

Institutional Strength and Middleclass in Antiquity and Modern World. A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Generally speaking, institutional stability requires a social frame that is compatible with the political system any given society. This lays behind the social struggles that affected the Ancient world in general and Rome in particular, where the emergence of new actors in the military and economic arena determined the dawn of new political systems, such as the Roman Republic in the late 6th century BC or the Empire in the 1st century BC. The emergence of what Harris would call a large middle class, a segment of small independent land owners that conformed the heart of Roman society, was the yeast that transformed the patrician Republic into the democratic entity that finally conquered Italy (4th -3rd BC). The expansion of Rome through Italy meant the expansion of small state holdings, something which is still possible to check in archaeological terms. Anyhow, the emergence of a capitalist economy during the second part of the 3rd century BC and specially during the 2nd, meant a steady decline of this social group whose basic commodity production (wheat) had to face the competition of external producers which, thanks to natural conditions or domination structures, could produce at lower prices and expelled the Italian producers out of the cereal market. At a point it could safely be said that “The wild beasts that roam over Italy have their dens, each has a place of repose and refuge. But the men who fight and die for Italy enjoy nothing but the air and light; without a house or a home they wander about with their wives and children” (Plut. Tib.). This social crises was the base of the social revolutions of the 1st century BC, which eventually destroyed the Republic. In a way, the decline of the Roman middle classes put an end to a democratic cycle whose origins we can detect in the 6th century BC. Nowadays in many developed countries a similar scenario is being staged. The middle classes, which are the backbone of modern democracies, are being challenged in their social predominance and this might bring a new form of instability that might put in danger modern democracy, as it did in the Ancient world.

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Citizen's acceptance is one of the basic elements for governance in any political system. In fact, all political systems need the collaboration of the governed, although those which are perceived as illegitimate will require a larger proportion of coercion from the State apparatus to function. Anyhow, all political systems alternate the use of force with the voluntary compliance of the governed to fulfil their goals. The proportion of violence that a system requires increases when its results are perceived as unfair, and decreases when citizens are participants of its successes. The wider the perception of unfairness, the larger the proportion the elite will have to invest in coercion to sustain the political order and, therefore, the system will have a smaller ability to expand and develop. In North's words: "The costs of maintenance of an existing order are inversely related to the perceived legitimacy of the existing system" (North, 1981:53).

In participatory political systems, as modern democracy, citizen's acceptance is fundamental, for their active involvement is required for the system to work, even at the most basic level in order to convince them to go to the polls every number of years. It is not a coincidence that democracy only acquired stability in continental Europe after the world wars, which unleashed one of the most massive processes of economic equalization known to humankind¹. The wealth of old elites simply vanished through inflation –caused by the abandon of gold standard-, physical destruction of capital and the stock shocks of the Great Depression. This brutal equalization brought the decline of inheritance as the main source of wealth (Piketty, 2014: 377), compared to the new possibilities that were open for the common man if he had access to education. The collapse of wealth concentration during the wars, brought a new social system that was perceived as egalitarian, where education and

¹ Piketty, on the matter gives some interesting data on wealth distribution in England and France during the 19th and 20th centuries. The most striking feature is the enormous equalization process that took place after the two World Wars and the Great Depression (Piketty, 2014: 126-139).

hard work were considered as the foundations of wealth. This is the substrate that has stabilized the political regimes of Western European societies, avoiding the emergence of totalitarian political regimes that could jeopardize their development. In contrast, Latin American societies, where no such collapse happened, have been periodically affected by totalitarian tendencies.

Anyhow, during the last thirty years, wealth accumulation has been rapidly increasing in Europe and the United States (Stiglitz, 2013: 1-27) and, consequently, a long list of populist organizations have been emerging from the bowels of their political systems, as the Tea Party, the Podemos or the Front National, and other political movements of doubtful democratic credentials. Evidently, we cannot know if these political groups are the outpost or an authoritarian drift in the self-proclaimed “advanced democracies”, but if the wealth concentration process deepens, this is perfectly possible. This work is a comparative exercise that will take the case of a different society, the Roman republic, where wealth accumulation brought the decline of a participatory political regime, which was finally replaced by the Empire.

