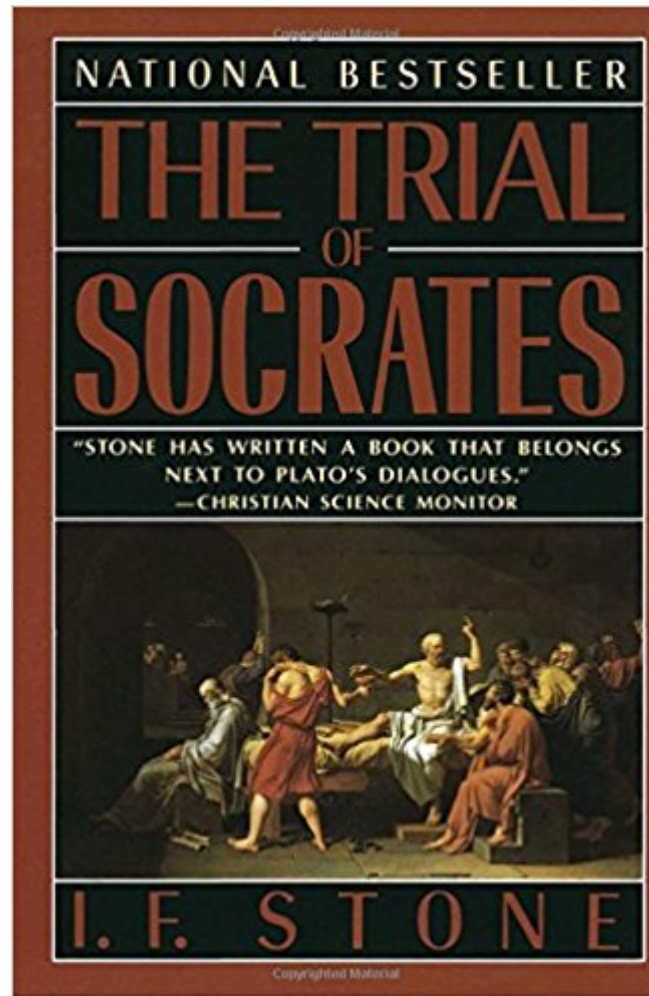




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The Trial Of Socrates



Synopsis

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."

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Customer Reviews

"The philosopher we meet on these pages is an arrogant, bullying elitist who welcomed death and did his best to antagonize the jury that sentenced him," stated PW. "In this iconoclastic portrait of a secular saint, Socrates emerges as a thoroughly dislikable, albeit superior, man who upheld unpopular truths." Copyright 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Since his retirement in 1971, former muckraker Stone has turned classicist. He is especially fascinated by Socrates's trial because it represents a "black mark" for the free and democratic Athens that he admires. Stone argues that while the Athenian verdict cannot be defended, it can be understood: Socrates was an anti-democratic reactionary whose philosophy posed a genuine threat to liberal ideals. Stone's portrait of Socrates sharply contrasts with the popular hagiographies and will stimulate a wide range of readers, although specialists will find much to argue with.

Recommended for general collections. Richard Hogan, Southeastern Massachusetts Univ., North Dartmouth
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This is a superb book. One comes away feeling like a far more educated person than before reading it. Stone performed an immensely valuable service in writing this book for the rest of us.

Exhaustively researched in Greek from original sources, I. F. Stone has created a masterpiece of scholarship, history and literature in his advanced years.

.What is so amazing about ancient Athens, is it's honest democracy, a true government by the people. This was no counterfeit version of democracy found in modern America with such authoritarian policies of the "war on drugs," and the "patriot act." Unlike the American justice system, revenue motivated decisions did not hold weight and were non-existent in Athens, where education and oratory powers were taught to ALL citizens, who were in turn, truly listened to, as there were no need for high paid lawyers as in today's so called veneer version of democratic society, for in Athens, each citizen was capable of defending himself in court and the court would honor and listen. There was no inside circle of prosecutor-judge-cop-public defender bias. All citizens took part in juries and government decision-making. True free speech existed, something that most people in today's American democratic society have no idea what that really is. For instance, Socrates, attacked such open freedom and democracy for years. The result was never persecution of any sort, but rather, the playwrights writing of various comedies depicting the infantile and foolish nature of the rhetoric Socrates was churning out. The history Stone brings out is well done. He relates the two temporary successful take overs from the Spartan influenced four hundred and later, the thirty, both replacing the democracy with oligarchy and dictatorships, only to fail in the restoration of democracy. Too make matters worse, the political enemies of such coos were former students of Socrates! What makes Stone's book so congruent with ancient Greece is his historical analysis of the Greek democracy and its very foundational working structure that could not endorse the loss of free thinking. The idea of Witch trials, and persecution for free thinking and free speech, however condemnatory of the government did not occur. The comedies, such as Astopheles, "The Clouds," to name just one, was only one of many that used the anti-democratic, anti-Athens attacks of Socrates as depiction in exposure of tragedy in comical form. Here Socrates was ridiculed and made to look like a fool. Never was there hard feeling, nor subsequent governmental persecution from such plays. Even Socrates is reported to have laughed openly at the plays depiction of himself and his "thinkery." The problem Stone brings out, and this is the highlight of his book, is that many other historians have literalized such play wrights into literal historical accounts, teaching that true history consisted of the Athenian democracy acting without free speech in punishment and accusations.

