

Sophism: Ideology That Destroys Societies and Nations

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What I'm about to say here, you should situate in terms of Lyndon LaRouche's "Visualizing the Complex Domain" essay, as well as his recent "Truman" paper ["World Nuclear War When? How Harry Truman Defeated Himself"; both papers available at www.larouchepub.com and www.larouchein2004.com]. What I'm about to say is situated within a more than 30-year continuity of historical work in the LaRouche organization. This ongoing History Project is based on the rather fundamental concept: *Isochronicity* is a central feature of creative mentation. Without breaking apart the Cartesian mental corset—with its rigid categorization of the past, the present, and the future—creative hypothesizing is impossible. The isochronic understanding of history, in view of the current world situation and future generations, is a fundamental point for any political action that is committed to truth. And—a point to be emphasized—the isochronic understanding of history has nothing to do with the widespread, obsessive fixation of drawing artificial, mechanical parallels between the past and the present.

Another fundamental point, in terms of the LaRouche organization's permanent History Project, has been, that it never accepted the separation of the history of ideas, and so-called "general history." The two are inseparable. They are one. And, my remarks today will focus on precisely this: the power of truthful ideas, and the negative, destructive power of ideologies in history. It is ideas that make nations and states. And it is ideologies that break nations and states. Ideologies typified by Sophism, about which we will talk here in some depth.

The process of self-destruction of nations—allowing

themselves to slide along the track of an ideology, which repudiates the crucial ideas of truth-seeking and the progress of culture—has been addressed, many times, by LaRouche, in respect to Rome: the Roman Republic destroying itself and turning into an Empire, which then, over time, decomposed. We owe it to a man of crucial importance for Europe's reconstruction after World War II and a passionate admirer of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to have given us crucial advice [on this]. It's 90-year-old Max Kohnstamm, who, in Spring 2002, told Mark Burdman and myself: "LaRouche is right on Rome; but also, look at Athens. Look up Thucydides again. Go through, again, the Athens-Melos encounter during the Peloponnesian War."

Athens From Solon to Plato

And, indeed, the more one looks into the history of Greece, and the history of Athens in particular, you recognize, how ideas were generating fabulous progress—in terms of culture, statecraft, and the economy. And, you see as well, how fast Athens went down, once it got endemically infected with the ideology of Sophism. Both the rise and the fall of Athens are unique, spectacular achievements (and failures) occurring in an astonishing density. With all due respect for India, its culture and history, which I admire so much—mankind owes so much to what India generated culturally long before there was a Greek culture—but, having said this, there is, to my knowledge, nothing in world history, so far, that compares with the cultural achievement in Greece during the roughly 200 years between Solon and Plato. And, for Greek history and culture, Athens was the center. So, the history of Athens—in a positive, but also, as we will see, in a negative respect—is a *unique experiment* so to speak in terms of world history.



The descent of ancient Greece into decades of war between Athens' Attic League and Sparta's allies, occurring so soon after their great and successful common defense against the Persian Empire, can be attributed to Athenian imperialism and "overstretch." But there was a deeper cause, as the historian Ernst Curtius described it—Sophism.

Now, let's look at this time-table for the period between Solon and Plato:

B.C 624-560: Solon of Athens
624-546: Thales of Miletus
611-546: Anaximander of Miletus
535-470: Heraclitus of Ephesus
580-500: Pythagoras of Samos
490: Battle of Marathon
480: Battle of Salamis
479: Battle of Plataia
477: The Attic Naval League
461: Sparta/Athens rupture
500-429: Pericles of Athens
450: Beginning of "Democratic Rule" of Pericles
431: Beginning of Peloponnesian War
415: The Sicilian Expedition
404: Downfall of Athens, end of Peloponnesian War
399: Judicial murder of Socrates
480-410: Protagoras
490-416: Gorgias, chief representative of Sophism, teacher of Callicles and Thrasymachos
469-399: Socrates
427-347: Plato
387: Founding of the Platonic Academy

And, let's look at these maps of ancient Greece and Athens. This reminds me of a truly outstanding man and friend of ours, who was murdered last week in his Moscow appart-

ment: Prof. Grigory Bondarevsky. He would tell us, many, many times: "Without a good map, you won't understand almost anything." So, keep that in mind. Maps are very relevant for understanding history.

