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Introduction: Socrates in democratic times

Over a decade ago, Christopher Phillips quit his job writing for magazines in order to "seek Socrates."[1] Disillusioned with the numbing normalcy of his daily life, Phillips hungered for something else; his "love of the question" and "passion for challenging ... assumptions" demanded another kind of existence. Stuck in a profession that no longer had meaning and with his personal life disintegrating, Phillips felt lost. But suddenly, his "Socratic sensibility kicked in." Phillips realized that he wasn't asking "fruitful questions" and once he did, the fog rose: He wanted to be a philosopher in the mold of Socrates and he wanted to hold Socratic dialogues.[2]

Following this revelation, Phillips founded and began to facilitate what he called "Socrates Cafés" as a way of putting his love of wisdom in action. The Cafés met (and meet) not just in cafés but also in prisons, retirement facilities, homeless shelters, public housing projects, hospitals, community centers, elementary schools, parks, and other public and semi-public spaces. Sometimes Phillips would facilitate; sometimes ordinary people would simply contact him to ask about how to begin their own groups. In all circumstances and with all kinds of founders, the Cafés initiated an active practice of philosophy, a practice instantiated among diverse groups of people who shared a passion for inquiry and came together in different spaces to question, converse, argue, and discuss the pressing dilemmas of their daily lives. As a facilitator, Phillips has traveled to

[1] In this paragraph and the following paragraphs, I draw on Phillips' three books describing his own work and the Socrates Cafés: Phillips 2001; Phillips 2004; and Phillips 2007. I will quote mostly from Phillips 2001 because it gives the fullest description of the Cafés in action as well as an explanation of their genesis and the theory behind them.

[2] Phillips 2001, 128–30.

Greece and Spain, Japan and Korea, across Mexico, and throughout the United States from New York City to the Navajo Nation, talking with immigrants, the elderly, children, the homeless, the incarcerated, students, small-business owners, and many nameless but curious citizens. Now over 600 groups around the world meet to philosophize as part of the project of the Democracy Cafés, a nonprofit organization started by Phillips and his wife Cecilia.[3]

The Cafés, writes Phillips, began with Socrates and, like Phillips, participants in the Cafés share the "calling" of "seeking Socrates." Here "Socrates" exemplifies a kind of philosophy that does not center around a single sage dispensing wisdom but rather a philosophy that lives in the people who practice it together. Phillips describes Socrates' philosophy this way:

> A type that utilized a method of philosophical inquiry that "everyman" and "everywoman" could embrace and take for his or her own, and in the process rekindle the childlike – but by no means childish – sense of wonder. A type of vibrant and relevant philosophy that quite often left curious souls with more questions than they'd had at the outset of the discussion, but at times enabled them to come up with at least tentative answers. A type of anti-guru philosophy in which the person leading the discussion always learns much more from the other participants than they could ever learn from him. A type of philosophy that recognized that questions often reveal more about us and the world around us than answers. A type of philosophy in which questions often *are* the answers.[4]

In other words, for Phillips the philosophy of Socrates, rooted in a shared love of questioning and investigation, exists neither for the aggrandizement of a particular individual, nor for the pursuit or achievement of a particular truth, but as a collective endeavor that both uplifts and humbles its participants through its tireless, reflexive examination.

The Socrates Cafés also seek to create new forms of community. Emerging in a variety of spaces and among diverse populations, the Cafés constitute what Phillips calls "a community of philosophical inquiry."[5] Discussions and the friendships that these discussions develop continue long beyond a particular evening's conversation.[6] In one instance, Phillips describes bringing together one of his "Philosopher Clubs" of children

[3] This number comes from the website for the Democracy Cafés, www.philosopher.org/Socrates_Cafe.html (accessed September 15, 2013). In 2004, an article in *The New York Times* estimated that Phillips had helped start an estimated 150 such groups: Vasilopoulos 2004.

