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Book Review: *The Trial of Socrates*

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Book Reviews

I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1988.

I.F. Stone died after I had written this review but before I could ask for his response to it. While I am sadly aware of that missed opportunity, I know that, with many of you, I have been the beneficiary of his thoughtful responses through my adult life. I am grateful for the opportunity to acknowledge that debt.

This readable and provocative book invites us to have another look at Plato and Xenophon, at Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, and, not least, at Thucydides, all of whom are called forth as witnesses at a reconvened trial of Socrates. Stone's reminders of what these witnesses have to offer are thoughtful and evocative. They led me, and I believe might lead many of you, to wonder about what academic life would be like if we had all once seriously read this literature. How much could such a sense of shared cultural continuity empower us and enable us to help each other and our students? What would a society be like in which such a cultural investment was general?

I spoke of having "another" look at the classical literature in my first sentence, but I know that it would be a first look for many of us, even here in a university, with our Ph.Ds and our academic commitments. I know that one of the lessons most students learn in school, if they have encountered classical Greece at all, is that its literature is esoteric stuff — the kind of thing they have no need to know. I know also that many of us, students and faculty, who have not made the classical canon our own, will define investment in it

as an elitist conceit. To some extent it is that. Nonetheless, I suspect that no one can teach us to puncture the sort of self-protective armor that suggests that is all it is better than Socrates. He was hard on self-deception, on confusing the appearance of knowledge with the thing itself, on a preoccupation with the uses to which learning might be put, on those who did not recognize that learning was also an important kind of prayer, in which we both celebrated and gave thanks for our gifts. If I am not mistaken, his admonitions would be well placed among us.

Stone, who decided to make the commitment to learning ancient Greek and to immersing himself in the classical literature after a long and heroic career as a political journalist, and who published this book after his eightieth birthday, makes us feel a little ashamed of our failures to have done much with this core of our own general education. That seems to me not the least of the book's strengths. The relevant Greek word is, I think, *Aidos*, connoting the basic virtue of being capable of a sense of shame. It is something many of us, and I am afraid I would in this instance include Stone, could do with more of.

Stone professes to admire Socrates, but he is clearly much less than altogether pleased with him. My sense is that Socrates might be similarly uncomfortable were he to review Stone's book — that Socrates would be particularly uncomfortable with what I believe he would regard as Stone's willingness to sacrifice truth to political ideology. He would, I fear, have to remind Stone that democratic ideology has no special exemptions from the

requirement that we pursue truth as assiduously as we can, and that he, Socrates, in saying this, was not being antidemocratic. Socrates, as Stone points out, is wary of Athenian democracy, but he has more compelling reasons for this wariness than the pro-Spartan monarchist views Stone assigns to him.

William Arrowsmith in the Introduction to his translation of Aristophanes' *The Clouds* suggests that one of the key phenomena of late Golden Age Greece was its divorce from its roots. Spartan control of the countryside had urbanized the state and the quick wealth associated with the empire had subverted the steady substructure of earlier times. Arrowsmith sees the decadence of the young men who study with Socrates as a function of these forces — much larger forces than anything Socrates could have been responsible for. Forde sees the same decadence as a function of the openly immoral quest for empire Athens embarked on under Pericles, and continued in its struggle with Sparta. Kitto sees it as the steady penetration of the wholeness of the polis by the narrow instrumental values of specialists — a central tenet of Socrates' own quarrel with the Sophists. These are themes Stone, I expect, would appreciate, and ones he should have known about. My reservations about what Stone has accomplished have a good deal to do with how I interpret his silence on these points. In order to speak to it Stone would have had to acknowledge that a good deal of the decadence Arrowsmith identifies was reflected in the democracy that Stone champions. That Socrates distances himself from that democracy, which is one of Stone's chief charges against him, would then be explicable in terms other than the fondness for an autocratic monarchism Stone alleges. I am sympathetic to Socrates' apolitical stance. I am reminded of that whenever political people like Stone manifest an unquestioning conviction that all things ultimately

have to be assessed in terms of their political consequences — particularly reminded of it when I sense, as I do in Stone's book, the urgency of the effort to politicize my point of view. Stone's fervor here is single-minded enough for him to fail to recognize Socrates' sardonic humor when he tells the Assembly that the "young men of the richer classes who study with him are those who have nothing better to do." How, one might ask, can Stone take this remark at face value when Socrates suggests, later in the same speech, that "examining myself and others, is the greatest good of man...that the unexamined life is not worth living..."? How can he take the implied cavalier diletantism seriously when Socrates in that same dialogue names the rich young men who are present, and who clearly cared so much about the outcome of the trial? One has to suspect that the opportunity to reduce their experience to a sort of distraction of overly privileged and idle youth tempted Stone more than it should have.

