

## Isocrates and the origin of civic education. Validity of a classical author

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**Abstract:** Isocrates has been neglected as one of the principal figures of the main political thought. This essay tries his philosophical legacy, particularly his work as a civic educator. Today this is necessary because it is indispensable to build citizenship.

His method in order to promote democracy was public deliberation not only by means of verbal discussion, but also by disseminating his writings. Isocrates promoted the creation of public spaces in which deliberation was possible. That is why he is considered a contributor of “public spaces” as we know them today.

What we underline is that Isocrates believed in the value of the word as the main transformation of men and political regimes. The idea of democracy was the regime established by Solon and Cleisthenes. He always took into account this model in order to restore civic life in Athens and governance in City-states in Greece.

**Key words:** civic education, policy, democracy, oligarchy, citizenship.

**Resumen:** Isocrates ha sido descuidado como una figura señera entre los grandes pensadores políticos de la Grecia antigua. El presente ensayo rescata el legado de este filósofo, particularmente su trabajo como educador cívico, hoy tan necesario para construir ciudadanía.

El método que utilizó para promover la democracia fue la deliberación pública, no solamente a través de la discusión verbal sino también de la difusión de escritos. En consecuencia, Isocrates contribuyó a crear espacios de discusión muy semejantes a lo que ahora conocemos como “esfera pública”.

Lo que ponemos de relieve es que Isocrates creyó en el papel de la palabra como eje transformador tanto de los hombres como del régimen político. El ideal de democracia que tuvo en mente fue el régimen instaurado por Solón y Cleisthenes. Siempre tuvo en cuenta ese modelo para restaurar la vida cívica en Atenas y en las ciudades Estado de la Grecia antigua.

**Palabra clave:** educación cívica, política, democracia, oligarquía, ciudadanía.

## **Introduction**

“Civic education” as a concept has attracted an increasing interest of specialists in the political theory, but also of the promoters of the so-called civic culture (governments and parties). Obviously, much has been written in this regard, since the classic book of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1989: 374).

Compared to a concept of this nature, like so many others of the political language, attention is immediately paid to the historical roots, which means the Greeks and, particularly, Aristotle. As two specialists in the field say: “among the Greeks who wrote on political issues, it is Aristotle who had the lion’s share as attention received” (Poulakos and Depew, 2004: 1).

It is attributed to the Stagirite, in addition to being the main political Greek writer, the role of civic educator. However, there are studies that report other results: “Isocrates was a high-profile figure in civic education, as for capability of rhetorical discussion. Much more than Aristotle (Poulakos and Depew, 2004: 2). This is an assertion based on a serious research work: Isocrates is more important than Aristotle regarding civic education. Statement backed up by several analysts as A. E. Raubitschek, who says that Isocrates’ educational technique and rhetoric was picked up and transmitted by Cicero (Collier’s Encyclopaedia, 1993: 319-320).

Isocrates lived a long life (436 BC-338 BC). Accordingly, he was a witness to many events: the confrontation between Greeks and Persians, the rivalry between the Greek City-states and as if were not enough, revolts aplenty in his native city, Athens. There were two fundamental purposes that moved him to act in public life: restore the Athenian greatness and unite the Greek cities to face the common enemy, the Persians. In order to achieve these tasks he considered that they should appeal to the power that once characterized his city, culture. It was mandatory to return to the foundations that had made the polis famous, the privileged instrument should be the education.

The method that Isocrates utilized to develop his educational project was dissemination writings of “deliberative philosophy” (Raubitschek, 1992: 319). The deliberation as the art of education. Isocrates promoted the exchange of ideas through controversy; he discovered that the discussion was an effective method to educate both the people and the elites. That is why his writings gained new vigor in the Italian renaissance. The idea was to recover the principle of contradiction by means of the discussion of ideas. This principle of contradiction, in fact, is one of the pillars of modernity. John Milton was the thinker who brought Isocrates’ legacy to modern times.

As it can be easily deduced, public discussion cannot be carried out if it is not supported and based on the individual freedom to express freely their thoughts and publish what they deem appropriate. The rights of freedom of expression and press are in debt with both Isocrates and John Milton indeed.

It is no coincidence that these authors – as distant as they were in time- are precursors of what today is known as “public space”; i.e., the place where topics of general interest are discussed.

Both, Isocrates and Milton, used reasons over force. The crucial point to improve a society is education and, particularly, civic education as a way to recover and strengthen democracy.

What is demonstrated in this article is that Isocrates was a passionate defender of democracy. As he lived at times when Athens was declining, he was hurt to see Athens plunging into degradation; mired in personal ambitions and insatiable appetite for material wealth. A completely different spirit had been the one used to build the Athenian greatness in the times of Solon and Cleisthenes; this is, when Athens was full of virtues that were an example for other Greek cities.

What Isocrates did, with the eagerness of raising his city from prostration, was to make evident the contrast between the ideal democracy (that of Solon and Cleisthenes) and the shadow of democracy that he had before his eyes. The solution, from his view, was to re-educate the rulers and the governed: recover the old spirit of sacrifice, virtue, for the good of the city and leave personal interests behind.

He improved the art of rhetoric as a mechanism to disseminate his ideas verbally and in a written way. By generating controversy “public opinion” is born; listen to what others say and answer them; create a didactical dynamic in which everyone participates in parity of circumstances. The most important thing was to have general interest as a guiding point.

However, regarding the problem of Pan-Hellenism, not only was it played in what today might be called “international relations”, i.e., at an external level among States but also at domestic level, in the way they were governed, precisely, in the heart of the City-state. Each power, on the one hand Sparta and on the other Athens, which sought to intervene in the internal policy of the States dominated by the other power promoting their own political regime. Sparta promoted oligarchy, while Athens enhanced democracy.

Under such circumstances, a key point was the promotion of democratic governance as a subordination to the law, honesty, the formation of a civic conscience, respect for others’ property, accountability, sobriety in customs and, particularly, rhetoric as the art of expressing in public, the education of children and youth in sports and philosophy.

Isocrates' works meet all the requirements to be listed in the great books of political philosophy and education. It is our duty not to leave them abandoned. Especially because he set the purpose that democracy neither degenerated into barbarians' hands (Persian) at international level, nor into demagogues' at domestic level (tyranny).