[4] Phillips 2001, 6–8. [5] Ibid., 12. [6] Ibid., 25.

and a discussion group he facilitated with "older folks" in a senior center. The insistent "why" of the children meets the proclivity for reflection of those advanced in years to create a new community:

> All too often children and seniors are at the margins of society, castoffs. But their peculiar status in society also unites them: younger folks and older folks *need* each other. They need each other to philosophize with. Unlike so many adults, older folks share with children a tenacious and passionate desire to keep asking and asking and asking: *Why? Why? Why?*[7]

This example of a new form of community also intimates the explicit political dimension of Phillips' project. For Phillips, the questions of Socrates appeal to those "at the margins of society," the "castoffs." These people are provoked to question a world that dismisses them. Finding their desire to philosophize not only strong but more promising than the conventionally powerful and well-reputed, Phillips seeks to develop "new generations of philosophers steeped in the Socratic method and ethos."[8] The resulting "congregations" of aspiring philosophers, followers of what Phillips calls "the heretical tradition of the gadfly," assemble to create a collective philosophical inquiry that by its very nature opposes established authority and hierarchies, emancipates self-understanding, and helps its practitioners to escape the intellectual prisons of societal constraint.[9] A "shared ethos of rational, reflective, egalitarian and empathetic inquiry"[10] follows, helping to create democratic and empowered communities as islands of freedom in otherwise disempowered political existence. As Phillips says, he hopes that "these foundational inquiries serve as a springboard for greater participation in society at large" and that they help "foment grass-roots democracy . . ."[11] Bonding and bridging groups at the margins around a common project of inquiry and questioning, the Socrates Cafés promise to pave the way toward more vibrant democratic life.

Yet the democratic promise of Socrates evident in Phillips' Socrates Cafés also presents a puzzle. Phillips' Socrates seems far removed from the conventional wisdom about Socrates' political effects. I.F. Stone's *The Trial of Socrates* gives a sense of how Socrates is more frequently viewed. On Stone's polemical and impassioned account, Socrates deserved the

[7] Ibid., 118–19. [8] Ibid., 198.
[9] As Phillips describes in Phillips 2001, 49–51, 53, 71, 86.
[10] This quotation comes from the mission statement on the Socrates Café website homepage: www.philosopher.org/Home.html (accessed September 15, 2013).
[11] Quoted in Vasilopoulos 2004.

hemlock for his antidemocratic teachings and inaction during the bloody dictatorship of The Thirty Tyrants in 404 BCE; Socrates does not exemplify the democratic organizer of Phillips' vision so much as a harsh detractor of democracy sympathetic to despotic oligarchs.[12] Socrates upsets his fellow citizens and threatens political stability: His criticisms harmed Athenian culture and its system of education by undermining its democratically constituted authority and unsettling its civic conventions; his example today promises a "tyranny of truth" or worse.[13] Far from the inspiring Socrates of Phillips' depiction, this image of Socrates appears in the shadows of harsh aspersions, less haunted by than deserving of the charge "corrupter of youth."

Following this line of argument, Sheldon Wolin conceives of Socrates as destructive to the kind of political work needful today. Indeed, one could read Wolin's *Politics and Vision* as dedicated to resuscitating a tradition of political thinking freed from the antipolitical biases Wolin sees as initiated by Socrates.[14] According to Wolin, the figure of Socrates begat a line of philosophers that legislated what we could call a philosophic politics, a politics born in the minds of philosophers and destructive of organic and ostensibly genuine political life around it.[15] So Wolin titles his chapter on Plato in *Politics and Vision*, "Plato: Political Philosophy versus Politics," and he writes that "from the very beginnings of political philosophy, a duality was established between the form-giving role of political thought and the form-receiving function of political 'matter.'"[16] Socrates begot this tradition, Wolin implies, and now we must move past it.[17]

[12] Stone 1988. For a a critical response, see Myles Burnyeat's review of Stone in Burnyeat 1988. For a reappraisal, see Schofield 2002.

