

CHAPTER 29

The Transformation of the Republic

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Defining the Problem

The “Fall of the Roman Republic” is the canonical English phrase – but a potentially misleading one. The Roman Republic did not “fall” in the way that the French Ancien Régime did, or the Third Reich, or the Soviet Union. Nor is just *when* it “fell” an objective, public fact: In 59 (Joseph. *AJ* 19.187), with the activation of the alliance between Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus that Varro called the “Three-Headed Monster”? In 49, when Caesar marched on Rome? In 48, 46, or 45, with each of Caesar’s major victories in the Civil War? In 44, after Caesar’s assassination? In 43, with the legal ratification of a kind of junta rule? In 42, on the funeral pyres of Philippi? In 31, with Octavian’s defeat of Antony at Actium? In 28 and 27, when, paradoxically, public affairs were ostentatiously, and ostensibly, handed *back* to the Senate and People of Rome? In 23, when Augustus took the title of *Princeps* (“First Citizen”) and assumed the complex of powers that would henceforth distinguish the ruling emperor? Or perhaps as late as AD 14, when Tiberius, the second Princeps, succeeded to his adoptive father’s position in monarchic fashion and in effect abolished popular election to the magistracies?¹ One could construct a plausible argument for any one of these dates. The important point is that the end of the Republic was not something objectively and explicitly marked by some public fact in our evidence – the beheading of a king, the suicide of a dictator, the resignation of a General Secretary – but something that we must infer circumstantially from a variety of facts and factual changes over the course of several decades.

Consequently, in an objective sense the Republic *never* actually “fell” – an over-worked metaphor that anyway prejudices the issue in various ways: by prompting us to look for a single, catastrophic event; by insidiously suggesting that one side in the conflicts of the mid-first century represented the Republic, overcome by others seeking to destroy the Republic, or alternatively, that it “collapsed” of its own long-incubating illnesses. On the contrary, the *res publica* (usually best translated

“state”) to which Cicero devoted himself was transformed incrementally and for the most part imperceptibly into the *res publica* over which Augustus presided as Princeps. Contemporary Romans do not appear to have distinguished terminologically between these phases in the life of their *res publica*. Use of that phrase to distinguish what we now call the Republic from the Principate is not unambiguously attested before Tacitus, writing toward the beginning of the second century AD; the most recent examination of the problem finds that, while consciousness of the special position of the Princeps *within* the *res publica* is of course manifest from the time of Augustus, the writings of the younger Seneca (mid-first century AD) are the first to betray a reasonably clear conceptualization of the Principate as monarchy, and thus as a fundamental change of the political system from the traditional Republic.²

The brilliant beginning of Tacitus' history of the post-Augustan Principate (*Ann.* 1.1–15) usefully highlights the problem of definition. “The names of officials remained the same. The younger men had been born after the victory at Actium, and most even of their elders, in the years of civil war. Few were left who had seen the Republic” (*Tac. Ann.* 1.3.7). Even when such a strong demarcation between Republic and Principate as this is imposed by an author looking back on this transformation from the distance of a century, “the Republic” still turns out to be something defined by experience and behavior, not the surface facts of political life. In these opening chapters of the *Annals*, the traditional Republic is conceptually opposed to any personal domination, however cloaked by formal legitimization. However, republican norms had also been temporarily suspended in the past without thereby actually constituting the definitive end of the traditional state: Tacitus notes for the “early” Republic the dictatorship, the Decemvirate of 451–450 (see Chapter 11), and the period of military tribunes with consular imperium; for the “late” Republic, the personal dominance of Cinna, Sulla, and the so-called “First” and “Second” Triumvirates (*Ann.* 1.1.1). On this view, personal domination, if transitory, was not in fact inconsistent with the survival of the old Republic; and permanence is something that by its very nature is proven only to posterity. Before Tiberius assumed his predecessor's position in AD 14 it would have been possible even for a hypothetical contemporary Tacitus to see the entire “reign” of Augustus as an interruption, rather than the termination, of Rome's deeply embedded republican tradition.

But from the vantage point of history it *is* perfectly clear that something important had changed over this considerable interval of time. If we are to dispense with the metaphor of the “Fall” of the Republic, how then *should* we describe the profound political change we see between the days of Cicero and those of Augustus? In essence, and irrespective of names and institutional formalities, a system directed by a relatively small and entrenched elite subject (to a greater or lesser extent) to popular approval became one apparently at least guided by a single man (cf. *Tac. Ann.* 4.33.2). The traditional diffusion of political power among leading senators (*principes civitatis*), the nobility, the Senate as a body, “knights” (*equites*), and the People, at least in part flowing along independent lines, was replaced by a much narrower concentration of power around *the* single Princeps and flowing directly from him.

