

Paul CARTLEDGE, *Democracy. A Life.*
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Reviewed by
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1. Introduction

The learned professor Paul Cartledge, renowned from the University of Cambridge, has produced a new book, called *Democracy, a life*, which unfolds the life-story of democracy as a system of government and as an ideal. In practice, it mainly covers Classical Athens and then uses the remaining chapters to summarize what happened in the millennia that followed. In this analysis, we investigate the development of democracy described by Cartledge in the light of Oswald Spenglers thesis of the civilization cycle.

Spengler can be positioned as a sceptic of Democracy, which

[...] counts by heads, not by rank. In all Late periods of all Cultures, 'liberal' in one way or another – namely, free from the inward powers of non-urban life. Economy is freed to make money, science freed to criticize. And so in all the great decisions we perceive the intellect with its books and its meetings having the word ('Democracy'), and money obtaining the advantages ('Plutocracy') – and it is never ideas, but always capital, that wins. But this again is just the opposition of truths and facts, in the form in which it develops from the city-life.¹

In essence, Spengler states that democracy wears a cloak of creative and egalitarian powers, while the financial interests are in truth the key decisive factors. Looking closely at the historic evolution of any city – say Athens, or Rome – you will find the evolution of intellectual life to mimic this developmental cycle. This happens as the city becomes an empire and expands along with the financial ties holding the political unit together. The process spawns urban classes that do not directly grow their own food nor plough their own fields – in their dependence they become a political factor to be manipulated by the rivalling financial elites. This process, Spengler induces us to think, we frivolously call 'Democracy'. But does this rough summary hold true? Through a deep inspection of Cartledge's book, I seek to provide a closer analysis of democracy as a historical phenomenon.

The top one reviewer on Amazon, 'Bookish-Em', had this to say: 'Cartledge has a rather terse style, seeming to write with precision, rather than entertainment, in mind.'² To be fair – the style of writing is often 'technical' and 'academic', in the sense that it repeats many things already known in heavy, mechanical and formal language. This need not be defeating: other 'great ones' have suffered from the same – Spengler not being the least of them. However, it does raise two questions.

¹ Spengler (1954), p. 356.

² <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Democracy-Life-Paul-Cartledge/dp/0199697671> (19/9/2016).

[1] Every reading is an investment in time. Therefore: why read secondary literature when we can also read the primary sources? Is it only to express in better wording what has been said before? An author must put something *new* on the table to make it worthwhile: he or she must dare to be controversial.

[2] However, controversial stances in science often lean on wobbly evidence, meaning that they either ignore too many of the conventional counter-arguments for said position, or downplay them too hastily. Novelty in academia takes its vigour from bombast and rhetoric – this is precisely an argument to treasure the intellectual traditions, put breaks on the academic ‘publish or perish’ culture, and spend more time reading the literature of primary sources. It is mental degradation to read from secondary sources what the primary authors have said more originally, urgently and directly.

2. Herodotus and the tradition of regime-critique

The Preface starts off by rooting this book in the tradition of regime-critique:

I aim to compare and contrast the democracy (democracies) that were created in Athens with those to be found elsewhere in the Greek world. (p. xvi)

This tradition hails from Ancient Greece, where different city-states furthered various forms of rule. These different ways to govern were then put side by side and criticized in philosophical dialogues. An underlying key assertion is that regimes live in the hearts and minds of their subjects: the way one is ruled influences one’s mores and merits, which in turn moulds one’s preferences for being governed.

