

I. F. Stone Breaks the Socrates Story

An old muckraker sheds fresh light on the 2,500-year-old mystery and reveals some Athenian political realities that Plato did his best to hide.

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On his 70th birthday, in an interview with himself for this Magazine, retired journalist I. F. Stone spoke of his new-found joy in Greek studies and his hope of finding in them “one last scoop” that would help clear up some of the mystery which still surrounds the trial of Socrates, that cause célèbre which has tantalized scholars and historians for centuries. Now, he believes he has found new evidence that sheds light not only on the trial itself but on the complex politics of fifth-century Athens. Here – again in a self-interview – Mr. Stone sets forth his discovery and, at the same time, takes us on an adventure in learning and an armchair tour of the ancient world.

Isn't it a little late in the day to be re-examining the trial of Socrates? I thought that was 25 centuries ago?

It was held, to be exact, in 399 B.C.

And now, in A.D. 1979, you have discovered something newsworthy – excuse the expression – about a trial that the wire services covered 2378 years ago?

This obsession with the trial of Socrates is not mine alone. Scholars and historians have been puzzled by it for centuries, and still are.

What's the puzzle?

The Athens of Socrates's time has gone down in history as the very place where democracy and freedom of speech were born. Yet that city put Socrates, its most famous philosopher, to death. Presumably this was because its citizens did not like what he was teaching. Yet he had been teaching there all his life, unmolested. Why did they wait until he was 70, and had only a few years to live, before executing him?

Why should this fascinate an old Washington muck-raker like you?

Because it's a black eye for all I believe in, for democracy and free speech. Anyone who starts out to study the problem of free speech in depth – as I did after ill health forced me to give up my *Weekly* – is irresistibly drawn back to ancient Athens, where it all began.

Isn't that pretty far from home base, from current concerns and difficulties?

Not really. All our basic problems are there in miniature. I fell in love with the Athenians and the participatory democracy they developed. Free discussion was the rule everywhere – in the Assembly, the law courts, the theatre,

and the gymnasiums where they spent much of their leisure. Free speech – what the Greeks called *parrhasia* – was as much taken for granted as breathing.

But then I was stopped, or stumped, by this contradictory and traumatic spectacle of what they did to Socrates. These people and this city, to which I look back for inspiration – how could they have condemned this philosopher to death? How could so blatant a violation of free speech occur in a city that prided itself on freedom of inquiry and expression?

But why should we care at this late date?

Because Plato turned the trial of his master, Socrates, into a trial of Athens and of democracy. He used it to demonstrate that the common people were too ignorant, benighted and fickle to entrust with political power. In Plato's *Apology*, the contrast drawn between the nobility of Socrates and the grim verdict of his juror-judges indicted democracy in the eyes of posterity. And thanks to his genius, no other trial except that of Jesus has so captured the imagination of Western man.

Plato made Socrates the secular martyred saint of the struggle against democracy. He stigmatized it as “mobocracy.” Yet this was the very same “mob” which applauded the anti-war plays of Aristophanes when Athens was fighting for its life against Sparta. (No such antiwar plays were allowed, by either side, during our last two World Wars). This was the same “mob” whose eagerness for new ideas, and its readiness to hear them, drew philosophers from all over the ancient world. It made Athens – in the proud words of Pericles – “the school of Hellas,” the university of the Greek world. It is the high repute of Athens that makes the trial of Socrates so puzzling.

And now you think you can throw a little fresh light upon it?

I've been happily bogged down in ancient Athens for several years, trying to explore all of Greek thought and civilization, in order to reach a better understanding of the trial. In my researches amid the ancient documents I recently stumbled on a crucial bit of evidence, hitherto overlooked, which makes the trial and its outcome a little less inexplicable.

I hope your life-insurance policies are fully paid up. The classical scholars will be lying in wait for you, with knives sharpened. No trial in history has been more intimately studied, pored over and speculated upon. And you, an interloper and – most horrid of academic epithets – a “journalist,” believe you have found something they all overlooked! Have you seen any unidentified flying objects lately?

Sneer if you will, but I've been encouraged by a remark of Jakob Burckhardt, the great Swiss historian of the Renaissance and of Greek culture: To emphasize the importance of restudying the classics in every generation, Burckhardt once said that, in a hundred years, someone would reread Thucydides and find something in his history "we had all overlooked."

