

## The History of Athenian Democracy, Now

Paul Cartledge, *Democracy: a Life*, Oxford 2016. 416pp. 9780199697670. £20.00.

Roslyn Fuller, *Beasts and Gods: How Democracy Changed Its Meaning and Lost Its Purpose*, Zed 2015. 424pp. 9781783605422. £14.99

Johanna Hanink, *The Classical Debt: Greek Antiquity in an Era of Austerity*, Harvard 2017. 352pp. 9780674971547. £23.95.

Brett Hennig, *The End Of Politicians: Time for a Real Democracy*, Unbound 2017. 205pp. 9781911586104. £9.99.

Thomas N. Mitchell, *Democracy's Beginning: the Athenian story*, Princeton 2015. 368pp. 9780300215038. £25.00

David Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections: the Case for Democracy*, Bodley 2016. 208pp. 9781847924223. £9.99.

Increasing dissatisfaction with the operations of present-day democracies has sparked a new interest in the operations of ancient ones, which in turn has raised questions about how and why classical Athens is venerated as a historical exemplar of good political practice. As some analysts contend that we are moving into an era of 'post-democracy', and the concepts and practices of democracy come under increased scrutiny and critique, democracy's history is being mined for alternative practices and ideas that might deliver a better form of politics, both within and outside the academy.<sup>1</sup> However, other commentators have criticised the turn to classical Greece as an exemplar, and its positioning at the beginning of the history of democracy as constructing a narrative of European and North American exceptionalism that serves to exclude other historical traditions and political practices. Such critics contend that the valorisation of Athenian democratic practice can feed into a triumphalist account of Western exceptionalism; for Johanna Hanink, 'the reputation that Athens enjoys today as the seedbed of liberal democracy is... largely an inheritance of Anglo-American Cold War propaganda'.<sup>2</sup> Yet there is still the problem of accounting for what Josh Ober has identified

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<sup>1</sup> C. Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge, 2004), J. Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, 2016), H. Geiselberger (ed.), *The Great Regression* (Cambridge, 2017), with case studies on recent events in individual democracies.

<sup>2</sup> J. Hanink, *The Classical Debt: Greek Antiquity in an Era of Austerity* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 24. See also J. Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London, 2009), pp. ix-xv; cf. Brennan, *Against Democracy*, pp. 6-8. J. Ober, *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*

as a conjunction of democracy and economic “efflorescence”, ‘a historically rare combination of economic, cultural and political conditions’, that now pertains across the contemporary developed world, but is rarely to be found in the societies of the distant past (p. 294).

Recent radical accounts of democracy’s history, such as those of John Keane and David Graeber, have, however, moved the focus away from Athenian democracy as a foundational moment. Keane took a wider, cross-cultural view, exploring the tradition of deliberative assemblies across ancient Near Eastern cultures and the mediaeval Islamic world, while Graeber explicitly rejected any appeal to classical Athens as a conservative trope that feeds into a ‘clash of civilisations’ model.<sup>3</sup> Such comparativist approaches have challenged traditional linear narratives in which the Athenian tradition is the starting point; both Cartledge and Mitchell, in very different ways, seek to reassert the primacy of Athens in any attempt to write a history of democracy.

New questions about the stability of democracy have also challenged established political teleologies, in which the democracy of the modern nation-state is the culmination of a developmental process. Our commitment to democracy as an ideology and a practice has been seen to waver. John Dunn, perhaps the most distinguished historian of democracy’s more recent history, warned of new threats to the legitimacy of established regimes in his *Breaking Democracy’s Spell*, while the presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump brought forth a flurry of commentary in which Plato’s account of democracy’s decline into tyranny (*Republic* books 8-9) was pressed into providing an analogy for the contemporary situation.<sup>4</sup> In these circumstances there seems to be a need for a new history of democracy,

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(Princeton, 2015), p. 294 rejects the genealogical narrative of cultural exceptionalism and forges a different link between classical Greece and the modern developed world, with the conjunction of democracy and economic “efflorescence”, ‘a historically rare combination of economic, cultural and political conditions’ that now pertains across the contemporary developed world (p. 294).