Cartledge roughly defines the concept of democracy these Ancient city-states shared:

Democracy as the rule of the masses, the political empowerment of the poor, on the basis of some workable definitions of freedom and equality. (p. xviii)

It is noteworthy that the author positions *Historia*, the work of Herodotus, as highly politicized writing which clearly reflects ideological predispositions. Victor Ehrenburg, for instance, had once asserted that ‘Herodotus had no discriminating knowledge of political or constitutional issues.’³ Sara Forsdyke⁴ was only able to arrive at the assertion that Herodotus’ work carried political significance after a laborious broadening of what historians define as ‘the political’, whereas Cartledge says this: ‘The tradition of thought about politics that started with the age of Herodotus was resolutely and overwhelmingly anti-democratic’ (p. 33). Thus we are to understand that Herodotus is not only a historian who made observations that could be classified as political with the right toolbox; no – he is the founder of a tradition of political writing. The evidence that the book presents for this assertion is:

[...] the sorts of insights highlighted in Herodotus 3.80 (the accountability of leaders, from the Persian Debate). (p. 309-10)

Herodotus used the concept *isegoria*, which Cartledge explains as:

³ Ehrenberg (1950). Compare Strasburger (1955), p. 585: ‘It does not matter to [Herodotus] in the least to evaluate the constitutional technicalities of democratisation besides the human-ethical factors.’ (transl. S. Forsdyke).

⁴ Forsdyke (2006).

[.....] freedom *from* tyranny and freedom to fight *for* themselves, *for* their own freely chosen ideals, rather than under external compulsion. (p. 78)

3. Cartledge contra Sen – the West versus the rest

Let us go back to what was stated before: that a good book must dare to be controversial. Cartledge argues against, among others, the Indian economist Amartya Sen, who has:

[...] a desire to dethrone or at least devalue what they take to be the ‘standard’, that is Western or Eurocentric, line in the history of democracy [...] They posit an alternative ‘secret’ history of democracy, which in their view shows both that it was developing in the Middle East, India, and China *before* classical Athens. (p. 2-3)

The author adds that the classical view of democracy is ‘viciously ethno- or culture-centric’ in the minds of his opponents, who rail against this Athens-based history by claiming that democracy ‘developed in unexpected ways through the grass-roots activities of Muslims, feminists and technophiles’ (p. 3). Cartledge attacks them by writing a book about the history of democracy that focuses on Athens.

Do not get me wrong – I like a book that presents a wide-ranging, possibly controversial claim. Yet, no matter how many cases and examples about Western democracy one cites: without diachronic examples, doing so does not prove that democracy was an *exclusively* Western practice. For a good example look at *The Anatomy of Fascism* by Robert Paxton (2004). After defining and exploring the notion of fascism in Europe, he examines South-American regimes as well. Then Paxton carefully explains why those systems may resemble features of fascism, but could not be defined as fascist in their core. By analogy – Cartledge could have considered examples of government in Asia. Then he could have demonstrated how those non-Western systems may have resembled aspects of democracy, yet could not be defined as ‘democratic’ in the essence of their being.

Sen argues that ancient Greece is not unique, even among ancient civilisations, in giving importance to public discussion and public reasoning; second that to speak of democracy as an exclusively ‘Western’ phenomenon is to indulge in ‘an element of racist thinking’. (p. 6)

With other words: the history of democracy is world history. Similar tendencies underlay the ‘Black Egypt’ revision of history (which uneasily also means that blacks held Jews as slaves), but we digress. A more important point Sen makes is:

[...] that the ancient Greek’s democratic experience had little or no impact in the contemporary ancient equivalents of what became France, Germany, and Britain in Europe but had great impact on ‘participatory governance’ in post-Alexander greater Iran, Bactria (Afghanistan) and India. (p. 7)

4. Is democratic triumphalism misplaced?

Sen adds that other people beside the Greeks, such as the Jains of ancient India, ‘were egalitarians’ (quote by Cartledge on p. 7). Now while democracy is egalitarian (in pretence), egalitarianism by itself is not yet democracy. India is known to have had a caste-system for roughly 2.500 years – this makes one frown, as far as egalitarianism is concerned. According to Cartledge, British anthropologist Jack Goody maintains that Western historians ‘conspired to deprive other, non-western

cultures of the credit for the pathbreaking cultural achievement that is democracy – which they erroneously attribute uniquely or preferentially to the ancient Greeks' (p. 36). The same page mentions 'Western triumphalism'. But this discussion about Western triumphalism only makes sense when *assuming that democracy will truly be triumphant*. And that, in light of recent global developments, remains to be seen.

