

POLITICS AND ARISTOCRACY IN THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

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THE last twenty years or so have brought a major reassessment of our ideas about the importance in Roman political life of the various voting-assemblies (the *comitia tributa* and *centuriata*). Unquestionably, they held important constitutional powers, at least in theory.¹ But did it in fact matter what voters in these assemblies thought about the issues on which they voted? Or was the exercise of their powers somehow predetermined by patronage or by political manipulation? Was power being exercised at all through the political processes of which we hear so much? Or was the apparent battle just a meaningless side-effect of a fixed system of authority vested in the ruling elite?

There might seem to be clear limits to the range of reasonable doubt on issues such as these. Nobody, surely, could read Cicero's letters and doubt that he and his contemporaries were very concerned about the way votes went in the *comitia* and found the outcome at least to some extent unpredictable. Similarly it can hardly be doubted that, by the time Tacitus was writing, the lower-class Roman citizens living in and around Rome had lost—forever—such voice as they had ever had in political decision-making, except where demonstrations or rioting at the games served to make their point. Something had changed quite radically after the fall of the Republic; and it would be very hard to argue that this was not connected with the loss of effective voting rights.

For most of this century, however, the profundity of this change from Republic to Principate has tended to be obscured, not just by the tendency to emphasize continuities between the Republic and the Julio-Claudian period, but above all by the influence and prestige of Matthias Gelzer's analysis of the political life of the republican period,² and the subsequent development of his ideas into a kind of consensus view, despite the fact that he himself very largely rejected this view in his later writings.³ I do not intend to discuss Gelzer's views at all specifically in

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1. The best general account of the various Roman assemblies is still that of L. R. Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies* (Ann Arbor, 1966); see also E. S. Staveley, *Greek and Roman Voting and Elections* (London, 1972).

2. *Die Nobilität der römischen Republik* (Berlin, 1912); repr. in his *Kleine Schriften*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden, 1962), pp. 17–135; English trans. by R. Seager, *The Roman Nobility* (Oxford, 1969).

3. For his later views, see, e.g., his comments in *Kleine Schriften*, 1:201–10, reviewing the first edition of H. H. Scullard's *Roman Politics, 220–150 B.C.* (Oxford, 1951; 2d ed., 1973).

this paper; but I do mean to assess the stage to which recent research has brought the debate, and for that purpose the previous orthodoxy must form the starting point. What follows is not supposed to represent the views of any particular historian, but the four linked propositions below characterize a position at one time widely accepted by ancient historians writing on the middle Republic:

- (1) Rome was controlled by a narrow hereditary oligarchy, firmly defined and rarely admitting new families to its ranks.
- (2) The system of group-voting in the *comitia* meant that the better-off voters controlled proceedings, in respect of both elections and legislation; and (this is Gelzer's most characteristic contribution) the behavior of the voters, including the better-off voters, was entirely determined by personal relationships of clientship or mutual obligations.⁴ It was on the basis of this network of personal and family commitments that the whole structure rested.
- (3) The ruling elite itself was divided into stable long-term alliances based, at least in the middle republican period, on allegiances to the great clans or *gentes*, rather than to immediate kin and marriage connections, let alone to groupings resting on common political ideas or objectives.⁵
- (4) Legislation and the election of magistrates by the assemblies were determined by competitive manipulation by the rival groups, the actual issues at stake or the personalities and talents of the rival candidates having little if anything to do with the outcome.