### **The link between Antiquity and Modernity**

John Milton was the one who took Isocrates' baton and transmitted it, precisely, to the modern age in his famous writing *Areopagiticus* (1644). Facing the order issued by the Parliament (Licensing Order, 1643) before the prior authorization of the government to publish any text, Milton claimed the right to freedom of thought and expression:

He who kills a man takes the life a rational creature, an image of God; but he who destroys a book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God. Fed up, men are nothing but burdens on the floor; but a good book is precious vey vital blood of a great spirit, embalmed and treasured on purpose for a longer live than life (Milton, 2005: 23).

In Milton' opinion, freedom of speech could not be the subject of censorship; it was a challenge not only against men, but especially against the Eternal Father.

In reference to Isocrates, Milton (2005: 21) writes:

I might quote anyone whom from their private room would write to the Athenian assembly to persuade it to change the ways of democracy, by then established. And such an homage was paid at those times to those who professed the study of knowledge and eloquence, and not only in their country, but in foreign land, cities and seigniories joyfully listened to them, and with noticeable respect, as they publicly uttered an admonition to the State.

Inspired by Isocrates, Milton demanded the English State to respect the plurality of opinions and not to censor the publication of books. The prohibitive practice -continued his argument- was proper to the Inquisition.

God had given men reason to the use it in every area; no authority should oppose that principle. Airing the views was beneficial for the political community, since it nourished unity around shared values such as tolerance. Accordingly, priority should be given to the consensus built by means of the exchange of views. Political unity would be futile if it was founded on force only.

Abounding in his argumentation, Milton (2005: 57-58) requested the English political representation to take into consideration the cultural power of England:

Lords and Commoners of England, consider which your nation is, which nation you govern; it is neither opaque nor obtuse but lively, ingenious and penetrating for intelligent invention, in the discourse tough and subtle, not in any subject poorly versed, nor in the uppermost that the human creature can deal with. Hence, studies on knowledge of the deepest sciences were so

ancient that among us, and noticeable, that knowledgeable writers of old were persuaded that Pythagoras' school and Persian wisdom started in the aged philosophy of this island. And that sane and civil Roman, Julius Agricola, who here governed on behalf of Cesar, preferred the natural amenities of Britannia to the Gaul's forced studies. Nor is it by vane whim that the grave and frugal Transylvanian send every year, as far as the Russian mountainous limits, and beyond the Hercinian lands, not their youth, but actual men to learn our language and our theological art.

The ordinance issued (Licensing Order) by the Parliament was detrimental because of, at least, two reasons: this ordinance was against domestic policy because it would lead to discontent and disturbances; but also worked against foreign policy, because England would cease to exert its cultural influence on other nations.

It is curious and significant that, in the likeness of Isocrates, Milton devised his allegation as a writing, in the first place, to an assembly, but he also had the intention to influence a wider audience. He wished that the ideas expressed in his plea were discussed widely and that measures were taken to avoid the negative impact.

John Milton's *Areopagiticus* is now part of history as a defense of modern civil rights. For performing this defense, Milton recovered the Greeks' legacy, and particularly that of Isocrates. Milton collected the art of education and educating oneself through reason from Isocrates. In fact, this is the method that is still used today in classrooms. We owe Isocrates the art of rhetoric as an educational method.

That is why we say that he opened spaces for discussion that today we call public sphere: "his commitment to support Athenian culture amidst political and economic changes –and the broadening gap between individual and political identity– looks like the modern idea of public sphere" (Hariman, 2004: 227).

Isocrates promoted public discussion not only through verbal exchange; he also did it in a literary way:

Citizens' participation in Polis' issues was no longer thought of exclusively as speaking in front of an excited or indifferent mass gathered to listen to the contingent demands of a particular situation.

Political deliberation could have been composed of writings, circulation for a public that reads, consequentially, disseminated for a wider audience. If it was possible to participate in this issues of the Polis stepping back and distancing from the assembly, then we may see such distance and step as the creation of a new space that transforms political deliberation. And as a result, it enacts alternative notions of civic education (Enciclopedia Salvat, 1971: 1871).

We must bear in mind that Greece has gone down in history as the founder of verbal discussion. In his book *The Structural transformation of the public sphere*, Habermas (1998: 3) makes the historical source of the concept of "public sphere" clear:

Here we are dealing with a Greek category transmitted to us by Rome. Once Greek City-states reached the highest development, the sphere of the Polis, which was common (*koiné*) for free citizens, was clearly separated from the sphere of *oikos*; in this sphere each individual remits to their own intimacy (*idia*) [...] The public sphere was configured in the discussion (*lexis*), which was able to assume, for instance, the shape of a consultation or the formation of the law, as well as in the terrain of common actions (*praxis*), war or athletic competitions.

What has not been sufficiently stressed is that Greece is also the founder of political written deliberation. Isocrates and his works are evidence that the glimmers of public literary space were also present in Athens (Poulakos and Depew it, 2004: 7-9).

Isocrates believed in the value of the spoken and written word and in its transforming capacity: “promote political solidarity between Greeks by means of the creation of a forum in which there were frank and honest criticism and the free expression of ideas. More philosophical and scientific discourses (*technikos*) might overcome the rhetorical claims over prejudices” (Konstan, 2004: 120). The word should be a carrier of reason, not of passions to make this transformation would improve with people and collective life.

### **Isocrates and his time**

Isocrates' dates of birth and death (436 a.C.-338 BC) witness, at the same time, a long life and a time of tremendous unrest both in his native city, Athens, and conflicts between the City-states of Greece. We must add that immediately preceding his birth, the Greco-Persian Wars were registered (492 a.C.-449 BC).

These conflicts were, precisely, between the Persian Empire and the city-state of Hellas (as the Greeks really called Greece) commanded by the Spartans and the Athenians united in the Pan-Hellenic league. The First Greco-Persian War (492 a.C.-490 BC) began with the invasion of the Persians led by King Darius against some Greek cities.