Three Influential Modern Theories

Discussion of the end of the Republic has been dominated for a generation by the theories formulated by three of the great republican historians of our time – Peter Brunt, Erich Gruen, and Christian Meier – and published within a decade of each other in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It would be fair to say that Peter Brunt's account of the end of the Republic became the orthodoxy in the English-speaking world; it therefore serves as the best point of departure for most readers of this volume. Brunt judges that the collapse of the Republic was the result of a shattering of political consensus as different sectors of Roman society in the late Republic developed irresolvably conflicting interests. The Senate, blinded by short-term self-interest, progressively eroded its own authority by its persistent failure to solve problems brought by Roman expansion through timely concessions to the Italians, "knights," urban plebs, peasantry, and soldiery. Thus eventually the state was left stripped of defenders and prey to powerful dynastic figures who could more effectively, if cynically, champion these interests. The process unfolded over many decades from at least the time of the Gracchi; but by the time that Caesar, the rebellious proconsul, was preparing to cross the Rubicon, all of these important sectors of Roman society were broadly alienated from senatorial government and prepared either to stand aside or make common cause with the man who sought to destroy it.³

The theories of Christian Meier and Erich Gruen in effect rebut different aspects of this powerful and coherent thesis. Meier (to take him up first) did not dispute that the death of the Republic was directly caused by the rise of a sequence of excessively powerful individuals who could no longer be constrained in the traditional manner. His innovation lay rather in constructing a complex and challenging argument that despite the succession of grievous troubles into which the Late Republic sank, all contemporary stakeholders, from the political elite to the plebs, remained intellectually and psychologically in thrall to the traditional political system, and since they lacked an objective perspective upon the real causes of the institutional failure in which they found themselves, their responses were limited either to aporetic paralysis or clinging ever more tightly to the traditional, but now anachronistic system – which merely accelerated and worsened the crisis. None of those sectors of society that had a role in the system, from the ancient nobility down to the plebs and out to the newly enfranchised Italians, actually sought to destroy the Republic. On the contrary, this was, in Meier's coinage, a "Gefälligkeitsstaat," a neologism that is impossible to translate ("accommodation-state?"), but that attempts to describe a system in which the needs of those privileged elements of the citizenry that played a significant role were sufficiently accommodated to prevent any one of them from regarding the system as the problem rather than as an essential part of any solution. Thus there evolved a "crisis without alternative" ("Krise ohne Alternative"), in Meier's pithy but somewhat ambiguous formulation: that is, a crisis that was inevitably worsened and ultimately made irremediable by the inability of contemporaries to conceive realistically of, or at least to accept, an alternative to the failed Republic.⁴

One will note that this interesting theory is not so much an explanation for the end of the Republic as for the notable failure of contemporaries to diagnose and remedy the affliction besetting their state. It is also somewhat awkward that eventually – under Augustus – an “alternative” did in fact arguably emerge (though one acceptable largely because it could be presented not as an alternative, but as an improvement of the Republic). But the theory’s major contribution is that it made a thought-provoking case for the seeming paradox that those who brought down the Republic, or were complicit with the leading agents in doing so, did not actually seek to destroy it but even arguably to save it (with the possible exception of Caesar). It followed that, in contrast to Brunt, it was unnecessary to show, or presume, that any of the major parties to the “Fall” had become deeply disillusioned with a traditional political system whose past glories gave it unparalleled prestige in the historical consciousness of all quarters of Roman society.⁵

It has seemed worthwhile to describe Meier’s thesis at somewhat greater length than the others because, despite having enormous influence upon present-day German scholarship, it is unfortunately relatively little known and less read in the English-speaking world. Partly, no doubt, this is for merely linguistic reasons, but surely also because Meier’s indulgence of sometimes murky abstraction and his pessimistic, almost tragic view of the gap between human cognition and historical process are both rather alien to the “Anglo-Saxon” empirical tradition of historical scholarship. That is a pity, for the richness of Meier’s analysis can be easily measured by the lively and thoughtful debate it stimulated, and still stimulates, in German scholarship (see Chapter 1) on a subject about which the English tongue seems to have fallen strangely mute.