It is perfectly viable to argue that Europe traced its democracy back to Ancient Greece, *in name*, while politics in practice had no ties with that system. The rise of (representative) democracy in Europe had to do with the emergence of trade and wealthy merchants which whittled down the hierarchy of the nobility; it had to do with the industrial revolution, with workers and labour unions who sought to be represented politically. But then, if one maintains this, as we have seen Sen does, one cannot maintain 'nominalism' simultaneously: India *calls itself a democracy and therefore it is* (the largest democracy on earth).

Discussions of this type – asking if democracy is the name a regime chooses for itself or must it also be carried by popular sentiments – always run into the 'chicken before the egg' problem that was part of Geerten Waling's recent promotion in Leiden.⁵ The democratic experiments that were carried out in the Europe of 1848 were only possible because of a widespread revolutionary fever. Yet simultaneously that fever was funnelled and made possible by the democratic experiments that were carried out at that time and signified the emerging spirit of that age.

5. Grand overarching history

Knowing a thing or two about the history of Ancient Greece and Athens, this book would have impressed me more if it either presented a new grand overarching theory, or would have presented fresh facts that I could have used for a new grand overarching theory. With its subject, 'the place of democracy within world-history', the book does enter the league of overarching theories. It sticks to its pond of Classical Athens and does not cover any possible counter-example, such as Barrington Moore junior did in his *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966). That is all in all a better book on the subject because it cuts through to the essence.

That essence is that the cause of democracy – not the origin but the cause – for Western Europe is not in Athens but in trade and industry, which created a commercial elite that contended with the elites of nobility plus the church. Both sides sought to bring the lower classes to their position, which gradually emancipated the citizenry, workers and peasants in a politically participatory sense. Benjamin Disraeli (1804 – 1881) to name one individual, was a key figure in this process. Where the commercial elites were too weak to contend, they instead sought favours and protection by the nobility, which resulted in an 'alliance of rye and steel' as seen under Otto von Bismarck (1815 – 1898). Finally in areas where there was no industrial elite to speak of, the result was a mass-rebellion that destroyed the nobility hierarchy.

This is how Barrington Moore outlined the paths to respectively capitalist-democracy as it existed in Western-Europe (think of the Netherlands and Great-Britain with their parliamentary traditions and liberal constitutions), followed by

⁵ Waling (2016).

nazism in Germany and communism in Russia and China. These paths include no reference to Ancient Athens, which is in fact defensible going by Cartledge himself:

The number who can with any confidence be called ideologically pro-democratic can be counted on the fingers of one hand: Herodotus himself, perhaps, Pericles as represented by the famous funeral speech attributed to him in Thucydides' *History*, Protagoras the drafter of democratic laws for the new city of Thouria, Democritus the atomist, Demosthenes the ideologically driven practical politician [...] and from around 300 BCE until approximately CE 1850 hardly anyone was so again. (p. 33)

6. Ancient Athens versus today

According to Spengler, it is justified to study a great historical development – in this case the evolution of democracy – by designating a city as the centre point. Spengler writes, that in every epoch,

[...] there is a city: a point in which the whole life of broad regions is collecting while the rest dries up. The great intellectual decisions take place in three or four world-cities that have absorbed into themselves the whole content of History, while the old wide landscapes of the Culture become merely provincial, serving only to feed the cities with what remains of its higher mankind.⁶

Cartledge summarizes the history of the world-city of his focus:

Athens progressed from semi-mythical kingship through aristocracy and timocracy (wealth related oligarchy) and tyranny to various shades and forms of democracy, interrupted by civil war and bouts of extreme oligarchy. (p. 16)

