Plato's Athens

Boom Town, Aristophanes' Guided Tour:--In the year that Plato was born Aristophanes, a kid from the country (some say he was only eighteen) produced his first play. It was a biting satire on the Athenian youth and the new education that was making them what they were. The lad "found in Athens, the fevered and ambitious Athens of the time, young men of his own age who were very different in their outlook. The morals were much less straight-laced. Their general lack of reverance disgusted him. They struck him as dreadfully ignorant of Homer and good literature." On the other hand, they knew a hundred times more than he did about the handling of money, public relations, "police courts and laws and summonses, and political intrigues...Also they were full of strange information and sometimes of shocking beliefs and disbeliefs," for the new education was not only highly practical but at the same time very much aware of Science. (G. Murray, Aristophanes, p. 10).

Periclean Athens was the great boom-city of the wonderful post-war world. With foreign commitments and armies of occupation scattered all over, there were careers for everybody. It was in the year of Plato's birth also that Gorgias came to down and caused an immense and lasting sensation by teaching a new and improved course in salesmanship. Tailored to train young men for important careers in administration, the Sophists Success Course quickly acquired a monopoly of education. When Plato was four years old Aristophanes produced his immortal critique on the educators; in this play everybody wants to be a promoter: "Can you dig ditches?" "No, I never learned." "Can you do ANYTHING honest?" "Lay off, won't you? Look, here's the pitch: what I want

is wings, see? Wings for business. I've got a sure thing. I just fly to an island, serve writs on a rich islander; then I high-tail it back to Athens before he can get there, bring the case into court, get the guy condemned in absentia, his property's confiscated, I get my cut--there's nothing to it!"

Aristophanes hated this new bulldozing business civilization, and Thucydides "devotes no less than twenty-two chapters of cold devastating analysis" of what it leads to." (Murray, 153). All through his childhood and youth Plato saw the growing perplexities and frustrations of his over-expanded city, met by a steadily mounting anxiety and progressively selfish "get-tough" policy, forced on it by the constant threat of the huge Persian Empire, the "Slave-world" of Asia. Aristophanes takes up this theme in the Babylonians, in which he shows Athens itself reducing the "Free World" to a state of Babylonian captivity. His next plays, the Acharnians, the Peace, and the Wasps all attack the super-patriots, the war-profiteers, "the war-mongering priests, more ferocious than any layman," and especially the hysterical hunt for subversives. Plato himself looks back with disillusionment on the days of Athens's pseudo-greatness: "Men say that they made our city great, not perceiving that it is swollen and ulcerous today because of bad leadership then. With no regard for self-control or justice [the problem was always to control others] they stuffed our state with harbors and docks and walls and tribute-money and all such nonsense...and Themistocles and Cimon and Pericles, the very men who are praised to the skies today, are responsible for the present mess." (Gorg. 518).

In reaction to democratic excesses, another class of men whom Plato knew and feared just as much, were constantly busy travelling about, holding meetings, organizing cells, gathering funds and weapons, constantly bringing charges of subversion against all who did not share their views; in the putsch of 400 B.C. they finally overthrew the democracy and ruled disastrously for a short time.

From the turn of the century on Aristophanes was muzzled, confined by law to writing escapist comedies such as the Ecclesiazusae, produced in 391 B.C. and taken straight out of Plato's Republic, even though that was not officially published until 367, when Plato himself "escaped" to Sicily. But when Plato was forty Aristophanes let off a rousing last blast, the Plutus, his final word, celebrating the victory of money over all things. In this play Hermes appears (as he does in Aeschylus' Prometheus) as the complete organization man, toady, subversive-hunter, and super-patriot all rolled into one; "but his bluff is called, and he is only too willing to desert the impoverished service of Zeus and accept that of Chremylus [Private Industry] and Plutus [Big Money]." (Murray, 206). Everybody is (to use Brigham Young's expression) going to California and finally even the High Priest of Zeus deserts the public service and shamefacedly enters Plutus's establishment, only to find that Zeus has got there before him--he too now has a cushy job with Plutus, Inc. In the end everybody talks about self-sacrifice, but self-interest is all.

The Scientific Age:--"When I was young," says Socrates, "I was fanatically devoted to the intellectual quest which they call physical research. Carried away by enthusiasm and conceit (hyperphanes), I was convinced that I could know the reason for everything...I was always experimenting to discover the secrets of nature and life. I knew that the brain was the seat of sensation and thought and hence of knowledge itself. I was convinced that no one need look any farther than science for the answers to everything." (Phaed. 96A). Plato likewise confesses that he was a convinced "naturalist" in his youth, until one day he heard a passage read that fired his imagination: "There is a mind that orders things and causes all things to be." The idea electrified him: "Somehow it seemed to me just right, that idea that there must be a mind responsible for everything." That would account for the fact that, try as we will, we cannot

view life neutrally; we are NOT impartial observers. "The pivotal idea," he explains, is the idea of the best and not best; when we applaud whatever is good and beautiful, it is no blind accidental force that we are applauding, a mindless operation that is just as willing and able to produce a bad thing as a good one, it is something good. We are not neutral observers, we give our approval and disapproval to what we see--there is something good and bad behind it all, and that cannot be a thing neither good nor bad in itself--it cannot be a moral non-entity. (Phaedr. 97B).