Erich Gruen targeted another premise of the traditional analysis.⁶ Gruen was one with Meier in stressing that no one consciously sought the Republic’s demise, but his even more provocative claim was that the state was suffering from no such terminal disease as scholars had long diagnosed. In his view, republican politics functioned in an essentially traditional fashion right down to the eve of the Caesarean civil war. The Senate showed, if anything, renewed vigor in its confrontation of continuing challenges after the death of Sulla. The recurring problems in the city and countryside, the association of great armies with powerful individuals, even the notorious “extraordinary” long-term commands such as that given Pompey against the pirates and then Mithridates in 67–62, or Caesar in Gaul ultimately from 58–49, which have so often been seen as crucial instruments of revolution – none of these were signs that the Republic was on its deathbed. Rather, “Civil war caused the fall of the Republic, not vice versa.”⁷ An unyielding proconsul dealt one grievous blow, his assassination another, and more than a decade of intermittent civil war finished the job. The view that by 49 the Republic was an empty shell ripe for toppling was, for Gruen, a product of the historian’s professional vice of treating every result, no matter how undesired and paradoxical to contemporaries, as somehow inevitable in hindsight.

Despite their salient differences, it is clear that Meier and Gruen have together mounted a serious challenge to Brunt’s central idea that the end of the Republic came because it (as represented by the Senate) had forfeited the allegiance of important

sectors of its citizenry. This important divergence of ideas probably offers a promising opening for further progress in this debate.

Coming Unglued: The Loss of Elite Cohesion

Gruen's assault on historical hindsight is refreshing and illuminating. In the pages that follow will be heard many echoes of his powerful challenges to the conventional wisdom on the end of the Roman Republic. Yet it is hard to follow him too closely in his claim that the Caesarean Civil War was essentially an "accident" of human choices with world-historical consequences. While Gruen may well be right to draw our attention to the notable show of vigor with which in 52 the Senate and Pompey drew the Republic back from the chaos that had prevailed for more than half a decade, it is also hard to credit the suggestion that had the tribune Curio or Caesar himself only acted more diplomatically in 50–49 the Republic would have lasted very much longer (see also Chapter 9). Montesquieu had a point when he wrote: "If Caesar and Pompey had thought like Cato, others would have thought like Caesar and Pompey."⁸ And it is not self-evidently obvious why the Republic could survive the damage wrought by Sulla, Marius, and Cinna in the 80s, complete with threefold military capture of the city itself and numerous bloodbaths of senators, "knights," and common citizens, but not the civil wars of the 40s – unless it was because the political system was in a much weakened state the second time around. This time there was to be no reconstituting the broader distribution of power that characterized the old Senate and People of Rome, and after a brief anarchic hiatus in 44–36 the process of concentration resumed until it yielded *the* single Princeps, Augustus.

Here our earlier definition of the phenomenon might usefully be invoked. The "Fall," "Collapse," or even simply "End of the Republic" are frequently useful shorthand phrases, but they tend to set us thinking about the phenomenon as if it were susceptible to the same kind of analysis we apply to a discrete historical event, that is, an examination of the motives and plans of individual historical actors within the context of the specific political, social, and economic factors that help to shape their decisions. These factors can never be considered entirely determinative, and thus events can never be regarded as entirely inevitable consequences of them. But if what we really mean by these phrases, as was argued above, is a long-term historical *process* (the "Transformation of the Republic") that cannot be encapsulated within any specific event – not even the Caesarean Civil War – then it cannot successfully be analyzed in these terms. An explanation of the transformation of the Republic cannot be reduced largely to an analysis of the motives, strategies, and results, intended or otherwise, of the chief political agents in the developing crisis of the year 50.

A broader perspective on the problem might start with the venerable and authoritative thesis that the Republic "fell" as a fairly direct result of acquiring its empire. Two of the founders of modern political theory, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) and Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755), meditated long on the history of the Roman Republic and the lessons it was thought to offer.

To account for the end of the Republic both perceived an ultimately fatal inconsistency between the Republic's institutions as a city-state and its administration of a great empire: great armies in far-flung places were entrusted for long periods to competitive aristocrats, to whom, as their commanders, the soldiers increasingly directed their loyalties rather than to the Senate and People.⁹ If we call to mind the careers of Marius, Sulla, Pompey, and especially Caesar (see Chapters 8 and 9), their argument appears plausible, perhaps even self-evident. Yet underneath such apparently self-evident and traditionally recognized truths often lurk questionable, if generally unquestioned, assumptions. Until the twentieth century it still seemed as axiomatic as it had to Cassius Dio (44.2) in the third century AD that only monarchic governments could successfully govern large states; one may reasonably wonder whether this great lesson of history has not been "read into" the Roman example as much as deduced from it.¹⁰ The assertion – often made but rarely, if ever, demonstrated in detail – that the Republic foundered on a fundamental contradiction between empire and the institutions of the city-state¹¹ is simply the modern version of this traditional critique. That does not, of course, make it wrong; but it certainly invites careful scrutiny.

