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1 Introduction: ideology and practice in Roman politics

After years of relative neglect the role of the people in Roman politics now attracts considerable interest among ancient historians. A wide range of new interpretations has been presented, and at the root of this interest lies a rediscovery of the fundamental paradox, which is the Roman political system itself. On the one hand, the Roman people wielded tremendous, almost unlimited powers. Their institutions controlled legislation, declarations of war and the appointment of all state officials; they were continuously consulted by their leaders and kept informed through public meetings. On the other hand, Rome was also an aristocratic society, where the elite controlled vast economic resources and monopolised public office, political, military and religious. The senate's influence was overwhelming. It embodied all political experience and religious authority in the Roman state, a position further boosted by its successful leadership during the conquest of Italy and the Mediterranean. This ambiguity has resulted in widely different assessments of the nature of Roman politics, some of which can be traced all the way back to ancient writers. Thus, according to Dio, 36.43.3, Caesar 'courted the good-will of the multitude, observing how much stronger they were than the senate . . .' Sallust, on the other hand, claimed that the affairs of the state were decided by 'paucorum arbitrio', because 'plebis vis soluta atque dispersa in multitudine minus poterat', *Iug.* 41.6. The question is therefore how these seemingly contradictory systems coexisted; or in other words how much real power the senate's ascendancy left the Roman people.

This book is thus an attempt to explore a familiar theme, and in this introductory chapter the main issues and problems will be briefly outlined. First, the recent surge in interest is placed in a wider historiographic context, followed by a short discussion of the ancient attempts at analysing the Roman 'constitution' and the conceptual problems they raise. The second part of this chapter looks at the question of ideology and the relationship between political discourse and political practice in ancient Rome.

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Recent decades have seen a remarkable shift in academic interest from the politics of the elite to the people's involvement in this process. Radical new interpretations have been offered, also introducing the notion of democracy, a concept which historians have traditionally been careful to avoid in analyses of Roman politics. Historiographically this development may be seen as part of a much broader sea-change in the study of social structures and relations in republican Rome. Until the last generation Roman historians paid little attention to the social strata below the elite. Certainly in studies of Roman politics the masses were largely ignored, with an overall emphasis placed on the structure of the elite and its internal political manoeuvrings. Family alliances and political groupings, office-holding and careers were the main foci of scholarly attention. This preoccupation was firmly rooted in the Rankean tradition of the nineteenth century, which saw politics, diplomacy and warfare as the proper subjects of historical research. Roman social and economic history only developed slowly, and the study of Roman politics long remained unaffected by these new trends. To some extent that may have reflected the broadly conservative outlook of most historians, for whom Roman politics was often little more than a power game played out between members of a few noble families. In accordance with this concept, the existence of ideology in Roman politics was largely ruled out. Even the emergence of 'popular' politics in the second century, which openly challenged the senate's supremacy and championed the interests of the people, was – following a hostile ancient tradition – seen as a barely disguised quest for personal power and prestige; little more than an alternative way to advance one's career, using the *comitia* rather than the *curia* as a stepping stone.[1] At the core of this approach thus lay a somewhat cynical view of politics in general, bluntly expressed in Syme's dictum that behind any political system, whatever it calls itself, there always hides an oligarchy.[2] This detached and world-weary attitude has characterised much ancient history, and has also led to a general rejection of social issues as a significant factor of Roman politics, which some politicians might take up for other than selfish reasons.

The *plebs* itself was viewed with a certain disdain – until recently most ancient historians identified instinctively with the elite and readily adopted its outlook and prejudices.[3] The lower classes were dismissed as politically immature and entirely under the control of a few ruling

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[1] Meier (1965); (1980), which devoted a chapter to 'die populare Methode'; Badian (1972); Gruen (1974).

[2] Syme (1939) 7.

[3] Ibid., 100: 'Debauched by demagogues and largess, the Roman people was ready for the empire and the dispensation of bread and games.'

