



Alcibiades and Socrates: A Critical Analysis of the Socio-Political Atmosphere of Athens, and How it Condemned Them Both

Lachlan Huck

About the Author

Lachlan Huck is currently a junior and is double majoring in history and political science at the University of Washington. His studies focus on ancient Greece and its slide from the Hellenic to Hellenistic Age. He greatly enjoys the texts involved with this study, and finds the parallels between ancient and contemporary politics fascinating. The wit and wisdom of the ancients is, for Lachlan, indispensable. In this vein, his favorite classical works include Plato's *Politics* and Plutarch's *Alcibiades*. Outside of school, Lachlan is an avid soccer player, having played for the University his freshman year. If his nose is not buried in a book, he is out on the field, and is currently running the men's club soccer team. Other than that, the only other biographical fact of note is the debt he owes to his wonderful family, who deserve so much more than this very brief footnote.

Abstract

This paper explores the complex conditions that surrounded the demise of the Socrates placing the Athenian philosopher firmly in the socio-political setting of 5th century BCE Athens. Alcibiades, one of Socrates' confidantes and a polarizing character, provides the backdrop for the picture of Athens presented, and typifies the forces that condemned Socrates to death. Political misfortune deprived Athenians of the means to greatness, while leaving intact the hubris that had characterized the populace since the defeat of the Persians in the Greco-Persian War. Alcibiades most perfectly epitomized this new mentality, combining irresponsible political ambition with absolute moral corruption. Both Socrates and Alcibiades, however, proved incompatible with the already strained public mentality. In executing one and exiling the other, the Athenians proved they were incapable of rationality, destroying their paragon of wisdom and



exiling the one person who most perfectly characterized Athens at the time. At its heart, Athens was becoming something new, and neither of the actors discussed were to witness the change of Athens or the rise of the Hellenistic kingdoms.

“As for me, all I know is that I know nothing.”

Socrates in Plato's *Republic*

In judging historical people, events, and places, it is always germane to first establish what is known, creating a haven of the concrete and reliable in order to spring into the murky waters of conjecture and assumption. The task of determining historical reliability, however, is complex. In order to simplify the task of truly *knowing* a historical fact, the use of interactions – especially social interactions – can be used to establish veracity, while also creating a fuller and more accurate picture of the past. Specifically, this paper will examine the veracity of the facts concerning Socrates¹ –

¹ The following sources come with certain unavoidable issues of bias and inaccuracy, which can only be touched on briefly for, like the Gordian Knot, they are complex and subject to more conjecture than is warranted in this particular paper. Too often the accurate fades off into the spurious. I cannot divine what the authors meant by their writings, how they felt about their subject, or what they were thinking in general. Thus I shall attempt to limit myself to strict explanation of cause and effect with regards to the socio-political attitude of the time, and how this could be helpful in understanding Socrates in a fuller manner.

one of the most famous Greek philosophers² – with a narrow focus on (1) the socio-political landscape of Athens (2) the importance of one young Athenian politician by the name of Alcibiades, and (3) Socrates in this Athenian context and how he is tied to Alcibiades and Athenian society in a fundamental manner. The following posits that the rotted social ties of Athens and the ‘mob mentality’ it spawned brought about the downfall of Socrates and Alcibiades, that “youthful, dashing *homme á femmes*, who had genius and complete egotism,”³ because the citizens of Athens had lost the capacity to rationally assess the motives behind their actions. Alcibiades might have been guilty of many things, but his eventual condemnation for the charge of heresy was unfounded, just as Socrates’ classification as a threat to Athenian society flew in the face of Socratic philosophy, as its purpose was quite the opposite.

Socio-Political Landscape of Athens

Assuming a given level of expertise, the following chain of events will be review.

² Socrates lived from 470/69 B.C.E. to 399 B.C.E.

³ Ehrenberg, Victor. *From Solon to Socrates*. New York: Routledge (1996): 294.



Their purpose, however, is not to educate, but rather to highlight a socio-political trend relevant to this discussion. First and foremost, this trend will be characterized by the leadership of Athens during the Peloponnesian War⁴ because it is during this time that Athenian society began to break down, losing the prosperity and stability that had characterized it during the Golden Age of Pericles. This initial political dystrophy will be connected with a greater loss of rationality and social democracy in Athens towards the end of the 5th century, which set the stage for Socrates' death in 399 B.C.E.