<sup>3</sup> Keane, *Life and Death*, pp. 78-145; D. Graeber, *The Democracy Project* (London, 2013), pp. 170-3.

<sup>4</sup> J. Dunn, *Breaking Democracy’s Spell* (New Haven, 2014). For the use of Plato *Republic* 8-9 as a critique of current US politics, see D.S. Allen, 'Donald Trump Is a Walking, Talking Example of the Tyrannical Soul', *Washington Post (Post-Partisan Blog)*; Washington DC, 2016), <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/10/08/donald-trump-is-a-walking-talking-example-of-the-tyrannical-soul/>>, accessed 23/4/2017. For an exploration of the idea of political decline framed in terms of Athenian democracy and its critics, see R.N. Goldstein, 'Making Athens Great Again', *The Atlantic* (The Atlantic, April

one that accounts for challenges and failures within specific circumstances, rather than a triumphalist account oblivious to the cultural forces that have shaped its narrative. Activists campaigning for reform and change in political practice have adopted features of Athenian democracy as possible replacements for current processes – increased citizen participation in town-hall assemblies and other forums for deliberation and discussion, and the use of sortition (selection by lot) to create representative discussion groups or even to shadow or replace elected representatives in parliament – and their accounts draw on Athenian examples and histories. Such accounts are necessarily selective, and there must be a role for specialists in ancient history and politics to provide the contextualised detail to support the claims made for ancient political practice.

Such is the motivation for Thomas Mitchell's *Democracy's beginning: the Athenian story*, inspired by the interest in ancient democracy shown by political scientists and theorists Mitchell met while an academic visitor at the Hoover Institution in the USA, and their need for a straightforward account of both the events and the people of the ancient world to support their own discussions and theorisation of the phenomenon of democracy (pp. 4-5). Its title also offers a firm riposte to accounts such as Keane's, although he is not explicitly addressed, and the contemporary debate appears not to be within Mitchell's sights. What Mitchell opposes is the earlier twentieth-century framing of democracy as minimal participation through election to the more extensive practice of Athens. As he notes, this narrow institutionalist perspective is a poor perspective from which to assess what constitutes democracy; ancient democracy lacks the processes by which modern democracies are identified, and would not count as a democracy for theorists for whom elections were the decisive identifying feature. As others (notably Roslyn Fuller, in her polemical plea for increased political participation) point out, the opposite is also true; ancient democrats would have regarded most parliamentary representative democracies as oligarchic rather than democratic, at best as a 'mixed constitution' in which democratic elements were balanced with aristocratic or monarchic elements, as Athenian enthusiasts claimed for Sparta, and Polybius for Rome.<sup>5</sup>

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2017, 2017), <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/making-athens-great-again/517791/>>, accessed 23/4/2017.

<sup>5</sup> R. Fuller, *Beasts and Gods: How Democracy Changed Its Meaning and Lost Its Purpose* (London, 2015), pp. 122-7.

This introduction, along with a thoughtful epilogue, frames what is at heart a narrative enterprise. Mitchell aims to give ‘the full story of democracy’s beginning’, including the ‘flaws that contributed to its eventual demise’ (p. 5). He therefore surveys the history of Athenian democracy from its archaic beginnings to a firm full stop with the Macedonian conquest of Athens; everything post-322 BCE is surveyed in his Epilogue. He ties the emergence of democracy to the development of the polis and its culture, although this was not universal across the Greek world.