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families. A finely woven network of *clientela* kept them in place and reduced the popular assemblies to a political instrument in the hands of senatorial factions.[4] The powers of the people were thus neutralised through tight social control and the overriding aristocratic structure of society in general.

This model of Roman politics has been challenged in recent decades. The nature and extent of *clientela* have been questioned, and there is now a growing consensus that its importance may have been overestimated.[5] For a number of reasons, to which we shall return in the following chapters, it seems clear that the entire population cannot have been individually tied to members of the elite. There is little evidence to suggest the existence of a comprehensive network of social obligations, linking top and bottom of society. That conclusion has important implications for our picture of the people as a political agent; it opens up the issue to new interpretations and forces the historian to reconsider much received wisdom.

One response to this challenge has been the introduction of 'democracy' into the debate on Roman politics. This line has been most forcefully advocated by Millar, whose recent book on the masses in late republican politics represents a sustained attack on traditional positions.[6] Millar here presents the popular meetings and assemblies as genuinely democratic institutions, which offered the Roman people a crucial role in the political process and ample opportunity to make their voice heard. There is an overall emphasis in Millar's work on the centrality of these institutions to the workings of Roman politics. Far from being a mere sideshow to the proceedings of the senate, they were the focal point around which political life in Rome evolved. In public speeches politicians of all persuasions addressed the assembled people and put their case before them. In that respect the political system approached what could broadly be termed a 'democracy'. The opening paradox of a seemingly cohabiting aristocracy and democracy has thus been accepted as political reality, representing a genuine sharing of power between the elite and the masses.

Viewed in a wider historiographical perspective, this rethinking of Roman politics appears to be part of a more general development in the

[4] Thus, the fundamental study by Gelzer (1912), later followed by e.g. Scullard (1973); Meier (1980) 124; Bleicken (1974) 81; Gruen (1974) 365.

[5] Brunt (1988); Wallace-Hadrill (1989); Pani (1997) 132–40, 197.

[6] Millar (1984); (1986); (1989); (1995a); (1995b); (1998), followed by Wiseman (1999). Along the same lines also Lintott (1987); Purcell (1994); Laser (1997). This model has sparked considerable debate: North (1990); Harris (1990); Gabba (1997); Molho, Raaflaub, Emlen eds. (1991); Burckhardt (1990); Jehne (1995); Hölkeskamp (1995); Flaig (1995); Pani (1997) 140–55.

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study of republican Rome, which also features the return of political ideologies and a rehabilitation of the urban *plebs*. Along with the 'faction' model of elite politics, the narrow focus on the office-holding class has largely been abandoned.[7] A growing number of historians also accepts that Roman politicians might have been devoted to social causes, which they pursued as part of a broader political agenda.[8] Our perception of what Roman politics was about has thus been expanded; it now seems to have dealt with real issues, which reached beyond the internal power struggles of the elite.[9]

Parallel to this development, the urban *plebs* has also been given a long overdue rehabilitation. Few groups in history have suffered worse in the hands of contemporary and later writers than the Roman *plebs*. In antiquity the lower classes of the capital were vilified as parasites on the state, fed by the public and overindulging in public entertainment. Until recently the condescension of the Roman writers was perpetuated by modern historians, who described the *plebs* in similar terms as a spoilt and degenerate *Lumpenproletariat*. This attitude has finally given way to a more balanced view.[10] Thus, historians have pointed out that the scale and extent of public entertainment were far more limited than the common stereotype would suggest.[11] Certainly under the republic it was a diversion only a small minority of the population could enjoy, and that just for a few days a year. Likewise public and private handouts were insufficient to support a family. Rome's was therefore a working population, which did not simply sponge off the state.[12] The result has been a new picture of the lower classes in Rome, which suggests that far from being overindulged, they suffered a precarious existence dominated by frequent food-shortages, poor housing, high mortality and a daily struggle for economic survival.