In English-speaking scholarship of recent decades the most influential version of the argument that the crisis of the Republic was a consequence of its conquest of an overseas empire in the second and first centuries was formulated by Brunt in his seminal paper of 1962, "The Army and the Land in the Roman Revolution."¹² Conscription for continuous wars abroad, Brunt argued, ruined Italy's small farmers, while the profits from their victories flowed mainly into the purses of Rome's ruling class, who used them to buy up bankrupt farms and turn them into vast estates worked by the slaves whom these same victories had made cheap and abundant. The result transformed Italy's agrarian economy and created a large class of landless poor in the countryside, while overall the number of free inhabitants dwindled because their poverty prevented marriage and childrearing.¹³ A series of reformers beginning with Tiberius Gracchus sought to alleviate their plight with various calls for land reform, but the event that made them an instrument of political change was Marius' decision to open the legions to these men by ignoring the customary property requirement for military service (see also Chapters 8 and 13). Subsequent generals followed suit, particularly during the crisis of the Social War, so that the legions of the late Republic contained a high proportion of landless men with no stake in the status quo. Not that they were bent on revolution; they simply wanted to better their lot in life. But that made them open to appeals for their loyalty and support from some of the politicians who commanded them, like Sulla and Caesar, who, finding themselves outmaneuvered in the political arena by their opponents, sought to continue the struggle "by other means" with the help of their armies in exchange for promises, explicit or tacit, of wealth and land.

Several elements within this reconstruction have come under fire in recent years. That the Republic's overseas wars in the second century would have ruined most or even many of the soldiers who fought them seems increasingly unlikely. Certainly, archaeological surveys in the countryside have failed to confirm a widespread decline in the numbers of small farms in Italy during this period, and recent studies have

argued that scholars have greatly overestimated both the prevalence of large estates and the numbers of slaves working them. (For this and the remainder of this paragraph, see Chapters 14, 28, and 29.) It may be that, contrary to prior views, Roman manpower requirements for its wars abroad were not inconsistent with the traditional patterns of Italian agricultural life, so that the effects of these wars in the second century upon the Italian peasantry from which the armies were recruited were not nearly so negative, and far more complex, than have previously been thought.¹⁴ Overall, the number of free inhabitants of Italy seems either to have held steady at around 4 million over the Republic's last two centuries or possibly even grown during that period at a healthy clip.¹⁵ But if all this is so, then it invites an obvious and crucial question, that is: if the domestic consequences of the Republic's acquisition of an empire in the second century did not ruin Italy's rural population, then what caused the poverty and landlessness and resultant calls for land reform during the late Republic? Possibly population growth continued throughout the period, so that demographic pressures can be blamed. But a growing consensus views this as less likely than long-term stability in the numbers of free Italians. It may be that the rural poverty we see in this period arose from much shorter-term and more transient causes than usually thought, for example, the devastation and confiscations that attended both the Social War and the two civil wars of the 80s or the debt crises of the 80s to mid-60s.¹⁶ Or perhaps there was much less poverty in the countryside than we have been led to believe by the powerful rhetoric and heightened passions that attended land reform proposals; perhaps these were actually aimed primarily at the urban population of Rome (which included recent migrants to the city), as the ancient sources sometimes claim¹⁷ and an earlier generation of scholars accepted.

The special power of Brunt's thesis derived from the close link he forged between agitation for land in the late Republic and an erosion of the loyalty of the great late-republican armies to the republican political system. Yet this too proves, upon examination, to rest on little positive evidence. Key supports of that causal nexus were the hypotheses that the modest property-requirement to enjoy the status of an *assiduus* and thus be eligible for military service was steadily lowered in the late third and second centuries as the pool of non-destitute peasants dwindled, and that Marius decisively broke the link between wealth and military service by enrolling the property-less poor (*proletarii*) for his Jugurthian campaign of 107 (Sall. *Jug.* 86.2-3); this is supposed to have set the pattern thereafter and opened the way to the formation of armies conscripted largely from the very poor who served chiefly in the hope of material advancement and looked to their commanders rather than the Senate for satisfaction of this goal. The first claim – that regarding assiduate status – has, however, been shown to depend on circular argumentation, while the second – that Marius' precedent in 107 was followed more or less thereafter – seems to be a debatable extrapolation from a single known incident.¹⁸ However that may be, on the third and most important point we simply do not know whether in fact the poor and landless constituted the bulk of the late Republic's legionaries.¹⁹ Since the demographic and social consequences Brunt and others before him drew from the wars of the late third and second centuries no longer seem firmly founded, it no longer seems self-evidently true that a dwindling pool of *assidui* and a general