How can a newspaperman find something new to report about a trial that took place so long ago?

You re-examine all the source material for yourself. You go back to the texts in the original language, so that you can evaluate every nuance. You search out internal contradictions and curious evasions. It's no so different from digging the real truth out of a Pentagon or State Department document.

Could you fill me in on the sources for the trial – and do it, please, in less than three volumes?

I can do it in one sentence: The sources are scanty and one-sided. The only contemporary accounts are by two disciples of Socrates, Plato and Xenophon, both anxious to put their beloved master in as good a light as possible. But they do not give us a transcript of the actual trial. They give us their own conception of what Socrates said, or perhaps their own conception of what he should have said in his own defense. Plato's exquisite, polished version, like his Socratic dialogues, can more reasonably be read as fictionalized biography. In Xenophon, we are told that Socrates's "inner voice" forbade him to prepare a defense. There is even one ancient tradition that tells us he was silent before his judges.

What of the prosecution's side?

We have no record of it. We know it only by indirection from the two "Apologies," one by Plato, the other by Xenophon – the word "apology" in Greek means defense — and from the *Memorabilia*, or memoirs, of Socrates by Xenophon. It's like trying to cover a trial when one is barred from the courtroom except to hear the defendant's summation to the jury.

Do we know the actual charges against Socrates?

There were two charges: first, that Socrates violated the law by "refusing to do reverence to the gods recognized by the city, and introducing other new divinities," and second, by "corrupting the youth." But we do not have the text of the laws on which these charges were based, nor the specific allegations.

So we do not know just what Socrates is supposed to have said or done that made him seem disrespectful of the city gods. Nor do we know what was meant by the charge of corrupting the youth. Under Athenian legal procedure such specifics were required in a preliminary complaint

and hearing before a magistrate, who then decided whether the allegations and the evidence were sufficient to warrant a trial. But we have no account of this preliminary procedure, the equivalent of our grand jury.

Didn't Plato's dialogue the "Euthyphro" cover the preliminary examination?

That's a common impression, but it's wrong. The "Euthyphro" pictures Socrates arriving for the preliminary hearing. But he gets no farther than the portico of the examining magistrate. There he engages in a long and inconclusive conversation with Euthyphro, the defendant in another case. The subject they discuss is the proper definition of piety or holiness. It's charming, but tells us nothing of what happened when Socrates went in for his own arraignment.

Why do you think Plato chose to be so uninformative?

A lawyer might surmise that he blocked out as much as he could of the specific charges because they were too damaging and too hard to disprove.

Do you see the same defensive strategy in Plato's *Apology*?

I do. Socrates evades the charge that he did not respect the city's gods, and proves instead that he is not an atheist. But he was not charged with atheism. We never learn what was meant by corrupting the young. The reader of Plato's *Apology* comes away with the impression that this wonderful old philosopher was condemned simply because he had spent his life exhorting his fellow citizens to be virtuous.

How do you account for his condemnation?

I believe the case against Socrates was political and that the charge of corrupting the youth was based on a belief – and considerable evidence – that he was undermining their faith in Athenian democracy.

If so, why wasn't the charge brought earlier? He had been teaching for a long time. A quarter century before the trial, Socrates had already been attacked in Aristophanes's play *The Clouds* for running a "think tank" whose smart-alecky graduates beat their fathers. If they thought him the source of such subversive teaching, why did the Athenians wait until 399 B.C., when he was already an old man, before putting him on trial?

Because in 411 B.C. and again in 404 B.C. antidemocrats had staged bloody revolutions and established short-lived dictatorships. The Athenians were afraid this might happen again.

I haven't found that in Plato.

Plato didn't intend that you should. Those are the realities his *Apology* was calculated to hide. Plato was a genius, a dazzling prestidigitator, with all the gifts of a poet, a dramatist and a philosopher. His *Apology* is a masterpiece of world literature, a model of courtroom pleading; and the greatest single piece of Greek prose that has come down to us. It rises to a climax

which never fails to touch one deeply, no matter how often it is reread. I read the *Apology* in the original for the first time last year, slowly and painfully, line by line. When I came to the noble farewell of Socrates to his judges, it gave me chest pains, it was so moving; I gladly offer up my angina in tribute to its mastery. "I go to die," Socrates says, "and you to live, but which of us goes to the better lot is known to none but God." Even Shakespeare never surpassed that! But these very qualities also make Plato's *Apology* a masterpiece of evasion.