Until the last twenty years of the 5th century, Athens had enjoyed the bounty that only a supreme maritime power can guarantee, exercising an unprecedented degree of power within the Delian League and waging a war of attrition against the Spartan state that seemed to be gradually wearing down the famed resolve of that thoroughly martial society. This success was made possible because the Athenian *polis*, like the Athenian trireme, whose shape was maintained by a “*hypozygata* or girding cable”⁵ that was pulled tight whenever the ship's structure warped, laid claim to a strong taut political cable in order to keep it structurally sound. In the context of this metaphor, the political cable that had kept the ship of the state together since the nominal beginning of Athenian dominance

⁴ 434 B.C.E. to 404 B.C.E.

⁵ Hale, John R. *Lords of the Sea: The Epic Story of the Athenian Navy and the Birth of Democracy*. New York: Penguin Books (2009): 25.

in the Hellenic world came in the form of two exceptionally strong leaders: Themistocles and Pericles, who provided a political continuity that lasted the better part of the 5th century B.C.E.⁶ Their importance in creating a stable imperialistic system – from the “Wooden Wall prophecy”⁷ of Themistocles to the ironclad grip on the Delian League by Pericles – collectively created a power of such breadth still admired today.

Unfortunately, as the historian Michael Walzer notes, “perfect equilibrium, like perfect security, is a utopian dream”⁸ and continuous change is the only status quo in any system, especially political systems. Thus time conquered both Themistocles and Pericles, making way for some new force in Athenian politics. This meant that in the latter half of the 5th century B.C.E., when one of these great men was needed, the city found itself leaderless, causing the society of Athens to warp, like the storm-bashed planks of a trireme, for the worse.

To generally describe the condition of Athens during this time, one should turn to the Greek historian Thucydides (460 – 399

⁶ *Ibid*, 319 & 324. Themistocles became archon of Athens in 493 B.C.E. and was influential until his death in 459 B.C.E. Pericles gained prominence as a general beginning in the 440s and retained a large amount of political clout until his death in the Plague of 429 B.C.E.

⁷ *Ibid*, 38. The prophecy was interpreted by Themistocles as a call to build a navy with the vast resources recently acquired from the Larium silver mines.

⁸ Walzer, Michael. *Just and Unjust Wars*. New York: Basic Books (1977): 77.



B.C.E.),⁹ whose love of Athens led him to record relevant political and social events throughout the Peloponnesian War. In his writings, Thucydides first lays his selective pen on imperial overreach – that political plague of 5th century B.C.E. Athens – as the root cause of the Athenian evils. In the early stages of the Peloponnesian War, under the leadership of Pericles, Athens had adhered to a policy of defense and counterattack – taking nothing from the Spartans that would incite further hostilities and refusing to be drawn into a land war, which they would surely lose.¹⁰ It was a policy that demanded continuous imperial pressure in order to guarantee the steady flow of tribute needed to sustain the Athenian navy, which the city relied upon as its only offensive weapon. Pericles had shown exceptional prowess in managing this flow, binding the Delian League tightly to Athens and ensuring that the sinews of war were not lacking, and allowing for the continued raids of the Peloponnese, which ensured that the Spartans were never truly comfortable despite their complete dominance on land.

With the loss of Pericles to the plague in 429 B.C.E.¹¹ came also the loss of his strategic policy, which had allowed the Athenians to maintain parity with the Spartans. After his untimely death, there was no longer a single strategic ideal to adhere to and, if there had been, there was no man of

Periclean stature to bind the city to it. The ensuing policy away from limited aims was not “consonant with the needs and/or best interests of [the] state”¹² and is identified by Thucydides as the impetus behind the dissolution of the Athenian social bonds. In his accounts of Nicias’ speech before the Sicilian expedition Thucydides recounts the words of the aged general, who advised, “you’re keeping what you have got and not risking what is actually yours.”¹³ He is clearly referencing the Periclean policy and the noted movement of Athens away from it – documenting a definite shift in Athens because of the break in political continuity. If anything, it is the difference between Mytilene¹⁴ and Melos:¹⁵ one was an atrocious disaster avoided, and the other an atrocious crime committed. Thucydides criticizes both, but only one is condemned. Both document the belief of Thucydides that the woes of Athens can and should be directly tied to the leadership of Athens and the political vacuum left by Pericles. Thucydides’ sharp criticism and melancholy – felt most

⁹Farrar, Cynthia. "Thucydides." Edited by Donald M. Borchert. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Macmillan Reference USA) IX (2006): 456-458.

