

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
AN INTRODUCTION TO ROMAN LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY
BY WOLFGANG KUNKEL

1966 A.D.

Note: This text describes the socioeconomic trends resulting from Roman hegemony of the Mediterranean basin which contributed to the decline of the Roman middle class, i.e., the yeoman farmers. In short, the requirements of extended military service (it was the duty of able citizens meeting the census rolls to contribute to the state in the form of military service) combined with the economic impact of foreign grain and foreign and domestic slave labor in the second century B.C., depressed and dispossessed the smallhold farmers which for centuries comprised the backbone of the Roman republic. The cumulative effects of these phenomena was to concentrate land – the chief basis of wealth and source of income in antiquity – into the hands of the oligarchy (into vast estates known as “latifundia”); to depopulate the countryside of free citizens, and to swell the population of the urban proletariat. While Kunkel, like some historians, shies from expressing these trends and the conflicts they engendered in terms of a declining middle class, The Institute does not, not only because several other historians have expressly described these trends in terms of a declining middle class, but also because the census requirements and the gradations of military service demonstrate the existence of a middle class. Despite this point of disagreement, Kunkel’s essential narrative is extremely useful for quickly obtaining a grasp on the key trends that led to the extreme social stratification which ignited the revolution of the Gracchi. Moreover, in the passages below Kunkel highlights the key inflection points on the road from republic to monarchy, a transformation which The Institute believes would not have occurred but for the decline of the roman middle class in the second century B.C. and the tragic failure of the Gracchi.

3. The State, Economy, and Social Development. II. Economic and social development of Rome at the end of the Republic

The expansion of Roman dominion over Italy was followed until the third century B.C. by an ever greater strengthening of the Roman farmer class. Time and again broad stretches of land were yielded to Rome by the defeated Italians and used for the foundation of fortified agricultural settlements (*coloniae*) or distributed by lot to land-hungry citizens. When, afterwards, the tempo of Roman conquests increased, a good deal of land remained undistributed in the hands of the state. Part of this *ager publicus* was leased out for the benefit of the state treasury; another large part was, in the course of time, auctioned off cheap to citizens with capital, particularly those from the ruling aristocracy, or was occupied by them without any title but under the state’s tacit toleration. It was probably mainly on such lands that there arose for the first time large properties worked by slaves, where farming concentrated on the grazing of cattle, but also, if the ground were favourable, on the growing of olives and vines; while the raising of grain, in the absence of agricultural machinery, could be more advantageously carried on on a small scale and was thus left to small farmers and leaseholders.

The loss of life and the devastations of the Hannibalic war, which hit the farming class hardest; the competition from the Roman possessions in Sicily and Africa which had been won in the Punic wars and which produced cheap grain in huge quantities and could transport it more easily by sea to the Roman market than could the remote districts of Italy which depended on land transport; the attraction exerted by the rapidly growing metropolis of Rome itself – all these things brought about the ruin of the Roman farming class in the second century B.C. It is true that the pursuit of agriculture was not abandoned, but to a large extent the independent peasant proprietor was replaced by tenants depending on great landowners, and the ranches and plantations of the urban Roman capitalists increased in number. The

capital city, which already in the third century B.C. had been more and more drawn into the trade of the Hellenistic world, soon became a commercial centre of the first rank and, above all, the dominant money-market of the whole ancient world.