Is there any way to check Plato's picture of the trial against the views of the average Athenian?

We do have one piece of evidence which shows that even 50 years after the event, when there had been ample time for reflection and remorse the Athenians still regarded the trial as political, and the verdict as justified.

Where did you find that?

In a speech by the famous orator Aeschines, the great rival of Demosthenes, in the year 345 B.C., just 54 years after the trial of Socrates.¹ This bit is well known to scholars but its significance has never been fully appreciated. With the clue Aeschines provides, we may begin to reconstruct the Athenian political realities. Aeschines cited the case of Socrates as a praiseworthy precedent. "Men of Athens," he said to the jury court, "you executed Socrates, the sophist, because he was clearly responsible for the education of Critias, one of the thirty anti-democratic leaders."

Who was Critias?

He was the bloodiest dictator Athens had ever known, a pupil of Socrates at one time, and a cousin of Plato's. Aeschines was saying in effect that the antidemocratic teachings of Socrates helped to make a dictator of Critias, who terrorized Athens in 404 B.C. during the regime of the Thirty Tyrants and just five years before the trial of Socrates. Critias seemed to have been the most powerful member of the Thirty.

But why do you give so much weight to one sentence in one man's speech to an Athenian jury court 50 years after the trial?

Aeschines could not have swayed the jury by that reference unless he was saying something about the relations

between Socrates and Critias which was generally accepted as true by the Athenian public opinion of the time. Though 50 years had passed, the dictatorship of Critias and the Thirty Tyrants must still have been a hateful memory. Justly or unjustly, Socrates's reputation still suffered from his association with Critias. The reference to Critias and Socrates proved effective demagoguery. Aeschines won his case.

How do you account for the deep and enduring prejudice against Socrates in his native city?

To understand this, one must touch on a damaging fact few historians have explained, or even mentioned, so great is the reverence for Socrates: *Socrates remained in the city all through the dictatorship of the Thirty Tyrants.*

Why do you put that in italics?

Because that single fact must have accounted more than any other for the prejudice against Socrates when the democracy was restored. The thirty Tyrants ruled only about eight months, but it was a time of terror. In that period they executed 1,500 Athenians and banished 5,000, one-tenth or more of the total population of men, women, children and slaves.

When the Thirty Tyrants took power, they murdered or drove out of the city all who were of the democratic party. A few months later, the moderates who had originally supported the Thirty Tyrants began to flee, especially after Critias murdered their leader, Theramenes. He, who had been one of the original Thirty Tyrants, was executed without a trial when he began to criticize the Thirty Tyrants for their brutality.

Socrates was neither exiled with the democrats nor forced to flee with the moderate oppositionists. He did not suffer at the hands of the Thirty Tyrants unlike his chief accuser, Anytus, who lost much of his property when he fled and joined the fight to free the city. Socrates, in Plato's *Apology*, calls himself "the gadfly" of Athens, but it seems his sting was not much in evidence when Athens needed it most.

How does Plato handle this in the *Apology*?

He never mentions Critias, or his past as a pupil of Socrates, nor does he dwell on the fact that Socrates stayed in the city all through the dictatorship. Instead Plato has Socrates represent himself as a man above the battle of politics.

How does Plato do that?

He has Socrates tell of two incidents in which he defied unjust orders, once under the democracy, and again under the Thirty Tyrants. Under the democracy, he was presiding officer in the Assembly during the famous trial of ten generals accused of misconduct for failing to succor survivors and recover the bodies of the slain after a naval victory. Socrates said he blocked the attempt to condemn them in one proceeding, because the law called for a separate trial for each man. He

¹ *Aeschines Against Timarchus*: "Did you put to death Socrates the sophist, fellow citizens, because he was shown to have been the teacher of Critias, one of the Thirty who put down the democracy, and after that, shall Demosthenes succeed in snatching companions of his own out of your hands, Demosthenes, who takes such vengeance on private citizens and friends of the people for their freedom of speech?" [1.173. (Loeb Classical Library)]

added that he did so “although the orators were ready to impeach and arrest me.”