Note that Plato uses 'timocracy' in a different sense: in *Politeia* (380 BCE) the term is used for rule by military figures who seek prestige. Plato does not relate timocracy to capital but to a hierarchy of martial values. Cartledge also uses the term *oligoi* (oligopoly) (p19). He bases himself not on Plato, but on Aristotle's *Politics*: 'A multitude is a better judge of many things than any one man' (Pol. 1286a). Antiquity does know the example of one demagogue who made plans for Sparta and Athens to embark upon a common war. The one Spartan emissary was not convinced, whereas a large body of Athenians were roused for the war, which ended in disaster. Cartledge does credit Plato, for his lifelong battle against the rabble-rousing rhetoric of the sophists:

He was committed on principle to countering such merely specious rhetoric with true philosophical knowledge and understanding. (p. 98)

One accomplishment of *Democracy, a Life* is what it clears up about the practice of ostracism. Ostracism was not only, as is often assumed, a way to get rid of a tyrant in the making – its more important function was to prevent civil wars (p73). This could also backfire. Alcibiades 'won' an ostracism in 416, but the result was the opposite of decisive, given that the wrong candidate was ostracised: not his direct opponent Nicias, but the lesser politician Hyperbolus.

The chapters about the Peisistratids are very good because they emphasize that this dynasty was an important step between Solon and Kleistenes. The tyrant Peisistratos cultivated a pan-Hellenic identity that was important to make common cause with the Spartans and other city-states against the Persians. The book explores this by going into the Panathenaea (p. 125) and the Delian League (p. 57).

⁶ Spengler (1954), vol. 1, p. 32.

Interesting is the case of the deme assembly of Halimous (p. 108), which proves how political struggles were waged by means of court cases rather than speeches and voting in the agora:

In its days of greatest imperial power between about 475 and 430 it had been able even to compel non-Athenians to attend courts in Athens and be tried before Athenian jurors if they were suspected of conspiring in their home cities against what most Athenians took to be the alliance's best interests (p. 118).

Cartledge makes the point that many students writing on Athenian democracy tend to omit these legal institutions. By 430, it had evolved to the point that powerful politicians were separated from effective orators (p. 114). We see the analogy with today – the politicians of the 21st century have their networks within institutions, their connections and teleprompters, but no longer have the mobilizing force of inspiration that speakers of the twentieth century had.

Much can be learned here from Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* (1949). On page 24, he reflects upon Jacob Burckhardt, who wrote in 1871 to a friend:

I have a premonition, which sounds like utter folly and yet will not leave me: the military state must become one great factory. Those hordes of men in the great industrial centres will not be left indefinitely to their greed and want. Long voluntary subjection under individual *Führers* and usurpers is in prospect. People no longer believe in principles but will, periodically, probably believe in saviours.⁷

Löwith states that by this 'new authority', nineteenth-century liberalism will find an unexpected end. The new authority is:

[...] no longer an authority of tradition but the result of a revolutionary reaction against nineteenth-century makeshift provisions.⁸

The current representative system, exactly like the Athenian democracy, draws its legitimacy from the will and interest of 'the people'. In practice, it is run by bureaucratic machines, legal technocrats, financial institutions and media moguls who work together with party elites to 'groom' their own successors. There always comes a point when the 'demos' wants their taste of the 'krátos'. And once they realize they cannot have it, they turn to Caesars and Dracos.

Cartledge emphasizes that Ancient democracy contrasts with modern democracy, because

Ancient Democracy = Direct Democracy: the *kratos* of the *demos* was exercised directly by the *demos*, whereas modern Democracy = Representative Democracy. (p. 91)

This distinction, however, only makes sense against the background of Hobbes' decisionism and the religious wars that divided Europe. Marsilius of Padua, Hobbes' important predecessor, is briefly mentioned (p. 277) but not properly discussed, given he was the foremost Medieval scholar to justify the state from a secular position, as a force to provide the populace with peace and stability. Both positioned 'the people' as the wellspring of sovereignty for both the clergy and the state, as opposed to the sacred authority of religious revelation. The Statement 'We, the People' implies 'who or what is "the people"?' which in turns amounts to: 'Who wields the sovereignty?' The idea behind the principle of decisionism is that sovereignty has to be transferred away from large bodies of people, given so many religions and creeds that divide the people and therefore foster civil war. Yet this

⁷ Löwith (1949), p. 24.