This first conflict ended with the Greek's victory. The Second Greco-Persian War (480 BC-478 BC) occurred due to the internal conflicts of Persia after the death of King Darius. When directing Greek's internal strife against themselves, King Xerxes invaded cities like Thermopylae, Boeotia and Attica. They succumbed to the Persian invasion; but thanks to the alliance between other Greek cities that were not invaded, it was possible to contain the expansion of Persians toward the peninsula of Peloponnese.

With the Third Greco-Persian War (478 BC-449 BC), people from Hellas met under the leadership of Athens to drive Persians out from all the Greek cities. The Treaty was signed in 449 BC, in which the Persians recognized the independence of the Greek colonies in Asia Minor and the sovereignty of Athens on the Aegean Sea. It was at that moment when the League of Delos was created, led, precisely by Athens.

The problem was that the Greek unity was dispelled: the Greeks gradually formed blocks of influence. The two great powers, Sparta and Athens polarized the Greek cities. Sparta integrated its allies in the league of the Peloponnese, meanwhile, as we already said, Athens assembled its allies in the League of Delos. The military confrontation arrived. As Thucydides said (1972: 49) in his book History of the Peloponnesian War (431 BC-404 BC): "What made this war inevitable was the growing power of Athens and the fear that such power produced in Sparta". It should be noted that Isocrates was born shortly before this war broke out. His childhood and youth memories left indelible traces in him.

As Robert Hariman said (2004: 225-226): "Isocrates lived at a time when Athens suffered military losses, occupation, the fall of the empire, tyranny and retaliation against the city, degradation of the city values, economic exploitation and social unrest ... the challenge was, then, secure cultural continuity".

Isocrates' purpose was that his homeland regained its former greatness through the greater power that had distinguished it since its creation, the culture. Gorgias, his teacher, cultivated in his disciple that ideal (The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007: 416-417). Other of the great Greek masters who contributed to Isocrates' formation were Prodicus and, none other than, his almost namesake, Socrates (Raubitschek, 1992: 319-320). In fact, Isocrates is considered the greatest teacher of rhetoric of Antiquity. Cicero, for example, retook his method and applied it in Rome.

During the Peloponnesian War, Isocrates lost his fortune and made a living out of writing legal speeches that other people read in the courts. He tried to start as a speaker, but his lack of voice and shyness dissuaded him to continue along this path. Then he decided to continue the teaching career.

Among his students Timothy stands out, prominent general, Nicocles, king of Salamis and Cyprus, and two great historians: Ephorus, who wrote a universal history and Theopompos, who wrote a history of Philip II of Macedonia.

His speeches and writings as the Eulogy (380 BC), Nicocles (372 BC), On Peace (355 BC), Areopagiticus (354 BC), and the Panatinaicos (339) are testimony of the events of that time. However, what concerns us here is to address those writings from the point of view of the political philosophy with especial reference to civic education. It is important to know the historical vicissitudes that led to these writings. However, for us it is even more important to notice the topicality of the philosophical and educational thesis of Isocrates.

Out of the two major sections in which we can divide his thought, the knowledge of the Athenian democracy and the ideal of Pan-Hellenism, some scholars have paid more attention to the first noting that his fundamental work is Areopagiticus. The operation of the institutions of that City-state is presented here, in particular the

Areopagus, a collegiate body which exerted monitoring and control over the city. Other scholars, in contrast, are more interested in Pan-Hellenism. In this case, the document distinguished is Eulogy, which is a call to the brotherhood of the Greek peoples.

### **Isocrates and democracy**

In our opinion Isocrates is the father of civic education and, particularly, the civic education that nourishes democracy. The fundamental thesis that runs around the Democratic thought from Antiquity to our days is that citizens are more important than rulers. Well, as an example of his commitment to democracy we can quote a letter written in 359 BC in which our author says: “the life of an ordinary man is better than that of a king, and honor a free state is sweeter than honoring a monarchy” (Isocrates, 1928: XXXVIII). However, we must specify what “democracy” meant to him. As it has been pointed out, his ideal was the democracy of Solon and Cleisthenes.

What was the democracy of Solon and Cleisthenes? Aristotle in his book Constitution of the Athenians, said that Solon’s wisdom was based on the idea that he was able to reconcile the interests of the noble and the people. Above all, he released people from debts through the “release of burdens” (Aristotle, 2005: 35). He also rearranged, in a skillful manner, the political regime at balancing the “Archonship” with the “Areopagus”, (Aristotle, 2005: 37 to 51). With regard to Cleisthenes, Aristotle noted that he carried out deeper reforms that Solon “with his gaze upon the popular mass” (Aristoteles, 2005: 71).

It is worth noting that in his book Politics, Aristotle devoted a specific section to Solon. It reads:

As for Solon, some believe that he was a respectable legislator: he abolished oligarchy as it was too absolute, ended the slavery of the people and established traditional democracy, mixing the elements of constitution, as the Areopagus Council was an oligarchic element, elective judges, aristocratic, and tribunals, democratic. It seems as if Solon did not abolish the institutions that existed, the council and the election of magistrates, but established democracy involving the citizens in the tribunals. Indeed because of this, some reproach him having nullified the other element, making the tribunal, appointed by draw, the absolute owner of all decisions (Aristotle, 2008: 144-145).

Isocrates set distance between the democratic ideal and the reality that he lived in: although he reaffirmed his faith in the Athenian democracy as it had been based by Solon and Cleisthenes, he looked with disdain at the Athenian State of those days, since it seemed to him that it was a degradation (Isocrates, 1928: XXVIII-XXIX).

What was the task to be undertaken? The answer is clear: he had to return to the original model. His contribution was, precisely, to remind people the glory of the old Athenian state and its ability to lead the Greek cities both in the cultural and the

political-military field. They had to rely on education. The first pages of the General Introduction of the English edition of his works, rightly mention: “the first objective of instruction is to correctly train man and citizen” (Isocrates, 1928: XXV).

The education of man and citizen to rehabilitate public life. But how to teach? That was the key question. Isocrates realized that “democracy is above all a form of discourse that cannot be monopolized by anyone in particular. This discourse can only be learnt in the middle of many voices” (Hariman, 2004: 227). Effectively, in tyrannies one person speaks and the rest remain silent; in democracies all men speak and all men listen.