This rehabilitation of the plebeians, as we have seen, has been accompanied by a wish to upgrade their importance as political agents. Thus, the studies of, among others, Vanderbroeck, Yakobson and Millar may be seen as further attempts to restore the dignity of the common

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[7] Against the faction model esp. Meier (1980), Brunt (1988).

[8] Perelli (1982); Doblhofer (1990); Mackie (1992) esp. 67–71.

[9] Beard and Crawford (1985) 67–8, cf. the survey of modern research in Lintott (1994). Brunt (1971b) is a fine example of this approach.

[10] Important Yavetz (1958); Brunt (1966); (1980). Later contributions include e.g. Kühnert (1991); Will (1991); Prell (1997). This line has also been promoted by Marxist historians, focused on class struggle in antiquity, e.g. Hahn (1975).

[11] Balsdon (1969a); (1969b), who noted that 'This army of unemployed idlers did not exist', (1969a) 268.

[12] Le Gall (1971); also Morel (1987) stressed Rome as a place of production, not just consumption. More literature on the living conditions of the lower classes is listed in ch. 6.

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people and present them as serious players on the political scene.[13] They have presented an alternative to the traditional stereotype which tended to see them as mere voting fodder, easily corruptible, devoid of any serious political interests and therefore readily giving in to patronal pressure; that is, if they did not happen to be carried away by the rhetoric of 'popular' demagogues. Millar has demonstrated in detail how deeply involved the popular institutions were in the daily conduct of politics, and sees the meetings and speeches to the crowd as indicative of the independent and often decisive role played by the people, who were carriers of distinct political interests, actively pursued in these fora. The 'democratic' interpretation may thus be seen as one strand of a general – basically sympathetic – revaluation of the masses in history. As such it draws moral authority and justification from this wider project but, as I shall argue below, the social rehabilitation of the *plebs* as a 'respectable' working class may stand in the way of its political restoration. Material necessity and political engagement might very well have been mutually exclusive commitments. And what is interpreted as independence from the elite may also be seen as separation from the political class and the world it dominated, resulting in a general alienation of the *plebs* from official politics.

The picture of the Roman *plebs* as a responsible political agent, able to provide qualified opposition to the senate, has found ancient support in Polybius' description of the Roman political system as a 'mixed' constitution in which the popular assemblies represented the 'democratic' element.[14] This analysis is part of an ambitious attempt to explain the wonder of Rome's conquest of the Mediterranean during the second century. The focus is on the Roman 'constitution', whose remarkable strength is presented as one of the secrets behind Rome's success.[15] As a Greek, writing for a Greek audience, Polybius' intellectual framework was naturally that of traditional Greek political thinking. His main analytical tool was the familiar model of the three constitutional archetypes of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, with their deviant forms of tyranny, oligarchy and ochlocracy. The Roman political institutions were fitted into this particular scheme and each interpreted as representing one of these archetypes: the consuls represented the monarchical aspect, the senate the aristocratic and the popular assemblies the democratic. Rome's was thus a 'mixed' constitution which combined

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[13] Millar (1984); (1986); (1995a); (1998); Vanderbroeck (1987); Will (1991) 1ff.; Yakobson (1992); (1999); Purcell (1994) 678; Pina Polo (1996) 126–50.

[14] Millar (1998) 24.

[15] Polybius' discussion of the Roman 'constitution' is presented in book six. See in general Walbank (1972) 130–56; Nicolet (1973); Nippel (1980) 142–56.

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elements of all three types, making it impossible to tell whether it was an oligarchy, monarchy or democracy, 6.11.[16] According to Polybius Rome had reached a balanced – and therefore stable – compromise, which accommodated different forces in society and allowed her to transcend the cycle of endemic constitutional change that was a feature of the 'pure' constitutional forms.[17] Thus, it was this 'mixed' constitution that gave Rome the strength and stability that enabled her to direct her energy outwards towards military expansion.

