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978-0-521-45455-1 - Ancient Greek Political Thought in Practice

Paul Cartledge

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THOUGHT IN PRACTICE

Ancient Greece was a place of tremendous political experiment and innovation, and it was here too that the first serious political thinkers emerged. Using carefully selected case studies, Professor Cartledge investigates the dynamic interaction between ancient Greek political thought and practice from early historic times to the early Roman Empire. Of concern throughout are three major issues: first, the relationship of political thought and practice; second, the relevance of class and status to explaining political behaviour and thinking; and, third, democracy – its invention, development and expansion, and extinction, prior to its recent resuscitation and even apotheosis. In addition, monarchy in various forms and at different periods, and the peculiar political structures of Sparta, are treated in detail over a chronological range extending from Homer to Plutarch. The book provides an introduction to the topic for all students and non-specialists who appreciate the continued relevance of ancient Greece to political theory and practice today.

PAUL CARTLEDGE is A. G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture at Cambridge University and a Fellow of Clare College. He has published extensively on Greek history over several decades, including *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece* (1997, new edition 2002), *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300–362 BC* (new edition 2001) and *Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past* (2004, revised edition 2005).

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK  
 Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org  
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521455954

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First published 2009

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*  
 Cartledge, Paul.

Ancient Greek political thought in practice / Paul Cartledge.

p. cm. – (Key themes in ancient history)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-45455-1 (hardback : alk. paper)

1. Political science – Greece – History – To 1500. I. Title.

JC73.C368 2009

320.01 – dc22 2008055928

ISBN 978-0-521-45455-1 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-45595-4 paperback

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*To the memory of*  
Moses Finley (1912–1986)  
*and*  
Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1930–2006)

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## *Preface*

‘The next remove must be to the study of politics; to know the beginning, end, and reasons of political society.’

(John Milton, ‘Of education’, 1644)

John Milton was born almost exactly 400 years ago as I write this preface. Paraphrasing Wordsworth, I should say that his spirit at least is still living at this hour. A powerful renaissance is currently under way in the practice of political theory and the study of its history, as an academic subject lying on the interdisciplinary margins between philosophy, history and social thought. Within the frame of this academic renaissance and the pragmatic political concerns associated with it, the Greeks’ pioneering and fundamental role in the Western political tradition is universally recognised. General books on democracy typically start with a ritual obeisance to the ancient Greeks; a few (Dunn 2006, for conspicuous example) even attempt to do something like justice to the ancient Greeks’ – very different – kind of democracy. Newer still is the reappraising of the potential contemporary reference and relevance of ultimately Greek ideas, especially those of democracy, with its axiomatic components of freedom and equality (see in particular Barber 1984, Euben, Wallach and Ober 1994, and chapter II, below). For political theory can entertain also the legitimate ambition to affect the world outside the academy (e.g. Held 1991; Tuck 1991).

The present study is a historian’s book, as befits the series in which it appears. Professional ancient philosophers, experts in the ‘great thinkers’ from Solon and Democritus on through to Sphaerus and Plutarch, may regret the general lack of close reading of texts or close contextualisation (or both) (but see appendix II), and, even more perhaps, the incompetence where such is essayed. If historians may be too prone to despise or dismiss as irrelevant the philosophical niceties, however, most professional philosophers in my experience are not usually as well versed, or as passionately interested, in the history – social, economic and cultural as well as narrowly political – conditioning political thought as they arguably should be.

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Hence the present attempt to combine the two, placing ‘ideas in context’ (to borrow the title of another Cambridge University Press series), in the manner advocated in chapter 1. I am, moreover, as interested in ordinary-language, everyday political thought as I am in high-flown political theory. The thoughts, however inchoate or inarticulate, of the mass rather than the theories of the elite will be what predominantly engages me here – in contrast to an earlier book (Cartledge 2002), in which Aristotle was featured centrally and very prominently as a uniquely valuable witness to Greek theoretical ideas of, among other things, citizenship, gender and slavery. I shall thus be concerned especially with the practical relevance of ordinary Greeks’ thoughts to collective, above all revolutionary, action. What has been well called ‘man’s double-edged capacity to reason and make speech concerning the advantageous, the just, and the good’ (Rahe 1992: 229) will therefore be only one part of my story. On the other hand, it hardly needs to be spelled out that any treatment of any conception of Greek political thought is throughout conditional upon the nature of the available evidence – a ticklish methodological issue that is explicitly faced head-on in chapter 1 (but see also Cartledge 1998).