Now when it comes to the history of Greece and Athens, we have, luckily, general access to a crucial primary source: Plato's *Dialogues*. They do contain excellent historical material and insights, especially if you add the works of Xenophon. But we are also lucky, that there exists a truly outstanding work on Greek history by a towering personality of ancient historiography: Ernst Curtius. Between 1857 and 1868, Curtius published his three-volume *Greek History*. And I think this work is a rare example of what one may call Classical historiography—with a depth of insight and a breadth of knowledge of ancient Greece that later generations of historians have been unable to match.

If you are interested in the history of Rome, there's Theodor Mommsen's six-volume *History of Rome*, written in the late 19th Century, which, I believe, is translated both into French and English. And there is Eduard Meyer's *Das Prinzipat des Pompejus und die Monarchie Caesars* (*The Consulship of Pompei and the Reign of Caesar*) on the final phase of the Roman Republic (published in 1919). Also to be recommended is Meyer's seven-volume *Geschichte des Altertums* (*History of Ancient Times*). Last, not least, as a crucially important source on Roman history, there are Shakespeare's Roman plays, which, as Muriel Mirak-Weissbach has shown, provide a much better historical insights than most of academic works of 20th-Century historians.

Why Athens' Downfall?

Now, on the question of the fantastic rise of Athens, and its subsequent rapid downfall, Ernst Curtius has made a crucial point. Most people would say—and not really wrongly so—that Athens fell because its productive middle-class of farmers and artisans became—like in the case of the Roman Republic—marginalized by oligarchical families engaged in maritime trade, banking operations, and large, slave-running manufactures and *latifundia*. The transformation of the Attic League, in which Athens was the *primus inter pares* of Greek city-states, into a quasi-Empire of Athens, led to the latter's dependency on "forced subsidies" from its vassals—one may call, more simply, looting. This looting, in turn, was used to subsidize Athen's once productive middle-class citizenry. And, in that process, Athens' citizen-soldiers and citizen-sailors became increasingly substituted by mercenaries, which was an important aspect of Athens' "imperial overstretch"—and ultimately of Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War. All these observations are true, and one could elaborate on them a lot more, but they miss a crucial point.

I won't read many quotes here today, but this quote from Vol. II of Ernst Curtius' *Greek History* is crucial: "Athens did not fall, because of its external enemies. Athens fell through itself. . . . Stains of a treasonous spirit were recognizable in



The ancient historian Thucydides saw the crucial error of the Athenians in dealing with the neutral city of Melos: their belief that they could abandon justice, as of no practical account, because they had the power to do so.

Athens already during the times of the Persian Wars. . . . But these tendencies became a genuine threat to the state when the teachings of Sophism penetrated Athens. It was Sophism, which, above all, stimulated the force of destruction. Sophism dissolved the bonds that brought together the hearts of the citizens into common aims. . . . A wealth of the finest talents was there, but they were turned into their opposite. The best minds became the worst enemies of their state, [Sophist] ‘education’ became a poison that destroyed the marrow of the Athenian state.”

You will later see that Plato, almost *verbatim*, came to the same conclusion.

Many of you, here in this room, have studied Plato. You know, that the majority of Plato’s Socrates dialogues, either explicitly or implicitly, deal with Sophism. The attack on Sophism is a through-going *leitmotif* of Plato’s Socrates dialogues: Take the *Sophists*, take *Protagoras* or *Gorgias*. The latter dialogue, I would want to address a bit more thoroughly, because *Gorgias* deals with Sophism—and Athenian politics—most directly and most ruthlessly.

Even if you know little about Greek history, you will know the term “sophistry”—and what you, here and today, spontaneously associate with that term “sophistry”—a sly, mean, dishonest attitude—is quite on the mark. During the Fifth Century B.C., Sophism emerged as a “fashionable” ideology, which increasingly became the hegemonic “counter-culture” in Greece. Almost no original Sophist texts have survived—and that’s no great loss. Most of what we know about Sophism, we know from Plato. And a bit also from Aristotle, who later “re-packaged” Sophism into a new ideological “product,” so it could be brought back on the “culture market”—after Socrates and Plato had completely discredited it in its original form. If you want to define the core features of Greek Sophism, you might say:

- There is no knowable truth, period! There is only sense perception, so leave it there and try to have a good time!
- Cognition is a fantasmagoria, because: 1) There is nothing “beyond” the sense perception of objects; 2) Between the sense perception of objects and the perceived objects as such, stands an irresolvable dichotomy; 3) Since all sense percep-



Solon dictating the laws of Athens. “The Greek Sophists had a very precise idea of how to repudiate and suppress the intellectual heritage of Solon, Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras. They had a project and its leitmotif was: ‘You’ve got to get the youth.’”

tion of objects is subjective, any attempt to communicate about the perception of perceived objects is a double waste of time.