Mitchell’s framing of his analysis, outside of the introduction and epilogue, tends to be in terms of established debate and analysis from the Anglophone world, and he is more comfortable with older scholarship, with works by the venerated figures of Moses Finley, Geoffrey De Ste. Croix and Russell Meiggs featuring heavily in his endnotes. Compared with the Francophile Cartledge, Mitchell largely omits the work of the French historians of the ‘Paris School’, whose structuralist and post-structuralist interpretations of Athenian history and culture have been one of the most notable strands in the development of ancient history in recent decades, beyond a brief nod in a note to Nicole Loraux’s account of the Athenian funeral speech (p. 316, n. 11).<sup>6</sup> This leads to a rather positivist and proceduralist account of ancient democracy, and one untroubled by the challenges raised by John Keane, or those now levelled at classical scholarship by Hanink. It also delivers a history that aligns Athens with specific strands of modern political discourse, exemplifying Hanink’s concern that classical scholarship supports rather than questions political preconceptions.

Mitchell’s analysis of Thucydides’ funeral speech (pp. 65-72) argues for the words attributed to Pericles as conveying ‘an ethos of liberalism’, providing the foundation for ‘a strong libertarian ethos’ in which citizens’ free speech and religious practice were unrestricted (he later argues that the execution of Socrates was politically motivated and ‘not a reliable gauge... of the level of freedom of speech and thought in fourth-century Athens’, p. 201). Athenian democracy, he claims, was based on negative not positive freedom, in Isaiah

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<sup>6</sup> The current state of play in Francophone study of Athenian democracy, after the decisive developments of the Paris School, is summarised in a special issue of *Annales*, with Vincent Azoulay’s editorial providing a summary, and contributions by Paulin Ismard, Azoulay and others (V. Azoulay, 'Repolitiser La Cité Grecque, Trente Ans Après', *Annales*, 69/3 (2014), pp. 689-719, V. Azoulay, 'Repenser Le Politique En Grèce Ancienne', *Annales*, 69/3 (2014), pp. 605-26); both Azoulay’s and Ismard’s most recent books have been translated into English (V. Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens*, trans. J. Lloyd (Princeton, 2014), P. Ismard, *Democracy’s Slaves: A Political History of Ancient Greece*, trans. J.M. Todd (Cambridge, MA, 2017)).

Berlin's typology; as his note acknowledges, this sets him against the established view of many previous historians of Athenian democracy (p. 316, n. 18). It also sits uneasily with Plato's view that the 'fatal flaw' of democracy was its 'concept of political equality' (p. 102); while freedom is the more important concept for many US conservative thinkers, the ancient evidence, as Mitchell admits in describing it, is that equality was a primary concern for Athenian democracy's founders and its fourth-century critics alike, and equality and freedom were both central to Greek conceptualisation of the relationship between citizens that characterised the polis. The relationship between ancient democracy and modern liberalism is one that has occasioned much debate, and may be best explored through examining the use of Athenian democracy by the architects of liberalism, briefly explored by Paul Cartledge in one of his final chapters.

Such contextualist concern is dismissed by Mitchell. He suggests that scholars show too much concern with the risk of anachronism in dealing with Athenian political concepts and their relationship with current ones (p. 315, n. 5). But whether one thinks it important to distinguish between the polis and the nation state, between Athenian *parrhesia* and *isegoria* and modern freedom of speech, or to accord the Greeks a concept of property and personal rights, is, within the history of political thought, a choice governed by ideology as much as methodology.

In contrast, Paul Cartledge's *Democracy: a life* derives much of its strength from the contextualist and cultural historical scholarship that Mitchell downplays.<sup>7</sup> This may be due to its origins as a lecture course, in which critical engagement with a range of current scholarship would naturally feature.<sup>8</sup> Important works on Athenian history and culture, including the classic works invoked by Mitchell, frame many of his chapters, but Cartledge

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<sup>7</sup> Cartledge dedicates his book to Josiah Ober, whose 1998 *Political Dissent* is a curious omission from Mitchell's bibliography, and whose 2015 Seeley lectures in Cambridge, on Athenian democracy as a basic form of democracy in which tenets of liberalism are absent, provide a counter-point to Mitchell's claim.

