

## The Roman “Social War,” Democracy and the Advent of Christianity

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The “Social War” in Rome, near the end of the Republic, is a classic episode not only in Roman history, but also in the history of democracy. Citizenship and equality were the basic issues here, and, more specifically, an equality based on an equal access to the spoils of war, both direct and indirect. In this case, the Latin and quasi-Latin tribes in Italy, including the Sabellians and Etruscans, sought Roman citizenship for many reasons, though, according to some scholars, such reasons were generally selfish.

The situation pits a growing Roman empire with the older, more settled tribes of the Italian peninsula who had, to a greater or lesser degree, fought Roman expansion. It is not as if the Latins (a general term used to describe all Italian “allies” of Rome) did not benefit from Roman expansion, but a complex set of political and judicial reforms threatened the position of the elites in the “federated” parts of Italy.

Because this is a battle for equality and what Charles Tilly calls “breadth,” the theory of Tilly concerning democratization, as well as “de-democratization” is important and significant. In his book *Democracy*, Tilly makes a rather commonplace connection between structures of exploitation and inequality. In a sense, exploitation is as much a product of inequality as its creator, but, in Tilly’s case, there is much more complexity. There are two issues here: first, exploitation, and second, “opportunity hoarding.” Both of these “generate” in inequality if some of the profits generated from the unequal relationship are reinvested into “institutionalizing” the relationship, or, to speak differently, creating a relationship that is able to replicate itself over time (Tilly, 2007: 112).

In Tilly’s schema, exploitation is the taking of profits from someone’s else’s resources. Opportunity hoarding is to keep access to both the profits and resources to a single, privileged class. In general, premodern societies created conditions of inequality based on access to land and the resulting coercive measures. Modern societies have based this more on technics and scientific knowledge (Tilly, 2007: 116). In the premodern model, inequality is replicated and institutionalized by the successful co-opting of local sources of power, of crating bonds of loyalty and hierarchy that prevent secession. The main goals are to keep local warlords and tribal chiefs loyal by, to some extent, buying their faithfulness. In other words, successful politics here is based on giving some of the profits of plunder and exploitation to local elites. Hence, they are given opportunities that are denied to other members of their tribe or group. The local leaders are included in the class of “opportunity hoarders.”

Further, in Tilly’s article “Inequality, Democratization and De-Democratization” he introduces two more technical terms: breadth, equality and categorical inequality. “Breadth” refers to the proportion of the population that can actually participate in government and, hence, make a difference politically. Equality is the extent to which the participants have equal access to the halls of power. “Categorical inequality” is related to exploitation, since this category is a definable group, such as an ethnic or religious group, that, as a class, is kept from power (Tilly, 2003: 38).

The Social War (c.91-88 BC) in Rome is a useful illustration to these concepts. In many ways, this war is central to understanding the fall of the Republic and its causes, but it also fits very nicely the concepts of Tilly in relation to equality and exploitation. In very general terms, the Social War concerns the fight for Roman citizenship carried on by the Latin tribes of Italy that are part of the early forms of Roman expansion. These are formerly independent tribes that, in the fourth and third centuries before Christ, have been placed under Roman tutelage. Basically, these tribes take part in Rome's wars, but do not get an equal share of the booty. But there is more to the story.

The ironic side to the story is that it is precisely in the reforms of Tiberius Gracchus, the populist senator, that caused the war to take the form it did (though Gracchus lived prior to this war, his ideas were at its root). Additionally, the work of Marcus Drusus had concluded that citizenship should be extended to the Latins. He was assassinated as a result. As a matter of course, most of the Latin tribes—at least their elites—profited from Roman control. They received some money, their control was solidified by Roman authority, and they were able to take part in a far larger market, controlled by Roman navies and regulated by solid Roman coinage, than they could have ever taken part in on their own (Salmon, 109).

