

## Socrates δημοτικός: Xenophon's Socrates and the Athenian Elites

Xenophon has long been associated with the aristocratic leisure class, yet his attitude towards democracy has been a matter of scholarly reevaluation in recent years (see Dobksi 2009; Kroeker 2009). Gregory Vlastos (1994:87-108) has argued that while Plato presents a democratic Socrates, the Socrates of Xenophon is fully oligarchic. Without addressing the question of Plato's Socrates, this paper argues that Xenophon's Socrates is not oligarchic in nature, but takes a complex view of Athenian politics, rooted in elite ideas but dismayed by the failure of the elite to live up to its ideals. Rather than mounting an attack on the Athenian democracy, Xenophon's Socrates focuses on the failure of the elite to live up to their role and reputation.

Xenophon's Socrates only rarely expresses a negative impression of the δῆμος: when trying to convince Charmides not to fear speaking in front of the δῆμος, Socrates characterizes it as full of people who are ἀφρονέστατοι and ἀσθενέστατοι, thinking of nothing but exchange in the marketplace (*Mem.* 3.7.5); while in the *Oikonomikos* Socrates speaks negatively of 'banausic' trades since they do not allow men to devote attention to their friends or their city (*Oik.* 4.2). Additionally, Socrates, claims that rulers (ἄρχοντες) are only those who know how to rule (τοὺς ἐπισταμένους ἄρχειν) (*Mem.* 3.9.10), which Vlastos (1994:106) takes as an attack on the sovereignty of the Athenian magistrates and jurors selected by lot.

Yet Xenophon refers to Socrates explicitly as δημοτικός (*Mem.* 1.2.60) and Socrates never approaches the idea of taking power away from the δῆμος. When the prosecutor argues that Socrates' remarks about the lot taught his companions to despise the established constitution (καταφρονεῖν τῆς καθεστῶσης πολιτείας) and to act violently (ποιεῖν βιαίους) (*Mem.* 1.2.9), Xenophon counters that those who believe that they are able to instruct the citizens in what is

beneficial are least likely to be violent (*Mem.* 1.2.10). Indeed Xenophon's Socrates shows remarkable trust in the decision-making of the δῆμος. In a conversation with the captain Nichomachides, Socrates defends the δῆμος for choosing an οἰκονομικός as general, rather than someone with military experience, arguing that it has selected someone with good management skills who has a knack for success (*Mem.* 3.4; Gray 2005:144).

In fact, Socrates views the elites themselves as a greater cause for concern than the commons. When the prosecutor suggests that Socrates quoted the Homeric passage about Thersites to show that it was right to ridicule the δημότας καὶ πένητας, Xenophon counters that by that argument Socrates would be advocating ridicule against himself. Instead, Socrates meant that those who cannot help the city, even if they are rich, must be hindered (*Mem.* 1.2.58-60). Likewise in Book III of the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon says that πονηρία at Athens lies in the supposed *kaloi kagathoi*, not the masses. In this conversation, Pericles the younger worries about the character of the Athenians for their un-Spartan ways and the loss of their old excellence (3.5.14). But Socrates tells Pericles not to think that the Athenians are sick from an incurable πονηρία, and points to how well ordered they are on the ships (3.5.18). Pericles responds that it is marvelous to see that these sorts of men obey their superiors, but the hoplites and the cavalrymen, who are thought to be the best for their καλοκάγαθία, are most insubordinate (3.5.19).

Socrates' main concern is the place of the elite within a democracy, not a desire for a change in the system. When Socrates says that rulers are those who know how to rule, he does not say that they need to be in an official position to fulfill their abilities. In fact, he draws a distinction between these rulers and those elected by vote or lot (*Mem.* 3.9.10). This attitude reflects the fact that since the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, most Athenian politicians, Pericles

being the primary exception, did not derive their power from public office (Ober 1989:76-91). Socrates wants leaders who are able to convince the δῆμος, not to take power away from them. Xenophon's Socrates thus approaches things from an elite perspective, the proper role of the elites, but he seeks to align them with democratic ideology, not supplant it.

### Bibliography

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