

HENRIK MOURITSEN: *Plebs and Politics in the Late Roman Republic*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001. ISBN 0-521-79100-6. VI, 164 pp. GBP 40.

This book on the nature of politics in the Late Roman Republic is a substantial contribution to an important scholarly debate that, with its current focus, has gone on now for two decades. The central issue of contention is the actual political role of the *populus Romanus*, as opposed to its formal constitutional position. This discussion was sparked by Fergus Millar, who in a seminal paper ("The Political Character of the Classical Roman Republic, 200–151 BC", *JRS* 74 [1984] 1–19), questioned the prevailing views of Roman politics, which are largely based on ideas first introduced by Matthias Gelzer in one of the most influential studies ever written on the Roman Republic (*Die Nobilität der römischen Republik*, Leipzig 1912). According to the Gelzerian model, the structures of political power in republican Rome are not found primarily in the political institutions, but embedded in the fabric of social bonds traversing Roman society. In this view, Roman politics was essentially a contest between various *factiones* within the *nobilitas*, as the extensive nominal powers of the people were effectively checked by systematic oligarchic control based on the *clientela* system. Millar and other exponents of democratic interpretations of the political system of republican Rome have argued that the popular vote was in fact the central element of the entire political process, assigning to the masses a truly decisive role in Roman politics. Mouritsen's book, which in terms of scope and focus appears as a direct reply to one of Millar's later studies, the monograph *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (Ann Arbor 1998), constitutes a systematic attack on democratic interpretations of this kind.

The book is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter ("Introduction: ideology and practice in Roman politics", pp. 1–17), providing an overview of the scholarly discussion, the author identifies the major points at issue and places the whole debate in a wider historiographical context. He argues that the recent surge of interest in the urban crowds reflects the return of political ideologies to the study of republican Rome. He perceives democratic readings of the Roman political system as products of an ideologically motivated desire to rehabilitate the *plebs*, and connects this desire to a likewise ideologically motivated general reevaluation of the masses in history. In order to show that the Roman state during the Republic was firmly controlled by an aristocracy, M. sets out to demonstrate that one of the results of the modern debate, the social rehabilitation of the urban masses as a respectable working class (rather than idle parasites as they traditionally have been vilified), actually stands in the way of a political restoration. The author contends that political engagement, which in Rome was very time-consuming, and the daily struggle for survival were mutually exclusive commitments. This state of affairs, in his mind, effectively thwarts all modern efforts to present the masses as serious players in the political scene. He concedes that the picture of the people as a significant political agent, able to provide qualified opposition to the Senate, has support in Polybius' famous analysis of the Roman political system, but dismisses this piece of evidence on the ground that it owes more to abstract Greek political theory than to personal observation of actual political conditions.

Chapter two ("The scale of late republican politics", pp. 18–37) is concerned with the size and social composition of the typical 'political crowd'. In an effort to look past

the *populus* as a mere constitutional concept, M. directs his attention to the citizens that actually turned up for political events. In order to corroborate his thesis that the political crowd in republican Rome consisted mainly of members of the propertied classes, the *boni*, rather than the working population, supposedly too busy with its struggle for subsistence (which took most of its time before the distributions of free grain commenced in 58 BC), he sets out to demonstrate that the physical limitations imposed by the political arenas themselves precluded the presence of large crowds. Examining the topographical evidence for the meeting places of the people (the Comitium, the Forum, and the Saepta in the Campus Martius), the literary evidence on attendance in the popular assemblies, and venturing some 'cautious guesswork' with regard to the voting procedure itself (including the counting of the votes), M. attempts to establish the maximum numbers possible of citizens convening in the various *comitia* and in the *contiones*. In what must be styled a drastic revision of previous similar attempts (notably by L. R. Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies*, Ann Arbor 1966 and R. MacMullen, "How Many Romans Voted?", *Athenaeum* 58 [1980] 454–457), he concludes that attendance in the legislative assemblies was extremely low, usually involving a mere 3000 citizens, and that even electoral assemblies rarely reached numbers in excess of 10 000. This situation, according to M., suited the political elite, who did nothing to encourage larger attendance by the lower classes, and a great deal to actually discourage it.