Among the usual *Key Themes* series audience of colleagues and students in especially classics, classical studies, history, and social and political sciences, my target audience specifically includes the young – in defiance of Aristotle’s strictures about not trying to teach political theory to them (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a2–6; cf. 1142a11–12, 1181a9–12; but see 1179b7–8). The ancient Greek world or worlds that I shall be covering stretch(es) across a span of about 1,000 years in time, and in space from central Asia to western Europe. Of course, during that period and area there were several major political changes; indeed, it is an important part of the purpose of this book to chart, explain or at least contextualise some of them. Besides the changes and differences, however, this ancient Greek world as a whole shared certain common features that made it in several fundamental respects quite alien to our own: the size of the political units, the nature and levels of technology, the place and function of religion, the exclusion of non-citizens, including women, and – not least by any means – the practice and ideology of slavery (Cartledge 2002: ch. 6).

One of my major *historiographical* aims therefore is to draw attention to and do some justice to this alienness. On the other hand, the small scale and deeply political nature of the Greek *polis*, including a high dosage of intense self-criticism and reflexivity, make it potentially not only a theatre of ideas but also a school of civil prudence. It is precisely because we have chosen to adopt the ancient Greeks as our political ancestors by labelling as

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‘democracy’ our own preferred mode of self-government (and all too often the mode chosen for governing or at least controlling others) that I shall be keeping on the alert throughout for ‘interference’ between ancient and modern political thinking and action.

In evidentiary *scope* the discussion will range from the Homeric shield of Achilles (chapter 3) to Plutarch’s pamphlet ‘Advice on public life’ (chapter 10). The former, an imaginary artefact commissioned from the Greeks’ craftsman god Hephaestus by Achilles’s divine mother Thetis and lovingly described in the *Iliad* (Book 18), was cunningly tricked out with images of two ‘cities’, one at peace, one at war; this was at or near the inception of the novel, real-life Greek state form, the *polis* (chapter 2). Plutarch’s advisory tract was composed for a Greek or hellenophone readership under the high Roman Empire almost 1,000 years later, by which time the significance of the *polis* as a self-governing power unit had shrunk drastically, although it retained symbolic appeal as a focus of primary socialisation and communal solidarity, especially through the medium of shared public religious ritual.

There will inevitably be some attention paid to the major political-philosophical works of the fourth century BCE, above all those of Plato and Aristotle (see especially chapter 8). Plato at least seems to have relatively little direct connection to practical politics, however, and this is partly, I am sure, because his powerfully original and intellectual ideas were unlikely to strike a chord with the mass of ordinary Greeks (for whom he expressed some distaste, if not contempt). Aristotle’s thought, by contrast, was far more practical and pragmatic, and is indispensably informative on the nature of ancient Greek conceptions of politics and the political. Even so, there are several very good reasons for proceeding beyond the usual late fourth-century BCE terminus of studies of Greek politics and political thought into the Hellenistic era. My two are as follows. First, that this was an era when Sparta, always a source of fascinated political reflection by outsiders, made a – second – direct and positive contribution to major political change and thinking (chapter 9). Second, that the writers and thinkers of the last three ‘Hellenistic’ centuries BCE include members of new philosophical schools or movements, some of whose members were committed to translating political ideas into practice, and a major historian, Polybius of Megalopolis, who made political thinking central to his analysis and explanation of the rise of Rome to ‘world’ power.

Cynics and Stoics will therefore get a look-in in their own right (and ‘write’), but Rome as such will feature only as backdrop to the essentially Greek political thought of Polybius and of Plutarch. Although the Roman

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reception of Greek ideas ('Graecia Recepta', rather than Horace's 'Graecia Capta' – narrative VI), was crucial to the early-modern and modern reception (or, usually, rejection) of Greek-style democracy (chapter 11), there is not the space to do justice to a properly contextualised reading of Roman political thought, above all that of Cicero (who, astonishingly, managed to translate, both literally and metaphorically, the thought of his Greek sources into an alien 'res-publican' context).

