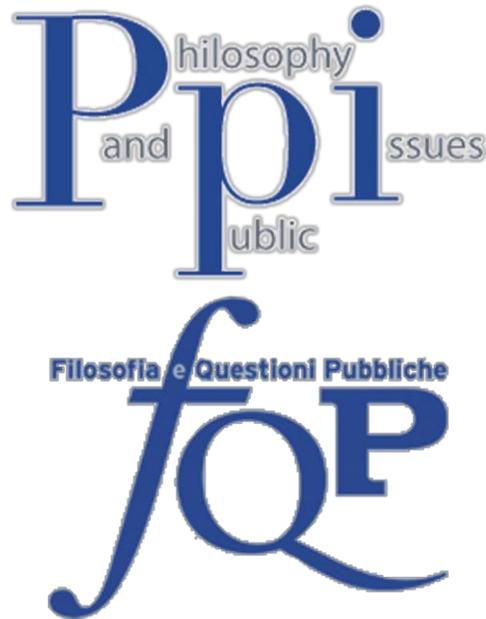


SYMPOSIUM  
THE LIFE, THE IMAGE AND THE PROBLEMS  
OF DEMOCRACY



WHAT DID 'DEMOCRACY'  
MEAN TO GREEK DEMOCRATS?

BY  
JOSIAH OBER

# What Did ‘Democracy’ Mean to Greek Democrats?

Josiah Ober

**P**aul Cartledge’s splendid book, *Democracy: A Life* invites us to think anew about the meaning of democracy, ancient and modern. He offers his readers a wealth of evidence and thoughtful assessment bearing on the question of what democracy meant to the Athenians and what it does and ought to mean today. He insists, rightly I think, that there is real value in returning to the Greeks, as a unique and valuable source of historical insight on the question of democracy’s meaning. Of course, democracy, since its *Greek* (as Cartledge stresses) invention, has been an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1955). There has never been any reasonable hope of coming to a settled agreement on a single, standard definition. But there is, by the same token, real value in considering the range of meanings that have been attached to the term, from antiquity to the present. Indeed, I take it that one of the aims of the book is to remind readers of meanings (notably those associated with social democracy and strict limits on the political privileges of elites) that seem now to be in danger of being lost. A second goal is to push

back against other meanings (notably right-wing populism) that seem now to be ascendant.

As one of Professor Cartledge's older American friends (full disclosure: old enough and close enough to be given the great honor of being the dedicand of this book), and as a fellow long-time laborer in the vineyards of democratic theory as well as Greek history, I offer two sharply contrasting definitions of the word. I follow these modern, resolutely American, conspicuously mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, definitions with a series of speculations about definitions of *demokratia* that might have been in play in classical Greece. I offer these to Paul Cartledge as a counter-invitation, in hopes that he will find them interesting and provocative enough to justify his own response. And I offer them as well to all other historians and political theorists who believe, with me, that it could be, at least occasionally, worthwhile to play a game of "speculative history of ideologies."

In 1943, in response to a request from the Writers' War Board to provide a definition of democracy, E.B. White – later to be the author of *Charlotte's Web* (1952) and co-author of the best manual on writing coherent English prose ever written (Strunk and White 1959, with many subsequent editions) – responded as follows:

"Surely the Board knows what democracy is. It is the line that forms on the right. It is the don't in don't shove. It is the hole in the stuffed shirt through which the sawdust slowly trickles; it is the dent in the high hat. Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half the people are right more than half the time. It is the feeling of privacy in the voting booths, the feeling of communion in the libraries, the feeling of vitality everywhere. Democracy is a letter to the editor. Democracy is the score at the beginning of the ninth. It is an idea which hasn't been disproved yet, a song the words of which have not gone bad. It's the mustard on the hot dog and the cream in the rationed coffee. Democracy is a request from a War Board, in the

middle of a morning in the middle of a war, wanting to know what democracy is (White 1943).

On the other side, we might evoke the austere, “realist’s view” of E.E. Schattschneider, a prominent student of American politics and stern critic of pluralism who served as President of the American Political Science Association in 1956-57.

Democracy is a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision-making process. (Schattschneider 1960: 141).