Some scholars have argued that since Polybius had first-hand experience of Roman politics, his description of the assemblies as a 'democratic' element which counterbalanced the aristocracy should be taken seriously, suggesting as it does that they in fact did function as effective 'democratic' institutions.[18] The terminological argument, however, seems to underestimate the influence exerted by Polybius' analytical framework. Given the limitations of his conceptual 'toolbox' it is difficult to see which other term he could have used to describe the popular assemblies. Polybius' application of his preconceived model to the situation encountered in second-century Rome is quite schematic, at times even crude. Strikingly so is his definition of the consulship as 'monarchical', which seems to ignore fundamental characteristics of this office; its collegiality, the short-term tenure, and its appointment by the *comitia*.[19] His approach to Roman politics is generally formalistic, emphasising institutional structures rather than the practical workings of politics. Polybius' analysis thus seems to owe more to Greek political theory than to personal observation, and the terminology he uses may therefore not be very helpful in determining the nature of popular involvement in Roman politics.

Polybius' stress on the people as a counterbalance to the senate and the consuls should be viewed in this perspective too. His aim was, as noted, to explain Rome's extraordinary success, and his analysis therefore had to point to unique features which distinguished Rome from other societies. The analysis followed conventional Greek patterns by focusing on the Roman 'constitution'; here Rome's superiority must be demonstrated in terms that made sense to his audience. It is therefore

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[16] Generally, though, Polybius does recognise that the aristocracy carried the greater weight in the Roman 'constitution', cf. e.g. Pani (1997) 93–4.

[17] Rome had not, however, completely transcended the 'anacyclosis'. Polybius, 6.57, predicted that eventually also the Roman system would decline under the influence of the imperial expansion.

[18] Millar (1984) 3, followed by Walbank (1995), despite his more sceptical stance taken in (1972) 155. Critical North (1990); Cornell (1991) 61–2; Flaig (1995) 88, 96.

[19] This may be based on a Roman tradition, cf. Walbank (1995) 215. Still, such subsequent rationalisation of its historical origins says nothing about its later functioning.

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hardly surprising to find Rome described as an approximation of the Aristotelian ideal of the 'middle constitution', which mixes aristocratic and democratic features. According to traditional Greek thinking only a state that had neutralised the conflict between these two was able to reach the equilibrium which was seen as an essential feature of the ideal constitution. The prominence accorded to the people in Polybius' Roman 'constitution' may therefore be seen as a product of the basic theoretical propositions which informed his analysis.[20] It would have served no purpose and made little explanatory sense to present Rome as a society ruled by a small, mainly hereditary, office-holding elite. Such a description would also, as we shall see, have been at variance with the prevailing ideology and self-perception of the senatorial elite itself, whose views Polybius had become deeply familiar with through his friendship with Scipio Aemilianus.

The case of Polybius underlines the conceptual problems we are faced with in trying to assess the scale of popular influence on Roman politics. The notion of 'democracy' is problematic, coming to us as it does with heavy historical and ideological baggage. Today 'democracy' is hailed as an almost universal *telos* and measure of human progress. As a political principle it has been appropriated by virtually every regime in the world, whatever its actual record. But not only is 'democracy' one of the most abused terms in the political vocabulary, modern notions of what in practice constitutes a proper 'democracy' are also very different from those held in antiquity. Most crucially, the concept of political representation was unknown; any form of democracy was necessarily direct.[21] For those and other reasons 'democracy' may not be very useful as an analytical tool. Thus, the simple question, 'Was Rome a democracy or not?' by definition defies a straight answer. For while it may be possible for autocratic regimes to eliminate – at least temporarily – most popular influence, probably no society can be totally democratic. The notion of extending power equally to all citizens is in the nature of things very difficult to realise in practice. 'Democracy' would seem to represent an ideal rather than an attainable goal. The question must be to what extent a given system approaches this ideal, and there seems to be no obvious way to proceed in such an investigation. A multiplicity of criteria may be applied: the formal powers held by the people, the level of direct popular participation, the equality of influence and access to public office, the accountability of officials to the people, the extent and quality of public debates and consultation processes, the scope for popular initiatives and policy-making, the influence of outside bodies,

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[20] Walbank (1972) 155.
[21] Cf. Finley (1983) 119.