¹⁰ Ehrenberg, 288.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 272.

¹² Bloedow, Edmund F. "Alcibiades: Brilliant or Intelligent?" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* (Verlang, Franz Steiner) 41, no. 2 (1992): 141.

¹³ Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. 1994-2009.

<http://classics.mit.edu/Thucydides/pelopwar.html> (accessed November 11, 2010).

¹⁴ A revolt that occurred in 428 B.C.E. that was notable for the stay of execution that spared the city’s inhabitants (Hale 324).

¹⁵ Another revolt, but one that occurred in 417 B.C.E. and was condemned by Thucydides – the Athenians sacked the city after it was taken (Hale 325).



poignantly before the Peloponnesian War had even started in his description of the Corcyran revolt where many “atrocities” where committed¹⁶ – captures the general dissatisfaction a concerned Athenian citizen of the time might have felt if confronted with the loss of a leader such as Pericles, who was well regarded even before his death. According to Thucydides, the Athenians were truly beginning to feel the cruel hand of war.

To stop at descriptions of historical events, however, does not capture the psychological impact the loss of Pericles had on the *polis*. What must be examined, then, is the tone of Thucydides’ work itself, and extrapolate how the political atmosphere was changing the character of Athenian society, and how this could have altered the psyche of the *polis*. As the rule of Pericles became more chronologically distant and more sorely missed, it is easy to imagine the petty squabbles that would have broken out in the newly formed political vacuum. Thucydides’ poetic rants about “intriguer[s]” and men “of violent temper”¹⁷ are indicative of a temperamental shift within the Athenian populace. Such discord was only exacerbated by increased Spartan pressure on Athenian shipping lanes and the resulting loss of trade with the grain producing regions of the Black Sea, the lifeline that kept the city solvent in its isolated state.¹⁸ Swift changes of fortune

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 171.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 169.

¹⁸ Hale, 146. Pericles – realizing the Athenian navy was unparalleled in strength and mobility – had advocated a policy where all Athenians were

serve only to expose latent social disintegration, and Athens was proving no different:¹⁹ as the war led to the corruption of morality and a political shift towards something foreign and aggressive. Thucydides’ account serves only to highlight this, beginning to resemble a tragic play rather than an unbiased history of Athens. His accounts of corruption and violence, which enter into the text just as the Plague occurs, signal the decline of imperial Athens – the fall of the tragic hero in the great Athenian play.²⁰

These accounts seem a plausible correlate to the actual Athenian condition, as the loosening Athenian grip on its holdings had prompted something very near our modern concept of ‘anarchy.’²¹ Athens was slowly tearing itself apart. “With this savagery,” Thucydides writes, “the civil war [of the Greeks] progressed.”²² Thucydides had begun to lament the war he once hailed as the greatest to ever be known to man. In short, he states that men “went beyond their power in their hopes, although not beyond their desires, and started a war, thinking they

brought inside the city walls during the summer months (the campaigning season), making the city heavily reliant on the grain trade from the north, as no one was left to farm outside the city walls.

¹⁹ Ehrenberg, 273.

²⁰ Thucydides, 171.

²¹ By 411 B.C.E the famous play *Lysistrata* had been performed by Aristophanes, calling for an end to the war just as a new oligarchic revolution was under way

²² *Ibid*, 168.



should set might above right”²³ bringing ruin upon them all.

With these events and Thucydides’ own unique perspective in mind come Socrates and Alcibiades, who must be placed into this lamentable war.

Alcibiades

It is within this social context that one “pupil and friend of Socrates”²⁴ – Alcibiades, son of Cleinias – flourished. Born in 450 B.C.E. to a well-connected and aristocratic family,²⁵ Alcibiades, a “complete individualist and egotist,”²⁶ was one of those rare individuals who made the conscious decision to alter history, creating within himself a political vehicle for influencing policy. In the context of the Peloponnesian War, this quality – having a natural political bent – gave Alcibiades every opportunity to incite the ire of the powerful and make himself visible to the plebian as he marched ever onwards in his political career. The portrayals of Alcibiades in Plato’s *First Alcibiades* and *Symposium*, render these characteristics in the social context put forth in the preceding section, focusing on the political needs and moral fitness of the man who had the ability

²³ *Ibid*, 148.