Wealth Concentration and Middle Class in Republican Rome

Before treating the governance problems that affected Antiquity, it is important to consider some key points regarding the creation and distribution of wealth that affect all pre-industrial societies. Firstly, it should be taken into account that in such societies economic growth is negligible and, therefore, any increase in population will necessarily imply a new provision of dispossessed whose survival is uncertain (Harris, 2011: 349). Antiquity is a Malthusian world, where increases in productivity accomplished by technical

innovation are soon absorbed by population increases that lead to new social crisis². In such conditions, the most effective way to increase the GDP is to expand the mass of fixed capital through military conquest of the neighbouring territories³. This is the cause for war's central role in Antiquity, for it meant something equivalent to economic growth. Antiquity's military obsession was especially important for societies that had to deal with demographic growth or that held political systems that were involved in the effective amelioration of life conditions for the governed. That is why democracies in Antiquity were invariably imperialistic, while aristocracies not necessarily.

Another element to consider is that Antiquity's economic structure was not favourable for paid work. Although it existed⁴, its economic role was marginal, especially for the ubiquitous presence of slavery⁵, as for other strategies to obtain subordinate labour typical of earlier Antiquity⁶. Differently to Modern world⁷, distribution of wealth and capital were equivalent. The irrelevance of economic growth and the dependence of income to capital implied that any governance crisis might quickly translate into propositions of agrarian reform, especially regarding newly conquered land.

Land Distribution and the Licinian-Sextian Laws

² On economic growth in Antiquity, the debate seems nowadays to be centred on the speed in which population growth can absorb the positive effects of economic growth (Scheidel, 2012: 321-333; Saller, 2010: 251-269; Temin, 2013:195-239).

³ In Morley's words: "the importance of violence as a mode of accumulation and a cultural practice in antiquity can scarcely be exaggerated" (Morley, 2007: 505).

⁴ Recently the role of paid labour in Antiquity is under re-examination. The possibility of a real labour market has being put forward (Harris, 2011: 546-578; Kehoe, 2012: 114-131). The most extreme position on the matter points to the existence of a large labour market fully operative during the Early Empire (Temin, 2013: 114-138).

⁵ Slavery seems to have being introduced during Etruscan monarchy, although we cannot be certain of it (Franciosi, 1959: 375; Franciosi, 1992: 206; De Martino, 1997a: 82-83; De Martino, 1997b: 27-57).

⁶ Among them, we should mention the *clientela*, with its connected obligation of lending personal service to the *patronus*, *nexum*, a loan guaranteed with the physical person of the debtor, and the transfer of sons and daughters through *mancipium*.

⁷ In modern world the distribution of income and capital are different. Generally speaking, capital tends to be much more concentrated than income, for the latter includes paid work (Piketty, 2014: 39-71).

Following Roman historians, the eve of the Republic was rather shaky in social terms. Tradition reports a long struggle between two social groups, the Patricians and the Plebeians, whose origins are not clear⁸. This conflict would have developed for three key elements: legal knowledge, access to political power and the control of public land. Although academic debate has literally been going on for centuries, we will only partially face the problem of land and its distribution as an element of our analysis.

Some scholars believe that the whole conflict is a mere invention of the annalistic tradition, a kind of pseudo-historic anticipation of the real conflict for land control that took place during the 2nd century BC (Maschke, 1980=1906: 14; Gabba, 1974: 135). Anyhow, there are enough elements in the tradition to discard this thesis partially or completely, and to confirm the existence of a conflict over land control between these groups during the Early Republic (Serrao, 1981: 67; Drummond, 1989: 237; Roselaar, 2010: 28).