I shall call this set of views the "frozen waste" theory of Roman politics. Its implication was that voting behavior in the assemblies could be regarded as completely divorced from the opinions, interests, and prejudices of the voters themselves. In form, the popular assemblies still existed, but at least by the second century B.C., when we begin to have some limited grasp of the social conditions within which it was operating, power had been wholly taken over by an all-powerful oligarchic elite. It is a paradox that much of this analysis derives from Ciceronian evidence about the social and political conventions of that time, although it is for the Ciceronian period that the position can be, and has been, most simply refuted. For earlier periods, where direct evidence is almost completely lacking, it is hard either to verify or to falsify any coherent hypothesis explanatory of political activity, as the unending arguments about noble *factiones* show so clearly.⁶ Thus, it is always

4. For a very full, though not very critical account of Roman clientship, see N. Rouland, *Pouvoir politique et dépendance personnelle dans l'antiquité romaine*, Collection Latomus 166 (Brussels, 1979); far more interesting, though with reference primarily to the Principate, not the Republic, is R. P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge, 1982), especially pp. 7–79. See now the studies in *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. A. Wallace-Hadrill (London and New York, 1989). See also n. 13 below.

5. This aspect of the "frozen waste" theory was developed by F. Münzer, *Römische Adelsparteien und Adelsfamilien* (Stuttgart, 1920), and was much elaborated by Scullard, *Roman Politics*. In part, the argument concerns the nature of the *gentes* at this period: were, e.g., the clan of the Cornelii (as Münzer's—in itself brilliant—hypothesis presupposes) a group of families with common purposes and leadership? Or (as critics assert) had they no more political identity than those who share a common family name today?

6. For this reason there has been much inconclusive discussion of the alleged noble factions in the third and second centuries B.C.: their existence is a hypothesis that can never quite be refuted, even if

quite easy to argue that the known conditions of the last days of the Republic were not typical of the Republic as a whole: in this case, the collapse of the conventions that marked the 60s and 50s B.C. might have had as one of its incidental consequences such a loss of noble authority that even Roman voters began to exercise some independent initiative, in a way they had not been able to do at all in earlier periods. In this case, the analysis of middle republican politics could be sustained, even if it could be shown to be quite inapplicable to the late republican world we know so much better, from the writings of Cicero.

It is one of the consequences of this set of views that Polybius, who lived in Rome for some years after he had been brought there as a hostage in the 160s B.C., completely failed to understand the political situation he found.⁷ It is a central part of his theory that in his own time—and for many years, if not centuries, earlier—the Roman assemblies had played a critically important role in maintaining the balance of the elements on which the famous stability of Rome depended. So either Polybius has to be seen as completely duped by his Roman noble friends,⁸ who told him that Roman democracy was just as good as Greek, while all the time sending instructions to their clients as to how they should vote on any issue; or he was a man who arrived in Rome with a fully developed Greek political theory in his mind and was determined to make the facts fit his presuppositions, whatever he actually found going on in Rome at the time.

This whole position has been attacked explicitly or implicitly, and a more open approach to republican political life has been recommended, over a broad front by a broad alliance of major historians: Finley, de Ste. Croix, Millar, Burton and Hopkins, Perelli, Beard and Crawford,⁹ and—perhaps earliest and most consistently—P. A. Brunt,¹⁰ who has

there is no direct evidence of their existence. For a survey of the debate to 1973, see Scullard, *Roman Politics*, pp. xxiv–xxx; attempts at establishing a moderate position have been made—best by E. S. Gruen, *Roman Politics and the Criminal Courts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968)—but this seems to me to be an issue on which compromise is not helpful: either the methods developed by Münzer have some validity, in which case there is no need to compromise, or they do not, in which case the whole edifice collapses.

7. On Polybius in general, F. W. Walbank, *Polybius* (Berkeley, 1972); Polybius' views on the Roman system are preserved in the surviving parts of Book 6, esp. 1–18, 43–58; see further F. W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1957), pp. 635–97, 724–46; on Polybius' political theories, see W. Nippel, *Mischverfassungstheorie und Verfassungsrealität in Antike und früher Neuzeit* (Stuttgart, 1980), pp. 142–56.

8. For his friendship with Scipio Aemilianus, a dominating figure in these years, see Polybius 31. 23. 1–25. 1, and A. E. Astin, *Scipio Aemilianus* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 19–21. Polybius implies a close friendship with Aemilianus and may, of course, be overstating the case; but he could hardly have invented the whole story.

