

The View from the Top: the ‘Poor’ in Cicero’s *Pro Murena*

Today, I hope, even as I fly from Detroit to Toronto, to convince you through the help of this kind and generous volunteer that when Cicero talks about the poor in his *Pro Murena*, he is not talking about Romans who have little money. He is talking about Romans who don’t have a lot of money. Cicero either ignores or is ignorant of this distinction between those who are poor and those who are not rich, and this has implications for how we understand Cicero and for how we utilize evidence like that of the *Pro Murena* to interpret Roman society.

Rome of Cicero’s day would have been crowded and poor, a reality thoughtfully explored by Holleran in “Migration and the Urban Economy of Rome.” Roman society, however, was not bifurcated between an economic and political elite and the impoverished masses, if you accept with me Scheidel’s arguments in “Stratification, Deprivation and Quality of Life.” Harris, citing Scheidel with approval, rejects the traditional view that, and I quote, “almost everyone outside the senatorial-equestrian elite lived just above the level of subsistence.” Instead, he asserts, “there were many people who were neither on the one hand destitute nor on the other hand able to acquire without a second thought every purchasable thing they desired.” Rome, Harris and Scheidel argue, had middling classes if not a modern middle class.

Cicero, however, had not read modern scholarship on the intricacies of Rome’s social and economic life. In his defense of consul-elect Lucius Licinius Murena, Cicero reduces the complex socio-economic reality of Rome to a simple division between the elite of the senatorial and equestrian classes and everyone else. He does not and perhaps he cannot distinguish between the social strata of Roman society beyond those sharing his own privileged status. From his precipitous perch, no matter how precarious his own social position as a *novus homo* from Arpinum, Cicero looks down on an undifferentiated mass that he sees as poor.

The bottom half of the Roman hierarchy surfaces in this speech, of course, because Murena faces charges of electoral corruption and the recipients of that alleged corruption occupy society's lower rungs. Cicero, batting clean-up for the defense team, delivers an oration designed to demonstrate that Murena had no need for recourse to bribery and that he conducted his campaign well within the bounds of Roman norms and Roman law.

Cicero locates one specific explanation for Murena's victory and the defeat of Sulpicius in Sulpicius's own behavior. Cicero criticizes the effort that Sulpicius expended strengthening the sanctions against electoral corruption, a law that proved the last straw in Sulpicius' electoral undoing, as we see at **HANDOUT ONE**, "It wrecked your campaign." Cicero begins with this conclusion which he then unpacks through an analysis of the proposal and its impact on public opinion. Three additions to the existing penalties passed the senate, and each had a negative impact on Sulpicius' reputation. In addition, the senate rejected several measures in the proposal but not before they, too, affected perceptions of Sulpicius. Elite perspectives dominates this discussion since those in the senatorial and equestrian orders would suffer under the ratified decisions to raise the sanction for electoral corruption to exile and to render culpable anyone pleading illness as an excuse for missing a trial. Although the senate refused to alter the voting system or the process for jury selection, men of position and influence were aggravated by the suggestions put forth by Sulpicius. The language of the passage emphasizes Sulpicius's agency and his demanding tone, **HANDOUT TWO**, as well as the senate's reluctance to go along with Sulpicius, **HANDOUT THREE**. Moreover, his aggressive lobbying for an unpopular measure cost Sulpicius votes not just among his powerful peers but across the socio-economic spectrum of the electorate, which Cicero, I argue, collapses into a binary system.

