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10 things you should know about democracy in Ancient Greece

Alumnus Dr Paul Cartledge ponders how democracy has been constantly reconstituted and reinvented since Ancient Greece.

Popular – or populist – politics triumphed over more conventional political wisdom and practice over the course of 2016

By Dr Paul Cartledge

We are all 'democrats' today, are we not? Well, of course not, actually, as a matter of literal fact. But democracy in its multifarious guises has been all the rage, not only in the Western world but globally, at least since US President Woodrow Wilson was so very keen on making the world 'safe for democracy'. Christian democracy, People's Democracies, the Democratic Party of the USA – it's everywhere, isn't it. But this year, 2016, has been the most extraordinary year for the practice of democracy in my own personal political experience, which goes back to 1970 in formal, voting terms (I was born in 1947, and the voting age of majority for me was 21, so 1968). First, the Breferendum of June 23rd, then the Trumpery of November 8th. In both cases, opinion polls got it very seriously wrong, even up to the point of exit polling. In both cases, popular – or populist – politics triumphed over more conventional political wisdom and practice.

My 'trade' book Democracy: A Life was published by the Oxford University Press (New York) before both those manifestations – on March 24th 2016, coincidentally my 69th birthday. I am by profession an ancient historian, a cultural historian of 'ancient Greece' during mainly the last millennium BC(E), when democracy – the word as well as the thing – first emerged, anywhere. As such, therefore, I have a

particular academic interest (in both senses) in bringing to light and spreading the word about what was so special in that world that it gave birth to such a devastatingly game-changing political phenomenon.

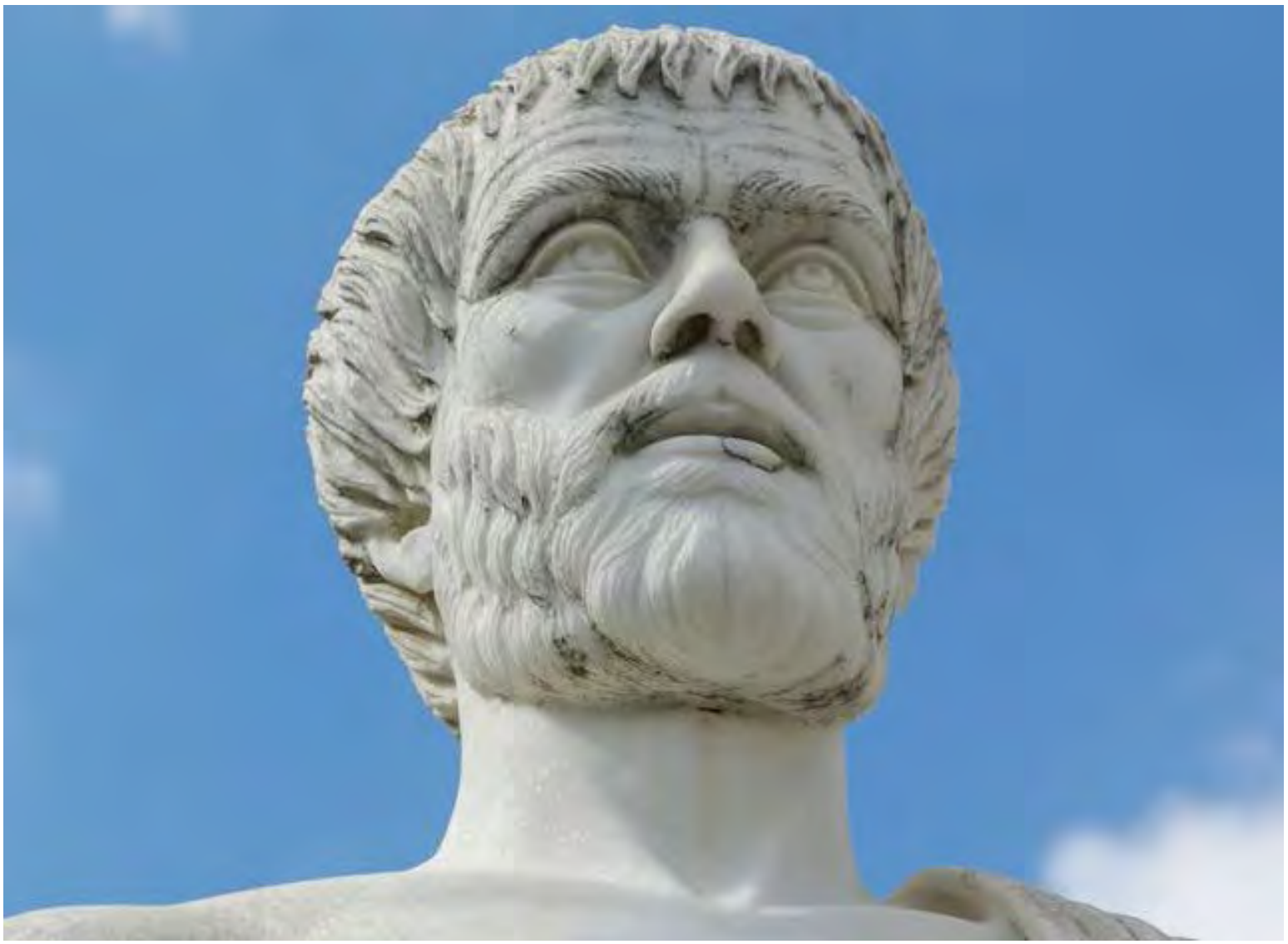
But I am also a politically engaged public intellectual of a minor kind, so I care very much whether our contemporary democracy is properly understood and practised, and one of my preferred argumentative and pedagogical gambits (employed, for instance, at literary festivals from York to Hay to Edinburgh to Buxton to Folkestone) is to point out the seeming paradox that, although our word ‘democracy’ is ultimately a loan-word from ancient Greek demokratia, our democracy and the ancient Greeks’ have almost nothing directly in common. It was not therefore a natural extension of normal democratic politics to hold ancient Greek-style referendums in Scotland in 2014 and in the UK as a whole in 2016 – but a direct antithesis and contradiction of them. With predictably problematic results in 2016 and for the foreseeable future, as I have myself blogged and argued in podcasts, on radio (Start the Week), and in lectures and talks to the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies in London, Cottingley Village College School, etc etc. The recent High Court judgement – or rather certain reactions to it – offers a rather terrifying reminder (cf. the 1930s) of how complex, precious and tender a plant representative democracy is, requiring constant vigilant tendance.

