

Et Tu, Brewte? Cicero on What Ales the State

Cicero is often held up as proof that the Roman elites despised what Nicholas Purcell has termed “*taberna*-world” (Purcell 1994, 666). While Cicero does have a lot to say about *tabernae*, an overarching terms for all shops, bars, and other retail spaces that made up a significant part of the urban landscape in Roman cities, and he himself owned several (*Att.* 14.9.1), a closer inspection of the vocabulary and deployment of *taberna*-world in his works reveals that Cicero, *contra* Kleberg 1957, should not be taken as representative of a social stigma towards the world of *tabernarii* and their patrons. In fact, Cicero’s references to *taberna*-world reveal that this supposed bias is actually a rhetorical device that is much more closely tied to the practice of politics than a social distinction. In the paper, I argue that Cicero uses *taberna*-world not to cast aspersions on the moral or ethical character of his opponents but rather to criticize their political activity. In addition, though perhaps more importantly, Cicero’s denigration of *taberna*-world is a recognition of the physical and political power of the people and the precarious nature of the Late Roman Republic’s stability.

Taberna-world serves a rhetorical purpose that should not be seen as a personal bias by Cicero towards the people who worked, owned, or frequented *tabernae*. While there is evidence that suggests an ingrained elitism towards *taberna*, *popinae*, *cauponae* and other retail establishments, a closer reading of Cicero’s corpus reveals that he is in fact rather indifferent towards *taberna*-world and indeed views it merely as one more rhetorical tool in his oratorical arsenal. The vast majority of Cicero’s mentions of *taberna*-world come in his speeches, and there is a difference in how Cicero depicts *taberna*-world depending on whether he is speaking for the prosecution or the defense. When Clodius ordered the *tabernae* to be closed in 58 BCE, he was

not rousing up the multitude to violence, but were asking for restraint from the modest and prudent men (*Dom.* 54). The sarcasm is heavy in this passage, but we see clearly that Cicero is against *taberna*-world for no other reason than he is against Clodius. Clodius does not practice politics the “right” way and is therefore a threat to the aristocratic order of Roman society, for the same reason, Cicero judged the killing of Spurius Maelius as just (e.g., *Cat.* 1.3; *Rep.* 2.49). Cicero elsewhere views closing the shops as dangerous (*Luc.* 2.144), because it is standard practice of rebellious tribunes (Russell 2016). In the *In Pisonem* 11-18, Cicero cleverly uses a rhetorical tricolon of locations to describe just how far from being a true Roman senator Piso strayed, claiming that Piso progressed from *gurgustium* (a type of dwelling, cf. *ND* 1.22) to *propina* (a place to drink wine), to *ganea* (an eating-house where prostitutes could sometimes be found). In *Pro Cluentio*, on the other hand, *tabernae* and their owners are not presented pejoratively at all (*Clu.* 163, 178, 180).

While Cicero is indeed engaging in a politics of exclusion, it is an exclusion from the social norms of the senatorial elite and an exclusion from the right way to do politics in the Late Republic rather than a snobbish refutation of *taberna*-world. It is not even about the lower classes being untouchables. Rather, it is that *taberna*-world is easy to rouse up, especially to violence (*Flacc.* 18; *Cat.* 4.17; cf. *BG* 8.38, Livy 25.10, Sen. *Ira* 3.4), and thus anyone who relies on *taberna*-world for power is simply not doing politics the right, that is, Ciceronian way. In *De Legibus*, Cicero argued that the people should be given only the appearance of liberty, to ensure that true power was kept with the *boni* (*Leg.* 3.39). Those who gave the people the sense that they had more power than they realized were not respecting the *mos maiorum* and thus, by extension, posing a threat to the *res publica* itself. Thus, Cicero’s invocation of *taberna*-world

should not be considered a reflection of class disdain, but as a rhetorical strategy that underscores the enduring tension between popular mobilization and aristocratic control of the state.

Works Cited

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