Introduction

This is a story about words and voices. Its main characters are people talking, gossiping and wandering around the city of Rome, more than two thousand years ago. They wrote works for and against one another, they praised and criticised one another, and they told and retold jokes about their fellow citizens.

German philologist Victor Klemperer, a Jew married to a non-Jewish woman, was a recluse for the most of the Second World War. Banned from libraries and the university because of anti-Jewish laws, he kept a diary and chronicled not only the hardships of everyday life, but also the changes in the German language.[1] Political jokes and gossip also featured regularly through the diary. Klemperer painstakingly compiled all puns and jests, since he believed them to represent true public opinion, and worried that their short-lived and ephemeral character would obliterate them from history.[2] We have no Klemperer for ancient Rome. Evidence is scattered throughout letters, anecdotes, historical works, speeches, and archaeological remains, such as Pompey's small terracotta statues that feature in the cover. Opinions are intangible and flit precariously through the centuries, but somehow they still remain.

In the second century AD, Plutarch wrote a brief treatise called *De garrulitate* (*On talkativeness*), in which he addressed the risks and perils of that vice. He alerted his readers to the dangers of rumours, which were uncontrollable.[3] They could be transmitted so swiftly that, as Plutarch recalled in an anecdote, a rumour could arrive in the Forum well before the

[1] This would become, after the war, his famed work *Lengua Tertii Imperii*, on the neo-lingo of the Third Reich.

[2] Klemperer 1998, 1999. E.g. entry of 9th May 1943: 'New jokes: (. . .) Julius Caesar, Frederick the Great and Napoleon in Olympian conversation; Caesar: If I had had the tanks, I would have conquered all of Germania! Frederick the Great: If I had had the aircraft I would have conquered all of Europe! Napoleon: If I had had Goebbels, even today no one would know that I lost the battle of Leipzig!'

[3] Plut. De garrul. 10 (507). On this treaty, see Van Hoof 2010.

person who had been its original source. A woman had insisted that her husband tell her what business the Senate was discussing in private. He decided to tell her a portentous story, about a lark flying about with a golden helmet and a spear. The woman told her maid, who told a fellow servant, who told her lover. This mechanism of circulation of information by word of mouth worked so well that according to Plutarch:

> With such speed was the story rolled out into the Forum that it preceded its inventor: he was met by an acquaintance who said, 'Have you just now come down to the Forum from home?' 'This very moment,' said he. 'Then you have heard nothing?' 'Why, is there any news?' 'A lark has been seen flying about with a gold helmet and a spear and the magistrates are going to convene the senate about the matter.' And the husband laughed and said, 'All praise to your speed, my wife! The story has even reached the Forum before me!'[4]

Gossip was transmitted in many places, but especially in barbershops, as Plutarch evoked in delightful stories about rather too chatty barbers who were duly punished.[5] News, gossip, and rumours were, thus, part of politics. But they played a special and active role in Rome during the second and first centuries BC when, together with writings, songs and graffiti, they became what could be termed 'public opinion'.

Why is public opinion important? Why is expressing public opinion significant? What did each different group (and society as a whole) gain from public opinion and from the circulation of information? The aim of this book is to provide an answer to these questions. Its purpose is to indicate the ways in which public opinion was an element of Roman political practice in the Late Republic, exposing how the public sphere, public opinion, and informal politics structured political life. It intends to offer a new perspective and interpretation of the political character of the Roman Republic and a wider approach to what constitutes political participation.

'You know, gentlemen, that bribery has been committed, and everybody knows that you know.'[6] These words, uttered by Licinius Calvus in a trial

[4] Plut. De garrul. 11 (507–508). Gell. 1.23 relates a version of the story with a son (Papirius Praetextatus) and his mother as the main characters. The story caught on in later centuries and fed the imagination of artists. See Angelica Kauffman's (1741–1807) painting *Papirius Praetextatus Entreated by His Mother to Disclose the Secrets of the Deliberations of the Roman Senate* (Denver Art Museum, Berger Collection).

[5] Plut. De garrul. 7 (505 b); 13 (508–509).

[6] Quint. 6.2.13: 'factum' inquit 'ambitum scitis omnes, et hoc vos scire omnes sciunt' (Calvus, speech against Vatinius).

to frighten the judges, attest to the power of public opinion. Public opinion could be used, abused and reused. It spread both inside and outside the city. It was a powerful means of communication that formed the basis of the interaction between the political elite and the rest of the citizens. It played a crucial game in the pre-printing press, pre-newspaper, and pre-industrial society that was the Late Roman Republic. As we shall see, Habermas linked the birth of public opinion to nineteenth-century Europe, the newspapers, and the rise of a public sphere. The analysis of public opinion during the Late Roman Republic shows that it could take many forms, and that the printing press and newspapers were not prerequisites.

