

CICERO AND THE GRACCHI

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That Cicero had definite conservative sentiments and was deeply disturbed by the Roman revolution is generally accepted. In order to gain some insight into Cicero's reaction to the revolutionaries of his own day, it will be the purpose of this paper to try to focus attention upon his remarks concerning two non-contemporary revolutionaries, the Gracchi, with whom the period of great unrest "officially" began.¹ With some understanding of Cicero's feelings and prejudices about the famous brothers, and perhaps with some hints regarding their history as it was understood by Cicero, we shall be able to establish a background which may help us in assessing Cicero's feelings and prejudices toward his contemporaries.

Roman politics in Cicero's day involved mainly the struggle between the optimates and the populares, and the intrigues within these two factions. For more than a century the senate had been the main force in the republic, almost to the exclusion of the assemblies and an independent magistracy. Those who were anxious to preserve this senatorial control made up the optimate faction; other men, however, who wished either to effect needed changes or who were eager to get more power more quickly, turned away from the senate to the people.²

¹ Cicero (through the mouth of Laelius) assigns the beginning of this party strife to the tribunate of Ti. Gracchus: "mors Ti. Gracchi et jam ante tota illius ratio tribunatus divisit populum Romanum in duas partes" (*Rep.* 1.19.31). This, of course, fits quite well the traditional date for the beginning of the Roman revolution.

² For discussion of the political situation during the last century of the Republic, see L. R. Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar* (Berkeley 1949); Ch. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge 1960); H. Strasburger in *RE*, 35 (1939) 773-98, s.v. "Optimates"; F. E. Adcock, *Roman Political Ideas and Practice* (Ann Arbor 1959); R. E. Smith, *The Failure of the Roman Republic* (Cambridge 1955); R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford 1939).

Qui vero se populares volunt ob eamque causam aut agrariam rem temptant, ut possessores pellantur suis sedibus, aut pecunias creditas debitoribus condonandas putant, labefactant fundamenta rei publicae, concordiam primum . . . deinde aequitatem . . . (*De off.* 2.22.78).

These populares, of course, are most favorably accepted by the *populus*, but "offendebant illi quidem apud gravis et honestos homines" (*Pro Sest.* 49.105; cf. 48.103). These surely are the senators—and perhaps some equites—who were not only themselves hurt by redistribution of the wealth and a loss of political power, but also probably were honest in their fear of encouraging the indolence of the crowd and placing too great strain upon the treasury (*De off.* 2.21.72; *Tusc.* 3.20.48).

Considering this view which Cicero held toward populares, and especially their financial irresponsibility, we should expect him to disapprove of the Gracchi.

Agrariam Ti. Gracchus legem ferebat. Grata erat populo; fortunae constitui tenuiorum videbantur. Nitebantur contra optimates, quod et discordiam excitari videbant et, cum locupletes possessionibus diuturnis moverentur, spoliari rem publicam propugnatoribus arbitrabantur. Frumentariam legem C. Gracchus ferebat. Iucunda res plebei; victus enim suppeditabatur large sine labore. Repugnabant boni, quod et ab industria plebem ad desidia avocari putabant et aerarium exauriri videbant (*Pro Sest.* 48.103; cf. *Tusc.* 3.20.48, *De off.* 2.21.72).

Although Cicero does not paint a sharp picture of villains and heroes, he here depicts the *populus* as selfish and the optimates as at least partially selfless. And the Gracchi have not chosen the better part.

Looking beyond economic matters, we find that Cicero's disapproval of the Gracchi is often manifested with stronger but less specific charges, such as *dominatus*, *regnum*, *seditio*. Thus Scipio is said to have freed the republic "ex dominatu Ti. Gracchi" (*Brut.* 43.212). In the *De amicitia* we are told through the mouth of Laelius about "Ti. Gracchum rem publicam vexantem," and of Blossius of Cumae who "non paruit Ti. Gracchi temeritati, sed praefuit, nec se comitem illius furoris, sed ducem praebuit" (11.37). A moment later:

Ti. Gracchus regnum occupare conatus est, vel regnavit is quidem paucos menses. . . . De C. Gracchi autem tribunatu quid exspectem non libet augurari; serpit deinde res, quae proclivis ad perniciem, cum semel coepit, labitur (*De am.* 12.41).