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such as pressure groups, lobbyists, and so on. Applied to republican Rome each of them would lead to different conclusions, and none of them would be able to tell us whether Rome was a 'democracy' or not.

Instead of focusing narrowly on the concept of 'democracy', it may be more fruitful to follow the traditional Greek definition of the three standard constitutions as those controlled by the one, the few and the many. This is admittedly a very unsophisticated model, but the advantage of 'the rule of the many' over the abstract notion of 'democracy' lies in its implicit suggestion of a more practical approach to politics and decision-making. As an ancient definition it reflects the direct nature of all political participation and draws attention to the actual scale of politics. It shifts the overall emphasis away from the putative nature of a constitution, its underlying principles or historical origins, onto the practicalities of politics, thereby allowing us to ask more concrete and therefore perhaps more answerable questions. This quantitative approach also has a crucial social dimension. For as Aristotle observed, the few and the many are in fact the rich and the poor. 'Rather, it is a democracy when the free and the poor who are a majority have the authority to rule, and an oligarchy when the rich and well born, who are few, do', *Pol.* 1290^{b}18–20. The involvement of the poor would therefore be a significant indicator of the level of 'democracy' in the Roman republic. For 'what does distinguish democracy and oligarchy from one another is poverty and wealth', Aris. *Pol.* 1279^{b}39.[22] The question is therefore whether the popular institutions of Rome really did allow the masses a say in the running of the state, giving them an opportunity to pursue their own interests.

The practical definition of democracy as the 'rule of the many' may also help us to draw a clearer distinction between political ideal and reality, that is, between the democratic potential and capability of a political system and its actual functioning. There is no identity between the level of participation and influence a system theoretically – or ideally – offers and the power the masses in reality hold.

This distinction between the ideals of popular political institutions and their practical functioning has wide implication. We will have to consider as a separate issue the ways in which the Roman *res publica* was constructed ideologically. The popular institutions were part of a complex system of values and ideals, which informed their procedures and conventions. To understand the nature and functioning of these institutions we must therefore look at the way the Romans thought about themselves and their political system. What we find is an almost

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[22] Ibid., 10–11.

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'democratic' discourse where the people appear as by far the most important political body.

The centrality of the *populus Romanus* to the political debate is a striking feature of late republican politics, where at first glance it would seem that the interests of the people were the primary concern of anybody involved. The freedom of the Roman people, their *libertas*, appears as the fundamental concept around which their institutions and political practices were built.[23] This was the principle to which all public orators, political theorists and historians paid tribute. The idea of the *civis Romanus* as a free man in a free state is ever-present in the political discourse of the late republic. The *res publica* was, as Cicero maintained, really the *res populi*,[24] and the people were recognised as the foundation of the Roman state and the ultimate source of political legitimacy.

Libertas was invoked by all Roman politicians whatever their views and objectives. Political leaders otherwise fiercely opposed to each other were united in their common invocation of *libertas* as their guiding principle. It may be less surprising to find the Gracchi as champions of the people's interests, e.g. Plut. *Ti. Grac*. 15.5, but their aristocratic foes donned the same mantle and justified their actions as a defence of *libertas*.[25] Later the Catilinarians conspired under the banner of liberty, claiming to have the people's liberation from oppression and hardship at heart.[26] However, after crushing the sedition, it was Cicero's turn to present himself as the saviour of the *res publica* and its *libertas*.[27] Moreover, when he was exiled for his unlawful execution of the conspirators, Clodius celebrated it as a vindication of the people's freedom and built a shrine to Libertas on the site of Cicero's house.[28] On his return from exile, however, Cicero claimed that not just his own person but also the *libertas* of the Roman people had been restored.[29] Caesar went to war against the established order not only to defend his own *dignitas* but also to protect the *libertas* of the people.[30] Eventually he was killed by disaffected senators who also acted in the name of the *libertas populi Romani*.[31] Finally, when Augustus had established his personal

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[23] On *libertas* see Wirszubski (1950); Hellegouarc'h (1972) 542–59; Stylow (1972); Fears (1981) esp. 869–75; Brunt (1988) 281–350; Perelli (1990); De Martino (1989); Ritter (1998).