Resisting the temptation of delving into the form, context, normative implications, and intellectual and aesthetic associations of those sharply opposed modern definitions (noting the ways in which White recalls Walt Whitman and John Dewey; how Schattschneider follows in the wake of Joseph Schumpeter and anticipates William Riker), I turn to the main work of this short essay. That consists in posing a question provoked by thinking about the wide range of views on democracy that were in play when and where I grew up and as I developed my own life-long obsession with the power of the people: What would a representative sample of ordinary, presumptively patriotic, “middling” Athenian citizens in the age of Pericles or Demosthenes think if they had been confronted with White’s love letter and Schattschneider’s deflationary realism? Or, to put it a bit differently – and dodging cross-cultural confusions (editor? coffee? the public?) – what did Athenians *hear* when someone spoke the word *demokratia*?

Obviously there would never have been a single answer to that question. Even were we, counterfactually, able to ask them, and they willing to answer, the range of responses would surely be wide. But we can at least guess at some of the possible answers across that range. More ambitiously, if necessarily more speculatively, we might suggest which of those answers would have been more and which less common - which would be near the middle point of a normal distribution and which off on the left or right tail. And we might, finally, ask whether the answers from the Age of Pericles would be relevantly similar or wildly different from those from the Age of Demosthenes. Speculating about the range of things an Athenian citizen might hear in the word *demokratia*, and the relative frequency of hypothetical responses to a request for a definition might be seen as little more than a parlor game. But I suppose that it provides one way for Greek historians and political theorists to explore areas of agreement and disagreement concerning the background ideological conditions under which democracy was practiced in Athens and other Greek poleis.

Below is my own, idiosyncratic but not unconsidered, selection of ten possible answers that I suppose ordinary Athenians might have given when asked, in say 443 or 343 BCE, by some classical era equivalent of the 1943 US War Board, for a definition. I have ventured to guess where I imagine that Paul Cartledge and I are in agreement and where we would still need to “agree to disagree” – but perhaps I have got some or all of that wrong. I trust that he will let me and the other readers of this collection of essays know, either way.

“*Demokratia* is...”

1. A name for a manual of procedure: “The established rules by which we conduct lotteries for office, determine how votes are cast and counted, draw distinctions among jurisdictions, and so on.”

2. A normative and descriptive claim about political values: “Every citizen deserves to live with freedom, equality, and dignity – and so we do, so long as we preserve our *politeia*.”

3. An aspiration: “The ideal of good government at which we aim and sometimes seem to approach.”

4. A warning: “We the people are armed, unified, and dangerous – you anti-democrats had better not try anything. Or else.”

5. A war cry: “To arms, fellow citizens! The danger is clear and present. The enemy within must be defeated!”

6. A social boundary claim: “We, the earth-born natives, the free, the adult men, the masters, the great and good Demos, are the ones that matter around here – all others are ... well, ‘Other’.”

7. A slur turned into a defensive boast: “The elite sneer at our isonomic *politeia*, by calling it people-power: So be it– and so much the worse for them.”

8. A celebration of joint action: “We, all of us citizens together, have the capacity, collectively, to get things done.”

9. A gloating victory slogan: “We, the people, have won, you elites lost; now we will dominate and you must submit.”

10. An elegiac lament: “Something precious, fine, and gone. We once had it but, while we still like to pretend, we know it is lost. We cannot find our way back.”

This list hardly exhausts the answers I suppose might be given by a pro-democratic Athenian sometime in the classical era. And of course we could readily imagine a whole different set of responses from the anti-democratic opponents of the people’s rule. But the list is at least a place to start in seeking to specify areas of agreement and disagreement among historians of Greece and political theorists who have an abiding interest in the phenomenon of democracy in the ancient Greek world.

I think that Paul Cartledge and I, along with many (although certainly not all) students of Greek democracy are likely to say that #1 (manual of procedure) would be almost universally taken for granted. “Doing democracy” – as an assemblyman, a councilman, a juror, a lotteried office-holder, a demesman, an infantryman or rower in the fleet, among any number of other civic roles – was a regular part of the ordinary Athenian’s life.

As a result, I suppose that most Athenians had a pretty solid grasp of the manual – indeed the grasp was likely to have been solid enough that a citizen could readily afford to attach deeper and more value-laden meanings to the word democracy without losing touch with the practical aspects of democratic citizenship. So I think that Cartledge, like me, would expect that #2 (value claim) and #3 (aspiration) would be quite prevalent among the responses from our imagined survey of ordinary Athenian citizens. The emphasis on the three values of #2 might be somewhat different in the fifth and fourth centuries, the assumed frequency of the approach to the aspirational ideal of #3 might have varied, and some of the procedures referred to in #1 would be different. But the similarities across the classical era would, I suppose, outweigh the differences.