9. M. I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 1983); G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London, 1981), pp. 350–62; F. Millar, "The Political Character of the Classical Roman Republic," *JRS* 74 (1984): 1–19; id., "Politics, Persuasion and the People before the Social War," *JRS* 76 (1986): 1–11; K. Hopkins and G. Burton, in K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 107–16; L. Perelli, *Il movimento popolare nell'ultimo secolo della repubblica* (Turin, 1982) (reviewed by P. A. Brunt in *JRS* 73 [1983]: 206–7); M. Beard and M. H. Crawford, *Rome in the Late Republic* (London, 1985), pp. 49–52.

10. *The Fall of the Roman Republic* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 281–502 (chaps. 6–9) give the fullest account of his ideas, but note that chap. 7 is a revised version of an article first published in 1965

most recently added to the arguments he has offered over many years a new paper on Roman *clientelae*, which has very important implications for this whole subject.¹¹ I call this an alliance of historians strictly for the purposes of this paragraph; in fact, it is one of the remarkable features of the situation that so wide a range of oarsmen seem to be rowing the same boat the same way. This fact alone must give cause for some hesitation about what is happening; the only thing that they all clearly have in common is that they are reacting to the same set of interpretations. It seems to be beyond any dispute that recent debates have created a far more realistic and interesting approach to all these problems; the purpose of this paper is to assess how far a really new interpretation has emerged and what further progress can be made.

The reaction to the "frozen waste" theory has offered a series of at least partly distinct contentions; I should emphasize in particular the following four:

- (1) In relation to the recruitment, definition, and character of the oligarchy itself, it has been argued that the use of the term *nobiles* to define the top political elite is misleading, and that the oligarchy was far more open to the entry of new families than used to be thought.¹²
- (2) The reexamination of the basis for the network of obligations between equals and unequals, especially the obligations of *clientelae*, has shown these links to be far less ironclad, far less predictable, and far more negotiable than was once supposed.¹³
- (3) Concerning the relationship of political issues and social problems to the activity of politicians seeking votes, it has been very forcefully contended that the importance of issues as vote-winners has been almost deliberately concealed by a "bourgeois" preoccupation with the motives of elite members: if you can concentrate the reader's attention entirely on the question of Ti. Gracchus' motives for proposing his bill, you can omit even to raise the more important question why the voters were supporting or even stimulating him in his campaign.¹⁴
- (4) Finally, Polybius' idea of a critically important role for the "democratic element" in the Roman constitution, at least in the last 150 years or so of the history of the Republic, has been restored to its place in the argument.¹⁵

All these arguments must to some extent interlock, and cumulatively they must be seen as fatal to the "frozen waste" theory and as somehow restoring to historical reality the activities of the much-abused Roman voter; but the precise nature of their impact on one another and on our understanding will take a closer analysis of their individual implications.

("Amicitia in the Late Roman Republic," *PCPS* 11 [1965]: 1-20); pp. 1-92 summarize his current position. The main lines were, however, already clear in his brief, but excellent, *Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic* (London, 1971). For other criticisms of aspects of the "frozen waste" theory, see C. Meier, *Res Publica Amissa*² (Wiesbaden, 1980) (the 1st ed., 1966, reviewed by Brunt in *JRS* 58 [1968]: 229-32); C. Nicolet, *The World of the Citizen in Republican Rome*, trans. P. S. Falla (London, 1980).

11. Fall, pp. 443-502.

12. P. A. Brunt, "Nobilitas and novitas," *JRS* 72 (1982): 1-17; Hopkins and Burton in *Death and Renewal*, pp. 31-119.

13. Brunt, Fall, pp. 382-442.

14. So Perelli, *Movimento popolare*.

15. See Millar, "Political Character."

In particular, two of the arguments advanced recently seem to me to call for some development. Both of them call parts of the "frozen waste" theory into question, but they then take their arguments in quite different directions. They provide, in fact, a minimum and a maximum view of the extent of democratic practice in the Rome of this period. I shall argue that their disagreement in itself suggests that the whole debate is being conducted in the wrong terms.

