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Exasperating Essays

On The Trial of Sokrates

In the year 399 B.C, an Athenian dikastery, consisting of a panel of 500 citizens, sentenced to death an aged compatriot named Sokrates. Two accounts of the case have come down to us, both by pupils and admirers of the accused: Plato and Xenophon. A comparison shows that the first at least is coloured by the literary ability of the reporter. It is reasonably clear from both that Sokrates did not defend himself on legalitarian grounds, but on those of what might be called the rights of man as regards freedom of speech. The legal aspect of the case can be seen fully discussed in any book that deals with causes celebres; the trial, in fact, is usually the first of any historically arranged series of famous trials. And jurists, Lord Birkenhead among them, come rather shamefacedly to be sure- to the conclusion that as the law existed in that age, the verdict was justified.

What gives the trial its interest is not the constitutional problem but the personality of the philosopher himself, which has grown enormously with the passing of centuries. Plato considered him the wisest, justest, and best of all men that he had ever known (concluding sentence of Phaedon); but there was no public regret at his death in Athens, or elsewhere in Greece. The arch-driveller Plutarch did not see fit to include him for biographical purposes among the great men of antiquity (not that this proves very much, as Epaminondas is also

omitted). But the trial has an aspect of martyrdom, inasmuch as the prisoner at the bar deliberately baited the jury and took a high tone with his judges; he preferred the alternative of a death sentence to that of stopping to teach and discuss; moreover, the law as administered gave him a certain amount of time in which escape into exile was possible, and actually arranged by his friends, but refused indignantly by himself. He waited thirty days in prison with chains on his legs, and calmly drank off his cup of poison at the end.

The nature of the charge was that Sokrates was a perverter of youth. This looks startling, but is true in that those who listened to him were more apt to be young men than old, and that their respect for established institutions was almost certain to be dissolved by his methods. It is of interest to Marxists that his method was the dialectic one, questioning and cross questioning, showing up the contradictions in a plausible and even accepted statement till, by a succession of negations, some sort of a valid conclusion was reached. By this, he is given the position of the very founder of moral philosophy, as he raised questions on every sort of ethical problem that could affect any person. Nothing of his has survived except what appears through Plato's Dialogues; on the other hand, Plato, Boswell-like, has allowed his own views, if he had any, to appear only through the mouth of his Guru. But there is no doubt that Sokrates's questionings dispersed the mist of vague belief that surrounded the mind of the citizens-at-large in Athens, as it surrounds those of citizens-at-large anywhere today.

Arguments on the trial have too often been based on the susceptibility of democracy to weaknesses of the crowd-mind. Most historians take up one position or the other in this matter, for or against democracy. Even our own Jawaharlal draws the conclusion, "Evidently governments do not like people who are always trying to find out things; they do not like the search for truth"

(Glimpses of World History vol. I, p. 68). This view would seem quite natural considering the political circumstances of the date of writing and the government of the day in India. But I propose to examine the matter a little closer, as regards the trial in question.

Athens can hardly be called a democracy in the modern sense of the word, as the vast mass of the population had little in the way of political power. The slaves, women, and foreign traders or foreign craftsmen (the metics) had no rights to speak of, though the last class did receive a much fairer deal by law than elsewhere-which accounts for a great deal of Athenian, progress in industry and trade. The citizen population was roughly graded by income, though old tribal divisions persisted and were revised as necessary. Taxes were also graded, and office was usually restricted to the wealthiest, who had to pay very heavily for it by bearing the costs of entertaining the whole (free) populace at certain annual festivities. Legal power vested in the citizens as a body; they alone had the right to bear arms; every citizen had to serve by turn also as a paid juror, the vote of the jury being binding in both civil and criminal cases upon the magistrate. The whole constitution after Kleisthenes implies a high degree of culture in the male citizen population, and understanding of the laws, particularly as there were no lawyers even for court business. This contention is borne out by the brilliant literature of the period, best of all by the dramas of the age which were meant for the entertainment of the general public, but have remained a model of the art for all times.

