

Socrates' Casus in Contemporary Media Space¹

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of the ancient heritage reception in modern culture. In the last decades the media environment, in which the antique knowledge representation is in hands of authors – non-professionals in ancient history, has become a major source of historical perceptions in society. Many figures of antiquity have been turned into media characters attributed with features and notions at the authors' discretion and in mass audience interests. A famous Greek philosopher Socrates appears such a personality in contemporary media space. The article offers the analysis of some cases of the Socrates' image usage in socio-cultural practices – education and performance. The educational sphere is represented by a current trend “Philosophy for children”, which applies the principles of Socratic dialogue as a basic teaching method. And the reconstruction of Socrates' trial, held in New York and Athens in 2011-2012 accordingly, is taken as an illustration of performance practices. The author has arrived to the conclusion that all the described examples have to do with “adaptive interpretations” (Wojciech Wrzosek), characteristic not only of professional historiography, but of mass historical perceptions in modern society as well.

Keywords: History; Antiquity; Reception; Media knowledge; Socrates.

1. Introduction

In the last decade's media space, as the information field with specific and constantly developing means of historical knowledge delivery and representation, absorbing all spheres of human life no matter voluntarily or not, has become one of the main sources of historical perceptions in society alongside with science and education. We can even trace the collocation “media historical knowledge” in theoretical constructs of specialists. Savelieva and Poletaev (2007) explain it this

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way: «In recent decades... we are witnessing an explosion of media culture as a whole, and historical one – in particular, with corresponding changes in mass historical perceptions. We use the term “media historical knowledge” to denote a great variety of different information sources about the past like religious rituals and preaching, festivals and commemorations, monuments, memorials and museums, fiction and science fiction, mass media (press, radio and television), various forms of visual and performing art (painting, theatre, cinema), etc.” (Savelieva & Poletaev, 2007; 2008).

Socrates' image is ever present in social conscience of the people related to European cultural tradition. Reference to the philosophical, political views and also to the circumstances of his public and private life, constantly generates new research in different social and humanitarian scientific fields, new associations and interpretations (Penner, 2011; Griswold, 2011; Irwin & Johnson, 2010). The freedom of such interpretations is explained by the scarcity and questionable reliability of antique sources, which, however, contribute to the conclusion that Socrates was an interesting figure since ancient times not only because of his particular philosophical ideas and methods, but also his personality characteristics and public behaviour (Blanchard, 2000; Morrison, 2011). All the above mentioned inevitably calls into being the “casus” term. The expression “Socrates' casus” doesn't have an agreed content within the academic community. But from here a certain vision of Socrates' casus has been imported into contemporary media space, where this word combination signifies at least two aspects – specific Socrates' method of dialogic attaining the truth, on the one hand, and Socrates' choice of his destiny in the form of conscious acceptance of the unfair trial (traditionally referred to as Socrates' trial) on the other hand. “Only after his death Socrates started to be reckoned with as a curious casus” (Emelianov, 2017). Each of these aspects has become an object of various interpretations and has been conferred with new meanings in the past few decades.

2. Methods

The suggested research is based on the cultural and historical or socio-cultural approach, when the events and phenomena of the past become an integral part of modern culture.

One of the major methods used is the interpretation of Socrates' method, the essence of which is dialogue as a key means in the search for the truth. The truth is attained in the process of conversation between people seeking it together and does not appear or is kept in the mind of a single individual. The goal of Socrates' activity was actually meeting people for discussion and searching for the truth. All the present-day dialogue theories in any case originate from Socrates' practices, and current media environment demonstrates numerous examples of Socratic dialogue principles' practical application in modern political, psychological and business

technologies. A special attention is given to the use of Socrates' method and his biography in the framework of the so-called philosophy for children.

The methods of historical reconstruction are considered in connection with their operation in contemporary socio-cultural practices of Socrates' trial reenactment as a performance. Besides, general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis are actively applied.

3. Results and Discussion

Socratic dialogue is the basis of modern educational practice, commonly called philosophy for children (Philosophy for children, 1996).

In the second half of the XX century, due to the efforts of professor Matthew Lipman from the University of Columbia, U.S.A. this movement started to embrace many countries, which gradually added Philosophy as a school subject into educational curriculum. And Socrates' experience was the starting point. The essence of the suggested programs is teaching children to make reasonable judgement, that is to talk justifiably, logically, critically, creatively, contextually, and behave with social responsibility. The fundamental principal of teaching the skill of philosophizing rather than just information on philosophy and the principle of problem teaching in philosophy are crucial for the current issue, as well as another 2 conditions. The first is the arrangement of the lesson in a class by the analogy with a researchers' community (Ch. Peirce and T. Kuhn's term) on the principle of Socratic dialogue, i.e. polyologue. The second one is providing children with a philosophically enriched tales instead of textbooks (Gorder, 2000).

