

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
VIOLENCE IN REPUBLICAN ROME
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1968 A.D.

Note: This text, extracted from a brilliant study of political violence, is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it makes specific reference to Anacyclosis, ochlocracy, and the doctrine of the mixed constitution, and places the historical narrative in the context of that framework. Second, it identifies the time period during which the democratic and plutocratic conflict began the sharp turn toward monarchy (i.e. the commencement of the Gracchan revolution). The reference to the year 133 B.C. refers to the year that Tiberius Gracchus became tribune of the Roman Republic. The constitutional crisis, and ensuing violence, that followed his agrarian law in which he attempted to rehabilitate the yeoman class (the contemporary independent middling economic stratum) commenced a century of bloodshed which destroyed the Roman Republic and was concluded only with the rise of a new monarchy. This is important not only because The Institute agrees that the era of the Gracchi marks the point at which republicanism accelerated its decay and monarchism began to loom on the horizon, but also because the fundamental socioeconomic and geopolitical trends of that period make it the key era for comparative analysis to our own time. Third, it identifies the contemporary belief – which is completely reasonable – that a key factor underlying the political conflict was the extreme and growing socioeconomic stratification; a situation that was exacerbated by the final Roman defeat of Carthage at the end of the Third Punic War. The situation was exacerbated because internal political solidarity declines as socioeconomic stratification increases during periods of international peace and stability. Fourth, Lintott implicitly acknowledges the accretive nature of Anacyclosis when he asserts that the Polybian “mikte” – the tripartite compound constitution incorporating elements of rule by the one, the few, and the many – was the product of political evolution, not legislation. It is also worth mentioning that Lintott makes specific reference to ochlocracy, which means “mob-rule”, the seventh stage of Anacyclosis, and which was the term coined by Polybius to describe the corrupt form of democracy in which man reverts back to the savage state and appoints a strongman/warlord, restarting the sequence of political evolution in primitive monarchy. This is noteworthy because use of the term ochlocracy tends to ratify, at least to some degree, Anacyclosis as the framework by which to describe the evolution of the Roman state. Footnotes have been omitted, except for the third footnote included below which references Anacyclosis and the mikte.

Introduction

Though the corruption of politics by violence has long been recognized as a major factor in the fall of the Roman Republic, it has rarely received separate investigation. In particular the special problems posed by violence within the field of civil government, as opposed to military insurrection, have received less attention than they deserve. It is possible to overstress the effect of a large empire and powerful proconsular armies on the equilibrium of Roman politics in the city while neglecting factors in Roman society and the constitution which made critical contributions to this lack of balance. Yet there can be little doubt that the conflicts within the city were the first steps in civil war. They not only prepared the ground psychologically, but also provided the provocation that induced a man whose interests had been worsted through the struggles in Rome to resort to war.

The transition from fighting with gangs in the streets to fighting with armies in the field is essentially one of scale, and, although this change of scale was disastrous for the Republic, it is not difficult to understand why it should have occurred. More important is the transition from the era in which disputes

were generally settled peacefully – the middle Republic – to the period which began in 133 B.C. Polybius suggested that even the ideal stability which he believed the Roman mixed constitution possessed could not last, and that there was a natural progression to a point where the democratic element would seize the upper hand. [3] Roman writers after the collapse of the Republic were inclined to ascribe the process to a destiny which was somehow inherent in the Roman situation. They were also united in believing that an operative factor throughout was a moral failure arising from the increase of wealth: this had led the governing class to seek riches and power without scruple, while at the same time economic inequality had made the lower classes desperate and ready for any crime against the state.

The readiness of the poor to join in street-fighting and civil war can be simply attributed to bribes and their dissatisfaction with the existing form of government, although we shall see that this was not the whole story. However, the attitude of the leading statesmen is more puzzling. For by their violence they were destroying the political framework which provided them with honour and profit. For this reason it is tempting to assume that the great politicians of the late Republic were prospective dictators, setting no limit on their pursuit of personal power: such revolutionary dynasts could not be expected to have any qualms about overthrowing the Republic.

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[3] Pol. Vi. 9. 12-14; 57. 1-8; cf. 10. 11-11. 1; Walbank, CQ (1943), 73 ff.; Brink and Walbank, CQ (1954), 97 ff.; Walbank, JRS (1955), 149 ff. Brink and Walbank's final view is that Polybius does in fact succeed in reconciling his two apparently conflicting concepts, the growth and decay *κατα φύσιν* common to all constitutions and the anacyclosis. The anacyclosis is the most logical and therefore the most natural way for a constitution to develop. The *μικτη* found its place in the natural development of Rome but even so could only add a brake to the anacyclosis.

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Violence of the Late Republic

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The picture of Ti. Gracchus as a pure altruist is unconvincing, but at the same time it is unnecessary to exaggerate his desire for power and minimize his honesty, simply because he was prepared to use force when physically obstructed. The accusations of aspiration to a *regnum* need not deceive us, when we remember the interpretation put on the activities of Manlius, Maelius, and Cassius. There seems neither evidence nor *a priori* grounds for the belief that he wished to be a tyrant on the Platonic model, using ochlocracy as a stepping-stone to absolute power.

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Conclusion

Polybius was right to hold that the Roman constitution was a mixture of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy, but his belief that this blend was as stable as law could make it seems misguided. He ascribed to law what was in fact the product of the *mos* of his period. The oligarchy had gradually made the vital concessions to democracy during an era of intermittent civil strife, separated by armistices when external pressure was strong. The constitution evolved was more of a truce position than a peace settlement. It formalized the conflict between the oligarchic element and the *plebs*. Afterwards, in the period of *concordia*, the tribunes from time to time tested the authority of the consuls and their own

powers. In a conflict the senate was usually accepted as the referee, but otherwise the rules of the game made a decision impossible, and the end was resignation or a stalemate.

On the other hand during the late Republic violence was used to force measures through an assembly, to influence the outcome of an election or trial, and to intimidate or even kill political opponents. Although a number of constitutional means were devised to check it and nullify its effects, these were not proof against persistent violence on a large scale. Moreover the declaration of emergency, the *senatus consultum ultimum*, required cooperation from the majority to be effective. The Romans of the Republic seem genuinely to have considered it an essential constituent of *libertas* that a man should be allowed to use force in his personal interest to secure what he believed to be his due. So, when a conflict could not be resolved constitutionally, it was not surprising that the frustrated party employed violence, and this in turn frequently could not be countered except by further partisan violence. This vicious circle continued until the military force which was finally summoned to break it moved the conflict to the higher plane of civil war.

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