Apparently the Plebeian group did not have access to the newly conquered lands, which remained as public lands (*ager publicum*), theoretically open to the use of any citizen⁹. We do not know the exact reason for this exclusion, but in practice, it seems only the Patricians had access to them¹⁰ and they were the only ones that effectively occupied them. The

⁸ The theories about the origins of Patricians and Plebeians are discouragingly many. Some are based on a dualist hypothesis where there would be either an ethnical difference between them (Arangio-Ruiz, 2006: 21), or at least regarding their citizenship (Guarino, 1973: 9-17). Others believe that the Patrician and Plebeian groups formed gradually during the Monarchy, either by the fulfilment of priestly duties (Mitchell, 2005: 128-167), by a process of wealth accumulation connected with the exercise of power in the Senate (Harmand, 1976: 32; Drummond, 1989: 172-242; Momigliano, 1989: 52-112 y 2005: 168-184; Magdelain, 1990: 385-403; Cornell, 1995: 244-258; Raaflaub, 2005: 185-222; Forsythe, 2006: 162; Smith, 2006: 305), or through the immigration of craftsmen of a predominantly urban environment (Plebeians), confronted to an agrarian aristocracy (Richard, 1993: 27-41 and Richard, 2005: 107-127), which eventually closed its ranks at the beginnings of the Republic.

What we believe most likely, is that the Patricians were the members of the old gentilician clans, while the Plebs were outsiders (De Martino, 1997c: 25-49 and De Martino, 1973: 78; Bonfante, 1916a: 1-17 and Bonfante, 1916b: 18-63; Castello, 1972=1942: 49; Capogrossi Colognesi, 2007: 49-51)

⁹ Sicul. Flacc. de condic agr 101.9-13 and 102.9-13.

¹⁰ The Patrician control of public land is quite straight forward in the tradition. Nonnius reports that the Plebeians were excluded of the public land just because they were Plebeians (Non. 149M.17 *Quicumque propter plebitatem agro publico eiecti sunt*). Although the reasons for this exclusion are unknown to us, we could theorize that their exclusion from the

struggle of the orders had at its core the Plebeian demand for land distribution. The disruptive effects of agrarian reform laws are classically expressed in Livy's comment on the major public disorders caused by them¹¹.

Anyhow, the conflict finally lowered its intensity only after 367 BC, after some 140 years of permanent hostility, with the *leges Licinia-Sextiae*. These statutes, among other major reforms, limited the maximal amount of public land that any individual could occupy. From this moment onwards, each military victory was accompanied by a land distribution of the conquered territory, whether in the form of a direct assignation to the poor citizens, or through the foundation of a citizen's colony¹². Appian describes the process in the following paragraph¹³:

“Romans, while they conquered Italy's different regions, took part of their territory and established cities, or levied their own colonists to send them to the already existent ones.”

It is interesting to corroborate the annalistic tradition with the information that archaeology offers. On the matter, from the 4th century BC a true explosion of modest size settlements can be detected in Central Italy, which can be correlated with land division and

gentes, the original clans that composed the city, might lay behind it. Another possibility is that they simply lacked the social power to impose their control over public lands and that more powerful people (the the rich Patrician) could simply expel them by violence. Anyhow, during the monarchy, tradition reports many land distributions made by the kings to favour the poor (Dion Hal. 2.62.2-3; 3.1.4-5; 2.29.6; 3.31.3; 3.9.8; 4.10.3; 4.13.1), but during the early Republic these distributions cease abruptly. By that time, the conquered land usually remains as *ager publicus*, save from some rather exceptional cases in which colonies were established (Liv. 2.21.6; 2.31.4; 2.34.6; 3.1.5-6). The first massive land distribution during the Republic is not of agricultural land, but rather of urban space, through the *lex Icilia* of 456 BC, which distributed the Aventine. On the other hand, according to the tradition, the Plebeian demands for the distribution of public land happen almost on a yearly basis, with more than ten bills rejected by the *patres* between 486 and 456 BC (Capogrossi Colognesi, 1981: 6; Manzo, 2001: 40-45; Russo, 2002: 161-193; Smith, 2006: 240 and Roselaar, 2010: 26-29).

¹¹ Liv. 2.41.3 *lex agraria promulgata est, nunquam deinde usque ad hanc memoriam sine maximis motibus rerum agitata.*

¹² It is not known for certain how much land was usually taken from the defeated enemy. It is usually said that about a third of its territory was confiscated, although there were occasions in which this number could increase up to two thirds (Roselaar, 2010: 31-37).

¹³ App. BC 1.1.7 Ῥωμαῖοι τὴν Ἰταλίαν πολέμῳ κατὰ μέρη χειρούμενοι γῆς μέρος ἐλάμβανον καὶ πόλεις ἐνώκιζον ἢ ἐς τὰς πρότερον οὐσας κληρούχους ἀπὸ σφῶν κατέλεγον.

its occupation by smallholders in a process directly linked with the *leges Licinia-Sextiae* (Terrenato, 2012: 147-148).

