THE SOPHISTS, DEMOCRACY, AND MODERN INTERPRETATION

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The student of political theory who ventures to travel through the various interpretations expounded on the sophists over the last two centuries cannot but be puzzled by the diametrical divergence of judgment as to their historical role and philosophical significance. In the history of classical scholarship, however, the most influential critical interpretation has been that advanced by George Grote, the Victorian Benthamite, which conceives of the sophists as an integral part in the development of democratic political theory. A historian of ideas often writes from the standpoint of his own system of values and experience, and any particular approach can be more or less linked with the fabric of contingencies and the various forms of philosophical reasoning. In the aftermath of the Great War, Plato became the focus of immense criticism inasmuch as he appeared to have been the effective prophet of totalitarianism. For the late Karl Popper, Plato, in the political schemes envisaged in the Republic and the Laws, systematically subordinates the claims of the individual to those of the state, leaving no room for the exercise of individual autonomy.¹ Popper’s approach is distinctly reminiscent of the hostility shown towards Plato in Victorian Britain by a certain group of liberal thinkers as his political propositions appeared peculiarly averse to democratic ideals - individual liberty included. Plato’s recurring parallel between the community and the individual, if ever put into practice, would negate the operation of the institutional machinery of democracy. The sophists, in contrast, represented the spirited advocates of democracy, a system of political organization that did not sacrifice unconditionally the interests of the individual to any collective scheme of civic aims.

This essay attempts to trace the origins of the widespread tendency to associate the sophists with the democratic tradition, and to show that defending the sophists, on the grounds
of their alleged capacity as democrats, has been from the outset markedly grounded on a
deliberate neglect of the substantial differences between participatory and representative
government. To that end, the sophists themselves are examined within their historical and
ideological contexts. A philosophical exploration of a particular aspect of their doctrines
would necessarily go beyond the scope of this work. It is suggested that the sophists
advocated a political individualism which turned against the prescriptive basis of Athenian
democratic rule. Greek democratic politics placed emphasis on collective interests and
disapproved of the intrusion of selfish concerns into public life. There was, I claim, no
definite conceptual distinction in antiquity between the political realm and the private sphere.
In this regard, I do not agree with Isaiah Berlin, who argues that the notion of individual
liberty was never developed in ancient Greece (yet he concedes that Antiphon might have
insisted on the primacy of individual ends). Mogens H. Hansen, however, goes to the other
extreme in asserting that a Greek under a democracy positively enjoyed 'personal freedom
in the private sphere'. Scholars who variously associate the sophists with Athenian
democracy see no conflict in recognizing that the sophists had both found a select and
favourable audience and encountered public animosity, because ancient *sophistike* is still
regarded as part of the democratic legacy which the Greeks are presumed to have left us.

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Grote's major task had been to rehabilitate the sophists against a long negative
tradition. His predecessors, and especially contemporary university scholars in Britain and
Germany, typically condemned the sophists, and exalted the personality and philosophical
credentials of the hero of the age, Socrates. The historian described the treatment of the
sophists before his novel undertaking in these illuminating lines:

The Sophists are spoken of as a new class of men, or sometimes in language which
implies a new doctrinal sect or school, as if they then sprang up in Greece for the first