⁸ Ibid.

aspect, so essential to the rise of representative democracy, is regrettably missing from the book: its 'life' is therefore incomplete.

Not only life, but also death is a topic in this book. Cartledge considers a rise in the number of Athenians accorded formal rites of burial in the later eighth century BCE to mark a beginning of an egalitarian spirit characteristic of democracy (p. 142). Yet without a comparison to Sparta, how much can rites of burial really prove for Athenian democracy? Perhaps it could have been important for the recognition of universal human rights – think of the story of Antigone who asked the government to recognize the right to bury her deceased brother – more than for democracy. The author then points out that from about 430:

[...] the erection of superior markers in marble resumed, and even the democracy could not foreclose the erection of a monument such as a lavishly carved marble relief stèle for the cavalryman Dexileos. (p. 142-3)

If the premise is that ornate grave monuments harbour anti-democratic tendencies because wealthy families could afford them, then we ask: are such artful sculptures not the medium by which the West has gotten to know the Ancient Greeks and admire them?

7. Blatant contradiction

A blatant contradiction of this work is that Cartledge first assures us that the Ancient Greeks had no political theory properly so called, because democracy to them was not a theory but a practice.

It is ultimately a matter of openness and transparency, that the ancients did not develop a theory or theories of democracy in the way that has become de rigueur for all modern, representative systems. (p. 91)

Yet he does go into Herodotus and Cleisthenes and examines how they deliberately used words as *isonomia* and *demokratia* to reflect the nuances of their deepest political convictions (p. 94). Then he writes that after Pericles' death:

[...] the issue [of democracy] had even then lost none of its theoretical salience for thinkers like Xenophon and his older Athenian contemporaries. (p. 101)

So was there an Ancient political theory of democracy or not? One reason the author may not cite Plato's *Politeia* as evidence of political theory, is because Plato, although he thoroughly defined and analysed democracy, was one of its opponents.

The author characterizes Aristotle as 'an armchair intellectual' (p. 92). Then he identifies him as a 'utopian thinker' (p. 101), only to concede on p. 103: 'However, as usual with him, reality and realism immediately broke in.' So we are to understand Aristotle was not only that, but also a conservative man of pragmatism. Following this reasoning by Cartledge, anyone who ever held ideals can be called a 'utopian thinker', since all political analysis serves to legitimize a system of rule or to change it, and therefore presupposes to further what is held to be good or to hamper what is regarded to be evil. After all, what can be considered 'practical' depends entirely on what one wishes to practice.

The book has many chapters where the reader ploughs a way forward through details, wondering 'where is he going with this?', only to arrive at the end of the chapter before said question is answered. Chapter IX is a strong exception to this – however here too, both the premise and evidence mainly lean on Aristotle. Which gives rise to another question: 'Why am I not reading Aristotle's works instead of

this?’ Cartledge dismisses Aristotle’s writings on women as ‘excessively retrograde and grossly sexist’, then adds that he ‘represented and reflected very fairly the views of the average Greek male citizen’ (p. 135). If so, why does his teacher Plato judge women more favourably in *Politeia*? ‘Does it matter to you if your watchdog is a male or a female?’ Plato asks (5.451D), ‘and if not, why would it matter to you if it is a man or a woman that fulfils the roles so vital to our great society?’ According to Socrates in that dialogue, a woman can do pretty much anything – serve in the army or practice philosophy – as long as her talents and character are compatible with it.