<sup>8</sup> I served as a teaching assistant on this paper, which was taken by finalists reading both Classics and History at the University of Cambridge. The two groups showed some difference in their choice of the essay topics: it was usually the modern historians who chose to write essays on modern democracy, often drawing on their previous study of revolutionary France and America; dealing with the vast chronological range, and the detailed knowledge of the political and intellectual history and intellectual culture of modern nations as well as Athens and Rome, challenged many students.

gives more weight to the structuralist and anthropological studies of French scholarship, typified by his use of Jean-Pierre Vernant's work on Athens and its 'intellectual revolution'.<sup>9</sup>

The title of the lecture course on which it is based 'Greek democracy and its legacies', perhaps better conveys the scope of the work than its title. The prospectus for that course, included in Cartledge's preface, clearly sets out its method as 'explicitly and determinedly comparativist' and its aim 'to problematize and defamiliarize modern democracy' and to 'sever any easy assimilation' of it to any ancient version (p. xvi).

The book title, on the other hand, makes a strong claim for the biographical metaphor, and also offers a riposte to Keane's suggestion that democracy was facing 'death'. Yet, just as with Keane's work, which subsumes a tripartite typology of democracy (assembly, representative and monitory, the latter describing late twentieth-century democracy with its array of lobbying organisations, NGOs, media, and other groups mediating between citizens and government) into the biographical metaphor, this book's structure and narrative demonstrate just how problematic this metaphor is. The fractured unity that Cartledge imposes on democracy's history challenges even the model of a tragedy; there are lengthy intervals and significant changes of characters, scenery and location between some of the five acts into he divides his account, notably as the pace quickens for his final acts' surveys of democracy in its post-antiquity decline and renewal. These gaps emphasise the lack of continuity between ancient and modern, and the problematic relationship between the two.

Cartledge engages with the existing debate on this from the outset, mirroring the frame they provided for his lecture series; his Prologue sets out first his objections to the kinds of argument raised by Keane (pp. 2-3), and to Amartya Sen's classic article, 'Democracy as a Universal Value' (pp.6-7), which argues for the relevance of democratic values across different cultures, and for the role of democratic politics in securing economic development.<sup>10</sup> Here there seems to be a tension between acknowledging Sen's case for the importance of asserting democracy's cross-cultural relevance, and avoiding the construction of a model that asserts a timeless identity between democracy ancient and modern and draws a line from Athens to Washington DC. In a sense Cartledge's argument is not that distant from the comparativist cases made by Keane and Sen, but in choosing classical Athens as his

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<sup>9</sup> J.-P. Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought* (Ithaca, NY, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> A. Sen, 'Democracy as a Universal Value', *Journal of Democracy*, 10/3 (1999), pp. 3-17.

exemplum Cartledge risks his comparativist account being mistaken for a traditional linear narrative of democracy's development.

In the book's five 'acts', Cartledge both explores the development and flourishing of Athenian democracy (Acts I-III), and its legacy in later forms of democracy and the reception of Greek democracy within later political theory (IV-V). This comparativist approach enables classical Athenian democracy to be seen in the context of other, possibly earlier, Greek democracies, the residual and distinctive democracies of Hellenistic poleis, operating beneath the veneer of monarchies and empires, and the democratic features of the Roman republic. Both Mitchell and Cartledge follow Mogens Herman Hansen in identifying the mature fourth-century democracy with its complex procedures (for which we have much better evidence than the fifth-century democracy) as Athenian democracy at its most successful and interesting.<sup>11</sup> In a sense they are also following the narrative of the Aristotelian Constitution of the Athenians, which ends with a survey of fourth-century Athenian institutions and practices, but Hansen and other modern scholars have unpicked details of continuing change within that century, difficult to discern from Aristotle's account, and quite distinct from Aristotle's more theoretical account of the development of democracy (*Politics* 4.4.1291b30-1293a34).