The first argument to be considered is that of Hopkins and Burton.¹⁶ The real originality of their important chapter on the republican nobility lies in their statistical analysis of elite recruitment and of its implications for the survival strategies of the major Roman families. They seem to me to have put this issue on a completely new basis; but far less clear is the impact of their results on the particular problem under discussion here. They emphasize how Roman nobles can be differentiated from nobles in post-feudal England precisely because a Roman's status was dependent on achievements and on election largely determined by those achievements. That goes some way toward explaining how status would be lost once a particular generation of a family failed to produce convincing candidates. But does this imply that the controlling element here was popular decision-making? That it really was the voters who decided that new families should be brought in at regular intervals, and who carried that decision into effect by their votes, even against the wishes of the currently dominant families? If that were true, it would really transform our conception of the relationship between voters and elite.

The model they eventually produce is not encouraging from this point of view (p. 112): "In our view, a model of a circulating élite with only a very small hereditary core fits the known facts better than the assumption of automatic status inheritance." The metaphors here are not entirely clear, but I take this to mean that there was an inner elite that was stable and hereditary, while many other families entered the charmed circle of power for a generation or two but were then again cast out into the darkness. If that is the right interpretation, then it does not inescapably follow that voter decisions would really have determined what happened: it would seem more plausible to suggest, on the view of Hopkins and Burton themselves, that the inner elite, which could after all insure its own political survival generation after generation, was also instrumental in controlling the emergence and subsequent disappearance of families of the outer elite. That is, client families could expect enough support to achieve high office once or twice, but not enough to establish themselves as permanently part of the circle; that view (which of course I am not myself advocating) would be compatible enough with the traditional view.

Hopkins and Burton do in fact go on to consider more generally how the system operated, recognize that there is at least some element of

16. *Death and Renewal*, pp. 31-119.

popular participation, but show themselves cautious, to say the least, in the way they state this point (p. 114): "With all due allowance made for manipulation by the élite and for hereditary power, the element of popular power in Rome remained significant." Reticence could hardly be taken further than this, and in fact they state roundly that Rome was "in no sense a democracy."¹⁷

It would be hard to accuse Millar of reticence on this issue: not only is democracy the right word for him, but even the parallel with fifth-century Athenian democracy is not to be shirked. Of course, Millar recognizes substantial differences and does not seek to apply the term "democracy" itself to Rome—well, not quite: "We may still not want to characterize this as democracy. Nor did Polybius."¹⁸ But he does repeatedly come back to the term and in particular consistently defends the Polybian conception of a "democratic element" in the Roman system. Furthermore, although he is not attempting the task in these two articles, he does imply the need to "restore the Roman people to their proper place in the history of democratic values."¹⁹

With much of the analysis on which these assertions are based, I have no quarrel at all. In particular, Millar is entirely right to say that much discussion of republican Rome had lost sight of the orator addressing the Roman people, the one talking to the many, expounding the proposals and persuading the potential voters. Much of Cicero makes no sense at all if we divorce him from this, the public context in which his art was formed and exercised.²⁰ And nothing could be clearer than his constant preoccupation with public demonstrations of opinion, whether shown by demonstrations at the theater or at public meetings or by voting in the *comitia*.²¹ He quite clearly reflects a political culture in which popular opinion, like it or not, was a factor constantly present to the political eye.

None of this, however, justifies the evocation of democracy or of democratic theory. In the first place, the very term "democracy" seems to me dangerously uncontrolled in this context: what sort of democracy does Millar have in mind? What sort of democracy for that matter did Polybius have in mind? One can perhaps distinguish: (1) radical democracy on the fifth-century Athenian model; (2) the Hellenistic sense of the word in Polybius' normal usage, which seems to mean little more than

17. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

18. "Political Character," p. 19.

19. "Politics," p. 9.