Certainly, the Athenian democracy had outstanding leaders and institutions: “The statesmen who made great this city were not people as the current demagogues and agitators. They were men of high culture and superior spirit those who expelled the tyrants and installed democracy and then they defeated the barbarians and unified the Greek under Athens' direction” (Jaeger, 2002: 948). It should be borne in mind to the great men and virtuous citizens of yesteryear; sure to know that if they managed to go ahead, their descendants could also make it.

It is worth saying that the demagogues and agitators were well described in comedies such as Aristophanes, “knights”. A long discussion is developed there between the Charcutier and Paphlagonius to convince Demo (the people) about who among them can be the best leader. Prior to this discussion there is a dialogue between the Charcutier and another character, Demosthenes, in which the first asks the second: “But I wonder, how will I be capable of ruling a people?” The second responds:

This is a most simple task. Do in full what you do. Resolve every issue, make them sausage and always grace yourself with the people sweetening it with cook phrases. The rest of conditions for leadership are yours: indecent language, ruin lineage, you are a discusser. You have everything needed in politics (Aristophanes, 2008: 259-260).

In order to prevent the degeneration of democracy, Athens was to undertake internal reforms. It was not about imposing changes by means of force, such a thing, as well as undesirable, was impossible. The alternative was persuasion through the exchange of ideas.

Isocrates realized that the engine of democratic politics is gradual change. In turn, the transformations in successive steps require education as an element that nourishes intelligence. And education is nourished from two sources, culture and history: with regard to the history, Isocrates was supported by Thucydides. It is appropriate here to point out that Thucydides is considered the father of both, history and international relationships. It was this thinker who registered Pericles' funeral pray in honor of the first fallen in the Peloponnesian War and it is considered as one of the highest praises to democracy:

We have a constitution that does not try to imitate the laws of neighbor cities, but is the example for the rest. Our government is called a democracy because its administration does not belong to a few but the many. This is why every one of us, regardless of their condition, is obliged to do good and honor the city. Each one can be appointed to the position, not because of their lineage or wealth, but because of their virtue and kindness. As poor as they be, as long as good and progress are sought, they will not be excluded from posts and dignities. As for the State, we governs ourselves freely. The deals and affairs we everyday make with other people are performed with no nuisance; without harm, we reciprocally exercise private relations; in public life, respect prevent us from breaking the law (Thucydides, 1972: 83-84).

Civic education consisted in teaching those values highlighted by Pericles in this funeral pray: the commitment to the political community; the selection of representatives and officials regardless of their social status or rank; freedom as participation in public affairs; the submission of all to the law. According to Isocrates these elements should not only rehabilitate Athens; but all of Greece. In his understanding, civic education and Pan-Hellenism walked hand in hand: “Isocrates’ teachings address the Polis and aspires to stimulate it to perform acts that make it happy and redeem the other Greeks from their pains” (Jaeger, 2002: 927).

### **Admonition to Athenians**

In *Areopagiticus*, Isocrates argued that the Athenians were wrong to feel powerful because they had boats and armies without realizing that they did not have the backing of the City-state of Greece. This meant, they had the power but not the consensus. Therefore, he tried to persuade his fellow citizens about how wrong that position was. Athenians should reconsider. No longer were the times in which democracy prevailed as a well-directed form of government; corruption and dissolution of the customs had gnawed the political regime. It was desirable to correct what had been done wrong. They could no longer be presented as an example for other people in Greece; they had to retake the basis of democracy first.

In “*Areopagiticus*”, Isocrates (1929: 113) writes: “It is in favor of our ancestors’ democracy that I intend to talk... we shall be ready to restore that original democracy that was instituted by Solon”. It is the democracy that the Thirty Tyrants nullified. The problem with the tyrants is that they polarized social relations causing the conflict. The distance between the majority of the population and the aristocrats became even bigger. This led to conflicts and hatreds of all kinds that put the city on tenterhooks. Cleisthenes was the one who brought down the tyrants and rehabilitated the popular government.

The decadence of that exemplary democracy ensued when freedom was altered and confused with the debauchery. That was what Isocrates lived, now: “democracy is taken as an insolence, liberty as disorder, equality as imprudence in discourse and

happiness as a license to do as one will" (Isocrates, 1929: 115-117). The problem is that excesses become the norm in a regime which believes to be democratic. This regime has lost the first trait which distinguishes a true democracy, the voluntary restraint of citizens and officials.

In a degraded democracy, friendships are not made on the basis of virtue, but in complicity. That is why Isocrates (1929: 267) wrote in "Antidosis":

not only do they [the evil ones] hate men, but also noble actions; and as if this were not enough, for their own shame, they align with the wrongdoers and consequently act like them, while they have power destroy those who produce envy in them. They do so, not because of ignorance, but because they want to wreak havoc and expect not to be discovered, and so, protecting their kin, they think they contribute to the same cause.

In times of Solon and Cleisthenes none of this was allowed. On the contrary, they hated and punished wrongdoers.

The recognition of two types of equality was what contributed to the good conduction of public affairs: 1) making all citizens similar to each other; 2) giving each man what belonged to him. Honors and punishment were administrated according to the good or the evil done. Those who held public office were not given riches in excess in respect of what was normal among common people. Simply, the best men were selected to perform the administrative functions. What these officials wanted was to earn the esteem of people.

This way of appointing judges was more democratic than that of selecting them based on an election, because if there were so they could have left the door open to introduce the oligarchy. Thus he wrote in *Areopagiticus*: "while based on the plan to select the worthiest men, the people would have the power to prefer those most faithful to the current constitution" (Isocrates, 1929: 117-119).

Part of civic education was to make citizens participate in public affairs. Not to profit with public wealth. If it was needed, each person put their money to complete collective expenditure. In the *Areopagiticus* is also read:

In short, our ancestors decided that the people, as the supreme Head of State, should appoint magistrates, call to accountability to those who did not perform well in the position, and resolve disputations. While those citizens with time and resources should devote to the attention of public affairs, as State servants, enabled to undertake governmental tasks if they proved reliability and aptness to receive such honor; however, they could have been punished if they acted incorrectly, and receive the worst punishments if they deserve so (Isocrates, 1929: 121).

