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CRISIS AND THE SOURCES FOR CRISIS AND GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSES

WHAT MAKES A CRISIS?

Crisis is the one of the defining words of our times. The news media constantly fire the word at us, declaring one situation after another a crisis. In the realm of political interaction, crisis is ever present. As one modern political scientist has stated:

> [C]risis is among the most widely-used verbal symbols of turmoil in the politics among nations. Statesmen often portray their tenure in office as a daily confrontation with crises. Journalists and scholars, too, write about disputes, incidents, riots and rebellions as crises. In sum, crisis is a universal term for disruption and disorder in the global arena."[1]

In the modern study of Roman history, the word is well worn. An entire volume of the *Cambridge Ancient History* was given the title of "The Crisis of the Roman Empire."[2] Recent works such as J. D. Grainger's *Nerva and the Roman Succession Crisis of AD 96–99*[3] and the collected volume *Crises and the Roman Empire*[4] demonstrate that the word has had popularity among ancient historians to the present day. Therefore, a study of crisis situations and the responses of the Roman government to them fits well with the current mindset.

Although popular, the use of the term can be somewhat hazy in modern scholarship. Because crisis is a matter of perspective, it depends on whose viewpoint one is approaching matters from when designating a situation a "crisis." To tackle a famous example, one of the most common usages of

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[1] Brecher (1993) 2–3.
[2] *CAH*² XII, published in 2005.
[3] Grainger (2003).
[4] Hekster, de Kleijn, and Slootjes (2007).

the term by Roman historians today is in treatments of the so-called Crisis of the Roman Republic. In the volume of the *Cambridge Ancient History* that covers the final century of the Roman Republic,[5] the first chapter is titled "The Crisis of the Republic: Sources and Source-Problems."[6] Whole works, including K. Christ's 1979 monograph[7] and a selection of journal articles assembled by Robin Seager,[8] have taken the "crisis of the Republic" for their titles. Interestingly, none of the authors of the aforementioned works have felt it necessary to address two important matters: (1) the definition of what, exactly, makes the situation being described a crisis and (2) a statement of who or what is *in* crisis. Concerning the first matter, I will not take the writers to task because the word *crisis* is used so commonly – albeit uncritically – in the modern world that many readers will not even feel the need for it to be more sharply defined when they encounter it. For most scholars, it has been acceptable to assume that people can recognize a crisis when they see one. However, the tools exist to deploy the word in a much stricter and more refined sense because there has been extensive work by modern political scientists in the realm of crisis as a phenomenon of interstate relations, and some modern ancient historians who have chosen to restrict the use of the term.[9]

Many works will merely call a situation a crisis and assume that readers will nod their heads without further thought. For example, Lintott, in his opening chapter to *CAH²* IX, states: "By the end of the second century before Christ the Romans faced a crisis as a result of their mastery of the Mediterranean."[10] After that, the discussion turns mainly to the nature of the source material, as to be expected from the title of the chapter, and then to discussing the theories of various modern ancient historians about the "downfall" of the Republic.[11] However, what exactly was the "crisis" mentioned at the beginning of the chapter? And who or what is facing this crisis? From the rest of the chapter, it seems clear that he means the potential overthrow of the institutions of government commonly referred to as the Republic, caused by the inability of a "constitution" meant for a

[5] *CAH²* IX.
[6] Lintott (1994).
[7] Christ (1979).
[8] Seager (1969).
[9] I very strongly recommend reading Eckstein (2006) 1–36 (who uses the word "crisis" in a much more sophisticated manner than many other works), which has references to many of the more important political science works dealing with interstate interaction, situations that often, but not always, give rise to crises.
[10] Lintott (1994) 1.
[11] Lintott (1994) 1–15.

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small city-state to regulate the political dealings of what became, without question, a multiethnic, large territorial empire. That is certainly a threat that would constitute a crisis, but is the destruction of the Republic what he is really talking about? Lintott states that it was a crisis for "the Romans." But were the Roman people as a whole threatened with serious harm by the potential overthrow of the Republic?