²⁴ Ehrenberg, 290.

²⁵ After his father’s death, Alcibiades became the ward of Pericles, learning the political process at the heel of that great statesman.

²⁶ Ehrenberg, 291.

and opportunity to lead Athens in this tumultuous time.

Alcibiades in Politics

Alcibiades’ commitment to personal political goals cannot be understated in Plato’s²⁷ *The First Alcibiades*, where its namesake and Socrates engage in a dialogue concerning the role of justice in politics, illustrating how Alcibiades had become something removed from the *polis*-loving citizen of the previous age.

Firstly, it is here that the universality of Alcibiades’ political motives are most concretely made known, hinting at a new breed of politician that was more a private individual than a public citizen and servant. This development is most sharply observed in Alcibiades’ assertion that he is fit to advise the Athenians about “war...or about peace, or

²⁷ Born in 428 B.C.E. Plato – that philosopher and student of Socrates – falls neatly into a category of contemporary sources that had a close emotional attachment to Socrates as well as a defined attachment to his way of life. As a philosopher himself, he was perhaps “best capable of understanding [Socrates]” in the prevailing terms of the time – especially in regards to Socrates’ position in Athenian society and relationship with Alcibiades. Plato sees in Alcibiades the ultimate reason for the death of Socrates and also the corruption of Athens. His posthumous accounts of Alcibiades range from mildly critical to openly scathing. Plato’s obvious dislike and indifference aside, this work contributes a character type for Alcibiades that must have had some basis in reality and can be used as a useful insight into the character of the man, for such descriptions could not have sprung Athena-like from his mind.



about any other concerns of the state.”²⁸ In short, there is no political arena that he does not seek to enter – he is remembered by Plato as a near megalomaniac politician who wants nothing more than to have the world “filled with [his] power and name.”²⁹ Such descriptions provide a useful corollary to the Thucydidean account of social confusion and disintegration, where violent intriguers and aggressive policies are unraveling those nostalgic qualities of the *polis*.

Secondly, hindsight – that great asset and chief liability of the historian – has led Plato to identify political amorality as the topic of most importance in remembering Alcibiades. He goes to great lengths to show its incompatibility with the political *savoir-faire* needed to guide a *polis* of such complexity as Athens. This trend identification in *The First Alcibiades* shows a latent interest in the fitness of an individual to engage in politics, as well as delving into the relationship between a politician and justice. “A man is a good adviser about anything,” postulates Socrates, “not because he has riches, but because he has knowledge.”³⁰ Such an assertion seems a clear jibe at the foolish Alcibiades, who Plato equates with the god of revelry Dionysus and

describes as a rich playboy.³¹ Alcibiades is remembered by Plato in *The First Alcibiades* as one who does not possess the requisite knowledge of justice needed to advise the Athenians on the issues of war and peace. He was not Nicias – that aged general and tempering political persona of the time – and felt no need to restrain the ship of state that he had the opportunity to captain.

The Sicilian Expedition and Irrationality

Instead, Alcibiades seems to have incorporated the universal ambitions of philosophy – to know all – with his own universal political ambitions.³² Knowing all, for Alcibiades, translated nicely into controlling all, which was a concept foreign to the Athenian political tradition. The universal impulse or scope of Alcibiades’ political ambitions can be typified by the proposal and execution of the Sicilian Expedition in 415 B.C.E.,³³ which he sponsored, and which became his finest disaster – evidence that his “megalomania and ambition” outstripped his ability³⁴ and that the Athenian people were incapable of limiting such impulses.

The idea of an expedition to Syracuse, having already captured the imagination of the *demos*, was further buoyed by the

²⁸ —. "Plato, Alcibiades 1." *Perseus Digital Library*. 1999.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0176:text=Alc.%201> (accessed November 21, 2010).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Nichols, Mary P. "Philosophy and Empire: On Socrates and Alcibiades in Plato's Symposium." *Polity* (Earhart Foundation) 39 (2007): 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

³³ Ehrenberg, 302.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 294.