Such was democracy well practiced. As a political regime, it was the most stable and fair system that could be found. The public office was given to the most suitable men; but, at the same time, the supreme authority was left in the people's hands.

The Athenians were subject to a great deal of care, since early childhood, which was the key. Areopagus was responsible of such a thing. As we have pointed out, this was a collective body composed of men of noble birth, which had made a career in the Archonship. As a group, it stood out above any other council of ancient Greece. The problem for Isocrates is that the Areopagus was downgraded to allow entering those who were no longer chosen in accordance with the criterion of being the best citizens.

Some authors have wished to see certain elitism in the predilection of Isocrates for the Areopagus (Konstan, 2004: 116-117). In contrast with this “elitist” interpretation, it seems to us that the function of the Areopagus must be understood on the basis of the role it played in the whole of the Athenian democracy and not only as an “elite group.”

Isocrates (1929: 129-131), in *Areopagiticus*, highlights that the best citizens occur where the laws are more respect. But, he adds:

Written laws do not increase virtue, but quotidian customs. Most men tend to take up the customs as moral of the place in which they were brought up. More so, it is evident that where there is a large number of defined laws, it is a signal that the state is badly governed. There are cases in which men try to build barriers against delinquency decreeing large numbers of norms. But well-governed men do not need to fill the porticos with written laws, but simply fix justice in the spirits, and those poorly educated will try to break the laws accurately produced. By contrast, well-educated men will be in good disposition to respect even the simplest codes.

The rulers were the ones who had to set the example of righteousness. Honesty as a characteristic sign of officials was very important for Isocrates, who placed it as the foundation of governance:

The criterion of good government for Isocrates was not the government of laws, as neither was the people’s control over the state organs. His vision moves beyond the modern conception of constitutional State, or a Rule of Law, in which the totality of public power management is subject to the law and justice. The modern standpoint indeed provides the base for a positive assessment of monarchies and aristocracies, to the extent that civil rights are respected. However, this was not Isocrates’ stance. Instead of laws and governments, Isocrates presented as political excellence criterion the moral character of the government (Konstan, 2004: 116).

To comply with the ordinance of the good government, the city was divided into districts, neighborhoods and fractions in such a way that there could have been direct contact between authorities and population. Wrongdoers were immediately brought before the Council to either caution or punish them. The purpose was to maintain the good customs so that young people would not fall into vice. They should be occupied, instilling sobriety. For Isocrates, it was very important that the youth were linked to culture:

If it were really true that culture corrupts youths, as states the fictitious accusation and which had been voiced in the process against Socrates, there was nothing to do but extirpate it. But, if on the contrary, it is something healthful, its advocates should be left and the sycophants punished, advising the youth to consecrate to culture with greater passion than to any other interest in the world.

Isocrates takes for granted that every superior spiritual education is supported on developing capability for mutually understanding. This sort of education does not consist in accumulating professional know-hows of any nature, but verses on the forces that preserve cohesion in the human community. These forces are the ones that summarize in logos. Superior culture is the one that educates man by means of the conceived language, this is to say, language as a word full of meaning, referred to issues fundamental for the life of the human community, which the Greek called “the issues of the polis”. Man, as a being composed of a body and a soul, needs to be cared in this dual meaning, which is why past generations have created the duality of gymnastics and the formulation of spirit (Jaeger, 2002: 935-936).

In this regard it should be noted that Athenian people paid attention to the integral formation of people. In fact, they used the word *kalokagathia* to indicate the ideal of education. This term covers physical and spiritual qualities: perfection of the body, skill, ability, sense of honor and dignity, economic solvency, piety, moderation, capacity for judgment and wisdom.

These ideals, unfortunately, are perverted. Degradation dragged almost all the people. It distanced them from culture. Squandered their forces in drunkenness, gambling and sensual appetites. Equally, it distanced them from politics as a commitment to the collectivity; but brought them closer to the politics understood as personal business. That degeneration was also due to those who canceled the force of Areopagus. In effect, the reforms introduced by Ephialtes in 462 BC marred the institution. While the Council of Areopagus took power, the city was not full of processes or accusations between individuals. There was no poverty or war. The Athenians won the goodwill of the other Greek peoples and they instilled fear in the barbarians.

Isocrates told the Athenians that their ancestors were fortunate in being able to have a constitution as the democratic. But now this memory was uncomfortable for them.

A person as Isocrates was damaging the status quo: his enemies (demagogues and sophists) accused him of pretending to establish an oligarchy in Athens. But the accusation had no livelihood: Isocrates himself presented as an evidence in his favor that he had criticized the oligarchies and violent regimes while praising the systems based on justice and reason, this is, democratic systems. And, making a comparison in the *Areopagiticus*, between democracy and oligarchy noted: “if we scan in the history of the most illustrious and greatest Greek cities, we will find that democratic governments are more convenient than oligarchies” (Isocrates, 1929: 143).

In oligarchies, in addition to oppress the most, governors surrender to the enemies of the city; conversely, in democracies none oppresses no one, everyone is part of the government and besides, this regime does not surrender to foreigners (Isocrates, 1929: 149).

There was a need to recover democracy in its original form: “if we change the political constitution, it is clear that, following the same reasoning, our situation will be similar to that of our ancestors. Because it is a must that identical political institutions always produce similar and equal results” (Isocrates, 1929: 155). Once true democracy is recovered, other Greek peoples would plead to the power of Athens, while the barbarians would not dare to attack Greece. Democracy implies well-distributed wealth. The first signs of a degraded democracy is the inequality in the distribution of income, the polarization between rich and poor.

Poverty degrades people. It is transformed into a vulnerable mass. Such impoverished mass mired in ignorance is prone to be manipulated by demagogues; these charlatans make it telling what they want to hear, not what they must listen. They are the “wolves disguised in sheep clothing” who, in the end, subdue the same people who took them to power. The alienated mass is prone to manipulation by unscrupulous men, who seek political profit rather than collective wellbeing. That mass is not interested in the direction of honest men. As an alienated body, it easily falls into tyranny. Athens had a clear history of this regime in the three tyrannies of Peisistratos (607-527 BC.). It was therefore necessary to avoid such risk: education was the best antidote to prevent the degeneration of democracy.