20. An important example is Cicero's attack on Servilius Rullus' agrarian bill (*Leg. agr.* 2), delivered to the people in the year of his consulship: he goes through the bill clause by clause, expounding its purpose and its dangers. The whole exercise belongs to a tradition in which persuading voters was a normal political necessity.

21. So, e.g., Cic. *Att.* 2. 19 describes attacks on Pompey the Great in 59 B.C., at the theater: "Diphilus the actor attacked poor Pompey quite brutally: 'To our misfortune art thou Great'—there were a dozen *encores*." (trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, in *Cicero's "Letters to Atticus,"* vol. 1 [Cambridge, 1965], p. 249).

“not a tyranny”;²² (3) Polybius’ usage in this passage, which must reflect the theoretical writings on which his cyclical theory was based and which was presumably closer to (1) than to (2), but distinct from both. From these options we must again distinguish the actual Roman situation, which may have grown up in some awareness of Greek institutions but is plainly quite distinct; Polybius, in Book 6, is constructing a comparison, observing a part-fit. Millar remarks that “Polybius, who should have known, did suppose that the categories of political analysis relevant to Greek cities could be applied to Rome.”²³ The remark suggests that Polybius had a supply of alternative political analyses that he could have applied to Rome had he wanted to, that it was a deliberate and considered choice that the Greek city-state option was the one picked out of the bunch. The fact is that there were no other “categories of political analysis” available to ancient writers. Polybius did all he could do; the surprising and still unexplained fact is that the categories did, to a limited extent, fit—that he could find a βουλή, an ἐκκλησία, and annual magistrates without doing too much violence to the truth. To say that he could have made another choice is like saying that Tacitus could have written, if only he had felt like it, a *Social and Economic History of the Roman World*; the categories of the analysis of economic activity did not exist, and Tacitus wrote what could be written in his day.

There is another level even more sensitive, and here I am more on Millar’s side than against him. By using the word “democracy” at all, one is of course evoking a whole range of contemporary uses of the word charged with political urgency belonging to today, not yesterday. However much the usage is loaded with reservations and qualifications about different scales of activity, different socio-economic systems, the role of women and slaves in the political system, and so on, the very use of the word by some historians and its deliberate avoidance by others is a statement of belief or disbelief in continuity, a statement that in principle at least there could be a “history of democratic values.” If one believes, as Millar obviously does, that there is at some level or other, however hard to detach, a common element to popular participatory systems in antiquity and now, then the very existence of the word “democracy” creates opportunities of contact between Greco-Roman antiquity and political debate today, opportunities that are of enormous value to the ancient historian as a communicator to his own generation. It may be that the term must import confusion to the despair of the rigorist; but if it comes in the end to a choice between confusion and silence, then some confusion has to be risked.

22. For the gradual shift in the meaning of the word δημοκρατία, see the valuable discussion in de Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle*, pp. 321–25; see also Walbank, *Historical Commentary*, 1:221–22 (on Polyb. 2. 38. 6). There is no doubt that Polybius was using Hellenistic political theory in Book 6, but we have no indication who his authorities were.

23. “Political Character,” p. 3.

There is surely no point, however, in having more confusion than you need to have: there are profound and well-established differences between Rome and Athens. I would emphasize two. First, the Roman constitution was an inherited structure built up over centuries, a structure whose main lines (as opposed to individual provisions) were not under discussion.²⁴ That is, the situation at Rome was completely different from that of fifth-century or even fourth-century Athens, where the basic mode of proceeding was recognized as a recent, man-made device subject to debate and alteration and having identifiable opponents, who advocated an alternative system and possessed at least a blue-print of their system. Second, the Roman oligarchy had an inherited, unchallenged authority going far beyond anything we know of in Athens and including a virtually complete monopoly of all forms of political initiative. If there was such a thing as Roman democracy, it was nonparticipatory to an extreme degree and therefore in many ways at the opposite pole to the Athenian democracy.²⁵ If we should be classifying Rome at all as a Greek city, then we ought to ask where Aristotle would have put it, with its very high property-qualifications for any participation other than mere voting and its savage system of weighting votes in favor of the better-off even for voting, at least in important elections. He would certainly have called it some kind of oligarchy, perhaps recognizing an element of democracy, useful to maintaining the stability of the oligarchic regime.