“double-edged intrigues”³⁵ of Alcibiades, as well as his ability to “argue prettily,” as Plato sarcastically puts it.³⁶ It was the irrationality of the Athenian people, who could no longer find a rational reason for their current position in the Peloponnesian War, that allowed Alcibiades to persuade them of his grand plan. His “charm and brilliance”³⁷ convinced a city that was begging to be convinced, playing on the whisper-of-a-hope-of-a-prayer that next they might become “masters of the entire Greek world.”³⁸ This is not to imply that Alcibiades schemed for the downfall of Athens – that would be irresponsible – but rather that he put forth a self-serving plan that lacked wisdom and forethought, but which was accepted by a public psychologically changed from the time of Pericles. Thus he came to nearly perfectly embody the irrationality of the Athenian public at the time and was most able to exploit the hopes and fears of a socially unstable city. It is not outrageous to assume that an *ekklesia* of rational actors³⁹ would

have limited the aims of Alcibiades as imperialistic and harmful, especially with the echoes of Mytilene and Melos still to be heard. Unfortunately, “*Eros* fell upon all alike,”⁴⁰ and the Sicilian Expedition was approved and undertaken amidst enthusiasm and jubilation, foreshadowing the spectacular events to take place later in year.

This connection between Alcibiades’ misappropriation of philosophic aims and an irrational public becomes even more pronounced when another of Plato’s writings, the *Symposium*, is considered. A certain derision of character and observance of political malaise dominate Plato’s work, where he creates a drunken Dionysian-like character out of Alcibiades – a vitiated persona with a keen intellect but little appreciation for the intellectual. Plato has Alcibiades proclaim that “one learned leach is worth the multitude”⁴¹ and that the symposium must not continue until the gathered have relinquished their sobriety.⁴² From this most auspicious of entrances, Plato then continues with the systematic destruction of Alcibiades’ character. Combined with *The First Alcibiades*, Plato has presented the modern historian with a myriad of descriptions that are far from savory – certainly there is very little within the two accounts of Alcibiades that hearkens back to the Periclean Age. For Plato, Alcibiades has neither the political credentials nor the character traits of an

³⁵ *Ibid*, 292. With this particular phrase, Ehrenberg is describing Alcibiades’ activities during the Peace of Nicias and his efforts to end the Peace. Alcibiades did, however, exhibit many of these characteristics in the build up to the Sicilian Expedition. His “double-edged” scheme in this case was: (1) to achieve ever greater glory for himself – a *strategos* without a war to fight is a poor one indeed – and, (2) open up the west to Athenian expansion.

³⁶ Plato *The First Alcibiades*

³⁷ Ehrenberg, 291.

³⁸ Hale, 187.

³⁹ Ehrenberg writes that it was “frivolous egotism and imperialism” rather than “common sense and realistic patriotism” (299) that dictated the approval of the Sicilian expedition.

⁴⁰ Bloedow, 146.

⁴¹ —. “Plato, Symposium.” *Perseus Digital Library*. (1999): 214b.

⁴² *Ibid*, 213e.



acceptable leader. Instead, Plato has given him the Socratic ability to, like the satyr, “entrance mankind” with simple prose⁴³ but in a way that convinces of personal, rather than public, aims and ambitions. These portraits highlight a fundamental difference of understanding between Plato and Plato’s Alcibiades. Plato values convincing people *of right living*; Plato’s Alcibiades values convincing people. In this context, it is no wonder Plato uses Alcibiades to voice his critique of the “imperfect human condition”⁴⁴ and, in doing so, provide further evidence of Alcibiades’ deficient understanding of the world and an almost perfect embodiment of a corrupt societal morality.

The above has been a conscious attempt to link the loss of socio-political continuity to the growing loss of rationality in the *polis* of Athens in order to make sense of the rise of Alcibiades, who seemed to lack the traditional characteristics of the true Athenian citizen. The use of Thucydides and Plato to depict, respectively, the collapse of Athenian imperialism and Alcibiades as a power hungry politician with little knowledge of Socratic wisdom further reinforces the feeling that Athens was moving away from its Golden Age. This is important as it created tangible consequences, especially for those caught up in the torrid waters of the late 5th century B.C.E. political scene.

