teddy Roosevelt Progressives in 1912, they became Wilsonian Democrats from 1916 to 1918, and embraced “liberalism” as a way to distinguish themselves from sectarians of any political party as well as from revolutionary advocates of socialism or communism.

As Paul Cartledge well knows, democracy, when it first appeared in Greece, had nothing to do, either in theory or in practice, with any such modern conception of liberalism.

In classical Athens, democracy presupposed shared norms, a shared religious horizon, and a shared projection of egalitarian ideals; it revolved around periodic public assemblies in which all the citizens met as one, and had, as its characteristic procedure, the

random selection of citizens to fill almost all the key offices of justice, administration, and government. As Socrates discovered at his trial for impiety and corrupting the youth in 399 B.C., the ordinary citizens of ancient Athens had little patience for nonconformists. Their collective freedom to wield their power was perfectly compatible with the complete subjection of the individual to the community.

Modern democracy, which revolves around an idea of popular sovereignty utterly alien to the thinking of the ancient Greeks and most powerfully expressed in Rousseau’s concept of the general will, also has no necessary connection to liberalism. As Rousseau pointed out in his *Social Contract*, a sovereign people can sanction any form of government *they* choose. They might prefer a democratic government, such as ancient Athens enjoyed; or they might prefer a natural aristocracy, or even a king. Indeed, a people may ask its officers to wield its sovereign will as a weapon against perceived enemies. The Protestant champions of the idea of popular sovereignty in the sixteenth century summoned the power of the people for the express purpose of dethroning rulers with whose religious views they disagreed: “It was not religious liberty they sought, but the elimination of wrong religions” (Morgan 1988, 98).

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In the summary of his book in this symposium, Cartledge proposes that we sharply counterpose the Greek word “*demokratia*,” understood literally as “people power,” to “democracy,” an English word that, he remarks, “was re-used and re-purposed in a new sense almost opposite to its original one.”

I favor a slightly different view of how democracy has evolved in modern times. In *Can Democracy Work?*, my own recent history, I analyze four major approaches to understanding modern

democracy, moving chronologically from “the assertion of popular sovereignty in revolutionary Paris in 1792, to the rise of a commercial republic of free individuals in America,” who shared a faith in the virtues of the common man, but entrusted most of their political power to representatives periodically elected by those lucky enough to enjoy the franchise (Miller 2018, 13). I then recount the struggle for social and political equality waged by nineteenth century European socialists, who (unlike the era’s liberals) argued that popular self-government required an egalitarian economy as one of its preconditions. Finally, I show how in the twentieth century, first in America and then around the world, the idea that democracy entailed the robust participation of ordinary people in government gave way to a vaguer belief that democracy merely required politicians responsive to “public opinion,” as ascertained via market research and public opinion polling, supplemented by periodic elections of representatives – a far cry indeed from the direct engagement in politics enjoyed by the citizens of ancient Athens.

Yet despite these vicissitudes, I believe that the word democracy, at its core, even today, implies “people power” – just as it did in ancient Athens.

That’s why democracy, when it’s taken seriously, *still* represents a potentially disruptive challenge to privileged elites – and also, to be blunt, a potentially existential threat to liberal institutions and values.

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Cartledge avers that democracy today is facing a crisis, a moment of decision. And for democrats who are also professed liberals, like Cartledge and myself, this is certainly true. As Brexit and the Trump election have both shown, it’s clear that the friends



of liberty in representative democracies like the UK and US must fight to defend key liberal institutions and norms against the onslaught of illiberal adversaries.

And yet, at the same time, I also believe that we are living through a global golden age of democratic participation. For *democracy* as such – unlike liberalism – seems to be more universally honored than ever before in human history, and still taken seriously as *people power*, for better or worse.

It is a familiar story: Out of the blue, it seems, a crowd pours into a city square, or gathers at a barnstorming rally held by a spellbinding orator, to protest hated institutions, to express rage and anger at the betrayals of the current ruling class, to seize direct control of public spaces. To label these frequently disruptive moments of collective freedom “populist,” in a pejorative sense, is to misunderstand a constitutive feature of the modern democratic project.

Yet these episodes of collective self-assertion are invariably fleeting and stand in tension with the need for a more stable constitution of collective freedom, embodied in the rule of law, and representative institutions that can operate at a larger and more inclusive scale, both national and international. Even worse, these large-scale institutions are prone to frustrate anyone hoping to play a more direct and personal role in political decision making.

This means that the modern democratic project is inherently unstable. Frustrated in practice, the modern promise of popular sovereignty recurrently produces new efforts to assert the collective power of a people, however narrowly or expansively defined. If observers like the apparent result, they often hail an event as a renaissance of the democratic spirit; if they dislike the demands being made, then they are liable to dismiss these episodes of collective self-assertion as mob rule, or populism run amok. No

matter. Since 2011, the world has seen wave after wave of democratic revolts on the streets of various capital cities, and also at ballot boxes.

The list of uprisings is long, and colorful, and worth recalling, with all of its ups and downs, from the Yellow, or “People Power” Revolution of 1986 in the Philippines, to China’s Tiananmen Square democracy protests of 1989; from the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia that same year, to the mainly non-violent, so-called “color revolutions” that followed, including the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003; the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004; and the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009. This set the stage for an explosion of global popular protest in 2011, when the overthrow of Tunisia’s government in January inspired Egyptian protesters to occupy Tahrir Square in Cairo, triggering a series of democratic uprisings in Oman, Yemen, Libya, and Syria – the so-called Arab Spring – which in turn helped inspire Spanish radical democrats to occupy Madrid’s central town square, the Puerto del Sol, which in turn helped inspire American protestors to “Occupy Wall Street” by erecting a tent city nearby in Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park.

Ever since, the world has been on a roller coaster ride of democratic revolts, some liberal, some not, some peaceful, some not, from Kiev in 2013 and 2014 to the yellow vest movement in France today – the latest in a line of sometimes chaotic popular movements, all explicitly meant to “take back control,” in the words of the Brexit slogan.

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Democratic revolts against remote elites can obviously create perverse results – but so can democratic elections. In any case,

these disquieting outcomes are essential to the continued vitality, and viability, of modern democracy – even as (and precisely because) they challenge the status quo, destructive (and illiberal) though that challenge may sometimes be.

Despite the obvious risks, both Rousseau and Thomas Jefferson nevertheless invoked a relevant maxim in defense of their own radical faith in giving political power to ordinary citizens. The Latin phrase they both cited is in fact an eighteenth century forgery (*Malo periculosam, libertatem quam quietam servitutem*) – but its sentiments are worth repeating in translation: “I prefer a dangerous freedom to peaceful slavery.”

It seems an apt motto for these dark times, at least to this liberal democrat.

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