The fact that the two accounts of Roman "democracy" considered so far—based though they are on similar analyses of the political phenomena without apparent sharp disagreements as to the facts—still reach such divergent conclusions, must suggest strongly that the problem lies at the level of the terminology being used. It seems, as a matter of fact, not particularly difficult to define more closely what is "democratic" about Roman political life in the period 250–50 B.C. In no sense am I claiming that what follows is a revelation. The elements of it are obviously implicit not only in Millar's articles but also in the earlier work of Brunt, and of others too; but it has not, I think, been detached as a theory or used to seek a definition in the way attempted here.²⁶

(1) The constitutional arrangements of republican Rome, fascinating though their details may be, tell us virtually nothing about the political life of Rome at any moment, other than as a set of potential rules, which in general evoke respect when they are appealed to.

(2) The Roman oligarchy had a position of entrenched authority within the Roman system, a position to which nothing in Athens cor-

24. This is not to say that specific changes could not be made: e.g., the creation of new magistracies or priesthoods (Livy *Per.* 15: 33, 43, 1; and see A. Lintott, "Democracy in the Middle Republic," *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* 104 [1987]: 41). But the replacement of the whole system was never a political issue.

25. Finley, *Politics*, pp. 84–96, offers a characteristically vigorous contrast between the Roman and Athenian systems; for the degree of participation in Athenian democracy, see now R. K. Sinclair, *Democracy and Participation in Athens* (Cambridge, 1988).

26. For a measured discussion of the issues, see Lintott, "Democracy," pp. 34–52.

responded, and which must be treated as fundamental to all Roman political proceedings; in particular, it will not do (and this is surely where Polybius goes wrong) to treat the assemblies as if they were the peculiar preserve of the *plebs* or the *δημος*, while senate and magistracies belonged to the elite. The assemblies were convoked, presided over, addressed, and dismissed by elite members in their roles as magistrates, and they were conducted according to voting systems privileging the well-off and inhibiting the poor from conducting any kind of conflict with the well-off.

(3) The popular will of the Roman people found expression in the context, and only in the context, of divisions within the oligarchy. So, democratic politics in Rome was a function of the degree and type of competition in progress between oligarchic families, groups, or individuals. It is quite simply a fact that the ruling class accepted the arbitration of popular voting in certain extremely important circumstances, just as they accepted that the power and success of families and individuals should be limited by the rotation of office, regular succession to commands, and so on. These conventions or restraints lie at the heart of the system; as they weaken, so the system collapses. This is not of course to say that all acts of the assemblies were of this kind; no doubt, most acts involved putting through necessary, uncontroversial business, and the results of many elections must have been foregone conclusions. Nor does it imply that all divisions within the ruling class went to popular votes; much lay conventionally within the ambit of the senate or even of negotiations between families or groups, to be settled, Gelzer-style, by the negotiation of mutual benefits. But true though all this may be, the politically determinative decisions were those where elections were bitterly fought or where rival groups advocated legislation or opposed its passage, or sought or opposed the setting up of investigative enquiries, and so on. It was this level of political activity that determined the characteristic forms of Roman political life and in particular the extent to which political life focused on popular voting and on the factors that might influence or change popular voting.

This means that to some extent the terms of debate were always set by the elite-members: characteristically, they did the speaking and the voters did the listening. But that is not the only possible resolution of what happened, because (as Perelli has pointed out) careerist politicians in search of political triumphs needed to evoke popular support;²⁷ and they did that, at least in the first century B.C., by putting forward policies reflecting the needs and problems of those they hoped would vote for them.²⁸ So the relationship worked, or could work, both ways: we should not be talking about the "democratic element" in the Roman

27. *Movimento popolare*.