Laelius, speaking after the death of Tiberius and before the tribunate of Gaius, was a staunch conservative and a friend of the Scipio family, and it is difficult in the *De amicitia* to distinguish Cicero's own feelings from a dramatic presentation of what Laelius might have been expected to say. However, these comments are at least not contrary to statements which are clearly Cicero's own. Thus, in comparing Tiberius the elder with his son: "alter stabilire rem publicam studuerit, alter evertere" (*De fin.* 4.24.65). And Nasica is identified as "illum qui Ti. Gracchi conatus perditos vindicavit" (*De off.* 1.30.109). Nasica is mentioned again in the first Catilinarian: "An vero vir amplissimus, P. Scipio, pontifex maximus, Ti. Gracchum mediocriter labefactantem statum rei publicae privatus interfecit" (1.3). In this last instance, description of Tiberius' crime is softened (*mediocriter*), presumably to make Catiline appear so much more monstrous.

In similar fashion Gaius Gracchus, "qui unus maxime popularis fuit" (*De dom.* 9.24), appears in Cicero's eyes as *seditiosus* (*Pro Sest.* 47.101, *De dom.* 31.82, *In Cat.* 1.2.4), and one who "rei publicae vulnera imponebat" (*De fin.* 4.24.66).

It is not altogether clear precisely what the political sins were which Cicero attributed to the Gracchi, but some of his comments are somewhat helpful. In *De legibus*, Cicero defends the institution of the tribunate against the criticism of Quintus (3.8.19 ff.), although he admits that individual tribunes, like Tiberius, have abused their power. "Quin ipsum Ti. Gracchum non solum neglectus, sed etiam sublatus intercessor evertit. Quid enim aliud perculit, nisi quod potestatem intercedenti abrogavit?" (3.10.24; cf. *Pro Mil.* 27.72). Some years before, Cicero compared the evils of Catiline's followers with the crimes of earlier revolutionaries: "Non Ti. Gracchus quod iterum tribunus plebis fieri voluit, non C. Gracchus quod agrarios concitare conatus est . . . in discrimen . . . adducitur" (*In Cat.* 4.2.4). The danger of land reform is repeated in the *De officiis*: "Quid? nostros Gracchos, Ti. Gracchi summi viri filios, Africani nepotes, nonne agrariae contentiones perdiderunt?" (2.23.80).

On occasion, Cicero seems more sorry than angry: ". . . Ti. Gracchus —patrem dico, cujus utinam filii ne degenerassent a gravitate patria!" (*De prov. cos.* 8.18), and he tries to give reasons why the Gracchi went astray. Tiberius was killed, "propter turbulentissimum tribunatum,

ad quem ex invidia foederis Numantini bonis iratus accesserat" (*Brut.* 27.103; cf. *De har. resp.* 20.43). "C. autem Gracchum mors fraterna, pietas, dolor, magnitudo animi ad expetendas domestici sanguinis poenas excitavit" (*De har. resp.* 20.43; cf. *Brut.* 33.126).

Perhaps the most telling of Cicero's remarks on the subject of the Gracchi are those in which he shows his clearly optimate view of the role of the senate in the republican constitution.

Ti. Gracchus convellit statum civitatis, qua gravitate vir! qua eloquentia! qua dignitate! nihil ut a patris avique Africani praestabili insignique virtute, praeterquam quod a senatu desciverat, deflexisset (*De har. resp.* 19.41).

Tiberius apparently had all the qualifications to become a great patriot, but he went astray from his duties to the state by leaving the cause of the senate.

A few moments later, Cicero returns to Tiberius and his disappointment regarding the Numantine Treaty: "eaeque res illum fortem et clarum virum a gravitate patrum desciscere coegit" (*De har. resp.* 20.43; cf. *De off.* 2.12.43). Whether *patrum* is to be taken here as "senators" or is to be construed as referring to his forebears is immaterial, since the famous *patres* would in any case be the elder Gracchus and Africanus, men who can hardly be conceived of without their senatorial connections.

