

Cicero and the Tyranny of the Tribunes

Cicero's conception of social conflict throughout Roman history centers on the particular office of the tribune of the plebs, primarily from the Gracchi onward. It is nearly impossible to read Cicero's social and philosophical prose at length without recognizing his animosity towards the Gracchi and tribunes in general, although this attitude coincides with a grudging respect for the office itself. This paper explores the Ciceronian rationale behind his reading of the role of the tribune in Roman social history, as well as towards downward-facing reform efforts more generally.

In Cicero the overwhelming problem of Roman sociopolitical history is men who, by his account, exploited economic tension, agitated for class warfare, and pitted rich against poor. Most of them held the office of tribune while doing so. The most consistent targets of his ire are the Gracchi, through whom he focalizes his portraits of earlier class firebrands, such as in *De Re Publica* 2.27 and *Against Catiline* 1.1-2, where Tiberius Gracchus is placed among lists of men executed for plotting tyranny. Behind it all is the intimation that introducing "popular" measures, especially in defiance of tradition, might deserve death.

What popular measures? The unifying factor behind all of Cicero's historical *populares* is their support for relief policies designed to aid, and perhaps exploit, the average Roman citizen-soldier. In long-past cases such as the reformist efforts of Spurius Cassius, Spurius Maelius, and Manlius Capitolinus, Cicero portrays their executions as necessary acts to protect the private property of the nobility and retain Roman social order. The heroes who resisted revolution, such as Aemilius Scaurus, adhere to the strict

conservatism and ancestral customs Cicero aims to portray himself as a champion of (Wood 1988: 44-5). His picture of the past neatly mirrors his picture of the present, in his steadfast defense of an aristocratic polity laden with aristocratic privilege.

When his works tackle the Gracchi directly, his tone is surprisingly reserved. In *Pro Sestio*, Cicero does criticize their policies, but on grounds that appear sensible rather than histrionic: that the laws they passed were hindering the ability of wealthy men to defend the state, and that they would accustom the plebs to idleness (48-9). While Cicero normally “came near regarding poverty as a crime,” (Brunt 1971: 128) he there acknowledges that, despite some radical policies being adopted, the populace still followed the advice of “wise and great men” when matters were truly important (*Pro Sestio* 29). A similarly measured approach also appears in *De Legibus* Book III, where Cicero winds up as a reluctant advocate on behalf of the tribunate, against the claims of his brother Quintus that the office should never have been invented.

The most obvious point of reference for Cicero’s thoughts on the tribunate would be his rivalry with Publius Clodius Pulcher. Cicero certainly, in *Pro Sestio* and elsewhere, depicts the former tribune Clodius as the worst of the *popularis* troublemakers, and if the archetypal tribune were based on Clodius, perhaps the office would be irredeemable. But the more complex stance in *De Legibus* sees an admission that tribunes play a vital role: some have been guilty of insurrection, but the real issue is the people over whom they stand vigil. Compared to the tribunes, “the power of the people is more savage and more violent by far” (3.9.23: *vis populi multo saevior multoque vehementior*). True power should remain with the traditional nobility, while the tribunes, despite a few going astray, provide a critical service by keeping the lid on the perpetually volatile pot of underclass

energy. The role of the tribunes could be restated as presenting the people with the illusion of political power, when in fact that power was incredibly limited – and the bad tribunes were the ones who attempted to break that illusion.

Bibliography

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