‘It is probably safe to say that at least in the first half of the fourth century there were several hundred Greek democracies or democratic *poleis*’, states Cartledge (p. 146). ‘But all we have by way of evidence to corroborate that crude approximation is the general statement of Aristotle that in his day most of the then-existent Greek *poleis* were some version of either democracies or oligarchies.’ If there is such a small basis to conclude that ‘outside of Athens, rule in Greece would have been roughly democratic’, then how can one be so decided that democracy was at the time exclusively Greek?

The author states that Sen and his allies must accept that the history of democracy, especially Ancient democracy, is something typically and exclusively Western, yet he does measure up the past against contemporary mores. Especially in his comments on women this is noticeable, even using the word ‘phalocracy’ (p. 135). On several topics, Aristotle is the prime, sometimes only source he refers to, and yet judges him according to today’s standards of egalitarianism. If so, then what is really gained if Cartledge ‘wins’ the democracy of Antiquity for the West?

Regarding the question ‘how widely was democracy really applied in Ancient Greece?’, the book explores the pact of isopoly between Athens and the Samian democracy – meaning that any Samian citizens who wished to reside permanently in Athens might do so and enjoy all the rights duties and benefits of Athenian citizenship – and ties this to the revolt of Mytilene (p. 148-9). The oligarchs of Mytilene sought active intervention from Sparta and had even armed the populace, whereupon that populace turned their weapons against said oligarchs. Yet in this example, where the people rose up against their Sparta-supporting elite, the author explains the uprising from starvation rather than from a thirst for democracy.

8. Democracy in Ancient Rome

To Rome, then, where all roads ultimately lead. ‘Actually there was no Roman Republican constitution, formally speaking – the Latin word *constitutio* means something quite different’ (p. 248). Pardon me, but... What about the Twelve Tables? Cicero mentions them in *De Legibus* 2.59 and they are often considered to mark the onset of more public lawgiving procedures and increasingly transparent legislation, which diminished the power of patrician families. Not only is ‘democracy’ a pillar of modern Western states, but also rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*), and for the latter Roman law has been a determining influence. Proceeding with these contemporary comparisons, it is interesting that Cartledge states:

Responsibility for the outbreak of the Second Punic War is not quite such a complicated question as that for the Peloponnesian War—let alone the first World War. (p. 249)

What makes it interesting is that we have about three hundred times more sources on the outbreak of the first World War.

All magistrates and the Tribunes were elected; there was no place for the democratic machinery of the lot in the Roman electoral system. (p. 256)

Here Cartledge states that there was only place for group-voting and not for a ‘practice in Republican Rome of the democratic one citizen, one vote formula.’ Fergus Millar for one, emphasizes ‘the quite widespread use of the lot (for instance, in the annual allocation of consular and praetorian *provinciae*).’⁹ Millar also wrote that ‘no one became a member of the Senate by right of birth, or without gaining some annual office that was filled by popular election.’¹⁰ It had never been ascertained exactly what the influence of one’s birth was in obtaining a political position of importance. On the other hand, every year there were, ‘twenty-four elected *tribuni militum*, twenty *quaestores*, and ten *tribuni plebis*.’¹¹ Millar points out that, concerning majority voting, that in the late Republic, ‘the passing of *leges*, most often on the proposition of tribunes, took place almost entirely in the *comitia tributa*, in which—within his own *tribus*—each citizen had an equal vote.’¹²

The central element here is the *comitia centuriata*, the voting space outside the ritual boundary of the city, the Campus Martius, where the *comitia centuriata* gathered, as an electoral, judicial and legislative assembly. Since the 140s the *comitia tributa*, in its role as an electoral assembly, had come to meet there, too. Ausonius, for one, comments on how important voting and ballot boxes had been to Rome before the rise of emperors.¹³

It is also noteworthy that when authors wrote about bribes, they often referred not only to the most wealthy but specifically to bribing broad sections of the populace – this does imply those sections had some formal say in things, given the voting by the *comitia* in particular.¹⁴ Dionysius remarks that the *comitia centuriata* had been reformed to be ‘somewhat more democratic’.¹⁵ But the bottom line is really that the *comitia centuriata* did conduct majority votings to elect consuls and praetors and incidentally voted on a *lex*.¹⁶ The votes were conducted by the middle class of Rome and they were anonymous. So there *was* an element of democracy in Ancient Rome even if there was no element of egalitarianism, given that the voters were summoned in groups, with the wealthiest groups going first.