We must not forget here that the *De haruspicum responso* was delivered to the senate, and that Cicero has been known to cater to his audience's prejudice to secure a favorable verdict. We are able to turn to one of Cicero's essays, however, and find a most striking statement in the same vein. We read in *Brutus* 27.103 that Tiberius "ab ipsa re publica est interfectus." Cicero knows that Tiberius was murdered by a pro-senate mob led by Scipio Nasica, *privatus*, and he often praises Scipio for his part in the murder. Yet, consciously or unconsciously, he so identifies the republic with the senate that he can refer to this mob of rioters as *ipsa res publica*.

But Cicero's presentation of the Gracchi is not one of unrelieved condemnation. At times he finds it in him to praise, if not their politics, at least their moral virtue, and always their ability as speakers.

At vero eius [Ti. the elder] filii disert, et omnibus vel naturae vel doctrinae

praesidiis ad dicendum parati, cum civitatem vel paterno consilio, vel avitis armis florentissimam acceperunt, ista praeclara gubernatrice, ut ais, civitatum, eloquentia rem publicam dissipaverunt (*De or.* 1.9.38; cf. *De inv.* 1.4.5, if the text is sound).

Utinam in Ti. Graccho Caioque Carbone talis mens ad rem publicam bene gerendam fuisset, quale ingenium ad bene dicendum fuit (*Brut.* 27.103).

In *De lege agraria*, although we have reason to suspect his sincerity (see below), Cicero compares Rullus with Tiberius, whose law Rullus has quoted: "et cum tu a Ti. Gracchi aequitate ac pudore longissime remotus sis, id quod dissimillima ratione factum sit, eodem iure putas esse oportere?" (2.12.31; cf. *De har. resp.* 19.41). Likewise, there is generous praise for the oratory of Gaius, "hominis, ut opinio mea fert, nostrorum hominum longe ingeniosissimi atque eloquentissimi" (*Pro Font.* 17.39; cf. *Brut.* 33.125). In the *Pro Rabirio perduellionis*, Gaius, as a popularis who showed some restraint, is compared favorably with Labienus.

An pietas tua maior quam C. Gracchi, an animus, an consilium, an opes, an auctoritas, an eloquentia? Quae si in illo minima fuissent tamen prae tuis facultatibus maxima putarentur. Cum vero his rebus omnibus C. Gracchus omnis vicerit, quantum intervallum tandem inter te atque illum interiectum putas? (5.14-15; cf. *De har. resp.* 19.41).

During his year of consulship, Cicero made a notorious remark, in which he seemed to be speaking directly contrary to his other statements on the Gracchi and agrarian reform:

Nam vere dicam, Quirites, genus ipsum legis agrariae vituperare non possum. Venit enim mihi in mentem duos clarissimos, ingeniosissimos, amantissimos plebei Romanae viros, Ti. et C. Gracchos, plebem in agris publicis constituisse, qui agri a privatis antea possidebantur. Non sum autem ego is consul qui, ut plerique, nefas esse arbitrer Gracchos laudare, quorum consiliis, sapientia, legibus multas esse video rei publicae partis constitutas (*De leg. agr.* 2.5.10).

In the interest of wrenching consistency into Cicero's writings, one can perhaps point out that "vituperare non possum" and "non nefas esse arbitrer" are not necessarily litotes, and that Cicero certainly does not claim that all benefited from the Gracchan legislation, or even that the

state as a whole benefited. But without great imagination and without an eye carefully peeled for loopholes, we are bound to see here a clear expression of praise for the Gracchi and their actions.

Inconsistency between this and later remarks is much more easily explained by the fact that this speech was delivered to the *people* against a *popularis* who claimed to be following in the footsteps of the Gracchi. Cicero knew his audience, as any good orator must, and was not above bending his words somewhat in order to secure a kind reception for his argument. He is "like a wolf," as Jonkers rather vehemently puts it, "preaching the gospel."³ Furthermore, as Cicero compares the radical Rullus to the patron saints of the *populares*, he is most likely overstating his own image of the Gracchi in order to make Rullus suffer by comparison.⁴

In spite of Cicero's kind words for the Gracchi, the overall impression is rather strong that he was unhappy with their politics. On the other hand, he is generally quite pleased with the actions of those who opposed them. He regularly refers to the anti-Gracchan element as *boni*, *optimi*, *fortes*, *summi*, etc., and though these adjectives have become synonyms for optimates, the root meaning is not altogether submerged. Cicero also makes quite clear that the reputed killers of the Gracchi are free of blame (*De off.* 2.12.43, *Pro. Mil.* 3.8, *De or.* 2.25.106, *Pro Planc.* 36.88, *Brut.* 34.128), and even to be praised:

Etenim si summi viri et clarissimi cives Saturnini et Gracchorum et Flacci et superiorum complurium sanguine non modo se non contaminarunt, sed etiam honestarunt . . . (*In Cat.* 1.12.29).

