



## POLITICAL HISTORY

## Making democracy thrilling

In his historical biography of democracy in its various forms over the past two and a half millennia, Paul Cartledge informs and inspires, writing with controlled passion and unerring accuracy.

IF YOU ONLY ever buy one book on the history of democracy, make it this one. In this study, Paul Cartledge offers a thrilling account, based on his near-legendary course of lectures at Cambridge, of why it matters more than ever to us today. The subtitle, *A Life*, encapsulates the book's underlying argument: it is a detailed historical biography of democracy as it has existed, with enormous intermissions, for more than 2,500 years, and a polemic arguing that although democracy, in various forms, is alive today, its future survival cannot be guaranteed. Cartledge insists that all history is contemporary history because every generation remakes the past to seek answers for the future. This principle guides his selection and exposition of material.

The other metaphor structuring the book is the notion of a transhistorical drama in five acts, the theatrical analogy inviting the reader to participate emotionally in each of the exciting periods of history in which the meaning of democracy was hashed out. The leading players are brought to colourful life; Cartledge believes that while economic and social forces motor

history, we must never overlook the contribution to its shaping made by potent thinkers and leaders. His personal heroes, intellectual or political, leap out from his pages: Cleisthenes, Aristotle, the Leveller John Lilburne, Putney debater Thomas Rainborough, John Milton, Gracchus Babeuf and historian, parliamentarian and agitator for democratic reform, George Grote.

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The Prologue and Act I set the scene with a marvellously clear exposition of the problems posed by the nature of the sources and the translation of terms across languages and epochs. Act II plunges us into the economic, social and cultural pressure cooker that, in archaic Greece, produced the 507 BC revolution

at Athens, followed by the 'golden age' of classical democracy; Cartledge emphasises the role of the law courts, with their large citizen juries. Act III takes us to the less famous but more richly documented history of democracy in fourth century BC Athens, to its death throes after the signally undemocratic Macedonians conquered most of the known world. In Act IV, Cartledge patiently unravels the residues of classical democracy in Hellenistic cities, assesses the claims of the Roman Republic to being a species of democracy and narrates the retreat of democratic ideas and ideals from the Roman Empire to the 16th century. The long medieval effacement of democracy magnifies the excitement of Act V and the Epilogue, on the rediscovery of democracy from the English Civil War to the unlovely consequences of 9/11 in the Middle East. It shows the extent to which the use of representatives and parliamentary parties has alienated us from the ancient idea that, in a democracy, the people themselves wielded direct executive power. It also judiciously sets the parameters of our contemporary debate about the political ambitions

and visions of the human race in the 21st century. From ancient slavery to theocratically justified terrorism, Cartledge stares unflinchingly at the worst aspects of human experience, writing with controlled passion and unerring accuracy.

Cartledge's writing is perfectly modulated to the needs of the non-specialist. He explains every ancient or technical term and concept, but never patronises his reader. He provides a timeline, map and invaluable bibliography conscientiously signposted in the text. The index is substantial and sophisticated; it will help school and university students enormously. Sometimes you have to work to follow the argument, but only when he is respectfully explaining the positions of other, usually less lucid scholars, and you are rewarded by the effort. Particularly useful is his explanation of the importance of his American colleague Josh Ober's contribution in insisting that ancient Greek democracy has a major role to play in contemporary political science and his reasoned response to the claims of Amartya Sen and Jack Goody that the western model of democracy is Eurocentric and implicated in the history of European imperialism.

Cartledge has an unrivalled eye for detail, as the sensitively selected visual images reveal. But what makes this book most memorable is his true ear. Time and again, he points out how the democratic phrase or *mot juste* has been instrumental in changing history, from the slogans inscribed on *ostraka* (the pottery shards used in Athenian ostracism), to Rainborough's 'the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he' and Lincoln's incomparable formulation 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. The restatement of these resonant phrases leaves Cartledge's reader not only informed, but inspired.

*Edith Hall*

***Democracy: A Life***  
by Paul Cartledge  
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