Throughout his mature life Plato opposed the teachings of his friends like Protagoras, who had popularized Ionian physics and created an immense sensation in Athens when he "attacked every illusion and every tradition in the name of truth, clarity, objectivity, consistency and neatness in thinking and speech..." (Schmid, I, 38). That was when Hippocrates declared: "Medicine is not satisfied to know that a thing works and to know what happens; as a true science it must always ask WHY." (De Arte, 6). The naive part of such teaching was the idea that the answer was readily available if one only renounced religion: "How big is the sun? Exactly as big as it appears to our senses--no larger and no smaller!" (Lucret. V, 564). Implicity in all such teaching, as Schmid points out (III, 37), is a basic atheism which, as far as the general public was concerned, infallibly became the main issue.[Y] "Shall we say," asks Plato speaking of the earth, "that God the Creator made it? Or would you prefer the teaching and language <u>that everybody follows today</u>, and say that it all came about simply by physical laws and without any guiding mind?" (Soph. 265C). Inspired by the example of the Sophists, smart people were expected to criticise and debunk everything. The friends of Plato's youth formed "Hell-fire Clubs" which deliberately met and dined on forbidden days, to show their contempt for the old gods and customs." (Murray, 142). The city "enshrined the worldly wisdom of men who stood wholly aloof from mystic excitements and sought for no

revelation." (Bury, 321). It was the physicist Anaxagoras, says Plutarch, who taught Pericles "to despise all the superstitious fears which the awe-inspiring signs in the heavens arouse in those who are ignorant of the real causes of such things." (Pericl. 6); and it was just this attitude of Pericles according to Plato (Gorg. 518-519) that laid the foundation for the ruin of Athens. (Jaeger, Paed. I, 329).

At the end of the Sophist Plato defines a Sophist as one who treats all traditions and beliefs as strictly human productions. These teachers constantly advertised themselves as frank, searching, unsparing crusaders of the Emancipated Mind, and it was Socrates' dangerous calling to expose the fraudulence of that claim. Typical is the broad-minded Hippias who prefers "the frank and straightforward Achilles" to "the wily and false Odysseus," (Hipp. Min. 365B), or Protagoras' devastating discovery that the opening lines of the Iliad are not a prayer at all, being in the vocative case (So what? snorts Aristotle, 'any fool can see that it is a prayer!'); or the shocking disclosure that Crete has 100 cities in the Iliad but only 90 cities in the Odyssey, or the God is said to see everything in the Iliad, yet in the Odyssey he sends out messengers, etc. All this, believe it or not, was very damaging to faith because of the clever rhetoric with which it was presented. The great liberals boil with indignation at the injustice and inhumanity with which a god kills innocent mules and dogs in a war. (Sandys, I, 209). This boys' philosophy, which loved especially to make fun of the oracles, worried Plato more than anything else, because he saw that it was bound to win out over all competitors, being made to order to appeal to human indolence and vanity; it is, he says in the Gorgias, the purest flattery and nothing else.

Education for Success:--Aristophanes' best play, the Clouds, was about Socrates but in the play it is not Socrates, as is commonly claimed, who

represents the "new" education, but Strepsiades, the "Old Twister". While Socrates' pupils are all starving to death in their hopelessly disinterested search for knowledge, Strepsiades comes to the school for the sole purpose of learning how to be successful in the business world: "He cannot see the good of all this irrelevant learning. He just wants to be taught how to cheat his creditors, and nothing else." (Murray, 90). He wants the practical Sophist education which Socrates will NOT give him. Moreover, Socrates' school, far from making a fetish of science, was "much occupied with religion and the after life." (id. 93). Callieles, the ardent disciple of the "new education", protests to Socrates: "...it's no disgrace to play the philospher while you're young, but that's nothing for grown men...So, my dear friend, take my advice: stop all this fooling around and take up the Fine Art of Business...join the men of substance and reputation and everything else that is good!" (Gorg. 485-6). In reply Socrates describes this gospel of Success as the philosophy of "a man who itches and scratches," which is what wanting and getting amounts to. (494). "It is your neglect of geometry," he explains, "which brings about your opinion that one should strive for a share larger than that which other men possess (508)...Do you really think that is the object of life: to live as long as possible, and give your full attention to achieving maximum economic security?...to save oneself and one's property irrespective of one's character?" (512).

An education program to be successful must be popular, and to be popular must be easy. When Socrates objects to an education which studies only "to appear, in the eyes of the ignorant, to know more than those who really know," Gorgias has the perfect answer: "Well, Socrates, isn't that a delightfully easy way of doing things?" To which Socrates replies, that is not education "but a mere knack and a routine--busy work...And I call it foul, as I do all ugly

things." (463). After observing that the word Sophist "in itself means nothing more than an educator," Dobson (Gr.Or. 138), notes that "Plato disparaged Sophists as a class and Sophistry as a profession." His Socrates never tires of urging young students to examine the credentials and test the real knowledge of those who would teach them. It was when the boys began to follow that advice, says Socrates, that the teaching profession raised an uproar against him: "Socrates is a most vicious character, and is corrupting the youth. And if anybody asked them just what I did and taught to corrupt the youth they could give no answer," and so in desperation fell back on the old stock charge of heresy: "He doesn't believe in the gods!" Socrates vigorously denied both charges: if there was one thing he was NOT it was a bare-foot liberal blasting away at conventional beliefs. What he did blast was the intellectuals: Whenever he heard of a famous professor coming to town he would look him up and apply his practiced techniques for finding out exactly what the man knew and did not know. Invariably, he says, it turned out that the great man did NOT know what he professed.

Plato's Solution:--If either science or the religion of his time could have given him the answers he sought, Plato would have had those answers--and indeed as a young man he thought he did have them. But both proved inadequate. Where then could he look for the answers to the questions of life? Answer: to revelation, specifically, to inspired men. There are such men, poets, statesmen, diviners, and prophets, who prove their inspiration "when they say much that is true without knowing what they say." (Meno 99D). This is especially true of the poets:: "I know that they do what they do not by any intelligence of their own, but by a special nature, an inspiration such as holy prophets and oracles have, for they too speak many fine and wonderful things without knowing what they are saying." (Apol. 22C). The only fit materials for the education of the youth

are the words of men "inspired from heaven," (Laws 809ff, 2740). Plato's favorite poet was the divine Pindar" (Meno 81B), who taught that "The human mind is blind when it attempts to find the path unaided by its own cleverness." (Paian. 7B). Both Plato and Aristotle, according to Jaeger, placed "inspiration above reason and normal insight...because it comes from God"; for while reason is far from infallible, "the sureness of inspiration, on the other hand, is like lightning." (Arist., 240f). Any person who would receive such inspiration "must have a pure and virgin soul," and anybody who thinks "that art alone will make a competent poet...will never attain perfection, but be surpassed by the inspired madmen." (Phaedr. 245A). Hence "there is nothing to which Plato right down to the end of his life was more passionately opposed than the statement that the soul can know what is just without being just" (Jaeger, Ar.23)--an intellectual apprach to these problems is simply a waste of time. Whoever receives inspiration must be both ritually and morally pure, "like an instrument properly prepared and fair-sounding," (Plut. De Pythag. Or.22).

Why did Socrates spend his life deflating stuffed shirts? In answer to that question he explains that he has never been a teacher himself, and has never taken a penny for his talk; he has done what he has "because, as I said, the way was shown me by God, by oracles and dreams and whatever other means divine providence directs the actions of men." (Ap.33). At his trial he held the Delphic Oracle responsible for his way of life (Ap. 20); there was no irony in that, for through th years that followed Plato and Aristotle both became increasingly impressed with the Oracle's response to Socrates as the one true instance of a real revelation to men in thur generation--the first genuine revelation since the days of Zoroaster. (Jaeger,

Even more abhorrent than revelation to the Sophists of every age has been the second article of Plato's creed: a firm faith in a literal after-life and

judgment. It is not out of any ethical or abstract moral considerations that Socrates takes the course he does, but simply, as he explains with great emphasis, because he believes that there is an after-life of rewards and punishments. "Listen to a tale which YOU consider a myth," he says to his intellectual friends, "but which I believe to be true..." Then he tells of the next world and its judgments and concludes, "This, Callicles, is what I have heard, and I believe it to be true...In a word, whatever characteristics a man's body presented in life, these remain visible in death...My concern is how I may present to the judge my soul in its healthiest condition...But the three of you, you and Polus and Gorgias, the wisest of all the Greeks alive at this moement can't demonstrate the necessity of living any other life than this one..." (Gorg. 527). He is not speaking in symbolic or allegoric terms (that was a Sophist specialty); in his last hour of life he declares himself willing to die because of his belief in the next life (Ap. 40f), and in the Crito (54b-d) says that he can't get the after-life out of his head--it is an obsession with him, like those voices he used to hear (Ap. 31d).

Such beliefs brought against Socrates the third and final accusation, that of being a religious innovator. How, he asks at his trial, can he be a religious innovator if he is anti-religious? And how can he be guilty of believing in false gods and at the same time in no gods? (26C). He turns to his chief accuser, not a religious bigot or a common citizen but a Professor, and asks, "Do <u>you</u> believe that the sun and moon are gods as lots of people do?" "Of course not!" replies the indignant Meletus, "The sun is just a stone and the moon a piece of earth." At the trial Socrates points out that that is just why Meletus and his like are afraid of death--because they think they know <u>all</u> the answers. (29). These men who brought the death sentence upon Socrates were not further matter states: they were emancipated

in the best science of the time. What irony that the people Socrates opposed all his life, and who put him to death, should forever after claim him as their patron saint! They adorn the tombs of the prophets whom they would slay again if they were alive.