Abraham Lincoln, who spoke of 'government of the people by the people for the people'

The Decalogue that follows is naturally only a (personal, very) selection, from all the many things 'you should know about democracy in ancient Greece', but I venture to claim that at least they are ten of the most important things. As I go through them, it will I hope be noticed that a keynote of the list is difference: namely, the deep and wide difference in both thought and practice between what the ancient Greeks meant by the form – or rather, forms – of democracy that they practised and any contemporary 'democracy' of our 2016 world. That, I believe, is as it should be. Comparative history works most effectively to my mind when it highlights fundamentally important contrasts in the ideas and institutions of different human cultures. But it does so most effectively of all, I would add, when one of those cultures – our own – apparently draws directly from another – that of the ancient Greeks, and yet there is in actual fact no direct continuity let alone identity of the cultural artefact – in this case, democracy – that is in question and at issue.

1. Demokratia, the ultimate origin of our word ‘democracy’, is a portmanteau abstract noun (feminine) in ancient Greek, combining the two words Demos and Kratos. Kratos meant Power, Might, Strength, Grip. (In modern Greek it is the word for ‘state’, as in ‘the nation-state of Hellas’.) Demos is a very ancient Greek word, attested as far back as the second millennium BCE among the ‘Linear B’ archival clay tablets produced by the bureaucracy of the – very much not democratic - Late Bronze Age/Mycenaean kingdoms of mainland Greece and Crete. There it meant village, a local designation that persisted into classical Greek, but already in the epic poems of Homer (c. 700 BCE) it had come to mean also ‘people’.

2. However, demos in that sense of ‘people’ is ambiguous and therefore ambivalent, since it could be taken to mean either i. (All) the People or ii. the Masses (the majority, specifically the poor majority) of the People. So, to use deliberately anachronistic modern analogies,demokratia might be translated/interpreted as either i. ‘government of the people by the people for the people’ (Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg, 1863) or ii. ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ (Karl Marx followed by V.I. Ulyanov, a.k.a. Lenin). In that ambivalence lies the explanation for the class-conscious struggles in antiquity to define and implement (or oppose) demokratia: who is/are the demos that holds and wields the kratos, and over what or whom is the kratos being held and wielded?