The reality is that Rome solidified the systems of inequality and exploitation found within the tribal system. But any move to alleviate such inequalities, in Rome or elsewhere, was bound to outrage the threatened tribal chiefs. Hence, the social war was not so much a complaint about Roman overlordship, but rather the dismantling of inequality in the Roman state, that could do nothing more than threaten their own privileged position.

Gracchus' reforms in Rome were admirable in themselves. They came down to two relevant issues: first, the limitation on the amount of land any man can own, and second, the removal of the judicial power from the senate (that bastion of oligarchy) to a newly formed group: the *equites*, or "middle class knights," for lack of a better term. Both of these moves, though popular in the city, outraged the federated tribal chiefs.

Hence it was a reaction against moves to alleviate inequality that began the social war for Roman citizenship. Without Roman citizenship, the Italian tribes had no form of redress. Even further, the decentralization of the judiciary meant that a more predatory class, that of the knights, was now challenging the old Latin aristocracy throughout the newly formed empire. While the Senatorial oligarchy was primarily interested in land and its profits, the new knights, empowered by Gracchus, were interested in banking and trade, the latter being the primary form of income for the tribal chieftains (Salmon, 111-112)

Therefore, it is clear that the interest in citizenship was not based on any love for universal equality, but to restrain the equalizing tendencies of the Roman populists. Needless to say, this puts the Roman state in a bind. Even worse, it became clear that the knights soon form a cooperate body, a "guild" of sorts, which can then more effectively fight the interests of the Latin traders. It was this that formed the "last straw," and the Italian tribes mobilized for action.

At this point a distinction should be made. Basically, the Sabellians were a very different group from their occasional allies among the Etruscans and Umbrians. This is because the relationship between Rome and the Sabellians was far more strained at the start than from the other two. The Roman treatment of the Umbrians and Etruscians was basically mild, made difficult only by the populist movement of Gracchus. At least in Salmon's analysis, the latter tribes owed little money (if any) to Rome, and were only required to provide troops for wars that directly affected Italy, hence, wars they had a direct interest in fighting. The Sabellians, on the other hand, were used in overseas wars, while the booty from these wars went to Rome. The

Sabellians also claimed that Roman commanders discriminated against Sabellian infantry and were generally treated as second class troops (Salmon, 117).

In the case of the Sabellians, they were the most nation-minded of the group, speaking a language that was non-Latin (though were becoming Latinized, as many of these groups had Hellenic roots), and had fought Roman expansion more fiercely than the others (Salmon, 116). It seems that while their federated rivals merely wanted equal access to power, the Sabellians were bent on independence. It was not long before this example became contagious, and most of the remainder of the allies joined the war itself.

Nevertheless, this is getting to far ahead. Prior to the actual fighting of the war, it was clear that the Senate had no interest in giving citizenship to the allies. In 95 BC, in response to organized agitation from the allies in Rome itself, the Senate passed what might be called an “alien exclusion act,” expelling all non-Romans from the city (Salmon, 114). So what had first become a moderate demand for citizenship now became an open rebellion against Rome.

Once the details of the Social War (at least its causes) is known, Tilly becomes more of a challenge to use relative to the Roman events. Several issues immediately stand out. While the question of breadth is central, the question of equality is not. The issue is the permission of Latin lords to use their influence to stymie attempts at equalization by Roman populists such as Gracchus and Drusus. Hence, the question of democracy here is problematic.

One cannot ignore the structures of exploitation and inequality at the local level (especially when dealing with Tilly). It is the lords who are threatened. Salmon even claims that the lords used anti-Roman rhetoric dishonestly, solely to mobilize a marginalized population against Roman efforts at equality, using ethnic and territorial arguments (Salmon, 115).