resistance to conscription led recruiters to levy the poor, "the very class least able to secure exemption by bribes or favour."²⁰

Moreover, Brunt himself, while contending against the common notion that the late-republican legions were essentially "client armies," acknowledged that it cannot be presumed as a rule that late-republican armies were simply disloyal to the Republic.²¹ We would go further and note that, despite the prevalence of the idea of the late-republican "personal army," no single army that launches upon civil war can be shown to have entered upon its revolutionary course out of disaffection from the Republic or hopes to be rewarded with grants of land. Much cited in this connection is the motive Appian attributes to the army to which Sulla in 88 appealed to defend his *dignitas* by marching on Rome: "they were eager for the campaign against Mithridates because it was likely to be profitable, and they thought that Marius would recruit other soldiers for it in their place" (App. *B Civ.* 1.57). Observe that Appian says nothing here of the expectation of land-grants or of Sulla's potential capacity to obtain plots for his troops but refers instead to the expectation of rich plunder – a thoroughly traditional incentive to forceful military action noted at least as far back as the popular vote for war with Carthage in 264 (Polyb. 1.11.2).²²

At times of deep crisis republican legitimacy itself was fragmented rather than directly denied, and it may well be that the soldiers who waged the struggles that ultimately established Caesar's and then Augustus' personal domination were motivated by their understanding of where that fragmented legitimacy predominated as much as by the material bounty that would come their way with victory.²³ This is fairly evident in the two notorious "Marches on Rome," by Sulla in 88 and by Caesar in 49. Scholars continue to be deeply shocked by Sulla's and Caesar's uninhibited citation of their wounded *dignitas* – "worthiness," thus roughly "honor" – as a justification for their (counter)-attacks upon those who had attempted to destroy it, and almost equally, by their armies' acceptance of that battle cry. Yet the respect and honor due from the community for personal *dignitas*, based upon achievements or the promise of achievements on behalf of the Commonwealth, lay at the very heart of the republican system.²⁴ An outright assault on high *dignitas*, such as the tribune P. Sulpicius' armed expulsion of both consuls from the city after deposing Sulla's colleague Q. Pompeius Rufus from his magistracy in a riotous assembly, was itself a gross violation of republican norms that had already thrown into doubt where legitimacy actually lay – quite apart from the outrage of Sulpicius' use of violence in the assembly, which had brought about the death of Pompeius' own son. Sulla's soldiers may well have felt that their own material interests coincided with those of the Republic, since they were after all defending the consuls of the Roman People (whom they had sworn in their military oath to obey), not rebelling against the Senate, cowed and intimidated as it was by "tyrants" (App. *B Civ.* 1.57; see also Chapter 8).²⁵ Much the same could be said of the reaction of Caesar's army to the virtual declaration of war passed on January 7, 49 by the Senate despite his extraordinary achievements (as they were seen) on behalf of the Republic.²⁶ The opening chapters of Caesar's *Civil Wars*, with their compelling picture of a craven Senate browbeaten by bullying enemies of Caesar, give a good sense of how the matter will have looked to his men: an attack by a vicious faction upon a popular and military

hero whose services to Rome were second to none, exacerbated by a gross insult against the tribunate, was no merely personal quarrel.²⁷ If Brunt's observation that "without his army Caesar could neither have conquered Gaul nor overthrown the Republic" is self-evident, Gruen's reply seems equally true that "not even the soldiers of Julius Caesar marched into Italy with the intent or desire to bring down the Roman Republic."²⁸

Perhaps, indeed, they marched to save it. The disputed US presidential election of 2000 is a salutary recent lesson in how rapidly what was once unthinkable can be contemplated, when each side in a political crisis feels that the other has violated the fundamental norms of the system and thus itself strives – out of *dedication* to its interpretation of that system rather than in disaffection – to "save" it by increasingly dubious methods. That calculation of personal interest can often coincide with such public-spirited reasons will surprise few. Sulla's and Caesar's armies may very well have expected to benefit materially by their actions, as soldiers whose victories had served the Republic had always done. There need have been no contradiction in their minds.