### **The mother of the Civilization**

In his book *Eulogy*, Isocrates asserts that Athens is the mother of civilization. For this reason it is called to lead the way in the battle against barbarism. The endeavor was entirely feasible. The Persians, in the words of Isocrates, were weak people without genius or force for war; they prospered because of the fault of the Greek. In his consideration, the advance against the Persians is “a holy mission” (Isocrates, 1928: 118).

Isocrates shows and analyzes the conditions of the cities that have polarized Hellas: On one side are the Spartans; on the other, the Athenians. What distinguishes them? The Spartans favored physical strength; the Athenians gave more importance to intellectual capacity. He compares both powers with a metaphor:

If every athlete gained twice physical fitness they have nowadays, the rest of the world will not be better; but let one single man acquires knowledge and all men will reap the benefits because they will be willing to share such knowledge (Isocrates, 1928: 121).

It was important that the wisdom, emanating from Athens, was again shared by the Greek as a unifying force of Hellas.

The problem of Pan-Hellenism was not played only in what today could be called the field of “international relations”, but at domestic level, precisely, in the heart of the City-state. Each power sought to intervene in the internal policy of the States dominated by the other power, promoting their own system. That is as it should be interpreted the following passage of Eulogy:

Because Hellenic peoples, a part is subject to us, others to Lacedaemonians, the politics upon which they rule their States has divided the most. If any man consequentially thinks that before the ruled States to fraternal relationships, the rest will join making anything good, he is being utterly simplistic and tactless in relation to the current situation (Isocrates, 1928: 129).

In other words: the Greek leadership is not one that can be shared between Sparta and Athens. There must be a single head. The two cities are diametrically opposed: they have different conceptions of power. While Sparta continues to favor force, conflict and oligarchy will dominate. The only thing that can integrate the Greek is intelligence, democracy and concord embodied by Athens.

The real enemy is not other Greek as the Spartans believe, but the Persian. The Spartans are short sighted. For this reason Athens must claim “hegemony” for itself. Isocrates uses the concept “hegemony” (Eulogy and Antidosis), in the literal sense of the term, as supremacy: “perhaps everything shall be done in such manner that it is seen as in the times of old Athens, indeed it assumed the sovereignty of the seas. In the same way now it claims, not unfairly, the legacy of hegemony” (Isocrates, 1928: 131; 1929: 219).

What were the reasons that helped Athens to find such hegemony? In the first place the experience and victories obtained both on land and sea. Isocrates said (1928: 131-133), “the sways of fortune often change (dominance never remains in the same hands)

and who thinks of hegemony, as any other similar thing must be who earned such an honor in the first place, or who have been provided with the highest services, I consider that everything is on our side. If we look to the past we might see that both leadership titles, according to the exposed arguments, respond our claims. Because it is known that our city is the oldest and largest in the world, and to the eyes of me, the most renowned.

If the lineage and experience were taken into account, Athens would be the most advantageous of the cities:

Hellenic peoples lived with no laws in disperse dwellings, some oppressed by tyrants, other dying in the middle of anarchy; but Athens freed them from these evils taking some under its protection and other were ordered with its own example. And this occurred because it was the first to establish laws and a government system (Isocrates 1928: 141; Thucydides, 1972: 4).

With these arguments Isocrates claimed the precedence of this city over other communities of Hellas; however, not to oppress them but to liberate them.

For Isocrates, education, knowledge and philosophy were the basis on which the political institutions and the laws of Athens were supported. These same elements had formed the Athenians in public affairs by making them gentle to one another. That had saved them from misfortune and ignorance. He writes in Eulogy:

Philosophy was given to the world by our city. And Athens has honored the eloquence that men yearn for and envy for those who have it, because this is the first gift of our nature that distinguishes from all living things and that is what makes us stand out from the rest. Philosophy witnessed that in other activities the chances of life are whimsical, so much that frequently the wise man fails and the idiot succeeds, while the beautiful and artistic discourses never are a thing of ordinary men, but are the work of a cultivated mind. It is here where the contrast between the cultivated and ignorant can be better seen (Isocrates, 1928: 149).

The yardstick that Isocrates used to measure the spirit of men was not wealth or strength, but culture (which was summarized in the concept of “philosophy”):

Philosophy knew that if men were educated with liberality from their early years that should not be determined by their disposition or wealth or similar advantages, but it was evident that it had to be particularly performed by their discourse. And this became the best indication of culture for each one of us, and those who are enabled to expose their ideas not only are men of power in their own cities, but are objects of veneration in other cities. Our city has taken such distance from the rest of the world in thinking and discourse that its students have become educators of the world. This has propitiated that the name “Greek” is no longer a referent of a race but an intelligence, and that the title of “Hellenic” is applied to those who share a culture rather than to those who share common blood (Isocrates, 1928: 149).

In another fragment of Eulogy, Isocrates (1928: 167-169) expressed that disputes between opposing sides in a political community should be of such a nature that was not designed for one of the fractions to dominate or bust the other, let alone to impose its mandate on the rest. Rather, disputes should permit everyone to take advantage from the State for the good. Thus, the political circles should be organized not to take personal or group benefit but should be for the benefit of the people:

In the same way Athenians ruled their affairs with other states. They treated the Greeks with consideration, not insolence. They assumed the task of heading the Hellenic in the battlefield as a responsibility, not to tyrannize them. They wanted to be taken more as leaders than masters, and be considered as saviors rather than destroyers. They gained the appreciation of Greek cities being kind to them instead of applying force onto them, keeping their word with more honorability than that of today... Athenians considered Greece as their common fatherland

Under this spirit the Pan-Hellenism should be rebuilt. These concerns make Isocrates say (1928: 169):

Since Athenians were inspired by these sentiments, and educated from early ages in this behavioral habits, they produced in the people that fought the Asian hordes such courage that none, nor poets or sophist, has been able to speak of in a more certain and generous way of their feats.