For the non-elite also express outrage at Sulpicius and his law against electoral corruption. He demanded and won, **HANDOUT FOUR**, a stiffer penalty against the plebs, so we should not be surprised by the result: those of modest means were enraged. Berry's note in his translation for *Oxford World's Classics* captures a typical scholarly interpretation of this passage, and I quote, "The poor liked being given bribes: it was one of the perks of citizenship." I contend, however, that although Cicero's language literally denotes a lack of financial resources, in its context the phrase has a broader connotation as Cicero invokes much more of the citizen body than those indicated by the English word "poor." His argument certainly aims to construct a picture of widespread hostility toward Sulpicius, to imply that all of Rome shared this antipathy with its predictable electoral consequences. If the bulk of the analysis explores elite responses to the new measures against corruption, the initial mention of the plebeians must convey the reaction from the bulk of Roman society, considered as a single social stratum. Cicero assumes that the entire social stratum was riled up by the law and its chief proponent. That social stratum is identified first as *plebs* and a moment later as *tenuiores*, so I would suggest that Cicero uses the words as synonyms. His argument needs the *tenuiores* to be the *plebs*, not just a poorer subset of a larger class whose opinions go unrecorded. Although Adamietz writes that the *lex Tullia* resulted in several groups opposed to Sulpicius, just two such groups are visible in the text. Briefly, the *plebs*, aka *tenuiores*. At length, the elite that ran for office, sat on juries, and cultivated their influence. Cicero's discussion of his namesake legislation reflects a simple division of Roman society into two and only two segments. Cicero finds no rhetorical benefit in offering greater nuance to the political and economic elite of the jury.

But I can agree with Fantham's note that *tenuis* is, and I quote, "almost a class code for the poor." Kühnert, in her study of Cicero's vocabulary of the plebs, concludes that *tenuis* points

to limited financial resources yet lacks a pejorative force, which Adamietz affirms with his suggestion that it is a gentle euphemism. A younger Cicero utilized the economic significance of *tenuis* in *De Inventione* where he supposes, **HANDOUT FIVE**, that fate determined whether someone was slave or free, rich or poor, a private citizen or a powerful official. Whittaker, Morley and Harris, however, remind us that the culturally freighted vocabulary of poverty makes it difficult to precisely locate the connotation of words for the poor. Whittaker points out that the satirist Juvenal considered himself poor and drew the poverty line at less than twenty thousand sesterces a year, twenty times the annual earnings of a laborer. The word “poor” in this case becomes a social distinction rather than a description of financial resources. Cicero can also move *tenuis* beyond the realm of money, as in *De Legibus*, **HANDOUT SIX**, where Marcus remarks that one of the benefits of the office of the tribunes of the people, for all its obvious flaws, was to offer *tenuiores* the illusion that they possessed equality with the leading citizens.

Back in the *Pro Murena*, we get a more extensive look at the *tenuiores* when Cicero, addressing the specific charges of bribery leveled by Cato, considers the inequality in Roman society and its political implications. Rejecting Cato’s accusation that illicit money bought Murena his supporters, Cicero contends that a traditionally reciprocal relationship balanced the generosity of the elite with the active campaigning of the non-elite. In a society replete with favors given and received, Cicero states, **HANDOUT SEVEN**, that electoral support provides the only avenue available to *homines tennes* for either earning the gratitude of the senatorial class or for repaying obligations previously incurred. Cicero then offers a contrast that can allow us to deduce the identity of these ostensibly poor men. **HANDOUT EIGHT**, One certainly can’t ask senators or *equites* to invest entire days in demonstrating their support. Fellow members of the elite might visit your house, might accompany you to the forum, might even make walk one lap

of a basilica with you. For that you should be grateful. Constant attendance, however, can be only expected from those friends, **HANDOUT NINE**, who are poorer and not so busy. Once again, Cicero presents two and only two kinds of Roman citizens, the elite, on the one hand, and, on the other, those described as *tenues, tenuiores* and *non occupatorum*. Cicero gives us another term for this segment of society when he exhorts Cato, **HANDOUT TEN**, not to steal from that lower class of people what they received by fulfilling their duty. According to Cicero, **HANDOUT ELEVEN**, the members of this lower class themselves attest that they are unable to provide the typical forms of assistance available from senators and *equites*: to plead in the courts, to stand as security, to issue invitations to one's home. Cicero thus defines that lower order by their inability to function as elites. Cicero concludes this line of argument by justifying the acts of alleged bribery, **HANDOUT TWELVE**, as the natural products of a society grounded in reciprocal relationships, relationships between those at the top and the bottom.