[13] We could also see Aristophanes and Socrates' activities as having key points of commonality in demanding thoughtful response from their audiences and thus participating in the political education of democratic Athens, as argued by Euben 1997, 109–38. "Tyranny of truth" comes from Latour's description of Socrates in Latour 1999. I treat both Euben and Latour more on this theme in Chapter 4.

[14] Although this hardly provides definitive evidence, I find it worth noting that Wolin omits Socrates entirely from the index of the revised edition of *Politics and Vision* and Socrates rarely figures in Wolin's discussions of Plato.

[15] Wolin 1990, 5. [16] Wolin 2004, 33.

[17] Wolin describes the tenets of this lineage as follows: "Politics should be grounded in a higher truth to which philosophy alone has access; a basis in truth converted a society into a community, a close or solidaristic grouping; a good political society would be one in which philosophers not only were tolerated but were honored members of the community and, ideally, would have influence over those who ruled or, stated slightly differently, the alienation of the philosopher, as dramatized by the death of Socrates, the political isolation of Plato, and the flight of Aristotle from Athens, would be over; and,

Given the tension between Phillips' example and the countervailing arguments in writers such as Stone and Wolin, how can we characterize Socrates' relationship to democracy, ancient and modern? In what follows, I seek to make sense of these opposing poles. I argue that Socrates' philosophy promises to empower citizens and noncitizens alike by drawing them into collective practices of dialogue and reflection that in turn help them to become thinking, acting beings capable of more fully realizing the promises of democratic life. At the same time, however, I show how these practices' commitment to interrogation keeps philosophy at a distance from the democratic status quo, creating a dissonance with conventional forms of political life that both opens space for new forms of participation and critical contestation of extant ones. In other words, Socrates may not hold the great promise for democratic times that Phillips imagines, but neither should we exclude Socratic practices from public life altogether. While engaging the politics of his day, Socrates' philosophy offers an alternative to "politics as usual": modeling what it might mean to assert one's thoughts publicly and contesting the extant democracy through questioning and dialogue. Asking "What would Socrates do?" can indeed contribute to collective life, although not perhaps in the directly democratic way Phillips and others may wish.

RECONSTRUCTING SOCRATES

To consider Socrates in his times as well as our own, this book reconstructs what Socrates did in ancient Athens, rebuilding Socrates' philosophy from five primary and interlocking practices of Athenian democratic politics that Socrates took up and transformed with his philosophy: the practices of accountability; the erotic practices of democratic subject formation; the practice of free or frank speech; educational practices; and the spatial and temporal practices of quotidian political life. Turning to democratic Athens and examining Socrates' philosophy from within its broader historical context, I reconstruct a "notional" Socrates through the reports of his followers but also rooted in the world he inhabited.[18] Our rich understanding of the background conditions of Socrates' life calls attention to basic points of contact between his philosophy and the

finally, the politics of virtually all of the Greek philosophers descended from Socrates was antidemocratic": Wolin, 1990, 5.

[18] "Notional" comes from Cooper 2012.

Athenian democracy. Rather than taking one source on Socrates as the basis for reconstructing an understanding of Socrates' philosophy, I begin from the concrete circumstances of life in democratic Athens; I educe Socrates' philosophy not from any single source or author but rather by constellating the different practices observed by Socrates' near contemporaries: Aeschines, Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon. While Plato remains the principal source throughout, in order to reconstruct Socrates from these disparate and often conflictual sources, I seek common reference points related to democratic Athens and then detail particular departures, transformations, and appropriations that appear in descriptions of Socrates. This shows how Socrates takes up specific practices of the Athenian democracy and transforms them by incorporating them into philosophy.