Cartledge final Act V provides a brief tour through the reinvention of democracy in modernity during the English Civil War, the French and American Revolutions, and the reforms of the United Kingdom in the long nineteenth century. Democracy, waking up from 'a long sleep', is frequently invoked in political argument during this period, although rarely with any positive sense until Grote's history and Mill's political thought reintroduced a form of democracy as an ideal.<sup>12</sup> Cartledge emphasises that the latter 'unwittingly created what has been dubbed the "myth" of ancient Athens' (p.303).

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<sup>11</sup> M.H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles, and Ideology* (Bristol, 1999); on proceduralism and its performance in fourth-century democracy, see for example the processes for consulting the Delphic Oracle specified in the 352/1 BCE 'Sacred Orgas' decree, *IG II<sup>2</sup> 204*, P.J. Rhodes and R. Osborne, *Greek Historical Inscriptions: 404-323 BC* (Oxford, 2003), p. 281.

<sup>12</sup> While Cartledge's Act V works through four centuries of dynamic political change and theorisation in a little over 20 pages, James T Kloppenberg's vast *Toward Democracy* offers a detailed account of democracy's history from the opposite perspective, offering a brief overview of democracy's ancient prehistory before beginning its main narrative with democratic ideas in the early North American colonies (J.T. Kloppenberg, *Toward*

Such mythologisation of Athens, in the classical scholarship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and its consequences for the understanding of Greece in the modern world, are the focus of Johanna Hanink's *The Classical Debt: Greek Antiquity in an Era of Austerity*. Hanink rightly perceives that mythologies created by earlier scholars, such as the art historian Johann Winckelmann, as well as the reception of antiquities such as the Parthenon marbles removed from their places of origin and feted in their new homes, have impeded understanding of the classical world by continuing to insist on the primacy of the imagined version, even though the cultural conditions under which that imagined version came into being no longer pertain. Winckelmann's idealisation of the white marble statue has persisted as a cultural ideal, despite Winckelmann himself acknowledging the polychromy of ancient statues, and the wide dissemination of intensive modern scholarship on the subject (pp.107-116).<sup>13</sup> But Hanink also shows how the ancient Athenians successfully mythologised themselves, describing 'How Athens built its brand', and how this mythology itself is based on a sense of past greatness now subject to decline, fatefully colouring future perceptions of their culture (pp. 68-69). Although Hanink does not address the history of political thought directly here, her concerns about the continuing mythologisation of Athens and its impact on contemporary perception of Athens as an exemplum are a valuable guide for interpreting appeals to the Athenian past within this discipline, and indeed her Epilogue provides a set of classroom tools for educators to use in interrogating accounts of the Greek past (pp.272-8).

While both Mitchell and Cartledge's books emerge from their authors' long careers in teaching ancient history, interest in Athenian democracy and its workings is far from being the preserve of professional classicists. A series of critiques of contemporary democracy, arising from other disciplines and from outside the academy, use Athenian democracy to contrast the failings of present-day practices. These works are more polemical in tone and intended to offer practical suggestions for political change; their focus is on practice and procedure as much as ideas and ideology. Roslyn Fuller's *Beasts and Gods* asserts the discontinuity in the democratic tradition, firmly separating ancient and modern, direct and

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*Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (New York, 2016)).

<sup>13</sup> A recent *Forbes* column on polychromy by archaeologist and historian Sarah Bond attracted a negative response from critics invested in the whiteness of antiquity, which she analyses in 'The Argument Made By The Absence: On Whiteness, Polychromy, And Diversity In Classics', *History from Below*, 30/4/17, <https://sarahemilybond.com/2017/04/30/the-argument-made-by-the-absence-on-whiteness-polychromy-and-diversity-in-classics/>. Accessed 17/05/17.

representative. Her view, that ancient thinkers would identify most contemporary democracies as oligarchies (pp. 23-25), has some support in the ancient evidence. Aristotle, for example, identified elections as naturally oligarchic, and the use of the lot to select citizens for offices to be the specific hallmark of a democracy (*Politics* 4.9.1294b7-9).