The philosopher was aged seventy at the time of his trial, and had led an exemplary public life except for his unfortunate habit of "perverting youth". He began life as sculptor, but left the field, to Pheidias and others of that rank, to betake himself to an incessant examination of the foundations of every possible contemporary belief. This did not improve his material circumstances, as he

despised the sophists (to whose class he nevertheless belonged) who charged a fee for teaching the arts of examination and defence of any cause, so necessary in view of the forensic duties of every Athenian citizen; it decidedly soured the temper of his spouse Xantippe, who has had no sympathy at all from history for managing the household on a minute and irregular income. Sokrates fought with vigour and distinction on the battlefield of Delium. At the naval battle of Arginusac eight commanders allowed the joy of victory to blind them to the necessity of rescuing more than a thousand citizens drowning upon some of the shattered hulks of the Athenian navy; after their return, they were impeached by mass-trial, contrary to law which called for individual trial; only one of the responsible men present dared to hold out for law against public sentiment: Sokrates. One might think that this made him a marked man to the Athenian rabble; but when, a little later, Kritias had established the aristocratic dictatorship of the Thirty at Athens, Sokrates again refused his compliance to an illegal and unjust order. Let us add that throughout his life, he had been a friend of "the very best people". At this stage, his trial apparently becomes quite incomprehensible.

One fact is ignored by both jurists and philosophers. The whole generation before the death of Sokrates had been taken up in a disastrous war: the Peloponnesian war. This was an out-and-out imperialistic clash, begun under the leadership of the moderate imperialist Perikles, the great statesman of Athens. The contradiction it was meant to resolve was the rise of a new mercantile class in opposition to the landed aristocracy; and that of limited power for an individual at home with unlimited power abroad. Athenian private enterprise, beginning as industrial pseudo-capital, had penetrated the Aegean hinterland very rapidly, and citizens not only owned mines in outlying places, but controlled trade routes,

managed private armies, owned small forts, and interfered as much as necessary in the local governments of the less developed regions such as Macedonia. The islands near Athens had formed a maritime league for defence against Persia; Athens exploited the other members of the league as shamelessly as possible, and inevitably ran into a war with Sparta, hegemon of the land-league. Both sides forgot their original purpose, and called in the help of the Persians. This twenty-seven year war of attrition finished the obstreperous common citizenry of Athens, and finished Athens as a powerful state. In and just after this period there were two violent attempts at a dictatorship of the aristocracy: the Four Hundred and the Thirty, with a bloody restoration of the democracy each time. And the notable circumstance here is that the oligarchs forgot that they were enemies of the Spartans, and called in Spartan aid to suppress their own democratic citizenry. This was granted very willingly, as the Spartans were thoroughgoing oligarchs on their own account, who naturally hated democracy in any form. One imperialism fighting another, but helping dictatorship to establish itself in a rival state is not a new phenomenon.

Now Sokrates is supposed to have been willing to teach anyone or enter into a discussion with him, regardless of rank or wealth. Yet, if we look into the dialogues of Plato, our only sources of information, we find a curious emphasis on just one class of people: the extreme aristocrats who misdirected the steadier imperialism of Perikles, and who later tried again and again for a coup d'etat. Kritias was the leader of the Thirty, and he is not only mentioned several times, besides having a fragmentary dialogue in his own name, but left the impression upon the Athenian citizens that Sokrates had taught him his actions. Another in the same category, so far as public rumour went, is Alkibiades, the handsome and noble (Kalos k' agathos) son of the aristocrat Kimon. This youngster, from all records, was the closest friend of

Sokrates. The Symposium of Plato bears testimony to this, and for some unknown reason, is considered by many litterateurs as a high water mark of civilization (cf. Clive Bell: Civilization). Alkibiades reduced every question to a personal one, and was a ruinous friend and a deadly enemy to both the Athenians and the Spartans by turn. The Athenians exiled him for his treachery; the Spartans eventually sentenced him to death without a trial. In personal character, he can only be described as a bounder, in spite of the admiration he excited in Greek bosoms. His undoubted military ability was never used in a good cause or in a reliable manner. There is, by the way, a Platonic dialogue named Alkibiades.