What emerges, then, is a process marked by the *fragmentation* of legitimacy, in which the Republic could no longer unreflectingly be associated with the contemporary Senate but might be seen as incorporated in persons – the odd proconsul and tribune – who were temporarily at least at odds with the Senate. But this is not the same thing as disaffection from the *Republic*. Indeed, just the reverse: the Senate's loss of a (near) monopoly of republican legitimacy was fully consistent with the continued monopoly status of the idea and traditions of the Republic as encoded in ancestral custom (*mos maiorum*). Adversaries of the Senate at any given time did not call for its abolition or overthrow but denounced the worthiness (and thus the moral legitimacy) of *its current leadership*, and called for a return to the paternalistic responsiveness of senatorial leadership to popular needs and demands that was a fundamental principle of the republican tradition.²⁹ The best evidence we possess for the political attitudes of the urban plebs – the speeches delivered to them in the Forum (*contiones*) – suggests that even they, who are often represented in modern accounts as the most disaffected of all, continued to embrace republican political traditions and favored those who most plausibly appeared to embody that tradition.³⁰ The power of this tradition, continually reinforced for the citizenry in mass oratory and civic rituals such as election, was such that no alternative model of state organization seen in recent history seems to have been realistically conceivable – certainly not the debased spectacle of late-Hellenistic monarchy.

The fragmentation of republican legitimacy doubtless had many causes and contributing factors which would reward careful analysis in future work and cannot be fully elaborated here. But we wish to stress one important point that seems to stand out fairly clearly. It was already in 133 that the astonishing cohesion of the senatorial order was blasted apart, first by Tiberius Gracchus' agrarian law and then even more by the circumstances of its passage; this explosion divided the elite and threw its parts back upon the two civic power-bases in Rome – Senate and People – and upon their corresponding, now often opposing legitimating principles. Thereafter, the Roman elite was frequently divided against itself in the face of major controversies, many or most of them precipitated in some way by imperial problems and responsibilities (the

Italians, Mithridates, land for veterans, the pirates, Gaul). However, the alternative source of power exploited by those individuals or factions who took up, or were forced into, a position in opposition to those who were able to work their will through the Senate was initially the People in their public meetings (*contiones*) and voting assemblies; the real exploitation of the military as an alternative source of power for its powerful commanders does not actually appear until more than four decades after Tiberius Gracchus in the 80s (Marius in 107–100 at most suggested the way). This observation casts further doubt on the traditional claim that the Republic “fell” because of the inability of a city-state to rein in its overweening provincial commanders – the still-popular core of the argument of Machiavelli and Montesquieu. This was a relatively late and secondary factor which raised the stakes enormously but was more consequence than cause of the division of the elite.

It is surely to the early and middle second century that we need to look more closely for the factors that heightened the potential for elite division to the inflammable level reached in 133. Notoriously, ancient writers put their finger on two underlying causes for what they persisted in viewing as essentially a moral collapse:³¹ the enormous influx of wealth into Italy and Rome; and the removal of the last direct and plausible threat to Roman hegemonic domination of the Mediterranean basin. Although their analyses in detail sound quaintly moralizing to the modern ear, it would be hard to quarrel with the essential point that the victorious march of Roman arms from the Straits of Messina in 264 to the Carthaginian Byrsa in 146 produced a concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the Roman elite that could not but loosen or even spring the restraints that had long operated upon aristocratic behavior. What Roman historians like Sallust and Livy diagnosed in the language available to them as moral collapse, a modern historian of a sociological bent might describe as an increase of individualism and relaxation of the social constraint that earlier generations, faced repeatedly with military crises beginning in the fifth century and extending through the Hannibalic War, had imposed upon themselves in the face of the exigencies of self-preservation. A dangerous and threatening world forced the aristocracy to become not only aggressive and militaristic but extraordinarily disciplined as well (see also Chapters 6, 17, and 26). Although military crises did not cease with the destruction of Carthage in 146 – the invasion of the Cimbri and Teutones and the Social War being only the most urgent – the willingness of aristocrats to impose restraints upon themselves did, leading to a spiraling escalation of violence and transgression of the unwritten rules of the political game. Further, the *uneven* concentration of wealth and power across the elite, depending on access to armies and profitable military assignments, or public contracts, must in itself have further upset the equilibrium upon which social cohesion depends. The elite was not wholly unconscious of these tendencies, it seems, to judge from the appearance of sumptuary laws, age limits on office holding, extortion courts, and the various judicial battles over triumphs and misappropriation of plunder through the second century.³² Yet the causes for the dissolution of elite cohesion are not to be found only among the elite. Unless one discounts altogether the role of the People in the Roman Republic one must acknowledge that urgent social, economic, and political discontents would tend to force themselves onto the consciousness of the political elite precisely