Fuller's vivid polemic identifies real issues, but her enthusiasm for Athenian practice occasionally skates over its difficulties, or makes unsupported claims for its achievements, suggesting that Greek science and philosophy is a product of Athenian democracy (p.22). But unlike the steadier work of Mitchell, and the more detailed account of Cartledge, this is not a historical account but a polemic. Fuller's aim is to praise the 'mad genius' (p.35) of selection by lot and the randomness that it introduced, contrasting it with the outcome of elections, influenced by the money spent by candidates and their backers; wealth and oligarchy were inextricably linked (p.88). While Fuller's Athens resembles the models that Cartledge and, to some extent, Mitchell, deconstruct, with her Athenocentric perspective on the Greek world, idealised versions of Athenian democracy have a distinguished history of their own in modern political thought, for example in Hannah Arendt's model of the polis in *The Human Condition*.<sup>14</sup>

Fuller argues that decisions made by a larger proportion of the electorate will be more acceptable to all than those taken by a tiny number of representatives. The divided response to both the 1975 and 2016 UK referendums on EU membership suggests that this may not be the case. The slender overall majority in 2016 barely masked greater regional divisions, and knowledge of these different results within the overall has threatened the cohesion of the political entity that is the United Kingdom. Fuller acknowledges that a member of the defeated minority 'might not be happy' (p.85) with a decision, but would accept it as that of the majority. Nicias' acceptance of the Sicilian expedition vote might represent such a process, although Nicias himself had a complex role in the debate (Thucydides 6.8-26).

Fuller's work exemplifies a series of recent publications that explore the mechanisms of ancient democracy to criticise the 'democratic deficit' of representative systems and suggest alternative practices. Disillusion with the practices of mature representative democracies and the desire to explore different ways of instantiating democratic participation have driven scholars and activists from other disciplines to inspect classical Athens and its perceptibly

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<sup>14</sup> H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1998), especially pp. 192-207.

different form of democracy. Public debate about what is and is not 'democratic' has often accompanied the analysis of outcomes of electoral processes, including the UK referendum on membership of the European Union, and the disjunct between the outcomes of the popular vote in the US presidential election and its electoral college. But exploring the details of the history of Athenian democracy reveals similar processes of challenge and change in democratic processes and the ability of citizens to access them.

Two further books, David Van Reybrouck's *Against Elections* and Brett Hennig's *The End of Politicians: time for a real democracy*, both discuss the Athenian practice of sortition as an alternative to elections, a perspective that Fuller endorses. In all three cases, the authors must deal with the problem of negotiating the difference in scale between the participatory democracy of the ancient polis and the representative democracy of the large-scale nation state.

Hennig suggests the use of large citizen panels, selected by 'stratified random sampling', to discuss issues and reach consensual decisions, a programme for which his Sortition Foundation campaigns<sup>15</sup>. Such panels could even form a national assembly of representatives, with the sampling weighted by age, gender and other criteria. Hennig discusses the problem of identity politics for democracy; sortition and mass participation could solve the difficulty of ensuring 'descriptive representation' of those with certain characteristics, particularly those who are underrepresented in current electoral systems (pp. 50-52). He concludes 'It is time for ordinary people to deliberate together, with experts informing them and independent facilitators helping them to arrive at the moral crux of decisions' (p. 196), but the history of democracy might suggest that all three of these groups and their interrelationship would not necessarily be neutral. Athenian democracy at its core relied on the possibility that the cultural homogeneity of its male citizenry, bound together by myths of autochthony and loyalty to the artificial tribes to which Cleisthenes had allocated their demes, could override the divisive class interests that otherwise might lead to faction and civil war. Some of the most powerful appeals in Greek rhetoric, from Pericles' funeral speech to Themistocles' appeal to the Greeks before Salamis, are to similarity and shared culture, suggesting an

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<sup>15</sup> 'What Is Sortition', Sortition Foundation, <[http://www.sortitionfoundation.org/what\\_is\\_sortition](http://www.sortitionfoundation.org/what_is_sortition)>, accessed 25/04/2017.

awareness of the need to counter class divisions within the polis and rivalries between cities and regions.

