How To Do Things With – Popular or Public – Ancient Greek History*
by *Paul Cartledge***

Abstract

Starting on an autobiographical note, examining how in the past 40 years he tried to make ancient Greek culture accessible in all its respects, the author examines the different ways in which Greek history and civilization can be popularized. The question that guided him has always been: how does a professional historian popularize his/her work, or how should one write popular history that is scientifically based? There are different kinds of audience that an historian can address, and it is up to him/her to make the choice of level. Using examples from popular books on Greek history written in English, the author shows how it is possible to do *haute vulgarisation* using one's knowledge of primary sources and adopting a more colloquial language, without burdening the text with footnotes and a long bibliography – thus aiming at the "educated general reader". The distinction between "academic" and "popular" is not so neat; the real distinctions are between the historian and the historical novelist as well as between history and memory. More specifically, the author shows how his own expertise in Spartan history enabled him to debunk the opposition between (Greek) liberty and (Persian) slavery which informs so many representations of Sparta, such as the movie *300*. Moreover, by examining ancient democracy and better knowing its functioning we can get insights for the current crisis of democracy. Finally, the audience for high level popularization is much wider than what authors, and even publishing houses, imagine when they start a new project.

Keywords: Greek history, Popularization, Democracy, Sparta, Theory of historiography.

1. Autobiographical Preface

Over the years – and especially since the publication of my little *Aristophanes* book in 1990 (Cartledge, 1990) – I have written on pretty much every aspect of ancient Greek history for wide/popular audiences (to be defined further below): economics, politics, society, theatre, war, diplomacy, sex/gender – even philosophy (*Democritus and Atomistic Politics*, a booklet of 50 pages; my Oxford undergraduate BA degree was in philosophy, both ancient and modern, as well as ancient Greek and Roman history). I co-edited and wrote about half of *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece* (Cartledge, 1998), which won the Criticos Prize. I have also lectured and written before on *vulgarisation*/popularization (also to be defined below).

I don't tweet or use Facebook, but I do write blogs from time to time, including several related to Democracy (cited below), and I have also been involved with broadcast media since the 1990s. I have done many podcast interviews. I was a – very minor – consultant for the blockbuster movie *300* (more below). I have been interviewed as a "talking head" for many television historical documentaries, both British and American. My first and only TV venture on the editorial side was a 6-part series made by Atlantic Productions of London for PBS, USA: *The Greeks: Crucible of Civilisation*, for which I wrote the accompanying book of the same title. I have been a participant in almost twenty shows of Melvyn Bragg's weekly *In Our Time* BBC radio series, which are both archived accessibly online and available worldwide as podcasts.

I suppose the (most) obvious choices for special focus here would be 1. Sparta (in popular reception *versus* the historical actuality), as I have specialised in the history and archaeology of Sparta since the late 1960s; and 2. Democracy (within the context of the relationship between political thought and practice, both ancient and modern), since I have spent the best part of the last decade and more being principally preoccupied with researching and commenting on this, both as an ancient phenomenon and as a current practice.

2. Public History, Popular History, the People's History?

The problematic I have been posed is: how does a professional historian popularize his/her work, or how does/should one write popular history that is scientifically based? "Popular", like "public" and "People" are all derived from Latin *populus*, and like *populus* they are only misleadingly or even deceptively all-inclusive. Put differently, there are many different "publics" and "people" out there for historians potentially to (want to)

address. And the nature of the target(ed) public(s) will be at least partly determined by the historian's aims. Fortunately, in one way, unfortunately in another, there is now a massive "literature" on this general topic of popular/public/People's history – fortunately, because it means the issues have been refined and clarified, and often very well discussed and illuminated; unfortunately, because it is also clear that the very topic is itself fraught with intrinsic ambiguities and controversies, even sometimes contradictions. For the sake of this short article and of space, I shall confine my illustrations and discussions to Anglo-American literature, but I am perfectly aware that this is very much not a purely Anglo-Saxon preoccupation or phenomenon (Jensen, 2009 appends a very usable list of some 40 items to his chapter, in Danish and German, but not French, as well as English and American).

Thus I began a recently published review (for the non-Classical, US-based *Journal of Military History*), of a book on ancient Sparta as it happens, as follows: «Philip Matyszak is a prolific author of books falling into the category that the French call – positively – *haute vulgarisation*: that is, books based on a first-hand scholarly familiarity with the primary sources, in his case texts in ancient Greek and Latin, but books written for "general" readers and unencumbered with learned apparatus (here there are no footnotes or endnotes, and a very minimalist bibliography of just a dozen items)» (Cartledge, 2019, p. 553). I quote that partly because that's exactly the sort of "trade" or "academic/trade" books that I myself aim to write, though of course I would add to the source database the material-cultural evidence of archaeology and art history. I would also note that "haute" is prefixed to "vulgarisation" in order to evade the accusation of what in Anglo-American English is slighted as "dumbing down". Roman court poet Horace notoriously wrote «I hate the *profanum vulgus*» (common-as-dirt mob), and the New Testament Christian Gospel according to St Matthew contains a phrase «casting pearls before swine» that has usually been taken in the same, pejorative sense. So, if one is going to vulgarise – i.e., write "popular" or "public" or "People's" history – one must at least claim to be doing so in an elevated way! And the French often do this exceptionally brilliantly.