One assumption about Roman politics relies on the scarcity of information that the citizens received about it. Serious political information was apparently restricted to what they could hear in a *contio*.[7] The study of public opinion, however, provides a more dynamic view of Roman politics, based on the circulation of information, rumours, and opinions across different groups, crossing all socio-economic levels. This analysis shows that rumours and opinions should not be dismissed as pointless hearsay: rather, they played a fundamental and pivotal role in politics and, in many cases, influenced the outcome of political decisions. Public opinion has been defined as the enforcement of social values by the elite. This book proposes a more flexible vision, centred on the interaction between elite and the rest of the citizens. However, this does not exclude the manipulation of public opinion by the former, or occasionally the hefty pressure of the latter.

This book analyses the mechanisms of public opinion in Late Republican politics. First of all, the possibility of expressing public opinion freely should be ascertained. The topic of censorship, either imposed by the State or self-censorship, must therefore be addressed.

Despite Cicero's statement that public opinion could only be found at *contiones, comitia*, and games, the sources reveal a wide array of places where information, opinions, and rumours were transmitted, as Chapter 2 shows. This book intends to go beyond the identification of the theatre and games as the only places for the diffusion of public opinion. These were a few of the many locations available to Roman citizens during the Late Republic: streets, bars, markets, etc. In these places, transmission of information was not the exclusive objective of the meeting, but was a consequence of a wider context: that of sociability and the cementing of networks.

[7] Pina Polo 1989, 1996; Morstein-Marx 2004: 20.

In Rome, information was transmitted through sociability. The study of the latter is thus indispensable to understanding the creation, circulation, and diffusion of rumours. Chapter 3 will also address the question of how these rumours circulated and how they influenced Roman politics. Rumours provided snippets of information and made communication possible between elite and plebs.

Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned with the circulation of information (in the form of ideas, opinions, rumours, gossip, etc.) through oral and written media. To what extent was it possible in Rome? This topic shall lead us briefly into the question of Roman literacy and how widespread it was among Roman citizens. In any case, people read out loud for other citizens in the streets and passed messages around orally, which then created a mixed written-oral circulation.

Chapter 6 will delve into the question of the agents of public opinion. Who were the brokers of news, the ones who transmitted it around the city? Other agents should also be considered: as public opinion is usually varied, levels of opinion should be analysed, questioning the sources beyond the dichotomy of *populares-optimates*. Furthermore, leaders were the people through whom others found out what the majority of the people were saying. They were not only the brokers of news but were also influential in the formation of other people's ideas.[8] Finally, over-simplification of the variation in these groups could lead to a misreading of public opinion, as the events after the murder of Caesar attest.

What characteristics enable us to identify a phenomenon as public opinion? Amongst other things is the elaboration of a conscious discourse aimed at influencing public opinion by Roman teachers of rhetoric. Public opinion shall thus feature as an important element to be taken into account when speaking in public, especially in the courts of justice. In Chapter 7, once theoretical strategies have been identified, the analysis of three Ciceronian speeches (the first Verrine, *Pro Cluentio*, and Pro *Rabirio Postumo*) will allow the tracing of these strategies in practice, to determine how orators dealt with a critical and contrary public opinion or with damaging rumours.

Finally, this study of public opinion will address the question of the existence of a public sphere in Rome, and the importance of public opinion as a political mechanism, attempting to propose a new way to describe and conceptualise the political participation of Roman citizens.

This study aims to address the question of how public opinion worked during a specific period in history; it is the intention of this work to

[8] Lazar 1995: 72 (about the leader).

demonstrate the existence of this system in the Late Roman Republic and to propose an analysis of the workings of public opinion in practical terms.

In summary, this book maintains three main hypotheses. First of all, that public opinion and a public sphere are concepts that existed in the Late Roman Republic, and in general in pre-industrial societies. They were not anachronisms, nor did they require the existence of the printing presses, newspapers, or polls, in order to exist, despite the Habermasian theory of public opinion (see *infra*). Secondly, that it was an element of informal politics that made possible the proper functioning of formal institutions. Thirdly, that popular public opinion was especially important in the Late Roman Republic. The discourse was usually promoted and led by the elite, but popular public opinion was fundamental in everyday politics, even though it did not always have a direct influence upon events. Thus, in terms of the relationship between elite and plebs through the lens of public opinion, it could be perceived as necessary interplay rather than perpetual conflict. Only when cross-channels of communication failed did conflict arise.