One of such stories is "Sophie's world" by Norwegian youth writer Justein Gorder with a subtitle: a novel on the history of philosophy (Penner, 2011). The basic approach of the author to the object of the narrative is manifested in a simple phrase addressed to a 14-year old girl Sophie and the reader: "Raise the curtain, Sophie! The history of thought is a kind of drama in several acts".

The introduction of Sophie to antique philosophy begins with Socrates not by chance, for his fate is a real drama for a present-day person. His principles are given to the young reader not straightforwardly, but through various descriptions of his actions, citing the attributed aphorisms, and what is the most important, through the applying of Socratic method in the storytelling. The book itself is constructed in the form of a dialogue, but in letters, between the schoolgirl Sophie and a teacher of philosophy Alberto Knox. The latter is not just telling the history of philosophy, but puts questions for independent thinking to his companion referring to Socrates' experience. "People *asking questions* are among the most dangerous ones. To answer them is much safer. A single question may include more explosive power than a thousand of answers". Some of the questions copy to some extent those asked by Socrates himself according to the sources. However, the key idea promoted by

Sophie's interlocutor is that Socrates was a true philosopher. Comparing Socrates to sophists, he claims: "A real "philosopher", Sophie, is someone different, altogether contrary, I may say. A philosopher is convinced that knows too little, thus constantly attempts to achieve true understanding. Socrates was just the kind of such a unique person. He *believed*, that knew nothing about life and the world. And the main thing: it was a torture for him to realize his ignorance". As a result of such a dialogue Sophie arrives to the conclusion about Socrates' method on her own: "Here lies the difference between a school teacher and a true philosopher. The teacher considers himself very knowledgeable and tries to get his knowledge through his students' heads, and the philosopher learns about the world together with them" (Gorder, 2000: García-Santillán, 2019).

Nonetheless the author manages to present contemporary children with a number of relevant notions and principles, for example, the human equality concept, or more exactly, equal opportunities in attaining the truth. "Sophie recalled the philosopher's story of Socrates at once. Socrates stated that philosophical ideas are available for everyone who is eager to make a mental effort. Besides, a slave possesses the same reason to solve philosophical issues as an aristocrat. Sophie was sure that Socrates would have proclaimed both men and women to be equally reasonable" (Gorder, 2000).

A major ideological component of the book by Norwegian writer was now traditional comparison of Socrates and Jesus Christ's images. Firstly, because the story of each of them was passed down by other people. "None of them had formulated their views in written form or had left a written instruction to the posterity, so we have to fully rely on the I mage created by their followers", for this matter there is no certainty that "historic Christ" really had pronounced the words attributed to him by Matthew and Luca. It is also an unsolved mystery what "historic Socrates" had really said. Secondly, they both sacrificed their lives for their beliefs. And Alberto Knox emphathises: "What particularly attracts me is that they had a certain outlook unseparably tied to their personal courage". They criticized all kinds of unfairness and abuse of power and never asked for mercy, keeping their dignity fearlessly facing death, when menaced with a real life threat. Due to this fact "thousands of supporters united around them afterwards". This is where the overwhelming idea was rooted in the book: the concept of divine providence and the triumph of Christianity: "One more similarity is of great significance: they both claimed to be speaking on behalf of some higher power" (Gorder, 2000). As far as pagan philosophy was giving its way to a new one, Christian preaching pathos gained momentum.

The book and its screen adaptation give convincing evidence that conversation with children, based on Socrates' method takes much time, but unlike monologous teachers' guidance and short parental instructions, these talks are more helpful in understaning people and the world around.

Taking into account the drama of Socrates' life and fate, his image is just waiting to become a performance practice. In essence, performance practices are a current trend in relation to Socrates. I imply not only various movies and plays, mentioned in any way, but also different theatrical enactment of a court procedure under the common name: "The trial of Socrates". The very fact of the court trial and its outcome as the culmination of the Greek philosopher's life principles and individual characteristics, has acquired numerous interpretations in the course of many centuries. However, the new socio-cultural environment of the beginning of XXI century: emergence of developed information society and cultural context globalisation, has affected the interpretation practices of Socrates' trial.