This polity of land distribution of the newly conquered land to the poor is a key element to explain the high levels of governance and the military push that Rome enjoyed during the Middle Republic. The city was socially cohesive, for the common perception was that the benefits from public activity –mainly war- were on the benefit of the common citizen, especially the poorer ones. War became a popular activity because it implied a source of economic benefits to the citizenry and supported socio-economic stability of the city. Military success meant a massive input of fixed capital, an increase in the GDP and, therefore, economic growth. In Harris' words, Rome exported her poor to Italy and later to the provinces (Harris, 2011: 1.439). Nearly seventy thousand men (and their families) received land after the Samnite wars only (Cornell, 1989: 405).

Middle Class during Hannibal's Wars

The benefits of war implied growth of the GDP. This growth was distributed among the citizenry directly through land distribution, which supported the creation of what could be called the Roman middle class. Although the concept of Middle Class is naturally exotic to Roman ideas, following Harris (Harris, 2011b: 1.308-315), we could classify the Roman population according to a highly flexible criterion, which is ultimately taken from Aristotle. We could distinguish between those who can live depending on alien labour –from slaves or other dependent people-, those who have enough property to secure their family's well-being through their own work in their land and those who are dependant workers, whether

they are free or slave¹⁴. In this sense, those who benefit from the land distribution polity of Middle Republican Rome become a kind of Middle Class.

Naturally, we cannot directly quantify its importance in Roman social structure, for we do not have reliable statistics about poverty, wealth or even the number of slaves living in Rome at any point of history. Nevertheless, we do have one relatively trust worthy piece of information that could, to some point, help us to do a gross estimate of its extension. That is the number of active legions in Rome.

The Republican army was recruited according to wealth. Only people who had some property could be levied, while the proletarians –the have-nots-, until the Marian reform were excluded. On the matter we have very precise information thanks to Livy's account¹⁵, which might be anachronistic for Etruscan Rome, but seems trust worthy for Middle Republican society. Livy tells us that the census divided the army according to wealth into five classes. Those who were under the minimum wealth fell into the *infraclassem* of the *proletarii* and were excluded from the army. It is likely that after the introduction of a salary for military service in 406 BC, legions were recruited indistinctly from the five wealthy classes¹⁶, granted that they were above the minimum level of proletarians.

During the Second Punic War, Rome was taken to the very limits of her military capacity, levying some years up to twenty five legions. Each legion, according to

¹⁴ Following a similar criterion, Knapp speaks of the ordinary man in Rome, defining him as the man that is socially below the senators and equestrians, but over the slave and day labourer (Knapp, 2011: p.5).

¹⁵ Liv. 1.43. The text describes Servius Tullius' reform, which would introduce the *centuriae* as the basic units of military organization. The numbers supplemented by Livy are rather unbelievable for monarchic Rome, for they would imply the existence of an army of almost 20 thousand men, for a city that did not have more than 50 thousand inhabitants. The most likely hypothesis is that such description is possibly based on the data established after the reform of 241 BC (Cornell, 1995: 180; Smith, 2006: 174; Forsythe, 2006: 113).

¹⁶According to Polybius, the minimum would be 400 drachmas during 216 BC. Pol. 6.19 (8).

Polybius¹⁷, would have at least four thousand two hundred men, although the figure could be higher and some legions would have up to six thousand men. If we take a median of five thousand men per legion, this would give us some 125 thousand men who could meet the minimum property standards to be part of the army. If we consider that adult male population in Ancient cities was usually around 25% of the total population (Raaflaub, 2005: 22)¹⁸, this figure implies a total population with a middle living standard of about five hundred thousand men. Although the total population of Italy at the time should have been around three million inhabitants (Cornell, 1989: 405; Scheidel, 2007: 45), Roman population shortly after Hannibal's war was surveyed at 243.704 male citizens¹⁹. If we suppose that men were about half of the population -something not necessarily true in a period of catastrophic military campaigns-, the total population of adult Roman citizens would be around 480 thousand people, to which we should add a number of boys and girls under 12 and 14 years respectively, that usually were not counted in the *census*. Following Saller's (Saller, 1994: 25) population figures, with a life expectancy of about 25 years, the figure would imply about a 50% of the total population (given that infant mortality between 0 and 10 years would reach almost half of the births), while if we take his upper figure of 32,5 years of life expectancy, adult population would be about 60% of the total. In short, the *census* figure implies a total population between 800 and 960 Roman citizens, including children. Although the figures we are considering are far from exact and they simply give

¹⁷ Polib. Hist. 6.20.8.