In this more theoretical portion of the essay I shall consider first the issue of target audiences and of (what kind of) readers are envisaged, then that of aims/objectives. I shall be using the writings – and interviews – of three British contemporary historians above all: David Cannadine (1998; 2002; 2004), Richard J. Evans (1998), and Ludmilla Jordanova (2000; 2006; 2015). Being a historian myself (a historian who happens to specialize in the study of the ancient Greek world, rather than an "ancient Greek historian"), I must begin by putting my own humble contribution within the broader context of historiographical trends altogether visible over the past 30 or so years.

Briefly, from the late 1980s and into the 1990s and beyond there was something of an existential, epistemological crisis within the historical profession. The "postmodernist" and/or "poststructuralist turn" had engendered a scepticism and hyper-relativism as regards not just the desirability but the very possibility of attaining *truth* in historiography. Actually, there was nothing new under the sun about the basic issue as such – Herodotus had sought not "truth" (*aletheia*, literally "not-forgetting"), but "unerringness" (*atrekeia*), while his major successor Thucydides had privileged the goal of "accuracy" (*akribeia*). For them, by the way, *historia* meant "research" or "enquiry" rather than the published results of such intellectual investigation. What was new in the 1980s and 1990s was the form the debate took – often conducted within the context of the "linguistic turn" that had affected philosophy, original creative literature and other humanistic disciplines, and indeed even some science writing. And the – to me extraordinary and outlandish – claim then being made was that, since *truth* was not on offer, it was okay to – as it were – make it all up, let it all hang out, let a thousand flowers bloom: "history" for the post-modernist/-structuralist was whatever "the historian" chose to make (of) it. No wonder we historians are now accused of paving the way for "fake news" cyberwarfare on the internet. Sigh …

I had launched my own academic book-writing career with publication in 1979 of the book of my doctoral thesis on early Spartan archaeology and history (Oxford, 1975: supervised by John Boardman), but I had been reflecting on deep historiographical issues, especially viewed through a marxist lens, since the late 1960s. Historiography as such had always appealed to me, and I included a good deal of it in my first book. I therefore followed the above debate very closely and was delighted to read Richard J. Evans's *In Defence of History* when it first came out in 1998. Of course, he was defending only his own version of what he took "history" to be, and to be about, and to be for, but nevertheless his text was manna to my ears. Like him, I then and still am *totally* committed to the view that the historian's primary task is to understand and ideally also to explain the or a past. Or rather – borrowing here from a famous insight of the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, to the effect that all history is contemporary history – a past that is meaningful and important to one's contemporary audience or audiences.

Who are these audiences – or who should they be? There is a standard book publisher's "pitch": this book is written for the *educated general reader*. Nowadays of course there are all sorts of ways and modes and mediums – and venues – in which one can "read" (or consume) a book. An author is unable to control that aspect of the exchange. For my readers, I tend to assume – that is, to have in mind as I write – people

(of all races, creeds, genders, etc.) who are either currently studying for a degree at a university or have been to a university and are therefore (well or well enough) educated and in their late teens at least – though I do, astonishingly, quite often receive emails from high school pupils, claiming (?) to have read one or more of my books before then stinging me with a cheeky request to answer a slew of questions for their "special project". I sometimes even supply answers. My target readers are therefore by definition not only nor even foremost my fellow-ancient historians, nor people who have done a university degree in Classics or Ancient History. I suspect this is a cause of some distress, even contempt, among at least some of my professional ancient historian colleagues.

What are or should be the aims and objectives of the popular/public/ People's historian? I think the last category should be quite sharply distinguished from the other two. If you are a self-defined "People's historian", I take it that means focusing quite closely on the mass of the "ordinary" people, as opposed to the doings and thinking of a tiny, unrepresentative – if also very often politically and culturally dominant – elite. (A side-note on that use of "culturally": when twenty years ago David Cannadine asked me to lecture and write on "Social History" for his *What is History Now?* collective update of E. H. Carr's 1961 lecture-based *What is History?* (Cannadine, 2002), I pointed out that "social" history was in something of a declining position as compared to the upcoming "cultural" history – that would be even more true now than it was then). I would not call myself a "People's historian". If on the other hand you are a "public" historian, then – a fortiori – you are some sort of public intellectual, and the public intellectual's role and task, as I see it, is to intervene critically in public affairs, in matters of public policy, and on issues that affect the or a general public. From this point of view it makes good sense to claim forcefully, as has Ludmilla Jordanova, that «History is, through and through, a value-laden, political activity» (Jordanova, 2000, p. 20). That is indeed how I would categorise much of my own writing, which is also "popular", since it is aimed at the sort of wide public I have described above. This does, however, pose a further problem: as Patrick Boucheron of the "College de France" has recently written (in a French daily national newspaper, *Le monde*, 21-22 July 2019), «how are we today to reconcile this historian's necessity of engagement with the obligation of methodological neutrality?». See further below.

