

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
MEMORABILIA
BY XENOPHON

C. 370 B.C.

Note: This text may demonstrate something about the pathology of public officials generally, and more specifically, the mindset required to think, speak, and act as a demagogue. A modest person, one who does not regard themselves far superior to regular folk, and certainly one who would not be disposed to canvass for high political office, does not underestimate the intelligence, opinions, or occupations of the common people – nor does he overestimate the wisdom, credentials, or wealth of elites. The attitude displayed by Socrates, engaged in a dialogue with Charmides, in disparaging “dunces and weaklings” and “amateurs” betrays a hubristic animosity toward the opinions of regular people which continues to be endemic among elites to this day. These animosities are only aggravated by the hollowing of the middle class and the expanding chasm between elites and normal people, as the accumulation of wealth is, sadly, universally interpreted as the chief measure of human achievement.

Book 3, Chapter 7, Sections 1-9

Seeing that Glaucon’s son, Charmides, was a respectable man and far more capable than the politicians of the day, and nevertheless shrank from speaking in the assembly and taking a part in politics, he said: “Tell me, Charmides, what would you think of a man who was capable of gaining a victory in the great games and consequently of winning honour for himself and adding to his country’s fame in the Greek world, and yet refused to compete?”

“I should think him a poltroon and a coward, of course.”

“Then if a man were to shrink from state business though capable of discharging it with advantage to the state and honour to himself, wouldn’t it be reasonable to think him a coward?”

“Perhaps; but why ask me that?”

“Because I fancy that you shrink from work that is within your powers, work in which it is your duty as a citizen to take a hand.”

“What makes you think so?”

In what sort of work have you discovered my powers?”

“In your intercourse with public men. Whenever they take counsel with you, I find that you give excellent advice, and whenever they make a mistake, your criticism is sound.”

“A private conversation is a very different thing from a crowded debate, Socrates.”

“But, you know, a man who is good at figures counts as well in a crowd as in solitude; and those who play the harp best in private excel no less in a crowd.”

“But surely you see that bashfulness and timidity come natural to a man, and affect him far more powerfully in the presence of a multitude than in private society?”

“Yes, and I mean to give you a lesson. The wisest do not make you bashful, and the strongest do not make you timid; yet you are ashamed to address an audience of mere dunces and weaklings. Who are they that make you ashamed?”

The fullers or the cobblers or the builders or the smiths or the farmers or the merchants, or the traffickers in the market-place who think of nothing but buying cheap and selling dear? For these are the people who make up the Assembly.

You behave like a man who can beat trained athletes and is afraid of amateurs! You are at your ease when you talk with the first men in the state, some of whom despise you, and you are a far better talker than the ordinary run of politicians; and yet you are shy of addressing men who never gave a thought to public affairs and haven't learnt to despise you — all because you fear ridicule!”

“Well, don't you think the Assembly often laughs at sound argument?”

“Yes, and so do the others; and that's why I am surprised that you, who find it easy to manage them when they do it, think you will be quite unable to deal with the Assembly.

My good man, don't be ignorant of yourself: don't fall into the common error. For so many are in such a hurry to pry into other people's business that they never turn aside to examine themselves. Don't refuse to face this duty then: strive more earnestly to pay heed to yourself; and don't neglect public affairs, if you have the power to improve them. If they go well, not only the people, but your friends and you yourself at least as much as they will profit.”

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