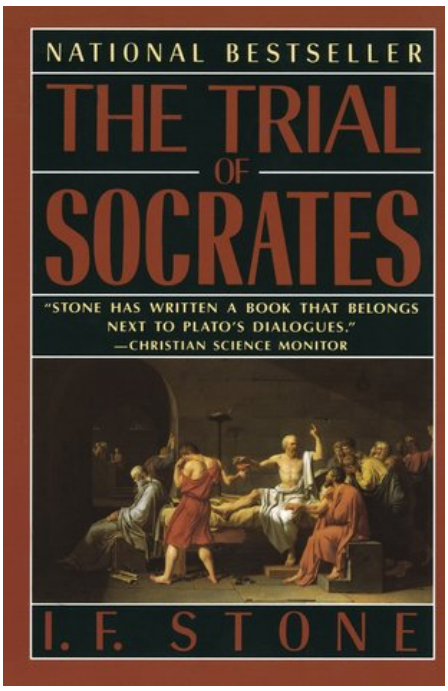

The Trial of Socrates

I.F. Stone

The Trial of Socrates

I.F. Stone

The Trial of Socrates I.F. Stone
In unraveling the long-hidden issues of the most famous free speech case of all time, noted author I.F. Stone ranges far and wide over Roman as well as Greek history to present an engaging and rewarding introduction to classical antiquity and its relevance to society today. *The New York Times* called this national best-seller an "intellectual thriller."

The Trial of Socrates Details

Date	:	Published February 1st 1989 by Anchor (first published 1988)
ISBN	:	9780385260329
Author	:	I.F. Stone
Format	:	Paperback 282 pages
Genre	:	Philosophy, History, Nonfiction, Biography, Politics

From Reader Review The Trial of Socrates for online ebook

Mike says

Most of us probably read at least excerpts from *The Republic* and *The Trial and Death of Socrates* (composed of the short dialogues *Crito, Phaedo, Apology,* and *Euthyphro* at some point in college. Socrates as represented by his pupil Plato is considered one of the greatest philosophers of all time; and in some degree, he is considered to be the break-point between Pre-Socratic or Eleatic philosophic and the philosophy of the classical age.

But what the astute reader of Plato's dialogues might notice is that Socrates really isn't all that great. He is frequently a snob, for instance; in *Gorgias,* he compares oratory to cooking, and "true philosophy" to medicine or good nutrition. But what's so wrong with making food tasty? Why can't truth also be beautiful—in fact, why isn't beauty one of the ways we know truth? It certainly is in philosophy and mathematics. It also shows a hostility to those who work, especially those who work with their hands. Why?

Then you get to *The Republic,* so admired by so many thinkers over the course of history. But if you read it carefully—or even not particularly carefully, as I did in college—you realize that Socrates/Plato is basically a totalitarian. He's really got something against those who work with their hands; he dislikes any sort of cosmopolitanism; he dislikes beauty, especially for its own sake. He advocates brain-washing, a strict caste system, and secret police to root out dissent. He certainly, and especially, hates democratic politics. Then you read *The Apology,* Plato's representation of Socrates' closing arguments to the jury that tried him, and you realize: this guy also had a death wish. He was purposely antagonizing the jury! He wasn't even trying to get acquitted!

So, Socrates, the secular martyr that many who could not quite bring themselves to believe in Christ sort-of idolized, is maybe a more complex character—and one far less to be admired—than we were taught to think. For this reason, Stone wants to bring his trial and death from the realm of "secular martyrdom" to "I ain't saying his execution was right, but I kind of understand." I think he is quite successful.

Stone's synopsis of the extant ancient literature on Socrates, from his students Plato and Xenophon, Plato's student Aristotle, the Roman historians Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, and Diodorus Siculus, and the late-Roman orator Libanius, added very little to my understanding (having read most of it already), but I can see it adding significantly to the knowledge of the non-classicist. What did add some knowledge for me is Stone's speculations on the political situation in Athens when Socrates died. His analysis sometimes fails to hold up, especially when it becomes wildly speculative; but generally, he at least makes his case believable.

Even if the basic chill that ought to run down your spine from the totalitarian state, or the idiotic Theory of Forms didn't happen, Stone will provide you with a lot of reasons to be an Aristotelian.

Mohamed Elshawaf says

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John says

Izzy Does the Ancients: The greatest US journalist of the 20th century -- or probably ever -- had to stop publication of "I. F. Stone's Weekly" due to health reasons, but then he spent his 70s learning ancient Greek and returning to the Classical studies of his youth, and the result was this book.