- There are no higher principles of lawfulness in nature; therefore the method of hypothesis for discovering higher principles in nature is mere wasting time. *Hypotheses non fingo*, period!

- As higher principles in nature are denied, there are, of course, no higher principles governing society. Natural law is a fantasmagoria. In society, there are only arbitrary—social, political, legal—settings, either tending in the direction of pragmatic “conventions” or, more, towards postulates like, “The strong rule the weak.”

One can easily see that the core features of Sophism mean the radical repudiation of the intellectual breakthroughs of early Greek science and philosophy, for which the names of Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras stand. They were the first to begin lifting the veil from the complex domain. They laid the very foundation of European science and philosophy. They pushed aside mythology, as well as reductionist sense-perception, in their search for understanding the universe. They were working towards concepts of higher principles, that are “beyond” or “behind” what is perceived by the senses. And they developed a method of hypothesis, of being able to conceptualize such higher principles.

So, this all was rejected and repudiated by Sophism. Thus, Sophism is *anti*-Thales, *anti*-Pythagoras; and Sophism is *anti*-Solon.

‘You Have To Get the Young People’

Here is a very important point: the parallelism, during the Sixth Century in Greece, of the emerging concept of higher



An artists' rendering of the inner city of Athens in Pericles' time, the "height" of the power of the Attic Naval League which Athens dominated, and the period of spread of the influence of Sophism, some of whose leading figures were Persian-backed and supported to destroy Greece from within.

principles governing nature, and natural law governing human society. What Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras did for science and philosophy, Solon did for statecraft in laying the foundations of natural law—stipulating the concept of a Republic committed to the Common Good. Thales for sure, possibly Anaximander, personally communicated with Solon.

So, this is a very sketchy first attempt to give you some insight into what Greek Sophism was. And, if this is too vague and abstract—which probably it is—then think about the modern Sophists. There's very little new under the Sun, when it comes to empiricism, reductionism, skepticism, relativism or phenomenology in the history of philosophy. The bestial Superman theory of Nietzsche is as much a re-invention of Sophism as are most of the teachings of Hobbes, Locke, Kant, or Leo Strauss. All of the basic ideological concepts of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment "modern" philosophical reductionism are derived from Sophism.

Leo Strauss, obviously thinking he can give himself a special aura of intellectual superiority, makes exactly this point: He asserts that there is nothing worthwhile in the development of political philosophy since the Greek period—but what he is intellectually basing himself on, is Greek Sophism.

The Greek Sophists had a very precise idea of how to repudiate and suppress the intellectual heritage of Solon, Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras. They had a project and its *leitmotif* was: "You've got to get the youth. You have to make Sophism fashionable. And you've got to set it up in way that we—the Sophists—will make a lot of

money out of it. Sophism has to become the 'in thing' for young people, especially when they are talented and come from wealthy and influential families." And this is exactly what happened in the course of the Fifth Century in Athens. And again, there's not much new under the Sun when it comes to engineering a "counterculture"—just look at what has happened during the last 30-40 years—in culture, the economy, and in politics!

In Plato's *Protagoras* dialogue, the top Sophist Protagoras, debating with Socrates, makes a sort of programmatic declaration on the "Sophist Project": "I tell you quite openly, I'm a Sophist, and I'm an educator. . . . Other teachers [like Socrates] torture the young people, by forcing them, who just escaped from science, back into the study of science, even though the youth does not like it.

They force upon them the teaching of mathematics, astronomy, geometry, and music. But the youth coming to me, will learn nothing but what they desire to learn. I teach them how you become successful with your personal business affairs. And in what concerns political affairs, I educate them in such a way, that they develop the skills—in words and deeds—to be able, and most efficiently so, to participate in governing the state."

Quite a blunt statement for a Sophist, one may say. Protagoras' statement also reveals that the ultimate thrust of the "Sophist Project" was *political*. This becomes even clearer in Plato's *Gorgias* dialogue.