because, in a highly competitive aristocracy, such problems offer opportunities for individual aristocrats prepared to part company with their peers to steal a march on their rivals by exploiting popular causes. Division among the elite was essentially a given during times of great sociopolitical stress (see also Chapter 18), as the period from at least 133 certainly was.

Still, it may be more fruitful, and indeed more consistent with historical patterns in the West, to turn the question of the “division among the elite” on its head. For the elite of the Roman Republic manifests a long-term strength, based on resilience and remarkable discipline, that seems unparalleled in European history. For 500-plus years men with the names Fabius, Claudius, Valerius, and so on supplied the state with generation after generation of consuls, priests, and censors. What is remarkable is not that this elite, whose competitive impulses were always, it seems, highly developed, eventually became chronically and sometimes violently polarized, but how such an artificial creation as a *cohesive* competitive elite had been created and was for so long sustained. In a discussion focusing on the end of the Republic it is reasonable to focus on the *loss* of cohesion, but we shall get the perspective right only if we understand that the survival of such a remarkable social construction was always tenuous, and that nothing would seem more natural than its dissolution through a kind of historical entropy.

Why, finally, did the gradual polarization and dissolution of a formerly cohesive elite entail concentration of power in the hands of one person, the defining step in the passage from Republic to Principate? Polybius, in his famous doctrine of the repetitive “cycle” (*anakyklosis*) of constitutions from monarchy to aristocracy to democracy and back again, had seemingly predicted some kind of democratic interlude (6.57.9), which, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus (or Clodius) notwithstanding, never actually came about in Rome. A more plausible alternative, which emerges into plain sight after 43 with the War of Philippi and the unstable “Second” Triumvirate (with Sextus Pompeius thrown in for good measure), was a descent into warlordism. That this was averted through Octavian’s and Marcus Agrippa’s martial success at Naulochus in 36 and Actium in 31 may have been due to mere contingencies of personal decisions and chance, but it would be difficult to deny that the continuing power of the Roman political tradition and the continuing concentration of military power in Italy made it almost inevitable that if the unitary *imperium* was to survive, then the warlord who held on to Rome would ultimately possess it. The paradox that a process of deep fragmentation led ultimately to monarchy is therefore only apparent – although it remains a remarkable achievement that Augustus and his successors were able to sustain the monarchy he had created.

Guide to Further Reading

The best starting point in English is Brunt 1971b or the later, more profound analysis in Brunt 1988c: 1–92. For the current, vigorous debate about the validity of Brunt’s premises in the areas of agrarian history, military manpower, and demography, see

Chapters 27 and 28 above; cf. Morley 2001, Rosenstein 2004, and Scheidel 2004. Gruen 1974: esp. 498–507 is bracingly revisionist; the 1995 edition contains an illuminating introduction. Somewhat heavy-handed criticism of Gruen may be found in Crawford 1976; Deininger 1980 includes a broad view of the historiography of the problem as well as a response to Gruen, whose central idea that the Republic was not on its deathbed has now been picked up in German by Girardet 1996 and Welwei 1996. Meier 1980 is tough going for those who are not native speakers of German (and perhaps for some who are); a brief sketch in English (without scholarly apparatus) of the theory of “crisis without alternative” may be found in Meier 1982: 349–63. (Some further references in Morstein-Marx 2004: 285 n.13.) An excellent critical review in English is Brunt 1968 (which Meier seeks to answer in the new introduction to Meier 1980: xv–xxxi); cf. also Badian 1990b. On Meier, see also Chapter 1 above. Recent debate has been carried forth almost exclusively by German scholars stimulated or provoked by Meier’s views on the Roman Republic and on Caesar: see especially the works of Welwei and Girardet just cited, with the response by Deininger 1998. Alongside that debate, however, see also Bleicken 1995b and (in English) Eder 1996, the latter of whom emphasizes the breakdown of elite consensus and loss of the constitutional conventions that moderated the full exploitation of archaic institutions.