Reconstructing Socrates depends upon a deeper and more contextual understanding of the Athenian democracy (and Socrates' relationship to it) than appears in many critical descriptions of Socrates. Such an understanding has been made possible by the past thirty years of scholarship on ancient Athenian democracy, which has brought new levels of appreciation for the complexities and successes of the world's first democracy.[19] The Athenian democracy that existed in Athens roughly from the middle of the fifth century BCE[20] was "remarkable ... unprecedented, unparalleled, exhilarating" and "capable of mobilizing extraordinary citizen involvement, enthusiasm, and achievement ..."[21] During the roughly two centuries of Athens' flourishing, the people (*dēmos*) genuinely held political power (*kratos*), creating a democracy in word and deed. The power of the *dēmos* fostered a public, open politics where the citizenry as a whole debated and decided all important political matters.[22] Through

[19] These three decades have brought a surge in scholarship, which Kurt Raaflaub usefully categorizes in the introduction to Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007.

[20] All dates refer to "Before the Common Era" ("BCE") unless otherwise indicated.

[21] Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007, 3. "Unparalleled" comes from Hansen 1999, 313. See also the general discussion by Cartledge 2005, 11–22.

[22] This language comes from Ober 1994, 22. In what follows I treat the fourth and fifth century BCE as one of relatively continuous democratic culture, following the arguments of Ober 1989 and Ober 1998. Given the lack of consistent evidence, we cannot know precisely how much the fifth century differed from the fourth; however, as Kurt A. Raaflaub points out, "there do not seem to be good reasons to assume that in the fifth century the citizens were substantially less involved in running their democracy than in the fourth": Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007, 5. Ober (2008a) has recently argued that if one takes the period from roughly 500 BCE – beginning with Kleisthenes and the democratic uprising of 508 BCE – until roughly 300 BCE – ending in 322 BCE and Athens' defeat in the Lamian war – Athens' radical democracy remained continuous.

formal institutions such as the Assembly and the law courts as well as customs such as rhetoric, civic education, and drama, ordinary Athenians created an extraordinary democratic polity that outperformed its rivals, promoted agreement while encouraging contestation, and sustained decision-making procedures for both timely and effective policy formation and implementation.[23]

As the understanding and appreciation of Athens' robust and sophisticated democracy has grown, many scholars have revisited ancient political thought in order to explain its relationship to this context and the dynamic and reciprocal interaction between theory and practice.[24] Rather than viewing the political thought of democratic Athens apart from the thick democratic context that surrounded it, this book follows recent scholarship by viewing theory and politics as, in Sara Monoson's word, "entangled," intertwined and mutually constitutive and sharing a concern with how the Athenian democracy might best work (if at all).[25] Taking Monoson's example, one can read Plato's dialogues as mobilizing "the language, imagery, and principles that the Athenians themselves used to fashion their orthodox civic self-understanding."[26] Along these lines, as Andrea Nightingale has argued, we must treat the texts of political thought as existing in relationships of interdependence to one another and to concrete political situations – they are "intertextual," written by authors in conversation with other authors, including the ultimate actor in democratic Athens, the people (*dēmos*).[27] Few of these scholars go so far as to view the democratic context as completely determinative of a given

When crises arose, such as oligarchic rebellions after the Peloponnesian War, the democracy responded *democratically* through such innovations as the collection and publication of laws, the establishment of a board of lawmakers to review existing laws and create new ones, and the introduction of pay for attendance of the assembly (as noted by Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007, 17).

[23] Here I draw on Ober 2008b, 73.

[24] The distinction here between "theory" and "practice" is soft and not meant to reify thought as "theory" against action as "practice." Indeed, part of the project of the book is to show how these were (and are) always already intertwined. As Jill Frank notes, despite the significant differences between the classical Greek world and today's, "classical authors . . . are fertile resources for contemporary scholars because they inaugurated a reflective approach to the study of politics that is no less reflective for being about the world of action, power, and institutions, and no less political for being reflective" (Frank 2006, 176). Frank's article also provides a useful survey of the scholarship I discuss in this paragraph.

[25] Gerald Mara usefully treats Thucydides and Plato along these lines as participants in a "civic conversation" that provides "cultural resources for conversations about the things that matter to individuals and communities": Mara 2008, 16.