No. The continued existence of the common people of the city of Rome and its peripheral territory was not extinguished by the fall of the Republic. Even the fall of the Roman Empire several centuries later did not result in the sudden death and disappearance of the Roman people, even if it marked their complete and lasting political eclipse as Roman political institutions were gradually dismantled throughout the territories once ruled by the Caesars (and the "Romans," of course, were a very different people by that time). Nor was the senatorial order (the ruling class of the Roman Republic) as a whole threatened with annihilation by the fall of the Republic. If the downfall of the Republic that Lintott is discussing is neither the absolute destruction of the state nor the annihilation of its citizens, then what was threatened and who felt that threat?[12]

It appears that he is talking about a segment of the ruling group within the Roman aristocracy: the fall of the Republic meant the end of their continuing hold on the levers of power in the Roman state that the Republic gave them. If this is so, then it should be stated clearly and not left to assumption. Therefore, from the perspective of this narrow elite at the top – and this is the perspective similarly adopted by many works that focus on the so-called crisis of the Republic – this crisis was not so much a crisis of the Republic as it was a crisis for certain ruling elements within the Roman senatorial order. If scholars wish to call it a crisis, they should name it "The Crisis of the Roman Ruling Class" or the "The Crisis of the Elite Roman Families." However, this is not done.[13] In the end, of course, the Republic fell because as a system of government, it could not be separated from the individuals who wielded the most power within it.[14]

[12] These are the most important questions in defining a crisis.
[13] The title "Crisis of the Republic" continues to be used. See recently von Ungern-Sternberg (2004).
[14] One need look no further than the fact that the civil war of 49 was centered on the person of Caesar himself and eventually devolved into a contest between "Caesarians" and "Pompeians," not "rebels" vs. "loyalists." Argument continues to rage over the nature of the Roman Republic and where power resided within it. The most recent assessment of current theories on the subject is Hölkeskamp (2010), an interesting work but one that suffers from bias and apparently personal animus against one of the major proponents of the opposing position.

However, the crisis was not a threat to the existence of the Republic itself but a threat to the entrenched power of the ruling element within the senatorial order. The process of their dislodgment from a favored position in running Rome's affairs began when Julius Caesar (*cos.* 59) crossed a small stream in northern Italy in January 49. Although Caesar's invasion of Italy and the events that followed certainly were a crisis, the perspective being employed by many scholars does not entail looking at the crisis from the perspective of the survival of the system of government – a system that, in theory, could have survived (and if you are willing to believe Augustus, it did survive) the displacement of certain "noble" Romans whose families had dominated it for more than four centuries.

In this examination of crisis situations and the response mechanisms employed to face them, our focus will be on the perspective of the governing institutions of the Roman state – that is, when the Roman governmental institutions themselves were placed in crisis. That phrase, "the governing institutions of the Roman state," of course, refers to the Roman Senate, the magistrates, and the Roman People all together. The official name of the government was *Senatus Populusque Romanus* ("the Senate and the Roman People"). In this work, we will be concerned with situations that posed a crisis for the decision-making authorities within the Roman state: those persons or groups who were authorized to take action (a response) in the name of the Roman state in the face of a critical situation. Because "the Roman decision makers" is a rather long and unwieldy phrase, let it be noted here that when I make reference to "the Romans," I am speaking specifically about the decision makers among the Roman ruling class, and the term, unless it is clear I am discussing the Roman people as a whole, should be understood in that vein.

Defining Crisis

Because I have spent some time chiding others for their loose usage of the term "crisis," it is only right that I provide a clear and precise definition of how the term is used in this work and what specific types of crises are discussed. A crisis, to put it in its simplest terms, is a situation in which a decision maker, or a group designated as the decision makers within a community, perceives a threat to itself or to things upon which the decision maker places very high value (core values). If a response is not made to the threat within a limited time frame, the expectation is that core values will be negatively impacted, possibly to the point of

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destruction.[15] As is immediately apparent, the highest core value is con-
tinued existence, and the threat perceived often includes the prospect of
temporary or lasting harm to the state if the threat is not dealt with in time.
This does not mean that all crises are sudden and must be responded to
immediately, but rather that a response must be made within a certain
amount of time before certain expected negative consequences will occur.
A crisis can resolve itself with no response made, although in this case, it
can be argued that *inaction* was the response decided upon, and it hap-
pened to lead to a successful resolution of the situation. For our purposes,
the decision maker is the governmental institutions of the Roman state that
we commonly refer to as the Roman Republic, with authority delegated
to those officials and official bodies of the Republic that can make binding
decisions for the entire community.