As for the aims/objectives of the "popular" historian, I agree with David Cannadine that the polarity of "academic" and "popular" can be merely apparent and a false dichotomy. But here it may be useful to distinguish between the historian and the historical novelist. In a Royal Historical Society "Public History Workshop", held at the "Institute for Historical Research" in London in October 2015, Jordanova issued *A Provocation.*

After observing that «public history» was a «distinctly tricky» term, she began her defence of a very inclusive view of what it could and should be taken to mean by asserting – against the counter-claim of Ferguson – «I consider historical fiction to be a major form of public history» (Jordanova, 2015). I too value historical fiction; like Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), more than once I have been led by a novel into a deep and instructive line of thinking. But I do not myself consider historical novels to be history proper. For two main reasons: first, historical novelists may legitimately "make it up", that is invent from whole cloth – that is one of the meanings of "fiction" after all; second, historical novelists may not be, need not be, and should not be held to account for what they write – as historians not only may and should but must be. I love Mary Renault's novels of ancient Greece, above all *The Last of the Wine* (1956), which I read first when a schoolboy of 16 and which I regularly re-read, for instruction as well as pleasure. But oh dear when she wrote *The Nature of Alexander* (1975), as a would-be serious history book to complement and justify her brilliant trilogy of Alexander novels, it was frankly a bit of a disaster, the worst sort of non-objective, non-scientific, intuitive special pleading.

I do agree, though, with Jordanova's use above of "value-laden". Behind that term lies the rise since the 1960s of variously social-scientific kinds of historiography that stress quantification and supposedly scientific objectivity, rather as political "science" is sometimes self-consciously distinguished from more qualitative political theory or history of political thought. Max Weber, a pioneer sociologist and social historian as well as theoretical historiographer, has to take a lot of the blame for claiming that his work and others' work in the same vein could and should be, and was, *wertfrei* ("value-free"!). I also agree with Evans that we historians must distinguish sharply between history and memory (how people, selectively, remember the past). See further the section on Sparta and discussion of the "Spartan mirage" below.

On the other hand, Weber – along with March Bloch and Lucien Febvre, co-founders of the so-called "*Annales* school" of historiography – were first and foremost comparativists, arguing that systematic comparison is a golden ticket to understanding and explaining historically one culture or society or one cultural, social or whatever phenomenon through the application of relevant tests of similarity – and difference. I have essayed such an approach many times myself, for example in my attempt in 1985 to explain what it was about Sparta and Spartan society that accounted for the fact that, whereas the *douloi* (unfree) of other Greek cities rarely if ever revolted (in the full, collective, let alone political) sense during the Archaic and Classical periods (*c.* 700-300 BCE), the *douloi* of Sparta did so on several occasions, and on one of them revolted into full, political

freedom as the founding citizens (*politai*) of a new Greek *polis* (at first called Ithome, then Messene) (Cartledge, 1985). Of course, a lot depended on the precise nuances of *douloi*, the most general of the dozen or so Greek words for unfree persons, but comparative evidence from the Old South of the (dis)United States, from the British Caribbean and from Brazil, and the way those slave societies had been analysed by local specialists, did, I argued, throw swathes of new interpretative light on this fundamentally important, and value-laden to a high degree, issue of ancient Greek history. And not only ancient Greek history – see the next section.

3. Sparta

The ancient *polis* (city-state, citizen-state, city) of Sparta (officially *Lakedaimon*) was one of the two or three or perhaps four most powerful and influential states in the ancient Greek world – Hellas – that consisted of up to 1000 separate political entities at any one time between *c*. 600 and 300 BCE, stretching from what is today south-east Spain to the northeast corner of the Black Sea. The other three cities are Athens, Syracuse and Thebes, all of which are included in my short "popular" book *Ancient Greece: A History in Eleven Cities* (Cartledge, 2009), reissued as *Ancient Greece: A Very Short Introduction* in 2011. Alexander the Great's conquests between 334 and 323 BCE extended Hellenism as far east as Pakistan and Afghanistan, besides leaving as one of his main legacies the city of Alexandria in Egypt (also included in my *Ancient Greece*). Sparta has not, however, been handed down in history straightforwardly: the dominant tradition is indeed so subjective and unreliable, partly but not only because it is the work almost entirely of non-Spartans, that in the 1930s the French Classical scholar F. Ollier coined the phrase «le mirage spartiate» to characterize the Spartan tradition, legacy or idea. A "mirage" suggests, rightly, both totally false/unreal and more or less distorted perceptions.