It can be argued that the role of the *comitia* has been overly accentuated by modern historians, and that there remains much to say on the *concilium plebis*, the principal popular assembly of the Roman Republic. But then again, why does Cartledge himself not address it more elaborately – not to mention why does he omit the Lex Hortensia and all that it meant for class-politics in Ancient Rome? It stands in shrill contrast with the manifold details he covers on Ancient Athens, notwithstanding his excellent if short treatment of Aelius Aristides. Cartledge bases his findings partly on Suetonius (p. 268), for which there was an ominous saying during my years as a history student: ‘If we may believe Suetonius...’ For more about the reliability of Suetonius as a source, I redirect our readers to ‘Suetonius’ Life of Augustus’ by T.J. Cadoux.¹⁷

⁹ Millar (2002), p. 1-13, ch. 1: ‘Approaches and interpretations’, esp. p. 3.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 5.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Idem* (2002), p. 197-226, ch. 8. ‘The Crowd in Rome: what sort of democracy?’, esp. p. 206.

¹³ Ausonius, *Gratiarum Actio* 3.13 (transl. R.P.H. Green).

¹⁴ Yakobson (1992).

¹⁵ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 4.16-21 (transl. E. Cary, Loeb).

¹⁶ Millar (2002), p. 204.

¹⁷ Cadoux (1953).

8. Civic Humanism

Later on, the book covers Machiavelli and Lipsius (p. 280), which is on the one hand very interesting, while on the other, because it is so brief, inclines the reader to switch over to the *Discorsi* (1519), to read deeper into civic humanism and the martial mindset that shaped it. Cartledge rallies against ‘the privatisation and individualising of the notion of liberty’ (p. 292), which does imply he attaches more importance to civic humanism than the book shows. He criticizes Montesquieu who ‘did not have a good understanding of Athenian democracy’ (p. 289), which merits a re-reading of *De l'esprit des lois* (1748): a closer examination of the many historical quotations from sources that historians still use today. Next to Montesquieu the author mentions Locke (p. 287), both men of ideas, while simultaneously underplaying the importance of practical acts by William III of Orange. It was his willingness to sign the Bill of Rights in 1689 that marked the birth of constitutional monarchy. William III was mainly interested in combining the Dutch and English navies against Louis XIV of France, as a form of containment policy, which meant he was willing to leave many matters up to Parliament.

As the end draws near we read about George Grote (p. 302) and Cornelius de Pauw (p. 290), yet we are only treated with cavernous glimpses of what could have been bountiful, insightful vistas. But a good writer, it can be supposed, always leaves new fields for his readers to plough and discover.

Then, finally, Cartledge stumbles upon the biggest problem of his book:

Actually, few of the US Founders knew well, let alone were decisively influenced by, ancient Greek history or historians and political thinkers. (p. 293)

Then, if so, what is the point of spending so many chapters in Ancient Athens, while reducing the topics outlined above to brief summaries? Much can be forgiven once we see he does not shun taking a position on America’s contemporary transformation, pointing out (p. 296) that the Democrats fought ‘on the side of conservatism, fighting to retain slavery as a legal mode of human exploitation, against Abraham Lincoln’s emancipatory Republicans.’ When reading this, we have to bring Frederick Douglass into memory, an African-American who climbed up from slavery and rose to be a politician.