As for the specific types of crises (including specific kinds of threats
that are perceived), there are many variations in our modern understand-
ing of the term, ranging from military-security crises to societal, economic,
social, and mental crises. My primary concern will be with military-security
crises – that is, situations in which physical harm threatened the core values
of the Roman state up to and including the free functioning of the govern-
ing institutions of the Roman Republic. At times, I also discuss political
crises: incidents in which the political machinery of the Republic was under
threat of being rendered inoperative because of competing forces within
the governing structures. In almost all cases, the Roman members of the
governing class – and especially those currently in office as representatives
of the government – would have perceived a crisis situation that threatened
temporary or lasting harm to the governing institutions or physical harm to
those who were charged with the Republic's defense. The line between the
two types is not so easily drawn, however, because political crises often
gave rise to violence and physical harm; the Romans, as becomes very
clear from the discussion to follow, found it difficult to agree to political
solutions to end political impasses. Instead of compromise, some men tried
methods of "gaming the system" to end the stalemate. When such methods
were unavailable, Romans of the upper class often preferred to resort to
force to resolve political impasses in their favor.

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[15] For this very simple definition, I have benefited from reading a large number of political
science works that study crisis as a political phenomenon, especially the theoretical treatment
of Brecher (1993). My own definition is not original, representing a simplified rephrasing that
best suits the purposes of this study.

Other types of crises that might today evoke a government response did not always produce such from the Romans during the period of the Republic. In general, the Roman authorities were not greatly concerned with societal "crises" such as those that garner media headlines and anguished handwringing from politicians today. It is true that certain prominent Romans took an interest in these types of issues: the most prominent societal "crisis" the Roman upper class seemed to be concerned with was the apparent decline in the numbers of freeborn native Italians, both among the well-to-do and the masses. The biographer Suetonius reports that Emperor Augustus read out to the senate a speech by a Q. Metellus *de prole augenda*, concerned with increasing reproduction among the upper classes.[16] Further, there were the schemes for providing feeding allowances to Roman children throughout the cities of Italy, the *alimenta*; although started by private individuals (the most famous, but not the earliest, established by the younger Pliny),[17] the allowances were eventually put on a state-sponsored basis by Emperors Nerva and Trajan.[18]

Again, one trying to make the case that the Romans considered these types of issues to be public matters could point to the rules and regulations that were established governing the behavior and responsibilities of the upper classes (the senators and the equestrians),[19] created in response to the perception by the Romans among themselves that the ruling order was in some sort of moral swan dive. "It had been the fashion at least from the time of Cicero to describe Rome as a bilge, sink or cesspool into which flowed all that was most depraved and corrupt from Italy and the provinces."[20] It should be noted, however, that these governmental responses to societal crises took shape under the emperors, when what constituted the Roman government was a very different animal entirely, and emperors had their own agendas to pursue. During the Republic, the period under study here, the Roman ruling class spoke a great deal about addressing societal issues but appears not to have employed governmental action to do anything about them.

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[16] Suet. *divi Aug*. 89. 2; attributed to Q. Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus (*cos*. 143) by Malcovati, *ORF*⁴ p. 107, following a statement by Livy (*Per*. 59). It is wrongly attributed by A. Gellius *NA* 1. 6. 1f. to Q. Caecilius Metellus Numidicus (*cos*. 109).

[17] See Pliny *Ep*. 7. 18 (cf. 1. 8. 10).

[18] For a good summary treatment, see *OCD*³ *alimenta* p. 63.

[19] For example, the SC from Larinum of AD19: see Levick (1983) 97–115. Also the marriage legislation passed at the behest of the Emperor Augustus; for a good account, see Treggiari (1991) 60–80.

[20] Earl (1967) 96–97. As a side note, the first apparent notice of an official ban on senators appearing in the arena comes from the domination of Caesar the Dictator; see Levick (1983) 105–106.