One of Sparta's most obvious legacies, at least to Anglophones, is the very adjective or epithet "spartan", meaning tough, austere, self-denying. Usually the word is more or less positive and complimentary, but the Hyatt Regency hotel chain once had a bit of fun at the expense of the ancient Spartans by saying that they were *too* Spartan: had they enjoyed better overnight accommodation, such as the Hyatt chain afforded, they'd have slept better – and not lost the decisive battle of Leuctra in 371 BCE! But Sparta has actually contributed two more words to English. One of these is mainly descriptive: "laconic" as applied to speech means clipped, minimalist, military-style utterance. The third and last Sparta-derived English word is both far less commonly used in everyday parlance and much more uncomfortably negative: "helot", meaning a member of an

economically and politically subordinated and exploited group or class. That is an englishing of the Greek word *heilotes*, meaning at bottom "captive". It is these *heilotai* whom the Greeks including the Spartans themselves labelled *douloi*, though they were *douloi* of a very different kind from the *douloi* of say Athens, among other reasons because the Helots too were themselves Greeks and not "barbarian" foreigners. Above all, though, it is the Helots who gave and give Sparta and Spartan polity and society their peculiar cast – a fact that complicates, invalidates or possibly renders unviable any further attempt to represent the ancient Spartans and their achievements in a wholly positive light.

That, however, my general book *The Spartans* (Cartledge, 2004) of course did not seek to do. I have been described as a "*Laconophile*" (Sparta-lover), and in some ways I am; and I am proud to be an honorary citizen of modern Sparta. But I should not have liked to be a citizen of ancient Sparta, as I am far from being an uncritical admirer of all things Spartan, as the ancient "laconizers" were and their modern acolytes (below) are today. Since 1967 I have studied the ancient Spartans intensively – archaeologically, comparatively, but above all scientifically, dispassionately. My general book was originally published in 2002 by Macmillan in the UK to accompany a 4-part British TV series fronted brilliantly by popular historian *par excellence* Bettany Hughes (see Hughes, 2017). It was intended to bring the fruits of my academic research to a general-readership audience in an accessible but critical way. It was reissued and indeed restyled in 2004 as a Vintage Books (New York) paperback, with a grandiloquent subtitle: *The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece, from Utopia to Crisis and Collapse*!

The book is some 300 pages long. It is divided both chronologically and thematically into three parts, following a longish scene-setting introduction. It goes back in time or myth as far as Homer – Helen before she became Helen of Troy was Helen of Sparta – and continues through all antiquity and beyond, right down to the issues of legacy and reception that preoccupy us still. It sets out to try to answer three main questions: first, how did Sparta come to be what it was, possibly the largest – in territory – *polis* of the ancient Greek world, and for many centuries the – or one of the – most powerful? Second, what made Sparta special – in some key regards (status of women, nature of the workforce, cultural profile) unique? And, third, what is, and what should be its legacy or legacies – how should we today reckon or evaluate Sparta's contribution to the sum of human happiness or flourishing? My answer to the last, in some ways the most important question of all, especially for a popular book, was inevitably: it's complicated – a judgment I try to explicate a little further below. But I should preface the following discussion by saying that among

those who make study of Sparta their profession one of the main divisive issues is how (far) they consider Sparta to be – or not be – a "typical" or "normal" ancient Greek *polis*. How far it was or should be considered admirable or even imitable – that's a quite separate, ideological question.

I mentioned above that I have taken part in many episodes of the *In Our Time* series of programmes put out live – or "as live" – by BBC Radio 4. I have also taken occasional part in a BBC World Service equivalent, though it is not done live or as live, which is called *The Forum*. *In Our Time* is, I know, "received" by several millions. Popular reception of *The Forum* may be as large, or larger, given that it is aired worldwide and repeated. On July 25th 2019, *The Forum* as first aired was devoted to the ancient Spartans: https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3csyp50.

The programme is (only) about 40 minutes long, and the expert academic discussants were Professors Paul Rahe (Hillsdale College, USA), Christy Constantakopoulou (Birkbeck College, University of London) and Prof. Angie Hobbs (Sheffield University, UK), moderated by Bridget Kendall (Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge, a distinguished ex-foreign correspondent of the BBC). Rahe is an acknowledged international world authority on the Spartans, Constantakopoulou a highly reputed historian of ancient Greece, and Hobbs both an expert on ancient Greek philosophy (above all, Plato) and a professor for the public understanding of philosophy.