Here, "Western Civilization's" favorite plaster (marble?) saint -- bigger than Jesus long before the Beatles were -- gets his long-overdue demolition. Stone can't justify the verdict that eventually sentenced Socrates to death, but he does reveal Socrates for who he was, even though the records of the prosecution's side have long since disappeared. Socrates was a sneering enemy of democracy and the common people, holding his own relatively free city in open contempt even as he admired the brutish barracks-society of Sparta. His bratty aristocratic disciples had been involved in two bloody dictatorships, including one on what we would today call Vichy lines, propped up in Athens with Spartan arms after the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War. The philosopher's followers had then been implicated in a third, failed plot to overthrow Athenian democracy again; and Socrates was put on trial when the democratic elements of the city were worried that he might inspire yet a fourth plot.

It takes a special sort of genius to bring new life to all of this ancient material, and I. F. Stone does it with that special combination of learned commentary, radical-democratic zeal, and investigative precision that earned him an eternal place in our hearts. In the process he even redeems Socrates on his own terms, because if the philosopher was right when he said that "the unexamined life is not worth living," it took nearly 2400 years before someone examined his life truthfully.

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Mohmed Abd el salam says

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Erik Graff says

My first exposure to I.F. Stone was in high school when I stumbled upon his Hidden History of the Korean War in the library. The contents were quite upsetting as they contradicted most of what I'd thought I'd known about the event. My second exposure to Stone was at Grinnell College when I saw a documentary about him and his Weekly in the Alumni Recitation Hall. Before that I'd not given much thought to him as a person. Indeed, although I'd seen him cited often enough by others, it hadn't particularly registered yet that he had

authored the Korea book.

Then, years later, I heard that he'd retired, learned classical Greek and had written a book about Socrates. Now this was interesting. As soon as I found a used copy, I purchased and read it.

The book is about Socrates' trial, conviction and sentence. It should be read by the legions of philosophers who purport to teach students about the legendary sophist without knowing much of the history of the period. Stone provides adequate background for the general reader and a convincing argument that Socrates was sentenced to exile or death because of treason.

Briefly summarized, the argument is based on the fact that Plato and quite probably Socrates--as witness the idealized Sparta of The Republic--were sympathizers with Sparta. Sparta had recently won the Peloponnesian War and had installed a military garrison on a hill on the outskirts of Athens while forcing the polis to decommission almost its entire fleet. Oligarchical Laconian sympathizers like Plato vied during the postwar period with traditional democrats for power, many of the former being represented sympathetically in the Platonic dialogs. With the garrison nearby, Socrates could not very well be prosecuted for treason. Instead, he was charged with impiousness and the corruption of the youth--most notably, of course, his lover, the repeated traitor, Alcibiades--and convicted by vote on these ostensible grounds.

A defender of the First Amendment, Stone is naturally ambivalent about the trial. He himself had been called a traitor often enough and had in fact been blacklisted from his profession during the fifties. On the issue of oligarchy versus democracy, however, Socrates/Plato and Stone stood on opposite sides.

Mark says

This work was incredible. I enjoyed it from start to finish. Many of us read Plato's Trial of Socrates in High School and were taught to regard Socrates as a kind of martyred vanguard who was wrongfully accused, tried, and ultimately murdered by Athenian Democracy. Teachers in particular typically view Socrates with rose colored glasses. However, after reading (on my own) most of Plato including his Republic, I couldn't mirror Socrates the man with the Socrates as he was lovingly depicted in my high school English class.

In his book, Stone demonstrates (convincingly in my view) that the Athenian democracy was justified in putting Socrates to death. He does this by actually READING ALL OF PLATO (something I doubt many who teach Socrates have done) and thereby understanding how out of place the political views of Socrates were in the first democracy. After all, Socrates proposed that an authorian dictatorship was the most sensible of all political bodies.

What I particularly liked was the ability of Stone to put Socrates in historical context, something that teachers of the three most misunderstood men in history-Socrates, Jesus and Shakespeare, fail miserably to do; and by doing so, he clears Athenian Democracy of the crime of the ages and no less points out our own gross hypocrisy to boot. We would certainly have put Socrates to death had he existed in our own time, and therefore we should not be casting aspersions on Athenian democracy.

Socraticgadfly says

The real Socrates (and Plato, too?) revealed

Socrates was NOT a democrat, of course. His touting of Sparta, and his relations to Alciabiades and other authoritarian rebels makes that clear.

But, Stone also points out that he wasn't an intellectual egalitarian, either, and that the "Socratic method," to the degree it is touted as egalitarian, or anything similar, is a fraud.

If anybody was egalitarian at that time, it was Protagoras and Socrates' other Sophist opponents. As Athens hand no lawyers, not even government prosecutors, citizens pressed their own cases, civil and criminal alike.

Hence, skills in rhetoric were hugely valuable.

Reading through the lines of Plato's "winners write history" description of Socrates, it's clear that he was interested in setting up straw men, etc., rather than having a legitimate, question-based search and dialogue. And, of course, we don't know the Sophists' *real* answers, just what Plato put on their lips. And, Stone sets you up to see all of that.