28. Plut. *Ti. Gracch.* 8 reports the writing of political slogans as influencing Ti. Gracchus in 133 B.C. The slogans surviving at Pompeii might seem relevant here; but see the acute discussion, in the context of elite control of the electorate, by W. Jongman, *The Economy and Society of Pompeii* (Amsterdam, 1988), pp. 275-329.

constitution, as if that were a separable section of popular intervention; instead, we should be talking about the symbiosis between ambitious politicians and people who were in need of a political voice but who had potential power that could be mobilized, given the right price. This in turn implies that we must reconsider the influence on the politicians themselves of the views, both actual and perceived, of the voters or potential voters.

If the relationship of competitive oligarchy and voting assemblies can be accepted as an analytical tool, it will have a considerable impact on our ideas of Roman political development, not just in the last few years of the Republic but during the middle to late republican period as a whole. For if there is one thing we do know well about this period, it is that the nature of the competitive struggle between the dominant families of Rome changed in its character and means of expression repeatedly and quite profoundly, down to the point in the 30s where competition came to an abrupt end and voting ceased to matter altogether.

But it may be that one should think in terms not of long periods of change, but of much greater volatility from year to year and from situation to situation than we usually do; we are prisoners of the image of constitutional stability propounded by Polybius and Cicero. To return, for a moment, to the position of Gelzer, it is not the case that his ideas about the functioning of the Roman aristocracy have been refuted; rather, they have been shown to express a half-truth, to apply only in certain circumstances, and hence to be an inadequate description of the Roman situation he was seeking to encapsulate. Rather than being a full description, they might be said to represent the political ideal of the governing classes: to fix the business of the Republic through deals and arrangements among themselves, without reference to the views of less important citizens. The fact that the ideal sometimes went unfulfilled because of divisions among the ruling elite on issues over which the *comitia* held jurisdiction, should not obscure the other side of the case: the ideal will often have been attained, whenever the noble leaders succeeded in fixing what they wanted to have fixed.

I have contended in this paper that democracy at Rome should be seen as a very particular form, badly in need of classification and of comparison with similar systems where high and entrenched elite authority is combined with an arbitral power retained by popular voting.²⁹ You might say that this advocacy of a classification of democracy in

29. There is, of course, some contact to be made, despite many differences of situation, with modern theories of competition between elites in democracy: see J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*⁵ (London, 1976); D. Miller, "The Competitive Model of Democracy," in *Democratic Theory and Practice*, ed. G. Duncan (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 133–55. The fact that M. I. Finley (*Democracy Ancient and Modern*² [London, 1985]) could seek to use Athens as a general refutation of elitist theories of democracy shows how great is the difference between Athens and Rome, where, on the view argued here, the theory evidently fits to some extent. A difference is, perhaps, that Roman aristocrats accepted popular arbitration, not because they believed in it, but because it was part of a traditional system to which they were committed.

action is more central to my argument than the particular claim for Rome. To my eye, the resemblance to classical Athens (unless that system is badly misinterpreted at the moment) is actually less striking than the resemblance to classical Sparta, dominated by a similarly revered elite and having a similarly limited democratic control.³⁰ But there is also an evocative parallel to be observed with modern two-party systems, where again an entrenched elite in a competitive situation accepts popular arbitration between formulated alternatives. There is no need to be reminded of the differences that beset such a comparison: Rome had no Government, no political parties advocating distinct policies, no representative institutions, no system of allowing mass voting in local areas, and so on. But at least the point should not be missed that such systems, however different in other respects, do share at least one essential characteristic, no more to be forgotten today than in the Rome of the first century B.C.: if, for whatever reason, political competition ceases, so almost automatically does concern about the opinions of the voters.

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30. See A. Andrewes, "The Government of Classical Sparta," in *Ancient Society and Institutions*, ed. E. Badian (Oxford, 1966), pp. 1-20; P. Cartledge, *Agessilaos and the Crisis of Sparta* (London, 1986), pp. 116-32.