The concept of “breadth,” then concerns solely the selfish desires of local elites. The point was, of course, to institutionalize and replicate local exploitation. Nevertheless, as far as Rome itself is concerned, the Latin lords were agitating against categorical inequality in Tilly’s scheme. It was only because these men were not Romans that they were excluded from citizenship, and hence, equality. Romans of the Senatorial class viewed them as “conquered” people and hence not worthy of citizenship. Therefore, regardless of motivations, in Tilly’s scheme, the claims of the lords were just. Exploitation was built into the Roman system in that, while certain benefits accrued to the lords, Rome took the lion’s share of profits. The tribes were junior partners, though, by some estimates, making up almost 2/3 of the Roman infantry.

Hence, to use Tilly here is to abstract from the issue at hand. The issue was the control over the tribal population by lords threatened by Roman legislation. However, to abstract, the issue is the relation of exploitation. Power should be given to the Latin lords on the basis of their contribution to the Roman cause throughout Italy. Regardless of local exploitation, Rome is basically using the federate tribes for their own ends, and not the least of which was the profit of the Senatorial landed nobility. If the lords were well-known traders, they might well become a threat to Senatorial interests. If cash were to accumulate in lords’ pockets, the Senate itself might be challenged. Hence, there is every incentive for the Senate to insist Gracchus’ legislation be applied throughout the empire.

The question of equality is also important. The purpose for the lords’ argument for breadth was as a means to the end of equality. Since the equality they demanded was primarily judicial, the question of equality becomes more conspicuous. The demand, according to Salmon, was equal access to the court system on the basis of Roman citizenship. Hence, if citizenship meant power (in some sense), then citizenship was concerned with breadth. Breadth, then, at

least conceptually, meant equal access to the court system.

Hence, my conclusion is that the question is one of the attack on categorical inequality, towards breadth and equality of judicial access. If this is the case, and Salmon says it is, then there is a perfect match between the theories of Tilly and the evidence of the Roman Social War.

By about 200 BC, the battles between plebeian and aristocracy were over. A joint elite was created. It should not be inferred that the lower classes were powerless. Rome was more or less a meritocracy. If you contributed to the defense of the borders, you were worthwhile. Many authors refuse to make any distinction here at all, since these were not really legal (or useful) categories. Senators, in fact, as the Republic crumbled, were quite vulnerable. Emperor Aurelian murdered dozens of them around 220 AD. Plebeians could be quite wealthy, and depending on land investments, patricians could be quite poor.

The natural law theory of Cicero was based around one notion: duty rules over all. Yet, this idea is insufficient to tell us how to behave. Duty implied this: that you do nothing that comes at the expense of someone else. This could also include NOT punishing a criminal. Cicero was enough of a Platonist to realize that punishing a criminal is a very good thing, since it might serve to rehabilitate the criminal and reestablish order in the republic. Cicero did not make any class distinctions (though he was class conscious). By the time of Cicero, the Republic was falling apart. Concepts of early Stoic duty went beyond classes. Civil war, political instability, economic inequalities and currency debasement forced a) a unity of classes around patriotism and the empire, b) the equalization of any and all who can contribute to the defense of the empire, and c) an ethic of duty that stressed a basic egalitarian concept of justice.

The virtues of Rome changed a bit in practice by the time of Christ, since Rome had reached its natural limit: Spain in the west, Britain in the northwest, the German forests to the north, the Asian tribes to the east, Persia to the southeast and the Sahara desert to the south. The problem was that once expansion ended, the flow of slaves and war rewards began to dry up. Land was slowly monopolized by the wealth classes, especially after the Punic wars were over. Borders became more permeable and wealth shifted to the east. By far, the wealthiest cities in the empire were Alexandria and Antioch.

Virtues changed in practice, but not in theory. Emperor Marcus Aurelius could still explicate the stoic virtues even late in the empire. Duty was the one and only concern, that is, duty to the state. Stoicism, the way Emperor Marcus grasped it, was based on the concepts that a) power was not something to be sought, it was a burden, not a privilege, b) that one's duty was the prime directive, and your own life is meaningless when compared to the empire, thus, c) dying in the performance of your duty is a normal part of life. Finally, d) defending the empire in any capacity was meritorious because it maintained order. Outside the empire, there was disorder. Hence, anything that harmed the empire created disorder, which meant injustice automatically. Order is manifest by law, based on natural law, and the laws themselves must stress the relativity of the individual human life and the absolution of the empire as the embodiment of law/justice (the Latin for law is "jus," identical with "justice.") an unjust law was not, by definition, a law.