Generally speaking, the reproduction of Socrates' trial in the form of a theatrical act is a traditional practice in educational process as well as extracurriculum activity of a number of law and history schools and pedagogical institutions. But it's worth mentioning the performance held in 2011 and 2012 which gained big publicity among European community members, for the Internet video of the process had been watched by more than 5,3 mln. people all around the world by summer 2018 (Demidenko, 2018). The two staged Socrates' trials organized by the Foundation named after Alexander Onassis (created by his father Aristotle Onassis or, more exactly, Aristotle Socrates Onassis) first in New York, and in a year in Athens are meant here.

On May, 12th, 2011 a historic reconstruction of the trial of Socrates was held in the building of New York court. It was a kind of rehearsal before the big scale event in Athens. Three judges and about 200 spectators playing "the jury" were to make the decision in the court trial. The result was quite unpredictable: two judges acquitted the thinker and the third found him guilty. The majority of spectators – 185 people agreed with the verdict of the judges (Demidenko, 2018). The mentioned result reflects the age-old situation, that may be called as postmortem Socrates' rehabilitation, bearing "rather a public and not legal character" (The trial of Socrates, 1997). It was the public interest which influenced a greater scale of the repeated trial in Athens in 2012. The organizer of the trial, Antonis Papadimitriou, the president of the Onassis Foundation, made a statement that it was not a mere reconstruction and entertainment performance. (<https://korrespondent.net/world/1353533-opravdan-spustya-2500-let-v-grecii-vosproizveli-sud-nad-sokratom>). According to the blogger, modern lawyers "hoped to clarify the terms "democracy" and "freedom of speech" (Chiglintsev, 2018) basing on the data left by Socrates' follower Plato, which was useful, in A. Papadimitriou's opinion, not only because the innocence of Socrates has always given ground to criticising Athenian democracy (<https://korrespondent.net/world/1353533-opravdan-spustya-2500-let-v-grecii-vosproizveli-sud-nad-sokratom>), but also because Greece was experiencing hard times. "We are going through hard times, but we stay optimistic: the same way we had overcome the Romans, Turks and Germans..., plant poisons (Socrates' death is

implied – E. Ch.), we will overcome the domination of “Euro” (Zvili, 2012). Thus when the society is experiencing radical anti-European sentiment growth, which may lead to the fascist or communist regimes, there rises an urgent need to activate historical memory and admit past mistakes, even if just in relation to one person.

Now, Athens, May, 26th, 2012 – a new big scale reconstruction of the trial of antique philosopher, based on the Plato's materials. In the process of the spectacular trial, followed by 38 500 online users (Demidenko, 2018), ten distinguished lawyers from Great Britain, France, U.S.A., Switzerland and Greece took turns to argue “for” and “against” the conviction of Socrates. Though in the real trial dated back to 399 B.C., Socrates advocated himself on his own, two prosecutors and two defenders participated in deliberations in 2012. A representative of American judiciary commented on her indictment: “Socrates pretended to be a modest man, but actually was a glory hog of a dangerous type, maintaining subversive social activity”. This is a characteristic American perception of a person through individual qualities' assessment and labelling. A French judge stresses the public outcry which could be caused by Socrates' acquittal: “The fact that Socrates was a bearer of a certain idea and his constant search for the truth are not a crime. The only mistake my defendant is guilty for is the tendency to mock his opponents and a wide use of a bitter irony, which he eventually payed for. His acquittal confirms the stability of democracy principles” (Zvili, 2012).

But such an optimistic statement about the triumph of democracy is seen imprudent today. Firstly, the votes of the judges during the second trial divided equally: five voted for convicting and five for acquittal of Socrates. In this case the verdict is brought in favour of the accused. And, secondly, the trial of 399 B.C. can't be regarded as not a victory of democracy, because the decision to allow the convicted to choose his fate was made in accordance with democratic rules of the time. The vision of Athenian democracy of the XXI century trial participants seems to be very adjusted to the present day.

4. Summary

Thus, having accepted a combination of specific Socrates' method, manifested in dialogic attaining the truth, on the one hand, and his deciding his own fate (deliberate acceptance of unjust trial), on the other hand, as the definition of “Socrates' casus”, we have gained new evidence of Socrates' image active usage in contemporary media space, as well as in educational system and system of performance practices.

5. Conclusions

Summarizing some observations of “Socrates' casus” in modern understanding, we may arrive to a conclusion, that the described examples, as well as

numerous cases previously analyzed by the author (Chiglintsev, 2018), but not represented in the article, demonstrate “adaptive interpretations” identified by Wojciech Wrzosek in the contemporary historiography (Wrzosek, 2010) and characteristic of historical perceptions of society.

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