What Isocrates (1928: 175) praises of the Athenians is the lesson of boldness that was left as a legacy to future generations:

what our ancestors wished to have above things was the reputation they earned. Make the world see battles they fought because of the courage, not luck, and secondly, stir the Greek to carry on with the war with their ships, showing that fighting on land or sea courage is more valuable than numbers.

It was courage inspired by love to Athens more than the hatred of enemies. I would like to echo what we could call the “foreign policy” designed by Isocrates, we see that in his speech on Peace he demonstrates the need for the moral code to be the basis of that policy. Such discourse was exposed to the Athenians he criticized (as he had already done in the other speeches) to accept and recognize only those speakers who sweetened their ears.

After all and that inconvenience, Isocrates (1929: 17) did not desist from telling the truth:

For I have come before you, neither to ask for your favors nor your vote, but to disclose my viewpoints... because it is not good will what has prevailed in affairs related to peace, unless we are well advised in relation to what must be done.

The point is to find the proper terms for each of the parties. And do not act precisely when the possessions and the territories of other people are retained by force. Isocrates thinks that Athens will not have a secure border as they do not regain the esteem of the other people of Hellas.

The problem is that war made Athenians poorer and face greater dangers; the war conflicts led them to have a bad reputation among the Greek. But if Athenians chose a diplomacy that seeks peace, they would take the way to security, they would be free of violence, uncertainty, and internal unrest. They would progress in prosperity. They would be free of tax war; they would discard the fear of cultivating their lands and navigate safely on the seas; they would restart activities that had been forced to leave because of the war.

And the most important, we would have all humanity as an ally —allies that would not have been forced but else persuaded to stay with us. They who would no accept of friendship based on our power which, we are sure, they would leave when we are in danger, but will be disposed to continue supporting us when there are true friends and allies (Isocrates, 1929: 21).

Intelligently, Isocrates stresses in this passage that it is better to have a policy of conciliation than one of confrontation. As it is seen, for centuries there has been a

talk about the disjunction between using soft power and hard power or else, between diplomacy and war (Nye, 2002: 222; 2004: 191). Well, under the conditions in which Athens was, economic collapse, political prostration, the city was unable to obtain any benefit through the use of weapons. In contrast, it could obtain tangible benefits from a prudent diplomatic activity. What Isocrates said was that through the foreign policy rooted in consensus building, secure borders could be achieved.

### **Advice to the Prince**

Although Isocrates was an advocate of democracy, it did not prevent him from understanding and presenting his ideas on what he considered a good monarch should be. This perspective was described in his speech to Nicocles:

Being above the rest in rank you should overcome them in virtue... you should be convinced that education and diligence are at the highest level of importance to improve our nature. Join the wisest of your fellow citizens and if it is not possible, look for the wisest men from other cities... you should listen to the poets and learn from the erudite men so that you can enrich your mind to judge those inferior to you and to emulate those superior to you. This way, soon you will turn into the man we suppose the right to duly perform the duties of a king and govern the State as it should be (Isocrates, 1928: 47-49).

But the question arises: what is not the good government, but the good ruler? In this case, meaning, in Nicocles, responds:

You will be a good leader if you do not allow that the crowd commits atrocities, nor that it experiences them. You also have to be attentive that the best in town are the object of honors and take care that the rest of men do not experience a lack of rights. These are the first and most important factors of governance (Isocrates, 1928: 49).

The good leader must ensure public order and make the rights of citizens be respected.

The advice to the Prince is: if institutions and laws are not well founded, he must change them. Isocrates invites him to do the best for his homeland, but if he does not know how to do it, he should follow the example of the States that have been successful.

On the grounds that the Prince has to do for the collective good, he should be better educated than other men. Ordinary people do not have permanent contact with politics. In consequence, their mistakes are not so remarkable; but those of the monarch are. Isocrates (1929: 225) recognizes, in *Antidosis* that things tend to be the opposite: "I reproach the monarchs that, it is supposed, they should be more prepared than the rest; however, reality is they are less educated than ordinary men". In this same sense, the monarch should avoid pleasures and dissipations.

The secret of a good Prince lies not to show his authority by means of force. The key is that the subjects recognize his good judgment. The Prince must be prepared for war, but must avoid carrying out unjust aggressions. He has to treat weak States as he would like to be treated by the stronger States.

The good leader must promote what today we call public opinion: he must be condescending with those who express their feelings. It is better, says to Nicocles, to let the voices of the people flow than to curb them: "Secure freedom of expression for those who are sensible, so that when in doubt you have friends that help you decide" (Isocrates, 1928: 57).

This way the man in power can be more aware about what people think and thus take the most accurate determinations. But here there is a very sensitive issue because, as he says in Antidosis, it is necessary to distinguish spontaneous opinion from concerned opinion; the one that flows naturally from the people from the one fabricated by agitators and demagogues. It is wise to separate these two types of discourse: promote the first and avoid the second. Because one nourishes democracy; the other poisons it (Isocrates, 1929: 263).

Governing a State is, certainly, governing the own passions. That is why Isocrates tells Nicocles: "Govern more firmly your desires than you exercise power on your people" (Isocrates, 1928: 57). Behave in such a way that people talk in their homes with admiration of your wisdom more than your defects. Prudence was taken from the beginning as a political virtue: "Set your own prudence as an example for the rest, knowing that the city's way of life agrees with that of its governors" (Isocrates, 1928: 57-59).

For the Greek, as we have seen, the exercise of public office was an honor. To serve others was a distinction that granted to those who had shown virtuous behavior. That is why abuse in the exercise of power was punished not only by the law, but also by the public. It was therefore of the utmost importance to build a good name:

Consider more important to leave your children a good name than great wealth, as wealth is ephemeral, whereas fame endures. A good name perhaps carries fortune, but wealth cannot buy a good name. Fortune even comes to lesser men, a good name however can only be attained by men with a superior disposition (Isocrates, 1928: 59).

In Athens the social prestige was not given by wealth; it was forged through an exemplary life, it was hand in hand with moderation: "be always careful with your words and actions so that you make as few mistake as possible. Make the most of the opportunities that arise from the moment they are difficult to take, opt to take care of something before going to extremes" (Isocrates, 1928: 59).