Here Stone acknowledges such comedies as purely fictional, that is, true characters, places and events fictionally changed, altering either past events, current or future to convey their points. This is reason for their stories that contradict the freedom of the Greek polis, the government of the people, the true democracy. The trial of Socrates was that of paranoia that eventually cropped up in Athens Greece. Two recent governmental take overs occurred with the threat of a third. The previous rebels being Socrates former students. Even here, Socrates could have used a defense that would have surely cleared him, but desired not to. He could have easily reached out to the Athenian ideals of free thinking and speech, the cities gods and goddess of wisdom, persuasion and justice, however his very defense while clearing him, would have both destroyed his anti-democratic, anti-Athens foundational arguments in favor of Spartan-like oligarchy and vindicate the democracy of Athens, the very type of free government that Socrates spent his entire philosophical life attacking. In Athens executed death penalty of Socrates, she went against her very foundation, she sinned against herself. What is so profound about this book and Stone's presentation is the structure of ancient Greece, Athens verses Spartan, and the very make up of Athens democracy. One shudder's when comparing the real deal and element of open Athenian democracy with the modern day American democracy, gaining understanding of both democratic values, vulnerability and today's quasi-democratic counterfeits, that of totalitarian/authoritarian efforts to control.

This explains what "corrupting the youth" was all about. Lets just say my philosophy professor didn't know what he was talking about.

No, that's not ME being provocative with my review title. I.F. Stone makes the linkage explicit between Critias -- Plato's spokesman in several dialogues and "the most thievish, the most violent, the most murderous" of the Thirty who briefly usurped power in Athens just a few years before the trial of Socrates -- and the several dictators of Latin America history. According to Stone, the oligarchic 'clubs' of Athens were "the prototypes of the death squads the military used in Argentina, El Salvador, and Chile in our time." (p. 143). It's a odd irony, says Stone, that Socrates has been the very icon of martyrdom in the cause of free thought, when in fact neither he nor his elitist disciple Plato had anything but contempt for egalitarian values, free speech, or the consent of the governed. Both were persistent admirers of caste-structured repressive Sparta, rather than the Athens which tolerated their disdain. Plato's "philosopher king", maintained by a caste of military "guardians", does indeed look a lot like Pinochet, Franco, Duvalier, Salazar, or a certain vice-president of recent memory. I.F. Stone has the rare distinction of having been castigated as a Marxist or worse by

right-tilting readers, yet acclaimed by readers of the same stripe as a 'libertarian.' He's a bit of both; his goal, as he says in his preface to this book, is "a liberating synthesis of Marx and Jefferson."Speaking of Jefferson... Slave-owners of the American South and their literary minions - chiefly lawyers, journalists, and clergymen - delighted in asserting that their 'freedom-loving' society was a New Athens. With their stringent repression of any discussion of abolition, their censorship of the mails, their imprisonment and sometime execution of dissidents -- all measures of proper government according to Plato's Republic -- the proper comparison should have been to Sparta, a tyranny based on racial enslavement of the non-Dorian helots, on enforced conformity, and on elitist derogation of labor. The accusation against Socrates was "corruption of the Youth." Stone's central thesis is that the accusation was accurate, though the trial was both illegal and unjust, and a lamentable violation of the very Athenian values that the Socratics rejected. The youths were such as Critias, Charmides, Alcibiades, the gilded scions of the wealthy oligarchs who were never reconciled to the enfranchisement of the middle and lower classes. As portrayed by Plato, Socrates invariably scoffed at the notion that 'ordinary people' - workers, merchants, farmers - could possibly govern themselves as wisely as a caste of 'experts' in the guise of philosophers. Stone concludes eventually that the 70-year-old Socrates recalcitrantly sought his own conviction and execution rather than acknowledge any virtues in popular sovereignty. It's a bit of a stretch, but in a sense Socrates, via the literary genius of his student Plato, had the 'last laugh' in tricking the Athenians into violating their own commitment to freedom of thought. Like virtually everyone of my age, I first looked at The Republic in high school, after some desultory fashion, guided by teachers whose insights were equally desultory. I read it again at least twice over the years. I have to confess that I found in it mostly what I'd been led to expect, though each reading has further shaken those expectations and uncovered ambiguities. Stone's reading of Plato and the Socratics has totally revolutionized my interpretations. It's a brilliantly orderly, close reading of the sources -- the dialogues of Plato; the works of Xenophon; pertinent passages from the stage works of Aeschylus, Aristophanes, and Eupides; and scattered references to the trial from later Greek and Roman authors as late as Diogenes Laertes. It's plainly, sensibly written, without a touch of academic pomposity. It's as exciting as any detective novel or courtroom drama. I wish I'd read it twenty years ago. Thanks to Egolfur the Floridian for reminding me to do so now!

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