Clare College, Cambridge, 1 September 2008

## *Acknowledgements*

The present book is, in a strong sense, a Cambridge product. It is broadly, and now somewhat remotely, based on the undergraduate lectures I have delivered periodically from the 1980s on within the History faculty's course in the history of political thought from the Greeks to John Locke. It is hoped that students taking this course, as also those pursuing Cambridge's interfaculty (classics, history, social and political sciences) MPhil in political thought and intellectual history, and indeed all undergraduates and postgraduates enrolled in similar programmes throughout the English-speaking world, not to mention their instructors, will find it as stimulating and helpful – and problematic – to read as I have found it to write.

The book is dedicated to the memory of two great scholars and teachers, great mutual friends and comrades, both of whom had a special interest in the political thought of the ancient Greeks.

Moses Finley (1912–1986) was my immediate predecessor and inspiration in this as in so many other aspects of my teaching and research at Cambridge, and my continuing role model as an informed, critical and accessible public communicator far beyond the boundaries of the discipline of classics and, indeed, of the university as an institution. It is very good to know that Professor Daniel Tompkins of Temple University, Philadelphia, has in hand a major study of the 'early' Finley, while Mohammad Nafissi's 2005 book is a clear sign of Finley's continuing influence and inspiration outside classics and ancient history.

Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1930–2006) was the living embodiment of the marriage of political theory and practice. Seeing himself as a public intellectual in the direct line of descent from Voltaire and Zola, he suffered in his career for being unwilling to keep silent on what he considered to be cases of monstrous political injustice, whether in colonial Algeria or metropolitan France. Together with the late Jean-Pierre Vernant, he was principally responsible for placing the 'Paris School' of cultural historians and literary critics of ancient Greece centrally on the map of world classical

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scholarship, and through his connections with such equally committed scholars in other disciplines as Cornelius Castoriadis he maintained the high profile of classics and ancient history within the broad field of 'les sciences humaines'.

Among the living, I have learned most from my present and former Cambridge colleagues, including, most notably, my series co-editor Peter Garnsey and Malcolm Schofield, a constant source of support and stimulation (not least in most generously reading through an entire penultimate draft with his usual acuity of insight); and from (in alphabetical order) Annabel Brett, Patricia Crone, Nick Denyer, John Dunn, Pat Easterling, Raymond Geuss, Simon Goldhill, Geoff Hawthorn, Istvan Hont, Michael Ignatieff, Melissa Lane (who also very kindly read and most helpfully commented upon a near-final draft of the whole), Aleka Lianeri, Geoffrey Lloyd, Robin Osborne, Garry Runciman, David Sedley, Quentin Skinner, Gareth Stedman Jones, Richard Tuck, Robert Wardy and James Warren; and from my former PhD students Matt Edge, Lene Rubinstein, Joanne Sonin and Stephen Todd.

I should like also to record my deep appreciation of the stimulation provided by both the writings and the conversation in friendship of colleagues in universities outside Cambridge, especially Ryan Balot (Washington University, St Louis), Janet Coleman (London School of Economics), François Hartog (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris), Karl Hölkescamp (Cologne), Phillip Mitsis (New York University), Josh Ober (Stanford, formerly Princeton), Pauline Schmitt (Paris, Sorbonne), Rolf Schneider (Munich) and Ellen Wood (formerly York University, Toronto), and by all those – too many to list by name – from eastern as well as western Europe, and from across the Atlantic, who participated in a colloquium entitled 'The Greek revolution' co-organised by Geoffrey Lloyd and me at Darwin College, Cambridge, in May 1992.

Finally, since this book has been rather long in the gestation, it should be noted that earlier versions of these particular chapters have been published as, or were delivered as, the following:

Chapter 1: Cartledge 1996b, 1998.

Chapter 2: Cartledge 1996b, 2000a.