Nowhere has Cicero left room for middling people to occupy a space between the political and economic elite and the *tenuiores*. The modern reader might have the impression that we are learning about the relationship between Rome's poor and its governing class. That is unlikely. Harris points out that, and I quote, "Roman patronage was a reciprocal institution, and the poorest Romans had virtually nothing to offer." Cicero has subsumed under the term *tenuis* a wider swath of Roman society. If Scheidel accurately calculates that the third and fourth classes of the census were not routinely at risk of deprivation, then, even though Cicero surely includes them among his *tenuiores*, we would probably not call them poor even if we would agree that they are not rich. This supports Verboven's contention that the Roman ruling class applied the vocabulary of poverty loosely to anyone who did not belong to at least the first class. Cicero has certainly collapsed a more complicated society into a simple dichotomy. If I am correctly

reading these bits of *Pro Murena*, we risk replicating Cicero's bias by interpreting the *tenuiores* as Rome's poor. McDonald clearly waxes aristocratic with his Nineteen Sixty Nine comment about the *tenuiores* from Handout Four, and I quote, "The poorer citizens who would be indignant because deprived of the chance of turning a dishonest penny in electoral corruption." If the *tenuiores* are not actually poor, even though they are not rich, then the dynamic of reciprocal relationships between the upper crust and their social, political, and economic inferiors needs to be re-assessed, especially in regard to its role in elections. While I sympathize with Yakobson's desire to instill some democracy in the Roman Republic, there is no point at which *Pro Murena* allows us to discuss, and I quote, "the votes of the poor as a class." Instead, we might talk about the consequences of Cicero's inability to comprehend the lived reality of Rome's Ninety Nine Percent as he shoe-horns them into a single, shared identity. While the elision of the middling in Cicero's *Pro Murena* may not teach us about the reality of Roman society, it can teach us about the view from the top. And the questions so raised might well be worth considering in the twenty-first century.

Please email your questions, thoughts, and suggestions to Dr. Clapp at the email address at the top of the handout.

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Murena 43-47: Identifying the Mistakes of Sulpicius

1. *Mur.* 46 petitioni vero refragata est.

2. Aggressiveness of Sulpicius: *Mur.* 46-47

- ...flagitasti...
- ...tua voce efflagitata est...
- ...postulationi tuae...
- ...te auctore...
- ...flagitasti...

3. Senatorial reluctance: *Mur.* 46-47

- Gestus est mos et voluntati et dignitati tuae...
- ...concessit senatus...
- ...sed non libenter...
- ...voluntas offensa multorum...

4. *Mur.* 47 Poena gravior in plebem tua voce efflagitata est; commoti animi tenuiorum

Philosophical Works

5. *De Inv.* 1.35, In fortuna quaeritur, servus sit an liber, pecuniosus an tenuis, privatus an cum potestate:

6. *De Leg.* 3.24 quo tenuiores cum principibus aequari se putarent

Murena 70-73: Refuting the Charges of Cato

7. *Mur.* 70 Homines tennes unum habent in nostrum ordinem aut promerendi aut referendi benefici locum hanc in nostris petitionibus operam atque adsestationem

8. *Mur.* 70 Neque enim fieri potest neque postulandum est a nobis aut ab equitibus Romanis ut suos necessarios candidatos adsectentur totos dies

9. *Mur.* 70 tenuiorum amicorum et non occupatorum est ista adsiduitas

10. *Mur.* 71 Noli igitur eripere hunc inferiori generi hominum fructum officii, Cato;

12. *Mur.* 71 Ipsi denique, ut solent loqui, non dicere pro nobis, non spondere, non vocare domum suam possunt.

13. *Mur.* 73 Omnia haec sunt officia necessariorum, commoda tenuiorum, munia candidatorum

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