[26] Monoson 2001, 4. [27] Nightingale 2000.

writer's options;[28] rather, viewing Athenian political thought as a *political response* to Athenian democracy has opened a new lens for understanding antiquity that can also potentially speak to the present.[29]

With a better sense of the intense and dispersed involvement of all citizens in the political process, scholars have also begun to trace how the figure of Socrates appears to take up various aspects of the extant Athenian democracy.[30] G.E.R. Lloyd, for example, has suggested how styles for political and legal debate served as models and analogues for philosophical and scientific discourse: the use of concepts and evidence; the polemical or adversarial manner in which discussion was often held; the development of theories of rhetoric and demonstrative argument; the emphasis on abstract analysis of concrete situations; and the notion of "radical revisability" in both philosophy and democracy.[31] As I discuss more in the next chapter, J. Peter Euben has connected Lloyd's work directly to Socrates by emphasizing aspects of "democratic accountability" embodied by practices such as *euthunai* and *dokimasia*, which underscore how democratic polemical argument and the giving of reasons formed the basis of Socrates' philosophy as described in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*.[32] Other work has examined the democratic practice of *parrhēsia*, or "frank speech," and its significance in Socrates' philosophy.[33]

[28] Paul Cartledge, following Quentin Skinner, may offer the most compelling argument for *situating* (in Monoson's phrase) all readings of Greek political thought in its political context. See Cartledge 2009.

[29] "Political response" comes from Allen 2006, 131. For ancient political theory as a "resource" for considering modern democracy, see the general discussion in Frank 2006. See also Stephen Salkever's comment on the propositions defining the "central tendency" of recent interpretive work on Greek political thought: Salkever 2009.

[30] I borrow "figure of Socrates" from Pierre Hadot, retaining the ambiguous meaning he gives it: Hadot 2002, 22–38. All our evidence of Socrates comes from the writings of others, with each taking "the mask of Socrates" (24). The scholars described in this paragraph all choose their particular sources for different reasons; I will explain my source selection and reasons later.

[31] Lloyd 1992, 44. See also the earlier and broader suggestions in Vernant 1982 and Castoriadis 1991.

[32] I follow Euben, then, by emphasizing "the degree to which elite critics (including Plato) remained dependent upon and incorporated aspects of that tradition [sc. the Athenian tradition of rethinking and reforming itself] even as they criticized it": Euben 1997, 92. Cf. the slightly different accent given by Josiah Ober in his reading of Plato as an "elite critic": Ober 1998, 156–247.

[33] See Saxonhouse 2003 and Markovits 2008. Two studies focused more on Plato's dialogues also give some attention to the figure of Socrates understood in the context of Athenian democracy: Mara 1997 connects Socrates' practices to the Athenian democracy in terms of their concern with the relationship of word (*logos*) and deed (*ergon*).

Studying how Socrates takes up and transforms specific democratic practices such as *euthunai*, *dokimasia*, or *parrhēsia* (among others) provides the general orientation for this book. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of practice helps to focus this approach.[34] A practice for Bourdieu takes place in the space of interplay between objective and determining factors (distributions of resources, ethnic diversity, geography, and so forth) and the subjective forms of life that work within these constraints (political and social institutions, culture generally).[35] "Practices" thus form what Bourdieu calls a "habitus," the set of responses conditioned by objective circumstances that also evolves as an improvisatory response to these conditions.[36] In ancient Athens, democratic practices arose under objective conditions of popular power and (relative) material abundance as responses to dilemmas created by these conditions.[37] For example, the practice of *parrhēsia*, or "frank speech," appears to have evolved in response to frustrations with the openness of the older form of equality of speech, *isēgoria*.[38] Originally a synonym for democracy,[39] *isēgoria* referred to the equal right of all citizens in good standing to address the Assembly. Yet this formal entitlement did not prevent perversions of the democratic process it ostensibly supported: manipulative and deceptive oratory could easily lead to poor outcomes. The practice of *parrhēsia* developed out of *isēgoria* to address these inadequacies within the terms of the Athenian commitment to an effective, participatory democracy, improvising on the democratic habitus by creating a discourse of "frank speech" that included norms of a speaker's motivation, his personal integrity, and critical appraisal of all speech, regardless of the speaker. By developing *parrhēsia* as a democratic practice from the original practice of *isēgoria*, the Athenian people found a way to establish confidence in the collective wisdom of the *dēmos* within the structures of political life that *isēgoria* had originally circumscribed.[40] Thus practices do not remain

Along these lines, Wallach 2001 takes Socrates as the vehicle for Plato's development of a way of bringing together *logos* and *ergon* under conditions of justice.