Most known ancient Greek writers, historians and theorists were non- or even anti-democrats, including Plato (very hostile), Aristotle (much less hostile)

3. Most of our political vocabulary is either ancient Greek-derived: politics (from polis), anarchy, aristocracy, monarchy, oligarchy, plutocracy, tyranny … democracy. Or Latin-derived: citizens, constitution, dictator, empire, liberal, republic, state - and power and people. But there is a fundamental difference of kind between our ('liberal', 'Western') systems of 'democracy', which are representative (indirect), and all ancient Greek systems (plural: there were several types/varieties of ancient demokratia), which were direct. To an ancient Greek democrat, our systems would all count as 'oligarchy' (rule by the few): even if – and because - elected by the many, They, our elected representatives, rule instead of - as well as for - Us.

4. There was no single 'state' of 'ancient Greece'. Instead, there were about 1000 separate ancient Greek political states and communities (most were poleis, citizen-states), and only a minority ever practised any form of demokratia – most were most of the time more or less moderate or extreme oligarchies. Athens is the best-known and most extreme of the democracies – but there was no such single thing as 'Athenian democracy'. Athens created at least three different versions over a roughly 200-year period (508/7-322 BCE), with two very significant interruptions – anti-democratic oligarchic counter-revolutions in 411-410 and 404-403 BCE respectively.

5. Most known ancient Greek writers, historians and theorists were non- or even anti-democrats: e.g., Plato (very hostile, chiefly on intellectual-moral grounds – democracy was the ignorant, fickle, stupid mob of the citizenry ruling over or dictating to their social and intellectual betters), and his best and most famous pupil Aristotle (much less hostile, and more careful to discriminate between different types and degrees of democracy, but still not an ideological democrat). Conversely, the number of known ancient Greek writers, historians and theorists who were certainly ideological and/or practising democrats can be counted on the fingers of one hand: Pericles, Demosthenes, Protagoras, Democritus, possibly Herodotus … Why so?

The statue of an Early Greek Kouras (youth) from Delphi, Greece, c 570 BC at the Ashmolean

6. The earliest known extant example of developed political theory is to be found in the Histories ('Enquiries' or 'Researches') of Herodotus (c. 425 BCE), in Book 3 (chapters 80-82) of a nine-book behemoth trying to explain why Greeks and Persians came to blows at the beginning of the 5th century BCE, and why the resisting Greeks had won. Herodotus's so-called 'Persian Debate' has a dramatic date of c. 522 BCE, but is quite un-historical! Its value lies in its exposition of Greek political theory, based on the perception that all forms of government are versions of just three basic types: Rule by All, Rule by Some, Rule by One. The word demokratia does not appear anywhere in the Debate, but elsewhere Herodotus makes it clear that democracy is crucially at stake throughout. The first of the three speakers, effectively a democrat, argues for a version of Rule by All, which he calls isonomia: 'equality under the laws', in his view the 'fairest of names'. As he represents it, this stands for or embodies above all the following three uniquely choiceworthy characteristics: i. the selection of all officials is done by use of the lot (election was considered oligarchic, since it favoured the rich and famous); ii. all officials are at all times responsible to the people; and iii. all major public political decisions are taken by the people (all

qualified citizens) by majority decision.

7. The other two speakers in Herodotus's Persian debate are respectively for Rule by Some (pro-aristocracy) and Rule by One (pro-monarchy, in the form of legitimate autocracy), but they are both equally anti-Rule by All or in effect democracy, which for them was merely mob-ocracy, mob-rule. All Greeks believed in – or paid lip-service to - equality (e.g., isonomia), but they differed often radically and irreconcilably over who should count as relevantly, politically, equal. To a non- or anti-democrat, democracy was the world turned upside down: the poor (and therefore ignorant, stupid, fickle, uneducated) masses ruling over the rich (and – perhaps – well-informed, clever, sensible, educated) elite few.

8. Ancient Greek democrats were radical egalitarians: one citizen = one vote, regardless of birth, wealth, beauty, strength, intelligence etc. (We, in contrast, prefer weighted voting systems – except, obviously, in referendums.) Everyone should count for one, and no one for more than one – and votes were counted, sometimes but not always secretly, in mass jury-courts as well as in Assembly. (The ancient Greeks did not recognize our 'separation of powers' – between the deliberative, executive, and judicial branches of government: the People ruled equally in all three.) The Spartans, who were not democrats, voted not by ballot nor by raising their hands but by shouting – thus there was no strict one man/one vote egalitarianism in operation there.