The man traditionally credited with the murder of Tiberius is P. Scipio Nasica. Cicero is not only not displeased with Scipio's actions (*De dom.* 34.91), but he actually counts him among the great heroes:

Nec plus Africanus, singularis et vir et imperator, in excindenda Numantia rei publicae profuit quam eodem tempore P. Nasica privatus, cum Ti. Gracchum interemit (*De off.* 1.22.76; cf. *Brut.* 58.212, *Tusc.* 4.23.51, *Phil.* 8.4.13).

³ E. J. Jonkers, *Social and Economic Commentary on Cicero's Orations De Lege Agraria* (Leiden 1963) 40.

⁴ Cf. Cicero's comparison of the Gracchi to Labienus (*Pro Rab. perd.* 5.14-15) and Catiline (*In. Cat.* 1.1.3 and 1.2.4).

L. Opimius, who shouldered primary responsibility for the death of Gaius, and whose subsequent trial seems to have been a famous court case (*De or.* 2.25.106 *et passim*, *Part. orat.* 30.104-6, *Pro Mil.* 3.8), based his defense upon the claim that Gaius' murder was accomplished *iure et pro rei publicae salute*. There may well have been some doubt regarding the propriety of this defense, but there is no doubt manifested by Cicero about the nobility of Opimius: "L. Opimius . . . qui praetor et consul maximis rem publicam periculis liberarat" (*In Pis.* 39.95); "Opimium . . . servatorem ipsum rei publicae" (*Pro Planc.* 28.69; cf. 36.88, *Brut.* 34.128, *Phil.* 8.4.14). And it is a source of shame to Rome that Opimius was eventually convicted, even though on another, unrelated, charge (*Pro Sest.* 67.140, *In Pis.* 39.95, *Pro Planc.* 28.69-70).⁵

The collection of quotations in this paper does not pretend to be exhaustive, although the majority of references to the Gracchi involving more than simple passing mention have been listed. Prescinding from politics, Cicero finds much that is good in the Gracchi. When they are compared to later populares, censure even for their politics is not severe.

Despite such occasional variations, Cicero's general attitude toward Gracchan politics is one of clear disapproval. He sees their economic reforms as fiscally and perhaps morally dangerous. He fears their methods, especially those of Tiberius, who pushed the powers of his tribunate to an extreme while violating the rights of his colleague. And he cannot but react against their moves which undermined the position of the senate.

In disapproving of the Gracchi, Cicero lined himself up solidly on the side of the senate. Whatever agreement he may have had with Polybius' theoretical ideas on the mixed constitution, he seems in fact to have equated republic with senate. And we ought to expect such an equation not only from Cicero, but from most of the men of his time. Since the Punic Wars the senate had taken over, by default, most of the work of running a city-state which was rapidly becoming an empire. Thus even as the old aristocracy was in the process of slipping, the habit of two centuries, of looking upon the senate as the state,

⁵ It must be admitted that Cicero's concern for the plight of Opimius may be colored by the fact that Opimius is a prime precedent upon which Cicero could base the legality of his actions against the Catilinarian conspirators.

was slow in receding. Furthermore, the importance of the optimate role was most surely magnified by the fact that most historical accounts available to men of Cicero's time had been written with a senatorial bias. The very vocabulary of the first century B.C., calling the senators by such terms as *boni*, *summi*, *honesti*, and *optimates*, suggests a built-in prejudice. Finally, in Cicero's day, the assemblies had fallen under the will of the popular demagogues, the whim of the crowd, and the coercion of lawless elements on both sides. As this led more and more toward chaos, the one solid institution which offered the Romans a sense of continuity was the senate.