Douglass details how he mastered the art of rhetoric to enhance his powers of persuasion in arguing for the abolishment of slavery. He read ‘white’ British political speakers as William Pitt, Richard Sheridan, Edmund Burke and Liam Fox. ‘The reading of these speeches,’ he stated, ‘added much to my limited stock of language, and enabled me to give tongue to many interesting thoughts, which had recently flashed through my soul, and died away for want of utterance’.¹⁸ Douglass did not worry whether he damaged his mind by educating himself in ‘white’ literature. Yet today, many authors such as those mentioned have been eradicated from the curricula in Western nations, under the politically correct pretext that such literature would ‘exclude’ students of colour or ‘discourage’ them. Douglass would turn in his grave.

Also in reference to contemporary events, Alexis de Tocqueville is inevitably mentioned (p. 297) who ‘praised [the US] for its associational life (‘civil society’) for acting as a buffer to protect the liberty of individuals from the coercive instinct of

¹⁸ Douglass quoted by Cmiel (1990), p. 91.

the State'. Today, many activists try to use the power of the state to further their own goals. Which always happens – as we can read in Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* (1971) – with a language that sounds democratic, yet turns out to be *despotic*, when put in practice.

9. Conclusions

'Politics is the business of how we decide as a society what our priorities are and then set about achieving them' (p. 305). When we define power as the ability to get things done and political power as the authority to decide which things have to be done, then it becomes apparent that today, political power is tied to procedures that are geographically determined: in terms of borders, territories and voting populaces. Simultaneously, the sovereignty of the nation-state evaporates within cyberspace, forming a democratic deficit. In the digital age of accelerating information currents, information is money, power and control. The currents of information and those of corporate entities are increasingly global, whereas democracies are per definition national or regional. Cartledge reflects upon 'the managed, hollowed-out, or empty democracy we actually and foreseeably have' (p. 307), pointing out that:

[...] the direct democratic system of the German-speaking *Landsgemeinde* are surely feasible only on – and because they are on – the smallest scale, and because they speak to the traditions and perceptions of small, culturally homogeneous communities. (p. 307)

To conclude we will have to hope for 'the forced marriage of new digital and informational technology with ancient democratic practice' (p. 310). We are offered a review of how that will work out in *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers. Also important are new technologies such as this:

The Chinese government is building an omnipotent "social credit" system that is meant to rate each citizen's trustworthiness. By 2020, everyone in China will be enrolled in a vast national database that compiles fiscal and government information, including minor traffic violations, and distils it into a single number ranking each citizen.¹⁹

As the economic power of non-democratic nations grows, the international ideal of democracy will also become feeble. That political researchers slowly become aware of this is a telling sign; Sharia-law, for one, competes with the Western notion of universal human rights. In this regard it is interesting that it is only on the final page (p. 313), that Cartledge makes a mention of political Islam.

When I was younger and read *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), it was always loudly declared that no-one could ever be more economically competitive than the West, because in order to do so, they would have to adopt liberalism, capitalism and democracy. They would thus become Western in spirit, which meant they would eventually embrace universal human rights. 'The ancient Greeks certainly did not invent, and would not feel at all comfortable with, any notion of universal human rights', Cartledge concludes (p. 311). He concludes that this is a recent, post-Enlightenment invention. Globally we observe that the Enlightenment is on the losing end, considering the demographic decline of Europe in relation to where markets now develop. Therefore, we can, at least in the coming decades, lay to rest this dreaming up of global democracies.

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-34592186> (20/10/2015).

In essence, there is some alignment in the analysis of both Spengler and Cartledge. The main point being that the hollowness of the big words that promote the appearance of democracy, is laid bare as time progresses. Cartledge adheres to the topical examples of local roots and democracies of a smaller scale, whereas Spengler emphasizes that metropolitan cities inevitably soak up all energetic souls and political sovereignty as civilisations bloom and age. It appears that the global age – the information constellation of the cyber-entangled world – make the ties of money and information that steer democracies visible and felt by all.

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