To mention just one other name, familiar to readers of the Dialogues, we take Nikias, the successor to Perikles. He was responsible for the most disastrous venture in the whole course of the Peloponnesian war: the Sicilian expedition. He lost his own life in it, being put to death by the Spartans when taken, with 7000 men. The flower of the Athenian armed forces, their best general (Demosthenes) and almost the whole of the regular navy were wiped out in an expedition of the type against which Perikles had earlier left a clear warning. Had this enterprise succeeded as originally planned, it would "have led to a dictatorship or at least an oligarchy at Athens itself, Alkibiades had a hand in this to", as he had gone over to the Spartan side at the time, and was responsible ultimately for directing operations in a manner that proved fatal to Athens. Both Alkibiades and Nikias were in political control of Athens when the Athenians (416 B.C.) took the island of Melos, giving an argument that stands to this day as a statement of pure, naked imperialism (Thucydides, Book V, 85-116). The proposal after the conquest was that all men of military age be put to death, and the women and children sold into slavery! But Nikias and his fellow aristocrats were, in spite of the war, friendly with the Spartans, pro-Spartan at times, and

hated the men of the people like Kleon, or Hyperbolus the lamp-seller's son, who rose to power in Athens on the strength of their persuasiveness, without the backing of birth, tradition, prestige, or landed inheritance.

I do not say that the Sokratic teaching was alone responsible for the actions of these men, but I do maintain that the rugged individualism to which the Sokratic dialectic could be such tremendous encouragement was undoubtedly to the advantage of the ruling classes, or of the would-be dictators, as against the citizens in a group. If the Republic of Plato, supposedly a narrative from the mouth of Sokrates himself, be any guide, the Sokratic ideal of a state was not the Athenian democracy. The training given there would have been nearer to that of the Spartans, and useful primarily for war. That a people trained for war without common ownership of the means of production will ultimately be tempted to fight for conquest and dominion is never thought of. It has been remarked that Sokrates himself would never have been tolerated for more than a week in his own Republic. It is also recorded that the common man tended to be suspicious of the Sokratic dialectic on its own grounds; it probably made him out a fool. Let me point out that the chief disciple of Sokrates, Plato, was allowed to continue teaching afterwards at Athens, and lived to a ripe old age himself; yet, in his youth, he had been directly involved in the temporarily successful attempt of Kritias and the Thirty at setting up a dictatorship, only to withdraw at an early stage when the differences between the ideal and the practice of an aristocratic rule became manifest.

It is clear, then, that the verdict against Sokrates was not brought about by the vulgar multitude, but by responsible people of his own day. The structure of society had not been essentially altered, except that the forces that demanded an imperialist expansion had been severely crippled by a long war and two rebellions. His condemnation did not cause a furore even among the

aristocrats, for they had nothing more to gain from him except long after he was dead, when his case was useful as an argument against democracy. But there is a very important moral that I have kept till the last: Sokrates behaved as he did because, in his own words, he was guided by an inner voice; a divine, or daemonic message was conveyed to him in times of stress, and he never allowed fear of the consequences to divert him from obedience. It is unfortunate that a person of his intelligence, ability, uprightness, and courage was told nothing by the Gandhian inner voice about the condition of the masses at large; about changing the means of production; about allowing workers (slaves) to participate in that sort of liberty which had already brought such an access of vigour to the Greeks as to enable them to hold out against the much more powerful Persian empire. The inner voice could have told him nothing about the far distant future: that liberalism in 19th century England would flourish because of Grote's close study of Athens in his days; that a study of the classics would be an important political asset for both democrats and reactionaries. But I do think that the inner voice should have made it clear to him that a certain class of people would twist his teaching to their own profit as against the well-being of the body politic. And when the attempts of this class failed, the class itself was content to look on while the sadly damaged state gave him a choice between keeping quiet or being executed.

Fergusson & Willingdon *College Magazine*, July 1939, pp. 1-6. I As regards Sokrates and his background, the reader will find much better information in: (1) A. D. Winspear and T. Silverberg: *Who Was Socrates* (New York, 1943), (2) Benjamin Farrington: *Greek Science* (2 vol.) Pelican Books. (3) A. D. Winspear: *The Genesis of Plato's Thought* (New York, 1940).