I thought the programme was pretty good of its kind, given the inevitable restrictions imposed by time limits and the constraints of extempore studio utterance; but there were errors and slips galore of both omission and commission – some probably mainly due to the editing down of the original recording to fit a 40-minute slot, others probably not.

Errors of omission that I noted included: no mention of the "Spartan mirage" (the systematic source-problem, ancient and modern); no mention by name of such fundamental sources as Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle; nothing whatsoever on the (both Laconian and Messenian) *Perioikoi*, the free but disfranchised population of the Spartan state intermediate between Spartans and Helots; nothing on the Persian empire's key role in Sparta's victory in the Atheno-Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE); no mention of Sparta's annual declaration of war upon the Helots, and merely a bare mention that the Helots had a family life; no distinction drawn between Laconian and Messenian Helots; and no mention of Leonidas's famous but now grossly abused *molon labe* (see below).

Errors of commission: the English adjective "laconic" is not derived from *Laconia*, and *Lakedaimonia* is post-classical; *homoioi* does not mean "Equals" (but Similars or Peers); not all (full citizen) Spartans were equal to each other (there were rich and poor, aristocrats and non-aristocrats,

and royal and non-royal aristocrats); Spartans did not directly kill as opposed to expose infants (they too exposed them – as did the Athenians, for example – but to their certain death, which is not quite the same); adult Spartan males did not live in barracks most of their adult lives; Spartans did not believe in or act on a belief in "racial purity" ("racist eugenics" is a modern, largely Nazi invention); the Persian Empire extended much further west than "the Aegean" (to Egypt and Cyrenaica in Africa, and Macedonia in mainland Greece); and the Spartans' allies at Thermopylae did not consist of just the 300 (actually 301) Spartans and 700 Plataeans.

Finally, another – controversial – point of terminology, not a clear case of error: Prof. Constantakopoulou stated that Sparta was an "oligarchy", which she spelled out as meaning "the rule of the Few", only in the sense that all the (relatively and absolutely shrinking few) Spartans ruled over all the other inhabitants of the Spartan state (Helots and the unmentioned *Perioikoi*), and she reiterated that in politics the Spartans experienced and fostered equality in some (unspecified) senses. But then so did all Athenian citizens rule over all other inhabitants in their – democratic – state... Aristotle in his *Politics* responds to what was clearly a lively and current debate over how best to classify the Spartan *politeia* in terms of the by then standard *oligarchia* versus *demokratia* terminology. For some witnesses, and this is telling, it was the Spartans' *kosmos*, their way of life more generally in terms of communal and communitarian living (common education, common messes) that made them in a way "democratic". He cites no one who defends or advocates for Sparta as "democratic" in a strictly political sense anything like Athens's or other Greek cities' *demokratia*. (For the record, my view is that Sparta – exceptional in this as in so many other ways – was a funny kind of *oligarchia*. I have argued this at length elsewhere, for example in Cartledge, 2001.)

You might consider this to be a relatively trivial example of the strengths and dangers posed by and to popular reception when academics are invited to address very wide, nonspecialist audiences. But some of us, and not only us Sparta-specialists, think quite a lot hangs on getting ancient Sparta right, especially so far as issues of human liberty and human community are concerned.

4. Sparta on Film

The mass-est of "mass" media, once upon a pre-internet time, was the silver screen, the movie house, the cinema. Even still today, films/movies create an unparalleled buzz, especially in our era of (oxymoron) celebrity culture. So it was with the re-make of *The Three Hundred Spartans* (1962), a

classic "epic", as *300*, directed by Zack Snyder in 2007. The subject was the August 480 BCE Battle of Thermopylae, fought between 6-7000 defending Greeks under King Leonidas of Sparta and over 200,000 Persian invaders under Xerxes, which the Persian won. The original movie had been shot "naturalistically" on location actually on the site of the battle, though the topography has changed a lot since antiquity, using a cast of thousands drawn from the Greek army. Given its date and its (originally Polish) director, Rudolf Mate, it was unsurprisingly a rather crudely polarized Cold War movie: for the Persians read the Soviets, for the Spartans and other Greek resisters, read "the West" and its values – freedom *versus* slavery. And the fact that the West as it were lost was obscured by the heroic manner in which it did so, and the moral superiority of the cause for which the losers were fighting. But its production values were of the highest: great cinematography, great battle scenes, great cameos from leading Greek stage actresses, and a score by Manos Hadjidakis to cap it all off.