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The Sources: A Very Brief Overview

A short word about the sources available for this examination: for the student of crisis situations and the Roman governmental response, the ancient sources are to a certain extent more helpful than they can be for other subjects of inquiry. For the period under study, from the era of historical myth (the early Republic) to 43, we are fortunate that the ancient historical sources are rich in material for an examination of crises and the actions of government officials in response to those situations. Writing about Hellenistic history, Eckstein notes that "the historical writers were intensely interested in crises between significant states."[21] The situation is the same for Roman history, where the main narrative accounts practically read like one recounting of a crisis followed by another. Although the viewpoint is outdated, being much too negative about the possibility of recovering other perspectives from our ancient informants,[22] the general tone of Earl's summation of what kind of information is available to us from the ancient authors only encourages the student of crisis response:

> Since the sources from which we must work were produced by the upper class, the history we can write must mirror the pretensions and interests of this class. Since the concern of the upper class at Rome was almost exclusively with politics and statecraft, military and political history is the only history we have enough information to write, in the sense of being able to trace processes and developments in some detail over extended periods of time.[23]

This is not to say that the sources present us with *all* of the information that we might want to know. What interested the authors of histories and historical works (such as biographies) does not always match our concerns. For example, we might want to know *why* the consul L. Opimius (*cos*. 121) had a body of Cretan archers ready and at his disposal for his showdown with Gaius Gracchus in that fateful year. Did the Romans regularly have armed bands of foreign *auxilia* just sitting nearby Rome? Did Opimius plan on using force from an early time in his term of office? We can do nothing more than make educated guesses as to the nature of their presence, but Plutarch, who informs us of this important and intriguing detail, offers no further information about them, other than that they were of great use to Opimius on that bloody day.[24]

[21] Eckstein (2006) 99 n. 81.
[22] Earl (1967) 11.
[23] Earl (1967) 12.
[24] Plut. *C. Gracchus*, 16. 4 [37. 4].

For the earliest period, we are most reliant upon Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. A detailed discussion of Livy, his sources, and his methods is unnecessary here. There is a large body of literature on the subject, including general works,[25] detailed scholarly commentaries on several books,[26] and recently more specialized studies on particular aspects of Livy and his history.[27] For our purposes, he is a wealth of information, but we must, of course, be careful with that wealth; especially for the early period, there is significant room for error and conflation. For some of the early crisis situations that faced the Roman Republic, the information presented by our sources likely tells us more about what the author and his readers would accept as a plausible reconstruction of Roman behavior in the past when responding to such crises rather then providing us with firm, factual material.

Two notable examples are the wrangling over the Licinian-Sextian Rogations (of 370–367) and the grave threat to Rome presented by the coalition of Etruscans, Umbrians, Samnites, and Gauls against the Romans, which would only be relieved by the Roman victory at the Battle of Sentinum (295). For the former, we have a full narrative from Livy, but one plagued with problems.[28] As for Sentinum, again, there are serious source problems, including an account of consular activities that is heavily interpolated with anachronism and rhetoric inspired by the "Struggle of the Orders." Livy himself, on numerous occasions, mentions that his own sources were confused and in disagreement with each other.[29] I shall take this occasion to discuss these episodes but more in terms of what they can tell us about first-century expectations than fourth- and third-century reality.

This is not to say that Livy is untrustworthy. He has many doubters, and it is undisputed that errors and anachronisms appear in his work. Still, we do not have much else to work with on occasion, and regarding the authenticity of the material contained in Livy's history, I am, in general, in broad agreement with the position taken by Cornell: despite the embellishments and errors, "our sources do depend ultimately on a hard core of

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[25] Walsh (1961); Dorey (1971); Luce (1977).

[26] Including Ogilvie, *Livy*; Oakley, *Livy*; Kraus (1994); Briscoe, *Livy;* the list is merely a sampling of the large number of commentaries on Livy's work.

[27] D. Levene (1993), (2010); Miles (1995); M. Jaeger (1997); Feldherr (1998); Chaplin (2000). This list is not exhaustive.

[28] For the full account, see Livy 6. 34. 1–42. 14. There are serious doubts about the truth of Livy's narrative, for which see the detailed discussion with bibliography and notes by Oakley *Livy* 1. 645–724 (esp. 645–660).