The immense fortunes which flowed to Rome through wars and the plundering of the provinces were concentrated in the hands of two relatively small sections of the population: the senatorial aristocracy and the *equites*. The members of the senatorial class took part in the activities of trade and finance – but in secret, as these occupations were beneath them, according to the notions of society; their wealth, mostly invested in land, was generally inherited or won through political activity; above all, it came from the booty assigned to successful generals or from – more or less – voluntary gifts of the provincial populations to their governors. Alongside these senatorial families, some of which had been famous and powerful for centuries, a second aristocracy of *nouveaux riches* businessmen and financiers arose from the ranks of urban Romans and prominent citizens of the *municipia*. These drew gigantic profits (often invested forthwith in land) from army contracts, tax-farming and other state concessions, from usurious deals with politicians short of money and with provincial communities stripped bare by plunder, and from trade both inside and outside Italy. This capitalist stratum was called the “knight class” (*equites*) because those citizens whose property was sufficient to allow them to serve in the cavalry with their own horses had, since early times, formed what was in some respect a privileged class within the Roman citizenship. The senatorial aristocracy, divided as never before into mutually warring groups: the *equites*, who had indeed no direct part in political business, but could enforce their economic interests both through relationships with senators and through their influence on the politically conditioned criminal courts: and the ever-growing and restless mass of the penniless metropolitan proletariat, the profitable object of demagogic machinations: these were the main elements in the increasingly tumultuous struggles within Roman politics in the last century of the Republic.

III. The crisis of the Republic

These struggles, which were to lead to the collapse of the Senate’s domination and to the establishment of a monarchy, began with the far-reaching legislation of social reform of the *tribuni plebis* Tiberius and Caius Gracchus (both of whom came from the senatorial aristocracy). In the years 133-121 B.C. they tried to restore the agrarian basis of the Roman state; their idea was to take all that part of the *ager publicus* which was in the hands of great landowners without legal title, divided it up into alienable parcels, and assign them to landless citizens. Put into effect by revolutionary means and with the help of the Roman mob, the Gracchan reforms provoked a reaction of the ruling class which soon stopped the settlement work which had begun (the *lex agraria* of 111 B.C.) and thus deprived the whole undertaking of lasting effect. The confrontation which the Gracchan revolution had called into being between the leaders of the Roman aristocracy who wished to support the senatorial regime (the *optimates*) and certain political lone wolves who tried to reach their political goals with the help of the broad mass of the people (the *populares*) remained the dominant element in further developments.

But now the main question was no longer chiefly that of social or political reform; it was rather the question of who was to exercise power in the state. The political struggles of that time have probably certain demagogic methods in common with the struggles of modern monster political parties, but very little else. For these were not class struggles, but basically struggles for power among the Roman aristocracy; and it is certainly no accident that none of the great “popular” leaders came from the common people, while the most important of them, the Gracchi and Caesar, came from the foremost families of the senatorial nobility. In addition, there were no doubt more or less demagogic programmes, but no parties in the modern sense. In their place the real basis of political influence was supplied by the various relationships of trust and political friendships which from the beginning had conditioned Roman society. As the outcome of these struggles, which were waged with the most ruthless and brutal methods and eliminated the best part of the Roman aristocracy, monarchy loomed ever clearer. As we have noted

earlier, it became inescapable. Extraordinary military commands and extraordinary law-making powers, political alliances, and bloody civil wars among rivals struggling for power: these were the first steps on the road to monarchy, which emerged at first merely as the factual supremacy of the strongest.

This penultimate stage was repeatedly reached before anyone succeeded in establishing monarchy as a lasting system based on law. Sulla was already the unlimited ruler of the state in 82 B.C.; but, true to his political origins in the optimate camp, he preferred to restore once more the regime of the senatorial aristocracy and then to retire voluntarily from political life. His all-embracing reforming legislation was intended to secure the senatorial regime, e.g., by cutting down the powers of the *tribuni plebis*, limiting consuls and praetors to the urban occupations of political leadership and the administration of justice, and permitting a second tenure of office (*iteratio*) only after ten years; but they could not prevent the crisis of the Republic. Caesar was the second man upon whom, after victory over Pompey and the Senate, political supremacy had devolved: he died under the daggers of fanatical republicans as he was on the point of bringing that supremacy to its logical conclusion. It was his great-nephew and adopted son C. Octavius, son of a senator of only praetorian rank of the municipal origin, who became the founder of the Roman monarchy: he is known to us by a name of honour which the Senate bestowed on him in the year in which the new order was founded, *Augustus*; and we call the constitution which he created – monarchical in essence if not in outward form – the Principate.

* * *