Notes

The first two sections of this chapter were drafted by RMM; responsibility for the final section is more or less equally shared by both authors.

- 1 Syme 1958: 369 (not his own view).
- 2 Cf. Meier 1980: 1; Sion-Jenkis 2000: 19–53.
- 3 Brunt 1971b, 1988c: 1–92.
- 4 Meier 1980 (first published 1966).
- 5 Brunt 1968 offers a rebuttal to Meier’s “Gefälligkeitsstaat”; Meier 1980: xix–xxxi responds.
- 6 Gruen 1974.
- 7 Gruen 1974: 504.
- 8 Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, ch. 11.
- 9 Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy*, 3.24 (cf., however, 1.5, 1.37); stronger emphasis in Montesquieu, *Considerations*, esp. ch. 9.
- 10 Ungern-Sternberg 1998: 611–12. On the two sides of this issue, compare Welwei 1996: 485–7 with Deininger 1980, 1998: 133–4.
- 11 E.g., Bleicken 1995b: 102–3: a “fact now disputed by no one,” dismissing Gruen 1974: 502–3. See however also Eder 1996: 441–7.
- 12 Updated in Brunt 1988c: 240–80.
- 13 See esp. Hopkins 1978: 1–98.
- 14 Rosenstein 2004.
- 15 See now also Scheidel 2004: 2–9, favoring the lower estimate.
- 16 Gruen 1974: 425–7; cf. Giovannini 1995.

- and Scheidel 2004. Edition contains an Gruen may be found historiography of the Republic was not 1996 and Welwei speakers of German but scholarly apparand in Meier 1982: n.13.) An excellent answer in the new On Meier, see also usively by German n Republic and on , with the response ken 1995b and (in n of elite consensus full exploitation of
- 17 Cic. *Leg. agr.* 2.70, *Att.* 1.19.4; Cass. Dio 38.1.3; cf. Morstein-Marx 2004: 129–30. See, however, App. *B Civ.* 1.13–14, 29–32 on the (earlier) land bills of Tiberius Gracchus and Saturninus.
- 18 Rich (1983: 328–30) accepts on general grounds that Marius' precedent was regularized in the time of the Social War. There seems to be no firm evidence.
- 19 See now Lo Cascio 2001: 126.
- 20 Brunt 1971a: 410.
- 21 Brunt 1988c: 257–9.
- 22 On which see Rosenstein 2004: 222 n.191.
- 23 Cf. de Blois 2000: 22, 29–30.
- 24 Good comments on this problem in Bleicken 1995b: 103–8. See, e.g., Cic. *Mil.* 82: “a thankful People should reward citizens who have earned the gratitude of the commonwealth (*bene meritos de re publica civis*).” *Dignitas*: Hellegouarc’h 1963: esp. 397–411; in elections, see Morstein-Marx 1998: 265–7.
- 25 Famously, all but one of Sulla’s officers (*archontes*) deserted (App. *B Civ.* 1.57) – probably not, however, a good indicator of senatorial opinion, since the term may not include the senatorial legates, and in any case their replacements included members of established senatorial families (Levick 1982).
- 26 Cf. Cic. *Prov. cons.* 18–47; Caes. *B Civ.* 1.13.1; Suet. *Iul.* 30.4 (*tantis rebus gestis*, “despite such great achievements”) with Plut. *Caes.* 46.1.
- 27 In his comprehensive study of the motives of the adversaries at the outbreak of the civil war, Raaflaub 1977 draws too sharp a line between the “personal” and the “public.”
- 28 Brunt 1968: 229; Gruen 1974: 384.
- 29 See, e.g., Cic. *Sest.* 137: “[Our ancestors] intended the Senate to protect and increase the freedom and privileges of the People;” cf. *Rep.* 1.52.5: “the People must not be made to think that their privileges are being neglected by the chief men” (an aristocratic principle that probably reflects Roman thinking).
- 30 Morstein-Marx 2004: esp. 279–87.
- 31 See Ungern-Sternberg 1982 and 1998 for an attempt to integrate ancient theories of moral collapse into a modern causal analysis.
- 32 Gruen 1992: 304–5; Gruen 1995: 60–73; Brennan 2000: 168–72, 235–6. On regulation of aristocratic competition in the middle Republic generally, see Rosenstein 1990.

30: xix–xxi responds.

the Romans and Their

, 1.5, 1.37); stronger

compare Welwei 1996:

missing Gruen 1974: