THE RAGE OF HERACLITUS:
REFLECTIONS ON THE DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE MASSES

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The relationship between the masses and the philosopher has, at least in the West, been strained from its beginning; indeed the tension at times has been marked by forthright hatred—in both directions. In the fifth Century BCE, a philosopher, Socrates, was put to death. In the early fifth Century CE, a mob, encouraged to do so by the Christian bishop, Cyril, publicly lynched the beautiful female Neoplatonist philosopher, Hypatia.¹

Conversely, aggression towards the masses is a common phenomenon among philosophers. Usually aggression does not manifest itself in a physical form, though some philosophers, or rather would-be philosophers, assassinated ideologically-driven leaders or representatives of the masses. More often, however, the aggression transformed itself into philosophical disdain for the masses, in one case symbolic provocation. The Cynic, Diogenes, showed his disrespect for the mass by masturbating in public.²

One of the most notorious ancient philosophical deriders is Heraclitus, an archetype in this respect, not only because he has been the first Greek philosopher turning his aversion of the masses into a philosophical theme, but also because the dynamics of his attitude towards them seem to encapsulate emblematically what is possibly the defining aspect of this attitude. Looking closely at Heraclitus, who in a sarcastic verse was called a mob-hater, or a mob-slanderer,³ may help us understand the nature of philosophical disdain for the masses, the subject of this essay.

¹ For the circumstances of her death, see Maria Dzielska, Hypatia of Alexandria (Cambridge, MA, 1995), pp. 83–100.
² Diogeni Laertii vitae philosophorum, ed. Miroslav Marcovich, bks. 1–10 (Stuttgart, 1999), 6.69, hereafter referred to as DL.
³ An ochloloidoros, in a verse by Timon quoted by DL 9.6.
Heraclitus, who lived in the second half of the sixth century BCE, wrote a large number of short aphorisms that together may have once constituted a book. These aphorisms are not fragments of a philosophical system that we are not able now to piece together; rather they reflect a common theme: having “true insight”—Heraclitus’ true insight—into the nature of reality and “being blind,” as the masses (the dèmes or the hoi polloi) are, to that same reality. Heraclitus characterizes the masses as passive, as unaware, as living in a world of their own but dreaming that they have found reality, condemning those who do not agree with them, those who are looking for a more adequate knowledge of reality. Heraclitus is disdainful of those who would not like to be drawn into the circle of “those who know.” Who would not like to be drawn into such a circle? Apparently not everyone.

Although certain modern philosophers, such as Nietzsche and Heidegger (or perhaps their admirers), have put Heraclitus in the center of their own thought and created virtually a cult of Heraclitus in which he appears as an inspired prophet of (perhaps pre-metaphysical) truth, my difficulty with several aspects of Heraclitus’ thought does not begin with the judgment of others. Rather it begins with certain questions. What indeed is the nature of philosophical disdain, the natural tension within the philosopher—within the reflective individual, if you will—with disdain for the masses? What stirs such disdain?

The Rage of the Masses

Understanding what may be wrong with a philosopher’s disdain for the masses presupposes understanding the logic of that disdain: its

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4 In referring to the fragments of Heraclitus I use the universally accepted numbering introduced by Hermann Diels, revised by Walther Kranz, Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker (Berlin, 1934), hereafter referred to as DK. Their edition of the Greek text is, as they were fully aware, far from adequate. I have, therefore, added within brackets references to the best edition to date: Miroslav Marcovich, Heraclitus: Greek Text with a Short Commentary (Merida, 1967), hereafter referred to as M; it has a recent strong competitor in Serge Mouraviev, Heraclite: Édition critique complète des témoignages sur la vie et l’oeuvre d’Héraclite d’Éphèse (2006). For my English reader, I give the roman ciphers of Charles Kahn, The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary (Cambridge, UK, 1979). Texts of Heraclitus condemning the lack of insight of the mass include DK B1 (M1, K I), DK B2 (M23b, K III), DK B17 (M3, K IV), DK B19 (M1g, K XVII), DK B34 (M2, K II), DK 56 (M21, K XXII); sleep and dream texts are found in DK B1 (M1, K I), DK B21 (M49, K LXXIX), DK B26 (M48, K XC), DK B73 (M1h1, K V), DK B75 (M1h2, K XCI), DK B89 (M24, K VI), DK B104 (M101, K LIX).

5 For example, DK B97 (M22, K LXI), DK B121 (M105, K LXIV).