Isocrates (1928: 61) emphasizes that the political power is nourished by the practice in public office and culture: "If you want to examine what kings should know, make use of the experience and study; because study will show the ways, while exercising in your own actions will give you the power to manage the issues you deal with".

Here is another piece of advice: the ruler takes care of his personal security and ensures the security of the State. But in case that life itself goes in pledge, it is preferable to die with dignity than to live in the reproach: "Strain yourself to preserve your own life and the security of your State, but if you are pushed to risk your life, opt for dying with dignity instead of living in shame. Remember at all times you are a king and try to never do something below the dignity of your rank" (Isocrates, 1928: 61).

With modesty says goodbye to Nicocles:

Make use of the advice I have given you or look other better. Consider wise not those who argue over unimportant matters, but those who speak properly of relevant issues; neither those in problems, who however, promise great fortunes for others. Take into account those that ask little for them, but which know how to deal with the things of life as they moderately take fortunes and misfortunes (Isocrates, 1928: 63).

Finally:

Reject those who know nothing about convenience; as it is clear that he who is not even useful to themselves, will not be useful for the rest. But when they are intelligent and capable of seeing ahead, take them into consideration and appreciate them, for a good adviser is the most valuable and strangest of possessions... and truly believe this contributes more to your understanding and greatness of your kingdom than anything else (Isocrates, 1928: 69).

It is, in the end, the value of intelligence over force.

## Conclusions

Isocrates gave advice to rulers: they have to be sensitive to public opinion; dominate their character; surround themselves with people with good reputation; cultivate the habit of reading and have sensitivity to address political problems; not to be carried away by flattering; not to fall into the equally pernicious ends of excess nor defect; act with dignity in view that they are a public person; do not allow the crowd to commit atrocities, but also prevent them from suffering them; to respect the rights of individuals; to dominate their impulses.

But Isocrates also gave advice to citizens: those who practice their rights and freedoms to be real and not to remain as mere pronouncements; to be part of the Koine (public life) and not to stay pushed in the idia (private life); acting on the basis of reason and not to be dragged by the passions; to recourse to public discussion and depart from the manipulation of the demagogues; to be ready to collaborate rather than destruct. As Norberto Bobbio said (1986: 24):

the only way to turn a subject into a citizen is by attributing them those rights that the writers of public Law of XIX called *activae civitatis* and education for democracy develops the same sense as democratic practice. According to the Jacobin model, this should no be first, as the first instance should come the revolutionary dictatorship, and only then the realm of virtue. But for the democratic good this cannot be so, the realm of virtue (which for Montesquieu was the principle of democracy contraposed to fear, beginning of despotism) is democracy itself. Democracy cannot forgo virtue, understood as love for the *res publica*, because at the same time they should promote, feed and strengthen it.

Unfortunately, what today abounds are indifferent citizens, scarcely engaged in public affairs. However, when moments of agitation come, and in the absence of an appropriate civic education, these same indifferent and poorly instructed citizens move suddenly to the opposite end, fanaticism. They are prey to the demagogues or radical movements that proclaim, precisely, the revolutionary dictatorship as a first step to arrive later to a supposed “realm of virtue”.

But we already saw the end that a, supposedly better and more democratic, society experimented: in the largest of the anti-utopias (the Stalinist communism). Even so, there are some who do not resign themselves to accept this historic defeat and want to exhume political violence as a mechanism to achieve an allegedly superior democracy.

We agree that indifference and fanaticism are not compatible with democracy. Understanding hinders indifference and fanaticism. One wallows in complacency, another in passions. The democratic regime is built on the basis of discussion of ideas by peaceful means. Indeed, as Montesquieu said, democracy is the realm of virtue that does not need any preamble of revolutionary character to be built, what forges it is the daily exercise of citizen participation.

The contributions of Isocrates for civic education are summarized in the following points:

1. The claim of the civic education as a mechanism to leave barbarism and build a community of free men.
2. Civic education as a critical nutrient of democracy.
3. Civic education is the key element to create strong citizenship.
4. Civic education becomes a reality by respecting the ideas of others and through the exchange of ideas; or, thanks to the art of the controversy. The reason must dominate passions. The use of word serves to prevent violent clashes.
5. Individuals must be educated since early childhood so that they will know how to think and structure their ideas correctly. Thus, they may express these ideas adequately both orally and in writing.
6. Isocrates was the teacher of rhetoric as the art of persuasion.
7. One of the motors of controversy is the principle of contradiction.

Isocrates' intellectual effort was commendable. His long life, as we have seen, was devoted to his homeland, Athens, and to try to redo the Pan-Hellenic unit. Nor his city-state, nor the other political communities of Hellas, deserved to sink in the degradation of internal political conflict or in the rivalries between those who shared a common culture. The recovery of dignity and greatness should be carried out by means of the statement of the individual and the citizen. It was the way to inject life into the ailing democracy.

However, military defeats, occupation, economic crisis and social conflicts had made a dent in the Athenian political unity. It was no longer possible to say that the good of the city would be in the wellbeing of every citizen, because the internal forces had suffered a serious breakdown. Each group was looking for its own benefit. Even so, as Takis Poulakos says (1997: 106) in his book Speaking for the Polis: "Isocrates' writings offer a vision, in the history of rhetoric, of the community as a unified collectivity, and perhaps the last successful unfolding of rhetoric against the driving forces of fragmentation and the pressure of differences".

The strength of his arguments in favor of the democratic State comes up to the present time. The message is clear: democracy is not simply the sum of individual opinions; democracy is the reason that enhances in the collective will. The Volonté Générale, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1964: 361) would say many centuries later. That is why we consider social and political deliberation the foundation of modern democracy (Fernández Santillán, 2011: 60).

Isocrates's works have exceeded the historical conjunction in which they produced, they have come to us with all their capacity to formulate proposals, on their own right they are in the list of classic works on political philosophy. A new proximity was born from the distance. As captured masterfully by Montesquieu (2010: 33-34), civic education and democracy walk hand in hand. That is the most important lesson bequeathed to us by Isocrates.

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Reception: June 10th, 2015

Approval: February 16th, 2016