A further claim taken up by these works is the idea that technology provides a mechanism for re-instantiating the level of participation of an Athenian citizen in the context of a modern nation state. New communications technologies may offer a solution to the democratic deficit in societies larger than the Greek polis (Hennig, pp. 83-88). But if the experience of the 2016 elections and referendum has any immediate lessons, it is that the relationship between technology and democracy is much more complicated and less innocent than idealists and cyber-utopians had envisaged. Suggesting that ‘digital democracy’ offers a ‘way forward’, as Fuller does at one point (p. 277), may be naïve in a context where persuasion and corruption through the circulation of fake news and manipulation of social media appears to have had a decisive effect on the public mood (elsewhere, Fuller acknowledges the problems of ensuring fair participation via technology; Hennig too is wary of the complex consequences of new forms of communication). Van Reybrouck offers a more detailed account of the problems of democratic information and knowledge in the context of new media technologies (pp. 41-54), along with a mixed proposal for both traditional democratic bodies and a chamber of citizens chosen by sortition to work together (pp. 150-58), a novel form of mixed constitution.

But all of these optimistic visions are vulnerable to Thucydides’ and Plato’s critiques of democracy’s susceptibility to fraudulent rhetoric. Ancient critiques of democracy, although their authors had plenty to say about the procedural failings of institutions, were often based on an assessment of its epistemic failings, such as Thucydides’ criticism of the Athenian decision to invade Sicily (Thucydides 2.65.11-12). Fundamental to Plato’s critique of Athenian democracy was his view that the Athenians were incapable of acting on or even possessing knowledge of the sort acquired by philosophers. The mass was inherently incapable of evaluating evidence or reaching a correct decision about it except when guided by severe constraints, and as his image of the Cave suggests, the information presented to the masses is a partial representation of reality rather than reality itself. Plato’s jaundiced view of democratic debate, and his view that elite speakers used rhetoric to mislead the gullible demos, was countered in antiquity by Aristotle’s ‘doctrine of the wisdom of the multitude’, or summation argument.<sup>16</sup> When Thucydides problematizes truth in political discourse, in the

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<sup>16</sup> T.N. Mitchell, *Democracy’s Beginning: The Athenian Story* (New Haven, 2015), pp. 102-3; this argument has received extensive recent scrutiny, notably in D. Cammack, ‘Aristotle on

debate at Syracuse, Athenagoras' claim (Thucydides 6.36-40) that the multitude are best at judging is in tension with his dismissal of Hermocrates' (true) claim that the Athenian fleet is on its way. The role of knowledge has also been central to recent explorations of democratic deliberation and decision-making, whether assenting to a Habermasian model of discourse ethics and deliberative democracy or criticising it.<sup>17</sup>

This problematisation of the role of knowledge and expertise within democracy perhaps offers a specific continuity between ancient and modern political theory; it is again a central concern of academic political theory, as both Mitchell and Cartledge acknowledge in their conclusions, following Josh Ober's utilitarian claim for democracy's capacity to deliver better government and enable innovation.<sup>18</sup> Athenian participatory democracy has been recast as a precursor to Habermasian deliberative democracy, and with both Thucydides and Aristotle providing arguments for democratic deliberation enabling knowledge-based choices more effectively than other regimes, one might expect to see historians compare such claims with historical practice (as Thucydides himself does, as arguably he does not endorse Athenagoras' claim, but narrates the Sicilian Expedition as a rebuttal of it).