[34] Pierre Bourdieu [1972] 1977 and Bourdieu [1980] 1990. This paragraph also draws on the use of Bourdieu by Allen 2000, 335–6.

[35] Bourdieu [1972] 1977, 52–65. [36] Ibid., 52.

[37] See the discussion of political and cultural innovation in Ober 2008a.

[38] Here I draw on analysis by Monoson 2001, 51–63; Saxonhouse 2003, passim; and Markovits 2008, 47–80.

[39] See Herodotus' *Histories* 5.78 and discussion by Monoson 2001, 56 n. 21.

[40] Here Arnaldo Momigliano comments, "parrhēsia looks like a word invented by a vigorous many for whom democratic life meant freedom from traditional inhibitions of speech": Momigliano 1973, 260.

static but develop as innovative and improvisatory responses to felt social or political needs, conditioned by the circumstances of the community.

The example of *isēgoria* and *parrhēsia* suggests how Socrates' philosophy might also have developed as a *practice*.[41] Just as the people of Athens adopted *parrhēsia* as a response to democratic inadequacies of *isēgoria*, Socrates' practice of philosophy emerged as a response to perceived inadequacies within aspects of the Athenian polis. By reconstructing Socrates' philosophy within the existing repertoire of Athenian practices, we can see how it responds to these inadequacies while remaining within the terms of the Athenian democratic habitus – an innovative and new practice related to and yet distinct from other extant practices. Socrates both is and is not of Athens. The resulting transformations might contain democratizing potential yet they also challenge the Athenian democracy and its citizens in highly demanding and perhaps even unsustainable ways. By reconstructing how Socrates took up and transformed extant practices of the Athenian democracy, this book shows how Socrates' philosophy is a practice and how understanding it as such illuminates important and novel approaches to the question of the relationship between Socrates and Athens, philosophy and democracy.[42]

Reconstructing Socrates' philosophy from within the Athenian habitus allows us to identify general connections (and departures) without being caught up in the particularity (and contingency) of the ideas ascribed to Socrates by his various chroniclers.[43] We cannot trust "the exact words,"

[41] There is more to say about Socrates' philosophy and *parrhēsia*, which I will discuss in Chapter 4.

[42] Rather than repeating "Socrates' practice of philosophy," I will simply refer to "Socrates' philosophy." As I argue here, however, "philosophy" should be understood in terms of its being a practice related to yet distinct from the other practices of the Athenian habitus.

[43] This approach to reconstructing Socrates' philosophy offers an alternative to the typical approaches to understanding Socrates. Studies of Socrates have long been plagued by what one scholar calls "the doughnut problem": "Socrates" has a hole in the middle, a gap at the most essential place because nothing remains of what Socrates might have written and we must therefore rely on the writings of his contemporaries and successors (Hughes 2011). The most influential response to this issue began with Friederich Schleiermacher's attempt to meld a definitive account of the historical Socrates by assembling the conflictual evidence available in four relatively contemporaneous sources: Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle. Such an approach, however, rests on the false assumption that these sources shared today's modern sense of historical fidelity while, on the contrary, all evidence seems to indicate the opposite. Xenophon's and Plato's Socratic writings belong to the literary genre of the *logos sōkratikos*, which authorized a great degree of fiction and freedom of invention; Aristophanes comedies clearly do not concern themselves with "getting the facts right" and Aristotle's discussions of Socrates are insubstantial. Given that all of our accounts of Socrates are