Under the Thirty Tyrants, Socrates said, he had also resisted an unjust order. Socrates and four others had been ordered to arrest a wealthy resident alien whom the dictatorship wanted to kill so they could seize his property. Such executions for revenue purposes were common under Critias.

Instead of obeying the order, Socrates says, “I simply went home, and perhaps I should have been put to death for it, if the Government had not quickly been put down.” But he himself neither helped put it down, nor tried to warn the victim, nor made a protest. Though he was always preaching virtue, he did not, like the Hebrew prophets, call such unvirtuous rulers publicly to account.

But few modern readers know enough to resist Plato’s beguiling narrative, and it serves to distract attention from the fact that nowhere in the ancient texts do we find Socrates resisting or deploring the overthrow of the democracy, nor welcoming its restoration. With the jury, this silence must have outweighed his eloquence. The dictatorship of the Thirty Tyrants was the dictatorship of the wealthy landed aristocracy to which Plato and Critias belonged. This was the social circle from which most of Socrates’s followers were drawn. Athens understood this, though the modern reader often doesn’t.

Does Xenophon – our other “witness” on the trial – confront these compromising political circumstances?

Xenophon does so in his *Memorabilia* by quoting an unnamed “accuser.” This accuser has been variously identified as one of the accusers at the trial or as a contemporary pro-democratic orator named Polycrates whose “pamphlet” on the trial of Socrates has since disappeared. In any case, Xenophon’s quotations from this accuser and his answer to these accusations provide us with some of the prosecution’s case against Socrates. In so doing, Xenophon discloses much that Plato hides.

Where do you find the political issue in Xenophon?

In his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon reports that “the accuser” said Socrates “taught his pupils to look down upon the established laws’ by deriding the egalitarian method of filling many minor offices in Athens by lot, and by teaching them that government should be left to experts instead of being determined by popular debate and vote in the assembly.

The “accuser” said Socrates thus led the young “to despise the established constitution and made them violent.” It is significant, but not often noticed, that Xenophon denies only the last part of this indictment. He could hardly deny the first two counts, since elsewhere in his memoirs

of Socrates he frequently quotes the old philosopher’s contempt for the assembly and for election by lot. Xenophon passes over these accusations in silence. But he does deny that Socrates taught his pupils to use violence against established institutions. Xenophon insists he taught them it was wiser to proceed by persuasion.

But Critias in power was hardly a model of persuasion.

Xenophon does not deny it. After all, our main source of knowledge about the misdeeds of Critias is Xenophon’s own history of his time, the “Hellenica.” Xenophon quotes the accuser as declaring that “none wrought so many evils” to the city of Athens as Critias and Alcibiades, the two most famous pupils of Socrates. The accuser said that in the terrible days of the Thirty Tyrants, Critias “bore the palm for greed and violence,” while Alcibiades “exceeded all in licentiousness and insolence” under the democracy.

What defense did Xenophon offer?

“I have no intention,” Xenophon replies in the *Memorabilia*, of excusing the wrong these two men wrought the state.” But he claims they sought out Socrates as their teacher “only to attain the utmost proficiency in speech and action.” And “as soon as they thought themselves superior to their fellow disciples, they sprang away from Socrates and took to politics.” With that answer most Socratic scholars have been satisfied.

But you are not?

No. The question left open is what kind of politics Socrates taught them. Clearly from everything we learn elsewhere in Plato and Xenophon, it was an antidemocratic politics. Xenophon’s silence on the point admits what he cannot deny.

Does the “accuser” in Xenophon link the Socratic teachings with aristocratic attempts at tyranny, as in 411 and 404 B.C.?

Yes, but in a curious, indirect way. He alleged “that Socrates, selecting the worst passages of the most celebrated poets, and using them as arguments, taught those who kept him company [i.e. his pupils], to be unprincipled and tyrannical.”

Just what exactly did those terms mean?

A tyrant was someone who used violent and lawless methods to seize and maintain power. The term “unprincipled” is one translation of the adjectival form of the Greek word *kakourgos*, which means, literally, an evil-doer. An Athenian would of course apply both terms to such men as Critias and the Thirty Tyrants.