Moving into somewhat more tendentious terrain: Surely, at certain moments in the history of both the fifth and fourth centuries, #4 (warning) and #5 (war cry) were very much to the fore. “Democracy” as a warning to its opponents hovered in the near background, ready to be activated at the level of collective action, at least from the later fifth century through the later fourth. It was made explicit in the Oath of Demophantos and, some 75 years later, in the Eukrates law (Teegarden 2014). My own sense, however, is that democracy would have been a war cry, raised against “the enemy within” only rarely during much of the classical period. Paul Cartledge might, however, see #5 as rather more

central to the ordinary, business-as-usual connotations that most members of Athens' democratic community attached to the word.

Cartledge's work has often stressed #6 (boundary claim), which I agree will have operated in the background of the social attitudes of many Athenians. But I would contend that it was not at the forefront of the popular idea of *demokratia* as such. Cartledge seems committed to # 7 (slur to boast), as I am not. I suppose that, whatever the origins of the term and whenever it was first coined (on which, see, recently, Lambert 2019), by the time of Pericles, and a fortiori of Demosthenes, *demokratia* was enthusiastically embraced by the ordinary citizens. Had there been negative connotations in its first use (which I continue to doubt, for reasons discussed in Ober 2017), those had been long forgotten.

For me, #8 (celebration of joint action) is the key response (again Ober 2017), the one that I suppose would be enthusiastically endorsed by most Athenians most of the time. While there were certainly moments in which collective action failed – famously in 411 BCE (Thucydides 8.46), those failures were fleeting. The steady conviction that “yes we can” do it *together* was the necessary (if not sufficient) condition for the first emergence of democracy in 508/7, for Athens' political development in the two decades thereafter, for the decision to resist the Persians at Salamis, for the building out of an Aegean empire. That conviction sustained the democracy through the long Peloponnesian War and enabled it to be regained after the two oligarchic coups of the late fifth century. It kept the Athenians on course as a civic community through the institutional experiments and the foreign policy tumult of the fourth century.

Although surely there were, no doubt, always a few democrats – and occasionally more than a few – who would have happily answered with #9 (victory gloat), I think Cartledge and I are in agreement that they were always a minority. At least the ethos of

the democracy strongly discouraged *acting* on that sort of view (viz. the Amnesty of 403 BCE), and there is little evidence in the preserved public discourse of the classical Athenian democracy for a gloating attitude. That absence is noteworthy in that elsewhere, for example during certain of the democratic interludes at Argos, one might have heard a gloating response from a much larger cross section of the ordinary citizen population. Athens' relative stability in the face of social diversity, persistent economic inequality, and under the pressure of dramatic exogenous shocks, remains worth attending to, especially in light of the frequency of *stasis* in most of the rest of the Greek world (Arcenas 2018).

I believe that Cartledge would not suppose, as I do not, that #10 (elegiac lament) would have been often voiced, by ordinary Athenians, before the later fourth century BCE. Lament was certainly, by the fourth century, a staple of the rhetoric of certain elite Athenians (notably Isocrates in the *Areopagiticus*) – in reference to an imaginary long-lost “ancestral democracy” under which a benevolent elite directed the activities of a grateful demos. The fourth-century demos was indeed invited (for example by Demosthenes) to look back on the fifth-century imperial era as a past era of unequalled grandeur and state-level glory. But the democracy remained vibrant, and was known to be so. At least one of the major accomplishments of later-twentieth-century ancient Greek historians was putting to rest an old and persistent notion of “post-Peloponnesian War democratic decline.”

There is much more debate about the status of democracy, real and perceived, in the post-classical Hellenistic world. Cartledge aligns himself with those (notably his teacher G.E.M. de Ste Croix 1983: esp. 518-527), who suppose that the Macedonians effectively put democracy to death and thus that post-classical Greek pretensions to democracy (in literature and documentary inscriptions) was a sham. I tend to come down on the other side

of that debate (see, for example, Ma 2018) and so I suppose that through the third and even into the second century BCE elegiac lament would have been neither an appropriate, nor a common response across much of the Greek world. That said, the history of post-classical democracy is surely among the most exciting frontiers of twenty-first century Greek history. All those concerned with debates about the status of Hellenistic governments calling themselves democracies will need to attend to Cartledge's concerns about what happened to the idea and practice of collective self-government by ordinary citizens in the age of Alexander and his successors. Those debates are particularly salient in the twenty-first century, an era, as Paul Cartledge reminds us in the envoi to his stimulating book, when the question of whether and how democracy can be preserved in the face of growing inequalities of wealth and power is once again a painfully open question.

*Stanford University*

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