9. But in one respect no ancient Greek democrat was (an) egalitarian: gender. The Greek city (polis) was a men's club: only free, legitimate adult males could be citizens (politai) with political power. Which gave rise to a (no doubt apocryphal) Spartan joke: when asked by an Athenian democrat why the Spartans didn't practise democracy, the Spartan allegedly replied – we'll introduce democracy into our public decision-making when you Athenians introduce democracy into your own homes… Athenians were notoriously sexist and patriarchal.

10. The changes over time in the valuation of ‘democracy’ – from depreciation of ancient, direct demokratia (the word as well as the thing) to upwards revaluation of indirect, representative

'democracy' today – tell a powerful story, as my Democracy: A Life tries to show:

i. there was hardly any genuine demokratia (people-power) anywhere in the Greek world after 300 BCE.

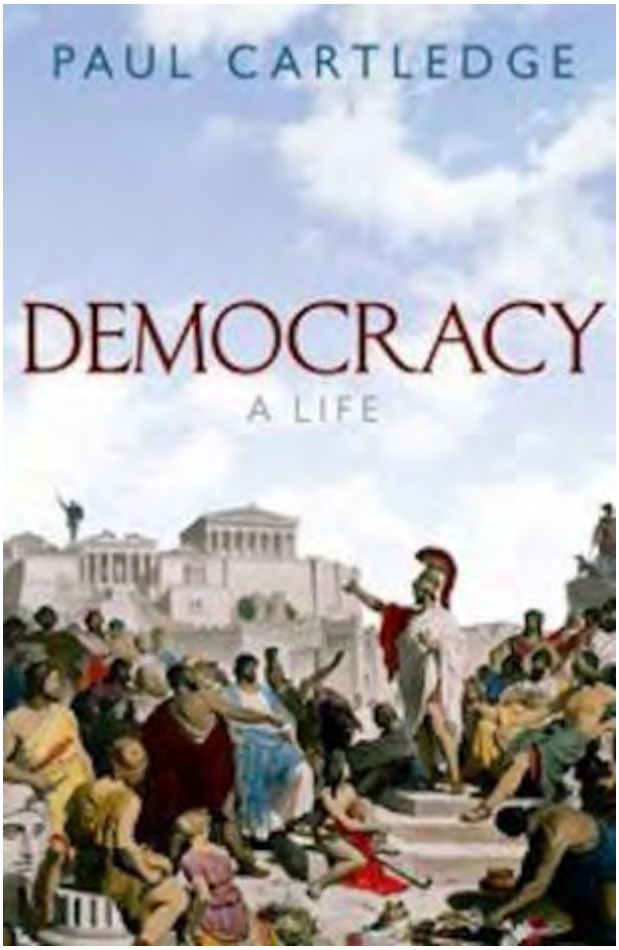
ii. demokratia came typically to mean 'republic', i.e. not-monarchy, or/and freedom from direct rule by either Greek autocrats or by Rome.

iii. Rome (first the Roman Republic, then the Empire) hated Greek-style direct democracy; the Latin for demokratia was democratia… The rule of the Roman People even under the 'free' Republic was variously mediated and in effect nullified by the power of the - aristocratic-oligarchic – Senate.

iv. the Byzantine Greeks, who called themselves 'Romans', were ruled autocratically by divinely authorised monarchs, and by the 6th century CE the term demokratia had been so devalued that it could be used to mean 'riot', a form of 'mob-rule'.

v. Not before the 17th century did the word 'democracy' start creeping back into political discourse as a potentially viable system of governance, only to be firmly and overwhelmingly rejected – by both the American and the French revolutionaries -within the largely negative reception of ancient Greek direct democracy as little better than mob-rule.

vi. Only with the invention of representative, parliamentary democracy – since then variously morphed into 'Western', 'liberal' democracy, based on universal adult suffrage – did democracy become an accepted governmental norm. It remains a fragile achievement.



Two 'lessons' may perhaps be drawn from this brief comparativist exercise.

First, the past, as L.P. Hartley (author of the novel The Go-Between) wrote, is a 'foreign country'. They (in this case the ancient Greeks) organized political ideas and their reception quite differently there.

Second, a real puzzle remains as to why and how 'democracy' – the word as well as very various and disparate versions of the thing – so rose in estimation from its late 18th century disapproval to its generalized approbation (and too often mis-appreciation) today.

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