Chapter 5: Cartledge 2007. A German version has also been published as Cartledge 2008: ch. 1.

Chapter 7: Versions of this chapter were delivered, first, in March 2006 as the Dabis Lecture in the Department of Classics, Royal Holloway, University of London (I am most grateful to Professor Jonathan Powell and his colleagues for their invitation, instruction and hospitality); next,

*Acknowledgements*

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in May 2006, at the University of Heidelberg, at the kind invitation of Professors Tonio Hölscher and Joseph Maran (see Cartledge 2008: ch. 3); and, thirdly, in September 2006 as my inaugural lecture as founding Hellenic Parliament Global Distinguished Professor in the Theory and History of Democracy, New York University.

Chapter 9: A much-abbreviated version was delivered in a panel at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association, Boston, January 2005. On utopianism, see also Cartledge 1996a.

In addition to those mentioned by name above, I am most grateful to the relevant conference convenors and book editors for making my contributions possible.

## *Timeline*

(All dates are BCE [before the Common Era] unless otherwise stated; many are approximate, especially those pre-500.)

1600–1100	<b>Late Bronze Age</b>
1300	Acme of Mycenaean (Late Bronze Age Greek) kingdoms
1184	Fall of Troy (traditional)
1100	End of Mycenaean political dispensation
1100–800	<b>Dark Age</b>
1000	Migrations east to Ionia and Asia Minor
975	Lefkandi ‘hero’ burial
950/900	Spartan king lists (adjusted) begin
775	Migrations west to south Italy begin
735	Migrations west to Sicily begin
750–500	<b>Archaic Era</b>
?700	Homer
700–670	Spartan political reform (‘ <i>rhêtra</i> ’, Lycurgus)
660	First stone temple of Apollo, Corinth
650	Archilochus, Tyrtaeus
640	Tyrannies at Corinth, Sicyon, Megara
600	Sappho, Alcaeus
594	Solon
585	<i>Floruit</i> of Thales
570	Birth of Cleisthenes
570–550	Anaximander, Anaximenes of Miletus
559	Cyrus II founds Persian Empire
545	Rule at Athens by tyrant Peisistratus
540 (–522)	Tyranny of Polycrates on Samos
525	Pythagoras (originally of Samos) politically active in south Italy



522 (–486)	Darius I of Persia
520 (–468)	Simonides the Praise-singer active
510	Hippias tyrant of Athens overthrown
508/7	Democracy at Athens: revolution of Cleisthenes
500–323	<b>Classical Era</b>
500	Heracleitus of Ephesus, Hecataeus of Miletus
499 (–494)	Ionian Revolt
?493	Birth of Pericles
490	Battle of Marathon
486 (–465)	Xerxes of Persia
?484	Births of Herodotus, Protagoras
480	Invasion of Xerxes: Battles of Thermopylae, Salamis
479	Battles of Plataea, Mycale
478	Delian League formed
475–450	Earliest extant political theory
472	Aeschylus's <i>Persians</i>
469	Births of Socrates, Democritus (approximately)
463	Democracy at Syracuse
462/1	Democratic Reforms of Ephialtes and Pericles
460 (–445)	'First' Peloponnesian War
?460	Birth of Thucydides
447 (–432)	Building of the Parthenon
440–439	Revolt of Samos
430s	Protagoras, Anaxagoras in Athens
431 (–404)	Peloponnesian War
429	Death of Pericles
427	Gorgias visits Athens; birth of Plato, Xenophon
?425	Publication of Herodotus's <i>Histories</i>
?420	Birth of Epaminondas
411	First Oligarchic counter-revolution at Athens
410	Democracy restored at Athens
405 (–367)	Tyranny of Dionysius I of Syracuse
404	Defeat of Athens by Sparta (with Persia) in Peloponnesian War
404/3	Thirty Tyrants' junta at Athens
403	Restoration of democracy at Athens; General Amnesty
401/0	'Ten Thousand' Greek mercenaries hired by Cyrus the Younger, Persian pretender
?400	Death of Thucydides
399	Trial and death of Socrates