Does Xenophon deny that Socrates used quotations from the poets that might encourage such behavior?

He doesn’t enter an explicit denial. Instead Xenophon, who is ordinarily such a clear writer, gets fuzzy. This provoked my curiosity. In trying to find out why, I stumbled on some fresh material. I found that Xenophon made some striking omissions

in discussing this accusation, and the omissions obscured its significance.

What were the omissions?

First of all, in giving us examples from the poets to show what the accuser meant, Xenophon limits himself to two poets. We know from another source, the *Apology* of Libanius, a fourth-century A.D. orator, that the “accuser” of Socrates cited four poets, not two, in this accusation. The two Xenophon omits are Theognis and Pindar. Both were aristocratic poets, notorious for their contempt, not only of the common people but of the new middle class of merchants and traders who had begun to rival the old landed aristocracy. Pindar wrote his lovely odes to celebrate some of the outstanding tyrants of his time. By omitting Theognis and Pindar, Xenophon was omitting the most obvious examples of what the accuser meant.

Who are the two poets Xenophon does quote?

Homer and Hesiod. But the quotations he gives seem to bear little, if any relationship to the charge.

What do the quotations say?

The one from Hesiod says, “Work is no disgrace, but idleness is a disgrace.” Hesiod was a farmer poet, and this is from his *Works and Days*, a kind of farmer’s almanac. That line is his expression of the work ethic. I will not bore you with my fruitless efforts to find any sense in which this trite but wholesome homily could possibly be interpreted as teaching tyrannical conduct. Hesiod was no aristocrat but a hard-working Boetian peasant who hated tyranny. I think the Hesiod quote has been screwed up for evasive purposes.

What of the quotation from Homer?

Here we come to pay dirt. At first, the quotation from Homer, as given by Xenophon in the *Memorabilia*, also seems to bear little relationship to the accusation. It long puzzled me. I went to the commentators on the *Memorabilia* without finding any enlightenment. Then I did what none of the commentators I read had done: I went back to Homer and took a look at the context of the quotation. There I found Xenophon had made two omissions, and suddenly I saw what the accuser was driving at. Here I believe I have found fresh insight.

Is this a “scoop” – if I may use so unscholarly a word?

I believe so. But to appreciate it, one must understand what Homer meant to the Greeks. He was their Bible. And with them as with us, the devil could quote Scripture to his purpose. A quotation from Homer was effective as Holy Writ, and the two omissions Xenophon makes are of two passages which would have infuriated an Athenian democrat, but would have delighted an anti-democratic

aristocrat – because they would seem fully to justify violent methods in putting down the democracy.

Can you tell us what was the Homeric episode referred to by the “accuser” in Xenophon?

It is in the second book of the *Iliad*. The siege of Troy has been going on for nine years. The homesick and weary troops, just recently devastated by a plague, make a mutinous rush for the ships, determined to set sail for home. Odysseus, the man of many wiles, intervenes to stem the panic.

How does Xenophon handle the episode?

He makes his quotations so minimal and selective as to blur the point of the accusation, and make it easier for Socrates to evade it. Xenophon quotes lines 188 to 191, and then skips to lines 198 to 202 from Book II of the *Iliad*.

In lines 188 to 191, Homer describes how Odysseus spoke “with gentle words” to the chieftains and aristocrats, while he tells us in lines 198 to 202 how differently he dealt with the common soldiers. When the angry hero encountered “a man of the people,” Odysseus “struck him with his staff,” calling him “a worthless fellow” and ordering him to turn back from the ships.

How would an Athenian react to this scene?

Very negatively. He was not used to being treated as an inferior either in peace or war. Xenophon’s account in the *Anabasis* of how he led his 10,000 mercenary Greek troops across Persia has been justly called a picture of “a democracy on the march.”

Was anything important omitted in quoting these lines?

Yes. Xenophon omitted the last four lines of the speech made by Odysseus as he struck and reviled the common soldiers. In those four omitted lines Odysseus attacked the idea of democracy altogether. Homer in these lines sets forth for the first time in Western literature the doctrine of the divine right of kings. Here are the lines, in literal translation. Odysseus tells the common soldiers:

We Achaeans can’t all be kings here. It is not good for the many to rule.