300, alas, was even cruder, ideologically speaking, if hugely more advanced (blue-screen, digital) technically speaking. So ideologically crude was it in fact that the official Iranian delegation to the United Nations lodged a formal complaint – as if the movie script had been written by a post-9/11 team commanded by US President George W. Bush himself. Sadly, the movie was and perhaps still is loved by members of the US Marines – and others with a militaristic and perhaps also ethnocentric bent. Even more sadly, to me, one phrase taken from the epic conflict between the Spartans and the Persians at the Thermopylae pass has acquired even more traction lately. According to one late source – not the near-contemporary Herodotus – Spartan king Leonidas, when demanded by Xerxes to surrender himself and his weapons, replied with a typically laconic, two-word note of defiant rejection: *molon labe*, short for "come and get 'em yourself, mate". Those two words now serve as the slogan for unreconstructed American gun-club members, passionate defenders to a man and a woman of a wildly anachronistic reading of the Second Amendment to the US Constitution. As novelist William Faulkner wrote, the past isn't dead – it isn't even past.

The *300* movie has generated a huge amount of critical literature. None of it is perhaps quite as good as Greg Dening's *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*, a wide-ranging, theoretically sophisticated study of "The Mutiny on the *Bounty*", which includes acute analysis of no fewer than five Mutiny-related movies (Dening, 1992). I agree with him too that «history is something we make rather than something we learn» (ivi, p. 366). But the best of the *300* criticism, from the historical point of view, I believe to be an article published on *spiked-online* by three Syracuse University academics: https://

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www.spiked-online.com/2007/10/03/300-the-use-and-abuse-of-greek-history/. I shall not repeat their arguments here. What does concern me now is the root factuality of both *300* and its 1962 forerunner as regards its basic polarized ideological premise of freedom *versus* slavery.

It is perfectly true that the ancient Greeks, and especially democratic Greeks, prized freedom or liberty, both individual-personal and collective-social, very highly indeed. Indeed, it could well be argued to be a core Hellenic value, lying behind both economic independence and political empowerment. But it was also divisible and quantifiable, in practice as well as theory. All free Greeks were by definition more free than unfree Greeks and non-Greeks, whether serfs or outright slaves. But free Greek males were more free than free Greek females. Rich free Greek males were more free than poor free Greek males. Rich free Greek male citizens were the freest of all, freer than their poor male and female fellow-citizens, and freer than all non-citizens, whether legally free or unfree. Moreover, when freedom was construed as political independence – freedom from subjection by or even just subordination to a foreign Greek or non-Greek power – one's own such freedom was considered perfectly compatible with denying, infringing or outright suppressing the freedom of another Greek or non-Greek community. Hence Spartan – and Athenian (and Theban and Macedonian) – imperialism.

If we apply those nostrums and principles to Sparta, we find that internally the freest inhabitants of all were the most powerful (richest and most aristocratic) of the full Spartan adult male citizens, though female adult Spartans were – by the standards of the rest of Greece, especially democratic Athens – also relatively free, at least in social and economic if not political terms. But that freedom was bought and maintained at a simply vast cost: the almost total *lack* of freedom of the Helots – who as noted above were themselves Greeks. Helots lived under a perpetual threat of instant death, for which the Spartans could not be held to account legally as polluted murderers since they annually and ritually declared the Helots to be "enemies of state". As I wrote in *The Spartans*, «these Helots are the single most important human fact about ancient Sparta» (Cartledge, 2004, p. 29). By which I meant that it was they who most decisively shaped the entire Spartan *kosmos* or way of life. One ancient, rabidly pro-Spartan source wrote that in Sparta you would find both the most free people in Greece – and the most *un*free or enslaved. So, when filmmakers, novelists, and popular historians who should know better hail the Battle of Thermopylae (actually a defeat, but it did lead on to victory later) as a triumph for freedom, I say "Remember the Helots". The Spartan "mirage", all smoke and mirrors, is alive and kicking – but it must be deconstructed and above all resisted, by popular including public historians not least. For it matters very much

indeed, in a peculiarly sensitive case like this, that we – popular as well as academic historians – get the facts straight and right.

5. Democracy

(What follows is a condensed and rewritten version of a summary account designed to introduce and provoke a "symposium" on my book *Democracy: A Life* (Cartledge, 2018), due to appear in the Italian journal "Philosophy & Public Issues".)

My *Democracy: A Life* was originally published by Oxford University Press in March/April 2016. Coincidentally – in the sense that the timing of publication had not been specifically so targeted – that fell in the middle of two crucial democratic campaigns: the EU "Brexit" referendum campaign in my own country (held on June 23, 2016), and the US Presidential campaign. To accompany and help publicise the book, I engaged in a raft of associated publicity activities: spots on radio and tv (local as well as national), blogs, online interviews, podcasts, book festival and bookshop presentations; the usual slew – except that, as mentioned, I do not myself use "social media" (Facebook, Twitter, the like) and so relied on the kindness of friends who do to spread the word (not only of the book's existence but also of the associated public events). The book was itself based on a four-year (2009-13) series of 24 annual lectures delivered to Cambridge University undergraduates in their final year reading for either the Classical or the Historical Tripos degree. The pedagogical inspiration and slant were for me crucial (cf. Cannadine, Keating, Shaeldon, 2011).