*Timeline*

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395 (–386)	Corinthian War: Sparta (with Persia) defeats Greek coalition
387	Plato visits Syracuse
386	King's Peace (also known as Peace of Antalcidas)
?385	Plato founds Academy at Athens
384	Births of Aristotle, Demosthenes
379/8	Liberation of Thebes from Sparta
378	Refoundation (democratic) of Boeotian federal state, foundation of Second Athenian Sea-League
377 (–353)	Mausolus Satrap of Caria
371	Battle of Leuctra
369	Foundation of Messene
368	Foundation of Megalopolis
367	Death of Dionysius I; Plato visits Syracuse again
362	Battle of Mantinea; death of Epaminondas
359	Accession of Philip II of Macedon
357 (–355)	Social War: Athens defeated by allies
356	Birth of Alexander
356 (–346)	Third Sacred War
353–351	Mausoleum constructed at Halicarnassus
347	Death of Plato
343	Aristotle tutors Alexander at Mieza
338	Battle of Chaeronea; foundation of League of Corinth
336	Assassination of Philip II, accession of Alexander
?335	Aristotle founds Lyceum at Athens, composes <i>Politics</i> (330s/320s)
334	Alexander begins Asia campaign
331	Alexander founds Alexandria (Egypt); Battle of Gaugamela
327	Death of Callisthenes
324	Exiles Decree
323	Death of Alexander the Great
323 (–281)	Wars of Successors
323/2	Lamian War
323 (–30)	<b>Hellenistic Era</b>
322	Deaths of Demosthenes, Aristotle, Athenian democracy; Theophrastus heads Lyceum
316	Death of Olympias
309 (–265)	Areus I of Sparta
305	Antigonus, Ptolemy I and Seleucus I become 'kings'

xxii	<i>Timeline</i>
301	Battle of Ipsus: Kingdoms of Antigonids, Ptolemies, Seleucids
300	Ptolemy I founds Museum and Library at Alexandria; Zeno founds 'Stoic' school at Athens
290	Aetolian League
281	Battle of Corupedium; Seleucus I takes over Asia Minor
280	Achaean League
287–146	<b>Middle Roman Republic</b>
267 (–262)	Chremonidean War
244–241	Agis IV of Sparta
235–222	Cleomenes III of Sparta
?235	Sphaerus advises Cleomenes
196	Flamininus declares Greece 'free'
167 (–150)	Polybius held hostage in Italy
146–27	<b>Late Roman Republic</b>
146	Achaean War: Greece falls to Rome, Corinth sacked
133, 121	Murders of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus
106	Cicero born
55 (–43)	Cicero's political theory
49	Civil war
44	Assassination of Julius Caesar
31	Battle of Actium: Octavian (later called Augustus) defeats Mark Antony
30	Deaths of Antony and Cleopatra: Rome completes absorption of Hellenistic Greek world
27 BCE – CE 330	<b>Roman Imperial Era</b>
27	Augustus founds Principate, Greece made a province of Roman Empire
CE 14	Death of Augustus
?46	Birth of Plutarch
60 (–230)	'Second Sophistic'
68	Death of Nero
70	Law on the Imperial Power of Vespasian
?120	Death of Plutarch
307(–337)	Reign of Constantine (sole emperor 324–337)
330–1453	<b>Byzantine Era</b>
330	Dedication of Constantinople
391	Library at Alexandria destroyed
393	Olympic Games terminated

*Timeline*

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476	End of Roman Empire in West
529	Emperor Justinian closes Academy in Athens
1204	Sack of Constantinople (Fourth Crusade)
1397	Classical Greek learning migrates west to Italy from Constantinople
1453	Fall of Constantinople to Sultan Mehmet II the Conqueror
1453–	<b>Post-Byzantine/Renaissance and Modern Eras</b>
1494 (–1515)	Printed editions of classical texts at Venice by Aldus Manutius
1891	First modern edition of (?Aristotle's) <i>Athenian Constitution</i>
2000	Publication of <i>The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought</i> (eds. C. J. Rowe and M. Schofield)
2005	Publication of Copenhagen Polis Centre's <i>An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis</i> (eds. M. H. Hansen and T. H. Nielsen)