Practical Consequences and The Importance of Socrates

⁴³ *Ibid*, 215c.

⁴⁴ Nichols, 2.

As the Athenian socio-political body became corrupt and the preserving ideals of Pericles were discarded for the ever more imperialistic policies lamented by Thucydides, we see Alcibiades and Socrates both sacrificed to the growing social irrationality. For Alcibiades, it seems somehow fitting that he would be sacrificed to the public impetus he exploited. Socrates, on the other hand, was a casualty of proximity – his interaction with the social forces of Athens in the late 5th century B.C.E. ensured his sacrifice to the Athenian public’s need for a scapegoat in a time of strife and uncertainty. In this, Plato finds the poignant evidence of his city’s downfall, as Socrates’ “execution was the first unforgivable crime of the restored democracy.”⁴⁵

The downfall of Alcibiades occurred at outset of the great Sicilian Expedition, when he was tried and condemned *in absentia* for the heretical crime of defacing the herms of Athens,⁴⁶ a crime that, in the time of Pericles, would have been nearly unthinkable, let alone enforceable. This transgression occurred after Alcibiades’ successful lobbying for the Sicilian Expedition, amidst a general fervor as the Athenians – hopefully desperate and the wildly optimistic – “threw themselves into the preparation of the armada with feverish

⁴⁵ Ehrenberg, 2. “Restored democracy” refers to the return to democracy in Athens after the expulsion of the Thirty Tyrants instated by Sparta in Athens after 404 B.C.E.

⁴⁶ Hale, 188.



enthusiasm”⁴⁷ in the hopes of once again reviving the prospects of their beleaguered city. “Even the gods,” one source writes, “seemed to be urging the people forward.”⁴⁸ Yet, days before the great expedition was to set sail in all its glory, tragedy befell the city – the herms that guarded the outside of every house and temple had been desecrated.⁴⁹ This act, of obvious banality and malice, was to prove Alcibiades’ undoing as his “escapades now came back to haunt him.”⁵⁰ It was not that Alcibiades had committed the desecration, but rather that the sublime illogic of the Athenian public – perhaps with some prodding by the latent political forces opposing Alcibiades – tied the outrageous nature of Alcibiades with the outrageous nature of the crimes committed. Of a sudden, connections were made that had no founding, and Alcibiades was swiftly exiled as the latest sacrifice to the “folly and hubris”⁵¹ of a populace suffering from an identity crisis.

Despite the exile of Alcibiades, the cult of personality that he typified remained strong in Athens, becoming the archetype of the Athenian political vision into the 4th century B.C.E. and leading, ultimately, to the death of Socrates. This new *status quo* was more irrational and individualistic than previously, not quite oligarchic, but not quite democratic. It was a *polis* in limbo. A consequence of this was that the now dominant trend governing the people was

fundamentally opposed to the ideals of Socrates, who embodied the rational questioning of everything – especially the *polis* itself. Where Alcibiades’ “flamboyant behavior and mannerisms kept him always in the public eye”⁵² and thus a constant object of public spectacle, Socrates held the public’s attention for a rather different reason: constant questioning. It was not a physical pursuit, as the drunken revelry of Alcibiades was, but rather a struggle to separate the mind from the body by doing such things as rejecting bodily pleasures and turning “towards the soul.”⁵³

The combination of a fundamentally altered public and of a man devoted to questioning led to Socrates’ conviction for the simple reason that he served to magnify the confusion that the *polis* was already experiencing. The Thirty Tyrants had been expelled from Athens, it is true, but that did not mean that the forces of democracy had completely supplanted those of oligarchy. A tension still existed, which in turn led to the division of the public as demagogues sought to sway the people one way or the other. In this atmosphere, the potential problems a Socratic philosophy might pose become evident, as it created a powerful need to question the corrupted democratic spirit around it. Thus Socrates’ frequent questioning, as well as a combative

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 187.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 187.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 188.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 188.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 201.

⁵² *Ibid*, 185.