Almost exactly two years after its first publication *Democracy: A Life* was reissued by Oxford University Press, the main text unchanged barring a few small corrections but complemented and I hope enhanced with a new, 3-page *Afterword* commenting on the most extraordinary period for democracy in my personal experience: one that encompassed not only the "Brexit" referendum (over 33 million voters) but also the US Presidential election (a popular vote registered by some 129 millions), the French Presidential election of 2017 and the General Election called by then UK Prime Minister Theresa May in June 2017. The US and French Presidential elections were held routinely as normal parts of those countries' democratic procedures, but the "populist" dimension to both was quite exceptional – and exceptionally disturbing for the future of normal, representative, party-political democracy. The UK Brexit referendum was quite abnormal in every way; and its direct consequence, the 2017 General Election, was called extraordinarily, out of normal sequence, and left the (Conservative Party) Government with a "hung" parliament (no overall working

majority). UK politics remain in a dreadful state of mess and uproar as I write (August 2019).

Democracy – in the shape of our Western, indirect, representative, parliamentary versions of democracy – is surely in crisis. In the ancient Greek sense of *krisis* – a moment of decision. The crisis has several key aspects, not least the rise of what is – far too vaguely and emotively – labelled "populism", in fact all too often a toxic compound of anti-elitism, nationalism, and racism. One of the most key aspects of the crisis, or so it seems to me from a political-theoretical as well as pragmatic viewpoint, is the relationship between (e.g.) the UK's normal, that is representative, mode of doing democracy, on one hand, and the quite recent and frequent resort to the referendum, on the other. The question that we – or most of us – have yet to resolve is whether electoral, parliamentary democracy and direct democracy are oil and water, chalk and cheese, even fire and ice – or are they rather, or can they be made, somehow compatible, even complementary? Already during the botched campaign for the 2016 UK "Brexit" Referendum I tried to sound some notes of due caution[1]:

The referendum or plebiscite may on the surface seem to be a mode of political decision-making that offers a useful solution to deep-seated, intractable problems of the normal, representative mode. But is it? Can it be? The latter mode has been developed, often painfully, since the later 17th century in Europe, and takes variant forms – including the UK's mixed constitution (an odd combination of a "constitutional" monarchy with an elected lower chamber and an unelected upper chamber, the House of Lords). The referendum mode, at least when it is misunderstood and mismanaged as it conspicuously was in the UK in 2016, complicates or even threatens to destroy our normal mode. It cannot simply be used as an add-on or get-out-of-jail card.

Historically, (versions of) *direct* democracy are or rather were the normal mode, not of Us, but of the Ancient Greeks – or some of them – who of course invented it. So I turn next to summarise and comment upon my aims and objectives in writing my book.

6. *Demokratia* and/versus Democracy

1. Being one of those historians who believe, with Benedetto Croce, that

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[1] http://www.historyandpolicy.org/opinion-articles/articles/referendums-ancient-and-modern (April 26, 2016). For my more or less immediate – July 25, 2016 – and disabused reaction/reflections to/on the Referendum, see my paper in *Eidolon*: https://eidolon.pub/brexitology-brexitography-7d644c389f4f. A later set of responses is here: https://adfamiliares.classicsforall.org.uk/paul-cartledge-chews-over-the-issues-involved-in-discussing-democracy-ancient-vs-modern/.

all history is contemporary history (see above), I am – and have as long as I can remember always been – concerned with "how to do things with history". This modified, ideally nonvicious presentism is the concern underlying and informing my long-run history of democracy both "ancient" and "modern". Or rather, ancient (*c.* 500-300 BCE) as compared/contrasted with its variously post-ancient, early-modern, modern and contemporary forms and varieties.

2. My *Democracy: A Life* had and has *three* main objectives:

a) try to describe and explain how and why *demokratia* – both the word and the thing (or rather things) – came into being during the 6th and 5th centuries BCE in ancient Hellas. I started therefore with and from terminology: sociolinguistics and etymology. The English word "democracy" and its contemporary equivalents (often simply a loan-word in other contemporary languages) mean something very different from the *kratos* of the ancient Greek *demos*. Nor was ancient Greek *demokratia* itself unambiguous or unambivalent. *Kratos* meant might, power, strength unambiguously enough, but *demos* could be construed in several ways: village (ward, or parish, or district, in political terms), the People in the sense of the entirety of a citizen body of a *polis* or citizen-state, and/or … the majority/mass of such a citizen body, i.e., the poor majority. So, for the interpretation of *demokratia*, both theoretical and practical, an awful lot depended on one's point of view, and that in turn – if Aristotle is to be trusted (as I believe he is here) – depended essentially and chiefly on one's socioeconomic status. There had always been anti-democratic critics who thought negatively of *demokratia*, as a form of class rule; it may indeed have been they who gave *demokratia* its – to them, bad – name.