The *dramatis personae* in the *Gorgias* are: Gorgias himself, besides Protagoras, was probably the most influential (and wealthiest) among the top Sophists. In a surviving text on epistemology, Gorgias repudiates human cognition as a fantasmagoria. Plato presents Gorgias as the sly, more pragmatic, "Locke-like" Sophist. One has to know that Gorgias, coming from Sicily, played an important role in dragging Athens into the disastrous "Sicilian Expedition" of 415-413 B.C.—the turning point of the Peloponnesian War. The second character in the dialogue is Polos, who is what you would call, in German, a *Klugscheisser*, a petty Sophist, who pompously tries to "assist" Gorgias when he feels things get somewhat unpleasant for the latter. But, of course, being a sly Sophist, Gorgias doesn't exactly like it, because it's so obvious. The third character is Callicles—brutal and ruthless, representing the "Nietzsche school" of Sophism, which probably is the most important variety of Sophism. And, of course there is Socrates.

(The following dialogues are not in the original quotes, but an attempt to summarize them, while avoiding indirect speech.)

Gorgias: When ‘Evil Is Appropriate’

So, the dialogue begins, by Socrates asking Gorgias: “Who are you? What are you doing?” Slimy Polos cuts in, praising Gorgias’ intellectual greatness. Socrates responds: “Listen, we want to know what Gorgias is doing. He himself should say, what he is doing.” So Gorgias answers: “I’m a Sophist, concerned with, primarily, rhetoric: the art of speaking—irrespective of the content of speech. I teach the art of persuasion, in particular in politics and legal affairs. And, I may say, that I have developed this skill of rhetoric to the point that I stand above those who possess real knowledge.” Socrates answers: “So you admit, you operate with opinion, assumptions—not knowledge and scientific competence. And for your rhetoric to succeed, you need an audience, a crowd. The Sophist, without any real knowledge, appears to the ignorant crowd, as knowing more, and being more convincing than those who do possess genuine knowledge.”

Polos cuts in, “You bet. The words of a first-class Sophist are so powerful that they can put people in prison, or force them into exile, or even have them killed.” Gorgias has to intervene, and says, “It is not exactly wrong, what he is saying.” Socrates goes on, “Now, I wonder: What about justice? You claim, whatever you do with all your special Sophist rhetoric skills, will be done in the service of justice?” And Gorgias says, “Oh yes. I’m committed to justice. But I cannot exclude that there are those who will use their skill in Sophist rhetoric, for unjust purposes.” Socrates says, “Ah, ah! Let’s stick to that point.” And Gorgias continues, “A wise man may wisely choose to do something evil, if certain circumstances necessitate it.”

And then Socrates says, “Well, Gorgias, now you said it yourself—you do not have a firm commitment to justice.” And the fascinating thing in the dialogue is, Gorgias shuts up. From this moment on, Gorgias barely opens his mouth. And now, Socrates goes fully on the offensive: “Now that you admitted that, I tell you what your great Sophistic skill really is: You try to create in people a feeling of being flattered, or adulated. This is how you target your audience. That’s more efficient than intimidating a crowd. Coaxing, wheedling, but no truth, no competence. And for the feeling you generate in the crowd—that of being flattered and adulated—I have a comparison. This is the same feeling you have when you scratch an itch. It gives you a certain release, but one would barely call it feeling well.”

And then, Socrates states, “Listen, Gorgias, aren’t you really operating on the dark side of politics? If you are sick, if your body is sick, you turn to medicine. You try to adopt a healthy life-style, you do sports. You try to stick to *sophrosyne*—avoiding excesses of all kinds. That’s what it means,

The leading Greek Sophist Gorgias with whom Socrates did philosophical battle in the Gorgias and many other of Plato’s dialogues. This battle, of life-or-death character for ancient Greece, is the explicit or implicit subject throughout the Dialogues as a history.



becoming healthy again and staying healthy. If I make an analogy to Sophism, I would say, it’s no medicine, no sports, no *sophrosyne*—Sophism is cosmetics, creating a false appearance.”

Socrates adds, “I want to say to say something else. In terms of your notion that occasionally the Sophist has to be unjust, has to do evil things, if he thinks that the circumstances are such that this appropriate: This is stupid, Gorgias. Doing evil, beyond anything else, is self-destructive. Injustice is self-destructive.”