In practice, however, things began to turn as the empire reached her natural limits. Once new lands and slaves were not forthcoming, Rome had to fortify her borders. This meant the constant recruitment and training of mobile field armies. Roman training was significant, since roman men were a) usually shorter than their enemies, b) were always outnumbered and hence, c) was based on skill and finesse rather than strength. Roman soldiers were an elite class of warriors at any level. Once foreigners were brought in as "fedoratii," this training began to

decay. The Roman martial arts were the equal of any in the world. Roman strategy was to mix novice with experienced units and, most importantly, to avoid pitched battles. This meant the use of technology and tactics like the turtle shield maneuver, where a phalanx of soldiers would form like rugby players and hold their shields above, behind and in front of them. It functioned like a living, human tank.

Rome thrived in hand to hand combat, since this is their strength. No one could out fight them in finesse and technique, but northerners especially could defeat them with size and numbers. However, outfitting this army was expensive. Since Rome had no policy of succession, emperor's deaths could lead to civil war: more specifically, that rival generals would fight it out. This wasted manpower. Good infantry was killed in civil war while the borders were constantly violated.

Personal morality continued to go down. The expansion of the empire meant the following things occurred: a) an elite class of wealthy developed, b) this class was not stoic, but often lived for debauchery, c) the family began to fall apart as the "individual" started to mean more than the collective, d) Roman population grew, yet land and jobs were scarce. Therefore, the state had to feed the the daily bread ration, which became more expensive once Egypt fell. Again, e) as land was concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, more former landowners crowded the cities. Roman unemployment was massive and always was.

Once Rome began to be wealthy and the dirty work was done by slaves (which did not help unemployment), the elite class was formed. They were soft, not used to any physical work at all, and were certainly unfit for combat. They could even buy their way out of the army if necessary. Eventually, as practices such as abortion and birth control spread (upper class women and girls would swallow lead pieces to poison the uterus), the family declined in importance and the population went down. The currency was manipulated all the time, which meant that there was no real motivation for saving. Spending right now and only for the moment is pure hedonism. Those fit for military service became fewer, and so foreigners were hired as mercenaries with usually non-existent money.

Now, as far as the church was concerned. It is silly to argue that it undermined Roman unity, since the Christian Orthodox Roman empire of the east lasted until 1453 AD, and Russia, taking the mantle of Rome, did not fall until 1918. In the west, Rome was represented by Charlemagne's empire, which, after its dismemberment under Charles the Fat/Bald, moved to Germany. Therefore, both east and west rebuilt Roman power on a Christian basis and create strong, virtuous societies where the much milder form of serfdom replaced slavery. All men were free in the Eastern Roman empire, and serfdom did not exist at all. Yet, that empire lasted for another 100 years and brought Russia, the middle east and North Africa into its orbit. The law code was rewritten and consolidated under Justinian. Paganism was associated with abortion, small families, and hedonism. Paganism had declined tremendously by that time. Pagan temples were banks and served as both. When Socrates denounced the pagan gods in ancient Greece, scholars often forget that this caused a run on the banks since paganism and bank deposits were considered inseparable.