b) to try to describe and explain how versions of *demokratia* spread and developed in the ancient world, and how all then became diluted and eventually turned on their head between the 4th century BCE and the 6th century CE (when, in Christian Byzantine Constantinople, the word *demokratia* could be (ab)used to mean "riot", an extreme form of popular political *misbehaviour* or mob-rule). Two particular "moments" were deemed to be of the greatest significance to the – or at least my – history: the Hellenistic, and the Roman Republican. In the post-Classical, post-Alexander (the Great) Hellenic world of the eastern Mediterranean in the third and second centuries BCE the term *demokratia* retained all its currency of the 5th and 4th centuries. But did – to take the sharpest, Athenian example – *demokratia* in official Athenian parlance mean the same in the 270s or 170s as in the 370s? Unsurprisingly – not. But then the Athenian *demokratia* of the 370s was not by any means identical to that of the 470s (if indeed – scholarly opinions differ – one grants the existence of any sort of *demokratia* in the 470s, as I would myself insist). However, in my view

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demokratia in the 270s at Athens had already taken on the protean, less than scientifically exact, emotive tone and sense that "democracy" has acquired in our own times. It signified more independence (of a territorial monarch) and republican (non-monarchical) governance rather than full-blooded People Power.

The Roman Republic is a rather different issue. It was necessary for me to distinguish as sharply as I could in reasoned argument the Rome of Cicero from the Athens of Demosthenes, politically speaking, in terms of ideology and practice alike. There was no Latin equivalent of *demokratia*. But roughly half the Roman imperial world was in its upper layers Greek-speaking, and *demokratia* retained a currency, albeit in ever more grossly degenerate forms. I singled out two low points: the second-century CE *rhetor* Aelius Aristeides hymning the Roman empire as a «perfect democracy – under one man», and John Malalas's sixth-century branding of a riot in the Constantinopolitan hippodrome as an example of *demokratia*, meaning mob-rule.

c) My third and final main aim was to sketch in (very broad, even crude) outline how and why, beginning in the 17th century in England, then spreading to the US and France in the late 18th, and more widely in the 19th, popular republican politics was revived and in time given the old Greek-derived label of "democracy" – even though that old word was now being re-used and re-purposed in a new sense almost opposite to its original one: government *of* the people and ideally *for* the people, but emphatically *not* (despite Lincoln's immortal 1865 address at Gettysburg) *by* the People. "People" of course has always been a term of artfulness, never mere literal descriptiveness. What I consider to be the toxic, cancerous growth of "populism" today is a lineal ideological descendant of such grossly, abusively loose usage.

7. Conclusions

To conclude on a comparativist – and cautious – note. The past is a foreign country: they did things very differently there. I mean, They did digital democracy (voting with their hands and fingers in various ways) but not digital democracy in Our modern, IT sense, so no Facebook, no Cambridge Analytica, indeed no communication at a distance whatsoever – and no cyberwar (e.g., on reality: see Pomerantsev, 2019) of any kind in the ancient Greek world of Hellas. Hooray!

Moreover, in perhaps no other area of life is the comparison or rather contrast between then and now, between ancient Greece and the contemporary world, potentially more misleading and damaging than in the sphere of "politics" and "democracy". Aristotle's *Politika* meant

"Matters to do with (the peculiar ancient Greek state-form) the *polis*"
or citizen-state, not "politics" in any of our senses. *Demokratia*, as noted
above, could mean rule by the poor masses as well as government of/by/
for "the People". Sparta, not incidentally, did not do *demokratia* of any
sort at all.

On the other hand, I am not arguing that ancient direct democracy and
modern representative democracy are at all times and in every possible
way incompatible. There may even be a case for holding referendums at
a national as well as at the local level, depending on circumstances and
on local political history and culture. But caution – and precision – must
always be the watchwords. I have hated being proved right, but it has
frankly to be admitted that, following – and in the gloomy light of – the
outcome of that 2016 Referendum, some palpably serious damage has
been inflicted upon the already complicated and eclectically mixed UK
constitutional process.

Finally, but not at all least, to revert specifically to historiography.
I am currently reading, as a personal favour and for pleasure not as a
professional obligation, a long book manuscript by two exceptionally
insightful and committed colleagues, Professor Edith Hall and Dr. Henry
Stead. It is a work of what I would call "People's history", but it is also an
academic book and so not a work of popular history as defined above. It
is a remarkably original and detailed scholarly investigation of the reading
and readers, especially "working class" readers, of the Greek and Latin
Classics from the late 18th century to the present. The main overall lesson
that the authors draw from their researches is that today the audience
even of a fairly high-level academic/trade book, online podcast, or tv
documentary may be very much wider than initially thought by those who
conceived or produced them. This I think is also a lesson for all of us to
ponder who write popular (and public) history.

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