Moses Finley used Athenian democracy as an example that told against the post-war technocratic visions of minimal participatory democracy, but the case for democratic knowledge has a cynical counterpart.<sup>19</sup> This debate has not been confined to the pages of academic political theory, but has been incorporated into political discourse, so that suggesting that someone is deploying 'expertise' has become a means of undermining the

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the Virtue of the Multitude', *Political Theory*, 41/2 (2013), pp. 175-202 and M.S. Lane, 'Claims to Rule: The Case of the Multitude', in M. Deslauriers and P. Destrée (edd.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Politics* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 247-74; see below for the importance of this argument for theorists of deliberative democracy.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. G.M. Mara, *The Civic Conversations of Thucydides and Plato: Classical Political Philosophy and the Limits of Democracy* (Albany, 2008), pp. 87-142, cf. G.M. Mara, 'After Virtue, Autonomy: Jurgen Habermas and Greek Political Theory', *Journal of Politics*, 47/4 (1985), pp. 1036-61.

<sup>18</sup> J. Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton, NJ, 2008), pp. 12-22, Ober, *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*, p. 294; Ober uses the term 'epistemic democracy' to describe the possible processes of democracy, rather than its legitimation.

<sup>19</sup> M.I. Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (London, 1973), pp. 3-37. Two major explorations of epistemic democracy incorporate examples from classical Greek texts: D.M. Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton, N.J. ;Oxford, 2008), pp. 206-22, H. Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton, 2013), pp. 53-64.

authority with which they speak. ‘Britain has had enough of experts,’ said Michael Gove in an interview just prior to the EU referendum in June 2016.<sup>20</sup> Gove’s rejection of the role of expertise was anticipated by Jürgen Habermas in a collection of essays on problems of democracy, *The Lure of Technocracy*.<sup>21</sup> Habermas was addressing the various financial crises of the Eurozone, and the conflict between political authority and the technical expertise of international institutions that this became, and identified rejection of technocracy as a problem for broad acceptance of the European project. But Plato’s depiction of Protagoras’ response to Socrates’ question on the teaching of virtue and political skill (Plato *Protagoras* 319a-328d) provides an ancient analogy for this concern.<sup>22</sup>

The uses for examples from classical Athenian democracy continue to develop, as the recent advocacy for sortition shows. While Fuller’s evocation of an idealised Athens draws on the cultural authority of classical Greece, she, like Hennig and Van Reybrouck, is more interested in the practices of direct democracy and its possibilities, than in the details of the Athenian tradition. The risk is that considering Athenian practice outside the careful contextualisation that Cartledge and Mitchell provide makes it impossible to evaluate the historical success of Athenian political procedures. The same holds true for the evaluation of Athenian political thought, such as the analysis of the problem of political knowledge and technical expertise provided by its contemporary critics; and, following Hanink, there is a need for an awareness of the way our reading of these sources has been shaped by the construction of classicism and Philhellenism. The extent to which Athenian practice and theory can provide informative analogies with contemporary situations and concerns may become more questionable when the context in which they developed is considered, although their perception of democracy as a fragile and contested phenomenon rather than the culmination of human progress has a new relevance. It may be that rather than framing our enquiry as the story of democracy’s beginning, or as a life, we may learn more from understanding the causes of its faltering in fourth-century Athens, its limitations in the Hellenistic world, and the constraints under which it was regenerated in its newer form in the modern world. Athenian democracy and its ancient theorists still have much to teach us.

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Mance, ‘Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove’, *Financial Times* 3/6/2016.

<sup>21</sup> J. Habermas, *The Lure of Technocracy*, trans. C. Cronin (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 3-28.

<sup>22</sup> P.A. Cartledge, *Democracy: A Life* (Oxford, 2016), p. 96, Mitchell, *Democracy’s Beginning*, p. 64.