Stone's willingness to sacrifice what he knows for what he believes he must stand for is evident in other places. He has a marvelous chapter on freedom of speech in Athens, but he also devotes a chapter to stories Socrates could have used from earlier Greek poets that had anti-democratic themes. The evidence presented by Stone, who is the recipient of a Medal of Liberty from the American Civil Liberties Union and should know better, is terribly thin. In the end we do not know that Socrates actually used such stories or even that he was accused of using them. We know only that Xenophon did not deny that he used them and that if Stone were Xenophon and Socrates had not used them, Stone would have made that explicit.

There are a number of what seem to me to be striking examples of this sort of thing. Stone's view of Socrates, for one, is largely drawn from Plato, and Plato, Stone certainly

knew very well, had ample reason to distrust the democracy that had executed his mentor. Nowhere is this simple fact affirmed. Instead Stone draws on the Platonic literature, not as if it were a byproduct of the execution of Socrates, which is its central pivot, but instead as if it were a cause of that terrible verdict. If sophistry is twisting the information one has in order to justify an a priori conclusion, it may well be Stone rather than Socrates who provides the clearer case in point.

It is also worth noting that Socrates is identified as a prototypical Sophist by Aristophanes twenty-five years before he is brought before the Assembly, not irrelevantly in a drama explicitly designed to win a prize based on popular approval. Aristophanes' broad strokes are directed at the otherworldly craziness of academic life — and at its irrelevance to anything practical, except perhaps the continuing income of its practitioners. It is as anti-Sophist (and anti-professorial) a play as one can easily imagine, and it is produced in the midst of the Peloponnesian Wars, but there is no suggestion that anyone is in secret league with Sparta, or that an anti-democratic animus informs the philosopher's other-worldliness. Stone, who says some very interesting things about Aristophanes, fails to note this omission, and it is hard for me to assume that his failure to do that is unconnected to the case Stone wants to make.

Stone compellingly points out that Plato's dialogues, despite their nominal rejection of Sophism, have a goodly measure of Sophistic qualities. In this too, Stone sees underlying political dynamics. It is not Plato's reaction to Heraclitus (which Stone mentions only once) that is responsible for the rigidity of the theory of Forms and some terribly sterile arguments about what is true. The sterility of these dialogues is instead attributed to a withdrawal from democratic politics masked as an apolit-

ical otherworldliness. Socrates' preference for rule by "those who know" is not seen as a commitment to the quest for wisdom and to that government which will support such a quest, but as a veiled way of expressing his secret belief in monarchy. Antiphon's belief in the inequality of wealth as the chief source of civic dissension, and his belief in the consent of the governed as the basis of the polis, like Alcidas' opposition to any natural law justifications for slavery, are presented as part of an implicit indictment. Stone, after noting the uniqueness of each of their positions in Athenian thought, goes on to ask rhetorically why neither Socrates nor Plato thought the same thing. Even if we allow the question, an answer that does not take into account the senses in which Plato's politics must have been a reaction, albeit a modest one, to the execution of Socrates by the Athenian Assembly, seems clearly inadequate. I can only understand Stone's position as an expression of his unwillingness to see Plato and his peers as victims of the democracy. That would put Stone on a side of an argument where he does not wish to go.

Political virtue, defined as holding forth on the side of "the people" and the Assembly, not truth, seems to be Stone's bottom line. I heard "What side are you on?" when I read the arguments I have been recounting. Do you know the song? "In Harlan County," it goes, "you either are a union man or a scab for J.H. Blair. There are no neutrals there." Stone doesn't seem to want to allow any in Athens either. The democracy is beautiful, fragile, and at war with the antidemocratic (and antiphilosophic) Spartans, and from time to time with the even worse Persians, on the outside, while it is being subverted by internal oligarchs like Socrates and his students internally. An explicit reference is made to Franco's famous phrase about his fifth column inside Madrid. The lessons Stone learned

from the Spanish Civil War and from hard times in Eastern Kentucky seem to simplify things for him a good deal.

Alcibiades, who was nothing if he was not complex, offers an interesting example of this proclivity to simplify. Alcibiades studied under Socrates as a teenager and knew him until his death at forty-six. He was by all accounts, beautiful, courageous, brilliant, and charismatic. He and Socrates were comrades in arms twice, each having had occasion to save the other's life. Alcibiades convincingly claims to admire Socrates above all men, though he has refused to act on his teaching all of his adult life. Alcibiades, who Xenophon suggests "was hunted by many on account of his beauty," is unable to seduce Socrates — claiming that his chance to do so would be about equal to his chance to defeat Ajax in hand-to-hand combat. Alcibiades, according to Thucydides, who certainly does not approve of him, is unquestionably the most successful Greek general of the Golden Age. He is interesting, complicated, and distressingly modern. At various times in his incredibly mercurial career, he is a champion of Samian democracy, a popular democratic leader, an agent of the Persian Satrap, an organizer of oligarchic revolts against both the Athenian and the Argive democracies, and the last great hope of the Athenian Democracy, which he almost rescues from what looked like certain defeat after earlier both betraying it and being betrayed by it. He is an enemy of the repressive Athenian oligarchies of 411 and 404, the latter of which is responsible for his death. Stone, however, needs him only to be on the side to which he is assigned, "a Sparta-loving Athenian," and that is all we get.