Keep one thing in mind: the use of the word "pagan" or "god" helps us not at all. There is no relation between the God of the Old testament and Roman gods. Pagan gods were not meant to be literally believed (maybe some of the hicks did, but certainly not the educated elite). They were symbols of social or natural powers. They were poetic personifications of those forces we have to deal with all the time: justice, lust, family, war, law, cowardice, virtue, adultery, order vs

chaos and many others had their patron symbol. That it was personified meant nothing. They were symbols. But as such, they had great power. The emperor was seen as “divine.” this is a poor choice of words: the emperor was seen as having power that is comparable to the divine because his job was to take the chaos we all experience and make it into order. That's what “creation” meant to Rome. There was no formal pagan theology, cult or ritual. All was local, and gods from different societies were taken at face value, except, of course, the God of the Christians, since he would tolerate no opposition. God is Truth, not a political symbol. God is connected to morals, not a prop for state power. Abandoning the symbols of the empire (Mars, the god of war, for example) was the same as rejecting Rome as such.

The correspondence between Pliny and the Emperor Trajan tells us little. This is especially the case that Romans could not get their head around a religion that a) said that it was True, rather than merely useful, that put the state second rather than first, and saw order in nature as such, rather than order being the society that is created by armed force. Roman grasp of ancient theology was consistently weak, especially given the fact that Roman Latin had a limited vocabulary and could not deal with metaphysical and ontological concepts like Greek could.

Rome understood power and, often, money. That was easy and quantifiable. But God as the essence of essence, the foundation that makes Being possible, or the connection of human nature and divinity in one man confused them. Christ was murdered, right? So how can he be a god? He would be one only if he defeated his enemies in battle and ruled us totally. This is about as close as paganism gets to a “creed.” This also shows that Christians would not alter their theology for the sake of converts. Its creed was totally opposite the Jewish and Roman one, it was almost as if they wanted to drive people away rather than attract them.

Christians could not take part in pagan worship, since it made the state the ultimate arbiter of reality: paganism, even though this words does not refer to anything in particular, might refer to both banking and the emperor, meaning money and power were the only goods. Christians had a firm theology that they would rather die than renounce. Paganism was not a theology at all, but an older political creed that exists today under new forms. Goodness and justice is synonymous with hierarchy, the warrior class, the cult of death, the state, the dominance of the material element and balance between passion and reason (symbolized by Dionysus and Apollo, respectively).

Given the fact that both early, poetic paganism and Christian theology created global empires, it is difficult to argue that either creed is responsible for the destruction of virtues. In all cases, however, the virtues of Rome and Christ (which were not all that different, especially in that Christianity never, ever claimed to be a religion of peace) could be abandoned by those who were supposed to adhere to it. Societies disintegrate because virtue does, because public morality disintegrates. Since that had already occurred by the time of Christ, the question is largely meaningless. There was no “Christian vs pagan,” that is apples and oranges; you might as well say it was Marxism vs Starbucks coffee. It makes no sense since they are not in the same category. The closest we can get is to say that the worship of the state and the force upon which it is based no longer appealed to anyone but the upper classes by 200 AD.

Several myths should also be dispelled: December 25 was made the day of the waning of the Sun only under Emperor Aurelian in the third century AD. There were few sun worshipers at the time of Christ. Second, we know very little about the Roman mystery religions, hence no comparison is possible. Third, as I mentioned, Christianity was warlike, not peaceful. Christ spoke quite differently about our personal enemies rather than the enemies of our faith or nation. This is why Christ quoted the Old Testament constantly, where Israel was a militarized society

that slaughtered its enemies in huge numbers (but was also punished by God for its own sins). But even then, Israelite could not kill or enslave another Israelite. The enemies of the faith were another matter entirely. There was never any tolerance towards non-Israelites, again, since god was True, real and active as a person, not just a poetic symbol. If God was truth, then his enemies were, by definition, false. These categories had little meaning in Rome.

Importantly, Christ completed the tottering Stoic ethics of the middle empire. The thesis here is that the social war, the ideas of the Republic were an excellent springboard for the acceptance of Christ. Paganism is not a theology and is not a religion. It is a secular form of poetry that makes the social world (and even the natural world, when understood by humans, is mediated by language and concepts) understandable and makes it a “home” for people. This was a world dedicated to community. At their worst, the pagans were virtuous people seeking that final ingredient: the permanence that only logos could provide.

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