Let one man rule, one man be king,

To whom the son [Zeus] of wily Cronos.

Has given the sceptre and the judgments. That he may take counsel for you.

That’s the doctrine of one man rule, and that’s just what Critias tried to impose on Athens. Xenophon could have denied that Socrates used these lines, or approved them. Instead Xenophon omitted them. The omission is a confession. These famous lines on kingship were too obviously anti-democratic teaching.

What was the third of the significant omissions to which you referred?

Xenophon omitted any mention of the assembly called by King Agamemnon to deal with the near mutiny. Assemblies are frequent in the *Iliad*. This one turned out to be unique. It was the only assembly in all of Homer where a common soldier spoke up in the debate. His name was Thersites, or The Brash One. To an Athenian, as to us, he thus represents the first stirrings of democracy in the Homeric assemblies.

What happened to Thersites?

Odysseus beat the bold commoner until he bled, humiliated him in front of the army and threatened to kill him if he ever spoke up again.

How does Homer treat this scene?

With approval. Homer sang his great lays in the halls of the rich and powerful, and clearly shows whose side he is on. Homer does not make Thersites a hero, but a shrill and vulgar upstart. Few peoples have been as sensitive to beauty in form and in speech as the ancient Greeks. Homer paints Thersites as bandy-legged, lame, hunch-backed and bald. One wonders how such a cripple ever got into the army at all. The words Thersites uses are made as repulsive as his appearance. Homer calls them *akosma*. This is the negative of *kosmos*, whence our words “cosmetics” and “cosmos” derive. The word implies disorder and lack of grace.

So what do you make of these omissions?

The accuser had charged that Socrates used certain passages from Homer to teach his young aristocratic followers to be violent and tyrannical. In dealing with this mutinous episode, Xenophon omitted what the Athenian democrats would have regarded as the most subversive part of it: the four lines on the divine right of kings, and Odysseus’s use of violence to suppress free speech in the assembly.

Homer was saying that the common people had no right to be heard. There could be no more sensitive point with the Athenian democrats. The right to speak freely in the assembly was the foundation stone of Athenian democracy. Until the reforms of Solon, two centuries before the trial of Socrates, the common people of Athens could neither speak nor vote in the assembly. And again, just five years before the trial of Socrates, they had been forcibly deprived of this precious right by the dictatorship

of Critias. In their eyes, this episode in Homer would seem to justify the violent tyranny they had so recently overthrown. I think that is why Xenophon omitted it from his defense of Socrates. They were too damaging a part of the prosecution’s case.

So you think Socrates was condemned because the Athenians believed his teachings had helped to produce such tyrants as Critias?

No, not exactly. The case is more complicated. Socrates was protected from such a prosecution by the amnesty instituted by those who overthrew and killed Critias. The dictatorship was crushed by a coalition of the democrats with moderate oligarchs who had been driven into opposition by the lawless extremism of the thirty. They took an oath to forget past offenses. The amnesty covered everybody but the remaining Thirty and their leading officials. To prosecute Socrates as the teacher of Critias would have been a violation of that solemn oath.

How do you know the oath was always honored?

All the surviving sources attest to it, and nowhere do Plato or Xenophon charge, as they otherwise would, that the prosecution of Socrates was a violation of the amnesty. The most striking testimonial to this is in Aristotle’s treatise on the *Constitution of Athens* where he says that the Athenians, after restoring their democracy, “blotted out recriminations with regard to the past” and behaved both “privately and publicly toward those past disasters” in “the most completely honorable and statesmanlike manner of any people in history.” That was written a generation after the trial of Socrates.

So what conclusion do you draw?

When Xenophon discusses the charge that Socrates used certain passages from Homer and other poets to teach his pupils to be lawbreakers and tyrannical, he had to be referring to teachings which continued after the restoration of the democracy. Athens felt that Socrates was still inculcating disrespect for its democratic institutions, and feared an attempt to overthrow the democracy again.

Do you think this justified the condemnation of Socrates?

No. the 510-man jury itself was deeply troubled and reached its verdict of guilty only by a narrow margin. But these fresh insights give us a glimpse of the political realities and extenuating circumstances which Plato, who hated democracy, did his best to hide – and which his *Apology* has so successfully obscured for 2,500 years.