One of the author's central contentions is that the small scale of the political institutions formally representing the whole people in practice meant that they represented the wealthy few, who had more in common with the senatorial aristocracy than the unpropertied masses which made up the majority of the population. The political consequences of this kind of situation are examined thoroughly in chapters three to five, focusing respectively on *contiones* ("The *contio*", pp. 38–62), legislation ("Legislative assemblies", pp. 63–89) and elective assemblies ("Elections", pp. 90–127). M. stresses the well-known fact that the voting power of those poor citizens who actually showed up to vote was checked by the very structures of the popular assemblies, and by the corporate voting peculiar to them. The division of the citizenry by wealth and age into *centuriae*, which were the voting units in the *comitia centuriata*, and the uneven division of the people into the rural and urban *tribus*, which were the units of the tribal assemblies (M. distinguishes two tribal assemblies; cf. this issue of *Arctos*, pp. 151 ff.) gave the propertied classes the upper hand. However, M. repeatedly emphasizes that it was the widespread disinclination of the masses to exercise their political powers, by actually attending the popular assemblies, which made it possible for the *nobilitas* to control the political process before the Late Republic. It was only the emergence of *populares*, politicians courting the people for its support, and the discovery of the voting power of the masses that created the need to attempt to actually control the voting in the popular assemblies. Although the majority of the crowds living in the city were confined to the four *tribus urbanae*, the immigration of rural *tribules* (citizens registered in one of the 31 *tribus rusticae*) assigned an increasing voting power to the urban masses. It is in his analysis of how the control of the voting worked that M. presents his most original ideas. A recurring theme in these considerations is the political role of the *clientela*, or rather, the lack thereof. Deeming it very unlikely that a significant share of the poorest citizens were connected to individual families of the ruling aristocracy, the author rejects the

Gelzerian view that networks of long-established ties of patronage were the fundamental determinants of the political process. For instance, in his discussion of legislation, he observes that there is no evidence that senators opposing law proposals by *populares* rallied their clients to vote against such bills. Proposals of this kind were rather stopped by way of tribunician *intercessio*, *obnuntiatio* and other kinds of formal obstruction, or, in the last resort, through violence. Popular politicians, on their part, garnered their support principally by means of bribing of local leaders (of *vici*, *collegia*, and the like), and not with the aid of the *clientela* system.

In the concluding sixth chapter ("*Plebs* and politics", pp. 128–148) the author discusses the connection between politics and society in general with the aim of placing the issues raised in the previous chapters in their proper socio-economic context. At the end of the book, there is an appendix on the *lex Licinia de sodalitatibus* (pp. 149–151), an extensive bibliography (pp. 152–161) and a general index.

Though being on the whole well-argued and meticulously documented, the book suffers from a lack of empirical foundation for some of its central assertions. For instance, in my opinion, the author tries to make out too much of very hypothetical assumptions in his discussion of 'the scale' of late republican politics (pp. 18 ff.). The present reviewer can only note too much speculation when it comes to assessing the capacity of the various political arenas, the social composition of crowds participating in political events, the time needed for counting the votes, and the like; the 'cautious guesswork' ventured by M. sometimes seems to be everything but particularly cautious. Moreover, the argumentation occasionally suffers from a marked disrespect for the testimony of the primary sources. In my mind, ancient explicit testimonia are too often dismissed as notably lightly when they contradict what appears to be nothing but a priori assumptions. This, I think, applies to his dismissal of Plautus' vivid sketch of social types in the Forum (Curc. 455–482), which suggests that this public space was not at all, as M. would have us think, the exclusive reserve of the men of substance. This passage, which is clearly a crucial piece of evidence for the social composition of the urban crowds, is rejected on the ground that it constitutes "comic exaggeration" (p. 43). I also think that the author does not give Polybius the consideration he clearly deserves. Polybius' analysis of the Roman political system provides far too much specific information about specifically Roman conditions to be dismissed as a work of abstract political theory in the Greek tradition (pp. 5 ff.). However, none of these critical remarks should obscure the fact that the book represents one of the most important books on the Late Roman Republic that has been published in recent years. It addresses a host of hotly debated issues and provides a number of interesting original ideas that cannot be ignored.

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