After this, Gorgias remains silent for the rest of the dialogue. Instead, Callicles, the Athenian Nietzsche, moves in: “I think I have to speak up now. What’re you talking about here, Socrates? Are you joking? The fact is a very simple one: There are the masters, and the slaves. There are the strong, and there are the weak. And the strong are those, who are strong in terms of willpower and instinct, and who possess a lot of wealth. And the good thing about the Sophists is, they have recognized this. You, Socrates, you don’t want to face the reality of master and slave, strong and weak, of lust and impotence. All this nonsense you are telling us here—virtue, goodness, morality, justice—are inventions by the weaklings, for the weaklings. The strong don’t need that. I would advise you, Socrates, stop trying to seduce the youth. Some philosophy for little kids is all right; But, from a certain age on, when a child is maturing, philosophy is no longer his business, because it makes the young person weak. It dampens his aggressiveness; it dampens his willpower; it dampens its instincts. And this is simply no good.”

So, Socrates responds, “Oh thank you, Callicles, I must admit, you are frank. Others are not so frank, and, in that sense, I appreciate what you are saying. But, let me repeat what I said earlier: Doing evil, endorsing injustice, is stupid. It’s self-destructive. It might appear that it works for a short while, but it doesn’t. You hail the excesses you say the strong must engage in, to enjoy life. I wonder what you’ll be like when you grow older. Your body will degenerate, you will get sick and weak, Callicles. But, that’s not really my concern. My concern is your mind, and your soul. You’ll get a sick



The trial and judicial execution of Socrates in 399 B.C., in the aftermath of the downfall of Athens through the Peloponnesian War, was the result of his fight for the truth against the spread of Sophism; the leading Sophists such as Callicrates had directly threatened him to stop teaching philosophy to the youth, "or else."

mind. And, you'll get an ever sicker soul. You will suffer from a 'rotting soul.' "

Isn't that a most interesting notion—"rotting soul"—of Socrates and Plato, in terms of what Helga Zepp-LaRouche said yesterday, on Friedrich Schiller's notion of the "beautiful soul"?

Socrates vs. Athen's Heroes

Now, one is hardly surprised, when Callicles begins to insinuate threats against Socrates. I will be frank, responds Socrates, knowing that I might get indicted and even killed for what I'm saying. He then moves straight into the center of Athenian politics, naming those who are seen as the political heroes of Athens during the Fifth Century: Miltiades, the victor of Marathon; Themistocles, the victor of Salamis; Cimon, the builder of the Attic League; and Pericles, the "liberal imperialist" who launched the Peloponnesian War.

You praise Miltiades, Themistocles, Cimon, and Pericles, says Socrates, because they "made Athens great," but isn't it clear that Athens "became just puffed up, while decaying internally," through what the four leaders did? "They pushed aside *sophrosyne* and justice, while filling up the city with harbors, wharfs, walls, customs, and the like." Socrates denounces Miltiades, Themistocles, Cimon, and Pericles as the "originators of evil" for Athens. They all were no good, because they failed in what is most important in a society: to educate the citizens, and the youth in particular, so that they become morally and intellectually better human beings. They failed to "implant the sense of justice" into the hearts of the

Athenians. Worse, says Socrates, the people of Athens have morally degenerated "under those who present themselves as statesmen as well as those who present themselves as Sophists."

About himself, Socrates says in the *Gorgias*: "I think I, together with a few other Athenians—as not to say I alone—engage in true statecraft." His fellow-Athenians thought otherwise. We know what happened in 404 B.C., when Athens was utterly defeated in the Peloponnesian War—occupied by Spartan garrisons, its walls pulled down and its navy seized. And then came the culmination of Athens' self-destruction—the judicial murder of Socrates in 399 B.C.

But, that is not the end of the story. The political battle for Athens was lost. The war, in world historical terms, was won by Socrates and Plato. Because, the "youth movement" that Socrates had built up over more than three decades of teaching, developed an intellectual strength which drove the Sophist ideology onto the defensive and soon discredited it completely.

Through Socrates' master pupil, Plato, a density of philosophical and scientific thought was generated, which not only preserved the enormous heritage of Thales, Anaximander, Pythagoras, and Solon, but developed it qualitatively further. Sophism was crushed by Socrates and Plato. And, in 387 B.C., Socrates' "youth movement" took the institutional form of Plato's Academy in Athens.

From Plato's Academy flows everything that has been truly great in European culture—up to what we have been discussing in the last two days, here in this room.