That all said, the book isn't perfect. Not all of Stone's conclusions are warranted. But, it's still the valued corrective to hagiography of Socrates that it was when it came out.

Abd El-rahman says

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Jim Leffert says

So you think that Socrates is deservedly one of civilization’s culture heroes for his pioneering use of the dialectic method in philosophy and for being a martyr for philosophic inquiry when he ran afoul of the Athens city fathers, who sentenced him to death by swallowing hemlock? I.F. Stone doesn’t think so, and in this book he lays out evidence to explain why the democratic government of Athens tried and executed him. Stone may not excuse the decision to execute Socrates but he makes a case for why it happened. Analyzing a variety of ancient sources, he demonstrates that Socrates had great contempt for Athens’ democratic form of government and continually ridiculed it to his young tutees; energetically advocated an “enlightened” rule by autocratic dictators; did little or nothing to speak out against or stand up against the dictatorial regimes that periodically took over Athens; and points out that his tutees, who were all from the aristocratic class, included two of the main dictators.

Stone also argues that had Socrates wished to, he could have persuaded the jury to give him a lesser punishment. Instead, because Socrates wanted to die, he baited the jury and goaded them into imposing this unusually severe sentence. Stone comes out swinging on the first page of this book and never lets up. He fires away: Socrates loved to poke holes in others’ reasoning to make them look stupid but did not offer a viable alternative to others’ thinking; furthermore, he didn’t take his wife and children’s well-being into consideration when he goaded his captors into making him kick the bucket. The book moves a little slowly in some places, but all in all, it offers an enlightening analysis of Greek philosophy, politics, literature, political history, and legal practices as he explicates the most memorable legal case of 5th century B.C.E.

Alan says

Since I was teaching Lit and Humanities when this first came out, Stone changed my teaching of Plato's Apology, which was in the Norton Anthology. I resisted the idea that Socrates was an aristocratic (and maybe, Thirty Tyrants) sympathizer, since I am the offspring of Puritan forbears who left England for Massachusetts when Charles II started executing--drawing and quartering-- Republicans who signed his Dad's death warrant. But I know England still has plenty of aristocrats and their sympathizers, as do Italy, Spain and France, not to mention Holland and Denmark.

But Stone has done his homework, and knows far more about politics and its history than I. Undeniable that Socrates' disciples were Critias (the most theivish and murderous of the Thirty Tyrants) and Alcibiades (the most licentious and violent in the days of democracy). Though Socrates himself lived a simple life, unattractive to most Athenians, whose very lifeblood was ambition, he could be accused of fostering such disciples, as well as leading the young to despise the democratic constitution (63). Socrates derided such egalitarian measures as election of officers by lot (64). And the youth loved to hear Socrates examine and undermine prominent citizens (82).

According to Plato, at Delphos Socrates learned to question Athenians, to find wisdom. First, the statesmen, whom he found wanting; next, the tragic poets (whose works are still read despite Socrates' judgement) whom he found deficient; finally, the craftsmen, whose work was prized throughout the trade routes, and who infact built the Parthenon. Socrates found them all ignorant.

He would not find IF Stone so. The heart of his book is Ch 11, where the satiric view of Socrates turns into prosecution. Stone titles this chapter, "The Three Earthquakes," of B.C. 411, in Thucydides, then 404 (precipitated by the loss of Athens' fleet) and 401 in Xenophon. The first two were dictatorships, the Four Hundred, and the Thirty Tyrants. Though each lasted only three, and then eight months, they "crowded many horrors into a short and unforgettable span" (141).
Socrates says he never joined the "sworn societies," synomosias, or "conspiracies," the secret vow-taking groups that affiliated to keep aristocratic command and privilege. Thucydides points out that "only enemies of democracy needed secret orgnizations"(142). Though Socrates himself did not participate, he could not deny that some of his most famous pupils or associates had taken a leading part in these conspiracies"(142).
After the military disaster at Syracuse, the treasonous general Peisander abolished the democracies Athens had established in its subject cities, and those cities soon provided troops of oligarchic sympathy to overthrow democracy in Athens in 411. Some of the young men in these secret clubs organized squads of assassins, and put to death "a certain Androcles," as Thucydides informs us, "'because he was the most prominent member of the popular party. Others opposed to their plans they secretly made away with in the same manner.' Terror spread."(143)
Imagining the conspiracy to be much more widespread than it actually was, the democrats were "cowed in mind." All members of the democratic party approached each other with suspicion.
After Sparta's triumph from Athens' loss of its fleet in 404, treason multiplied. So we in Trumpster America are proper spectators of Athenian democracy versus oligarchy, patriotism versus treason, craftsmen versus imports. But where are our Athenian tragic poets? Bob Dylan? Our Socrates? That'd be me, if I only sympathized with the aristocratic party. Hmmm... Since the Royal Marriage, I've been saying, maybe the U.S. should re-apply for Commonwealth of Nations status.
Prime Minister May has more balls than the Trumpster to challenge Putin's attempted murder in Salisbury, as well as oligarchic destruction of American democracy.