Alcibiades is presented as a disciple who followed through on the path Socrates had, perhaps unwittingly, laid out for him. Plato's representation of Alcibiades in the Sympo-

sium sees his relationship with Socrates differently. Socrates, he suggests "...makes me admit that while I'm spending my time on politics I am neglecting all the things that are crying for attention in myself. So I just refuse to listen to him — as if he were one of those Sirens you know,...Socrates is the only man in the world who can make me feel ashamed...I know I ought to do the things he tells me to, and yet the moment I'm out of his sight I don't care what I do to keep in with the mob. So I dash off like a runaway slave...". "Things that are crying for attention in one's self" are reduced to elitist detachment for Stone, and like Alcibiades, he "dashes off from them like a runaway slave" — only in Stone's case, he does not seem to know he is running.

Alcibiades is said by Stone to have "...won the hearts of his Spartan hosts by giving up his elegant Athenian manners, and adopting the Spartan mode of life." Plutarch's *Life of Alcibiades* is cited to the effect that "When they [the Spartans] saw him with his hair untrimmed, taking cold baths, on terms of intimacy with their coarse bread and supping black porridge they could hardly believe their eyes...In Sparta, he was all for bodily training, simplicity of life and severity of countenance." In the next sentence Stone builds his case by speaking more generally of the "Sparta-loving Athenians" of whom Alcibiades is said to be an example. The rest of Plutarch's description, which Stone does not give us, suggests that "he [Alcibiades] could...change faster than a chameleon...At Sparta, he was devoted to athletic exercises, was frugal and reserved; in Ionia, luxurious, gay, and indolent; in Thrace, always drinking; in Thessaly, ever on horseback; and when he lived with Tisaphernes, the Persian satrap, he exceeded the Persians themselves in magnificence and pomp." Alcibiades is terribly ambitious. He can reduce public issues to the private scores he wishes to settle, and then

proceed to settle them with great ruthlessness. He does not seem to allow the public consequences of these actions to come to mind any more than he allows himself encounters with "the one man who can make me feel ashamed." He was orphaned early and brought up in Pericles' household without any close family contact at all. He flees those who are close to him all of his life. One is tempted to think of him in clinical terms. When Stone suggests him as the test of the Socratic tie between knowledge and virtue ("...if virtue is knowledge, as Socrates taught, then ...Alcibiades should have been preeminently virtuous..."), it is hard for me to imagine that he does not know that he is distorting the Socratic position. He allows himself to do it, I believe, because he, unlike Socrates or Alcibiades, is on the right side.

I have dwelt on what seem to me to be the book's weaknesses. It is passionate, powerful, and full of interesting insights too. I found Stone's discussion of Greek theatre, like his discussion of free speech, quite wonderful — something it may well be useful to share with students. Stone's discussion of the dialectic was similarly instructive, though he gives less credence to the value of a quest for ideals than I would. His discussion of the polis is lovely and in its emphasis on the centrality of logos — good rational conversation valued as an end in itself — might well be something many of us could think about more when we considered our roles as teachers and colleagues.

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Barry Castro

Primo Levi, *Other People's Trades*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Summit Books, 1989. 222 pages.

_____, *The Drowned and the Saved*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Summit Books, 1988. 203 pages.

Primo Levi's apparent suicide in 1987 shocked the literary world. Best known for his *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947), a recounting of the unspeakable brutalities he experienced in the Buna Lager at Auschwitz, Levi wrote eight books in all: *The Reawakening* (1965), *The Periodic Table* (1975), *The Monkey's Wrench* (1978), *Moments of Reprieve* (1981), *If Not Now, When?* (1982), and the two of this review. Each in some way touched on events of the Holocaust, some in memoir, some in fiction.

At his death, Levi left no explanation, no statement. Some attributed the suicide to failing health; he was 68. Others pointed to Levi's comment on the suicide of Jean Amry, also a victim of the Nazi concentration camps: "Anyone who has been tortured, remains tortured." Whatever the reason, and it is doubtful we will ever know, Levi's last two books will remain a tribute to his engaging mind and moral vision.

Though *Other People's Trades* is Levi's last published work in America, it first appeared in Italy in 1985. For my purposes its earlier publication date makes it a good starting point in examining Levi's wonderfully fertile mind. Readers who do not know Levi may be surprised to learn he was an organic chemist, who spent his professional life managing a paint factory in Turin. Indeed, his education in chemistry is one of the accidents of fate which contributed to his survival in Auschwitz, where he "worked" on the Nazi's ill-fated efforts to produce synthetic rubber.

In *Other People's Trades*, Levi's boundless curiosity and scientific training combine to produce some of the most engaging personal essays