⁵³ —. "Plato, Phaedo." *Perseus Digital Library*. 1999.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0170> (accessed November 21, 2010) 64e.



personality, was too radical to be left unmolested by the forces gripping Athens. In this, Socrates' inability to disobey the divine command that he search ever for wisdom seems to have also been proven as his greatest liability. "I cannot hold my tongue,"⁵⁴ he declares in Plato's *Apology*, and thus became the very person Athens found most irksome in that time of socio-political unease. If something can be questioned to the point that there is no good answer to it, it loses legitimacy. Socrates questioned – and in turn taught many others to question – the role of the citizen so thoroughly that it lost its meaning, perhaps completing the banishment of the Periclean citizen and the rationality that had governed the *polis* for so many years. The body politic, already something other than the guiding principle behind Athenian life, became even more individual, egotistical, and destructive – Socrates had proved to be one gadfly too many for the *demos*.

The rhetorical ability to question and turn arguments inside and out creates confusion and – if a Socratic assertion can be taken to be true – what can be done to one man can also be done to a group and the questioning of Socrates had led to the confusion of society. Socrates was not guilty of corrupting the youth or slandering the gods, rather, he was guilty of being the progenitor of fine speaking and of unleashing sophistic rhetoric on Athens without the ability to ensure it was coupled with wisdom. The primary product of this

⁵⁴ Plato. *Apology*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1992.

guilt was that when the Athenian people looked for the source of their woes and the cause of the evil their confusion had brought – from Melos to Mytilene to Sicily – they looked past Alcibiades to Socrates. And, because they were in the grips of a population-wide nascent irrationality, they subjected him to accusations that – to the modern observer – seem ridiculous.⁵⁵

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide a chain of events that document a socio-political shift after the death of Pericles in 429 B.C.E. in order to come to understand how both Alcibiades and Socrates were condemned – one by exile and the other execution. To trace a line from the loss of political continuity to the loss of rationality, and then posit that Alcibiades was the paragon of this change, is fraught with the dangers of extrapolation, but taking into account the concurrent loss of rationality and the rise of the individualist Alcibiades it seems plausible to assume they are correlates. Further, from what we know of Socrates, a reasonable explanation for his sudden disfavor can be provided – Athens had become something fundamentally different during the Peloponnesian War, something that was not reconcilable with

⁵⁵ The veracity of the accusations that Socrates corrupted the youth, slandered the Gods, and charged for his services are sources for another paper, but suffice to say that there are instances of hypocrisy that make the charges seem quite overblown. It is very similar to the charges leveled at Alcibiades – charges that, with hindsight, seem ridiculous.



Socratic notions of wisdom and the pursuit of the elevation of the citizen. As Hale writes of the change, he notes the paradigm that “democracy unchecked by reason proved as violent and unjust as any tyranny”⁵⁶ and ensured the crimes of the people were visited upon the guilty as well as the innocent alike. Thus, the irrationality and social disintegration of Athens latched onto Alcibiades, our guilty politician, and Socrates, our innocent philosopher, and proved their downfall. Historically, it is most telling that Athens never again rose to the heights of the Periclean Age, and was completely eclipsed by the Macedonian empire within the next forty years.

⁵⁶ Hale, 232.

Works Cited

- Bloedow, Edmund F. "Alcibiades: Brilliant or Intelligent?" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* (Verlang, Franz Steiner) 41, no. 2 (1992): 139-157.
- Ehrenberg, Victor. *From Solon to Socrates*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Farrar, Cynthia. "Thucydides." Edited by Donald M. Borchert. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Macmillan Reference USA) IX (2006): 456-458.
- Hale, John R. *Lords of the Sea: The Epic Story of the Athenian Navy and the Birth of Democracy*. New York: Penguin Books, 2009.
- Nichols, Mary P. "Philosophy and Empire: On Socrates and Alcibiades in Plato's Symposium." *Polity* (Earhart Foundation) 39 (2007): 502-521.
- Plato. *Apology*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1992.
- . "Plato, Alcibiades 1." Perseus Digital Library. 1999.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0176;text=Alc.%201>
(accessed November 21, 2010).
- . "Plato, Phaedo." Perseus Digital Library. 1999.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0170> (accessed November 21, 2010).
- . "Plato, Symposium." Perseus Digital Library. 1999.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0174> (accessed November 21, 2010).
- Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. 1994-2009.
<http://classics.mit.edu/Thucydides/pelopwar.html> (accessed November 11, 2010).
- Walzer, Michael. *Just and Unjust Wars*. New York: Basic Books, 1977.