[24] E.g. Cic. *Rep*. 1.38; 3.43. Cf. Schofield (1995) 69–77.

[25] Cic. *Phil*. 8.13; *Brut*. 212; *Pis*. 95; *Planc*. 70.

[26] Sall. *Cat*. 20.14; 33.4; 58.8,11.

[27] E.g. Cic. *Sest*. 123; *Cat*. 4.16.

[28] Cic. *Dom*. 108, 110; *Leg*. 2.42; Plut. *Cic*. 33.1; Dio 38.17.6. Cf. Picard (1965); Berg (1997).

[29] Cic. *Dom*. 110–11. Clodius is presented as an enemy of *libertas* in e.g. *Pis*. 15.

[30] Caes. *B. Civ*. 1.22. Coins were also struck celebrating *libertas*, Crawford (1974) no. 473. Both Caesar and Pompey claimed their allegiance to this ideal, Dio 41.57.2.

[31] Dio 47.42.3–43.1. Cf. Crawford (1974) nos. 498–502, 506.

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monarchy, he too presented himself as the restorer of Rome's *libertas* from the domination of a political faction.[32]

The political discourse in Rome was dominated by an almost universal claim to be the true defender of the *libertas populi Romani*. It may come as no surprise therefore to find that there was little consensus about the actual content of this notion. Freedom, then as now, was an elastic concept, open to a variety of interpretations. There was in this period broad agreement that the liberty of the Roman citizen involved certain basic civil rights, among them the right to appeal, the *ius provocationis*, which offered some protection against magisterial coercion, and the right to tribunician assistance, *auxilium*. *Libertas* could in this sense be used almost synonymously with *civitas*, citizenship. On the other hand, the amount of political influence entailed in the *libertas* of the Roman citizen was – understandably – more controversial. On a basic level *libertas* simply meant freedom from oppression, *dominatio*, which again allowed for a range of interpretations, the most minimalist merely identifying it with the absence of kingship. On this view *libertas* was little more than *res publica*, a polity based on equality of citizenship and a formalised system of power-sharing. At the other end of the scale, however, *libertas* could be used to support calls for a much more egalitarian distribution of power and wealth. *Libertas* in this form represented the people's right to freedom, not just from kingship but also from oligarchy. As such it was central to the agenda of the *populares*, who applied a much wider interpretation than did traditional supporters of senatorial authority, whose strategy was to limit the political impact of *libertas* by reconciling it with the concept of *dignitas*.[33] For while *libertas* was equal for all, *dignitas* was not; it reflected your status in society.[34] Thus, while the historic right of Roman citizens to elect their own leaders went unchallenged, it was at the same time argued that political influence had to reflect the difference in *dignitas*. The two principles were ingenuously blended in the *comitia centuriata*, which combined equality of voting rights and disparity of influence.[35] Cicero even introduced a deviant form of *libertas*; the unrestrained rule of the people which he defined not as liberty but as *licentia*, a disorderly state which

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[32] *Res Gestae* 1, cf. Syme (1939) 155; Ramage (1987) 66–72. Augustus also presented himself in his coinage as 'vindex libertatis populi Romani', *BMC* 1 no. 691, Scheer (1971).

[33] Cic. *Rep.* 1.43–4. In 1.53 Cicero describes the ideal situation in which each citizen is established in his proper station. For Cicero's concern about the *gradus dignitatis* see e.g. *Mur.* 48.

[34] This line was not new, cf. Cato maior, *ORF*^{3} frg. 252: 'iure, lege, libertate, re publica communiter uti oportet; gloria atque honore, quomodo sibi quisque struxit'.

[35] Cf. Cic. *Rep.* 2.39–40. Cf. Di Gennaro (1993).