[29] For details, see Oakley *Livy* 4. 268–294, esp. 272–274, 283.

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authentic data, much of which is readily identifiable."[30] In the main, we may place a great deal of trust in the information given to us by him.

Of course, the lack of Livy's second decade and all of his books following book 45 is a great loss, as there are incidents of which we only have shortened and not very satisfying accounts (such as the revolt of M. Lepidus in 78), where Livy's full narrative would have been indispensable. As for Dionysius, because his history becomes fragmented far earlier, it is of less value for most of the incidents studied here.[31] Of the other major narrative histories, Polybius is again a wealth of information, but sadly, we do not have his complete work after 216.[32] Except at the very end of the Republic, Cassius Dio, sadly, largely consists of mere fragments, with Zonaras' summary providing some idea of what Dio might have said.[33] Appian's various histories, especially the one treating civil wars in Rome, are sometimes our sole source for important episodes.[34] Occasionally, the history of Diodorus Siculus provides crucial information.[35]

Of other sources, the biographies of Plutarch[36] – and to a much lesser extent Suetonius[37] – provide useful information that is not preserved in our existing narrative accounts. Late epitomes such as those of Florus, Orosius, and others will be noted, but they rarely provide information that is truly valuable. As for inscriptions, they generally do not provide us with much direct information, but they do occasionally give us items for comparison with the narrative histories (for example, Livy's treatment of the "Bacchanalian" conspiracy can be measured against the surviving *senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus*). And of course, especially for the very end of the Republic, the speeches and letters of Cicero are invaluable, albeit providing only one man's view of matters.[38]

Overall, when dealing with the subject of crisis, our source materials are quite good for the aforementioned reasons. They are not, however, as comprehensive as one could wish. For the early sections of Livy, we have

[30] Cornell (1995) 16–18; a position followed by Oakley, *Livy* 1. 102 (although he cites Cornell's earlier statement of this position, which Cornell made in *CAH²* VII. 2 249).

[31] For Dionysius, Gabba (1991) is very useful.

[32] The literature on Polybius is immense. A good starting point is Walbank (2002).

[33] On Dio, see Swan (2004) 1–36; Millar (1964) is old, but still worth consulting. See also Gowing (1992).

[34] There does not seem to be a more recent monograph dealing with Appian than Gowing (1992). For some of the problems with Appian as a source, see Badian (1984).

[35] See Green (2006) 1–34 for a good summary treatment with references to previous studies.

[36] The literature on Plutarch is vast. Pelling (2002) is a starting point.

[37] Only the lives of Julius Caesar and Augustus provide major information related to this study.

[38] The literature on Cicero is too large to even suggest a starting point. For the letters, at least, we have the invaluable commentary editions of Shackleton Bailey (1965–1970, 1977, 1980).

to be careful because the reconstruction of crisis behavior sometimes reads more like what appeared to be a reasonable course of action to a first-century Roman than a genuine reflection of the actions of a fourth-century reality.[39] Polybius, although justly praised by many, could occasionally get things wrong, as when he stated that when a dictator was in office, all other magistrates were removed from office (when in actuality they stayed in office but were subordinate to the orders of the dictator).[40] Yet the focus of the sources on crises, as noted in the beginning of this section, compensates for all of the shortcomings of the sources. The greatest problem is actually the lack of detailed source materials for certain events. Plutarch's biographies fortunately tell us much about Pyrrhus and Marius' campaigns against the Cimbri-Teutones, but we do not get the same wealth of institutional or administrative information about those events that we might have gotten from Livy's books had they survived. We are fortunate that some of the gravest crises faced by the Roman Republic – the invasion of Hannibal and the coup of Julius Caesar – have full narrative accounts, and for the latter, the letters of Cicero provide us with an almost daily commentary for certain stretches of time.

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[39] Livy also had his own agenda for including or excluding certain events in order to make specific points. For Livy's deployment of certain *exempla*, for example, see Chaplin (2000).

[40] Error noted with citations of other ancient authors who copied the mistake by Walbank, *Polybius* 1. 422 on Polyb. 3. 87. 8.