Ahmad No'man says

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Chris says

I haven't read a book that has made me more angry in a very long time, perhaps ever. Part of this was due to the surprise that I felt at the tone of the book. I was expected a scholarly book, but what I got was an ad hominem attack on a figure, Socrates, that had enjoyed a very favorable standing in my imagination due solely to his portrayal in Plato's dialogues.

I don't use the term ad hominem lightly. I do believe that Stone's book rests completely on the false assumption that democracy is always the best form of government, and that every upstanding 5th century B.C. Athenian is above criticism because he was a democrat. Democracy is never formally defended, rather Stone's own prejudices and beliefs are taken for granted as a starting point for the taking down of Socrates. I should have known what I was getting into with Stone, but I was ignorant to who he was - a prominent leftist journalist who had some role in the documentation of McCarthy hearings of the fifties. Ironically enough he writes a book attacking and denouncing Socrates simply for being anti-democratic.

Anybody with a passing familiarity with Socrates through the writings of Plato is well aware that Socrates was no democrat. Stone presents it as if it's a revelation, and then proceeds to justify Socrates' execution because of it. Stone acknowledges that there is a contradiction here. Any real democracy worth its salt would never execute a man simply for things he said. Yet this is exactly what Athens did. Stone does claims he cannot defend the act, but you wouldn't know it by reading this book

In reality, we know very little about the historical Socrates. For all we know, Socrates wrote nothing. Knowledge of his life comes primarily from Plato's dialogues and to a lesser extent from works by Xenophon, Aristotle and Aristophanes. However, Aristotle never knew Socrates, for Socrates predated him, and Aristophanes was a comic playwright whose focus was not historic accuracy at all. Even Plato's Socrates was a vehicle for his own philosophy and determining where Socrates ends and Plato begins in the dialogues is an exercise in futility (those same exercises are a PhD candidate's specialty). Stone acknowledges as much, but then proceeds to quote Socrates straight from the dialogues as if this were not an issue at all, and as if we were getting direct quotes from a reliable source.

Repeatedly through the first half of the book Stone frames Socrates and Plato as anti-democratic philosophers who spend their time on "wild goose chases" for absolute truth. According to Stone, it is an unforgivable sin that they are aloof and skeptical of the goodness and competence of humanity. If one do not spend one's time lauding the talents and virtue of the common man then apparently one's philosophy is completely worthless. Worse than this is Stone's anti-intellecutal bent. He sees no value in someone who abstains from the public sphere. A life of contemplation can benefit no one.

On the other side of the spectrum he puts Aristotle on a pedestal. He argues that Aristotle was actually representative of mainstream Athenian thought, which is that true happiness or "eudaimonia" (a greek word which more is more accurately translated as a satisfaction deeper than what we think of as happiness) can only be found through communion with society. Stone claims that Aristotle argues "The individual can find the good life only when associated with others in a community." But in reality Aristotle views were much more complex than this. Surely no thinker as profound as Aristotle could have spent the majority of his time cavorting with society. The catalogue that Aristotle amassed must have required vast amounts of time alone in contemplation and study. And his philosophy reflects a contradiction between the desire for an active and contemplative life. Daniel Robinson, a scholar far more familiar with Aristotle and Philosophy in general

than I.F. Stone puts it this way: "[In Aristotle:] There is a fundamental tension between a life of activity and a life of contemplation. Once a scholar decides to devote him or herself to a life of study, which includes the recognition that by nature we are fallible beings, it becomes impossible to take decisive action at the daily political level." This is a fact that any scholar recognizes, and problem that anyone who examines their base assumptions comes across. I.F. Stone is not a man who has examined his base assumptions.

The second half of the book redeems it somewhat. It reveals what I believe to be Stone wanted the point of the book be . It gives historical background of the Trial of Socrates. It details the political turmoil that had severely threatened the democratic government (twice overthrowing it completely) and gave reasons why Athenians might have been afraid of an absolute monarchist such as Socrates. In the end the book becomes a defense of Athens rather than an attack on Socrates. It gives the reader a different perspective of the trial, and lets one see it from the perspective of the accusers. That being said, the book is still a failure because of the ridiculousness of the first half. The tone of the narrative is vitriolic and completely inappropriate for a study of something that happened over 2,000 years ago. Socrates views threaten nothing and interest only a few, so spare us the venom, Stone. If you wanted to write a defense of Athens, then you should have done it. Trying to take down the father of philosophy as we know it is far to big a task for Stone, and frankly he chose one of the more uninteresting and inconsequential aspects of Socrates philosophy to dissect: his politics.

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