¹⁸ For a complete study using higher and lower life expectancies: Scheidel, 2007: p. 40.

¹⁹ Liv. 35.9.21.1. On the reliability of Republican census figures: Lo Cascio, 2013: 155-166.

us an order of magnitude, they seem to tell us that between a 52 and a 62% of Roman citizenry would have enough property to face everyday needs²⁰.

This is a relatively high figure for what we could call Roman Middle class. It is true that in this figure we are deliberately ignoring the situation both of slaves and resident foreigners, but the figure is anyhow expressive. Most Roman citizens had enough wealth to live independently, working their own land and serving in the army during Hannibal's war.

Regarding the elite, we have no way to quantify it, nor to measure the resources it accumulated, but it was always a rather small group. There were no more than three hundred senators and if we suppose a ten times larger group of *equites* and add up their families, the figure could not be more than twelve hundred people, about one per cent of the total population. To sum up, and to return to Harris' categories, we could say that Roman population was divided into an elite that comprehended about 1% of the population, a Middle class that accounted about 55-60% of population and have-nots that were between 40-45% of the total. These figures sound awfully familiar and are not very different to the ones a modern democracy would put forward today.

Republican political system was based on a middle class that gave Rome its social ideal of a man that was also a soldier, a citizen and a farmer. This archetype was the model of Republican civic life, an ideological incarnation of its virtues. Cincinnatus, who works his small farm, who was called to save the Republic and who returns the scarlet of dictatorship fifteen days after assuming the magistracy, represents the Republican ideal. The common

²⁰ Our figures are slightly more optimistic than Brunt's, that estimated the total number of *assidui* in about a 50% of the population (Brunt, 1971: 64-66), but significantly lower than Rosenstein's, who estimates the total percentage of *proletarii* in about a 10% of the population during Hannibal's War (Rosenstein, 2004: 185-188).

man, farmer, soldier and citizen, assumes him as a model and can imagine himself a protector of the Republic.

Rome's conquest of Italy was backed by a harmonic political system, where its citizens were directly benefited by the prosperity gained. Support for the Republican system was unanimous. With some excess, this political system has been described as Roman democracy (Guarino, 2008: 11-26). It is beyond doubt that it was a participatory political system, where citizenry, through the *comitia* and the tribunes held power, and the common man not only had a voice in the decisions taken by the political apparatus, but also benefited from the results. Its costs of maintenance were extremely low, to the point that Rome did not have a police to impose order, nor a bureaucracy to administrate the system. To call it a democracy or not is a merely semantic problem.

The Decline of the Middle Classes in the Late Republic

Rome's social order declines quickly after Hannibal's war. The process has been described in several occasions and it can be related to different economic and social phenomena that the military successes of Roman polity implied. From our point of view, the most important one was the insertion of Rome in Mediterranean long distance trade markets²¹.

Most of Roman smallholders were corn producers, although they usually cultivated vines and olives too, a typical feature of the Mediterranean *coltura promiscua*, which was in use in Central Italy since the 7th century BC, at least (Torelli, 2006: 52; Forsythe, 2006, 56). It was aimed fundamentally to self consumption, though the surpluses were usually

²¹This is what Harris calls the Hellenistic-Carthaginian system, which had been operating as a trade system from the East side to the West side of the Mediterranean basin during centuries (Harris, 2007: 513).

traded to acquire a wide range of goods that they could not produce by themselves. Nevertheless, Roman conquests putted into market vast quantities of superior quality grain, which entered gratis from Sicily –as a tribute- or at very low prices, from Egypt and Africa. This immediately expelled smallholders from grain markets, who simply could not compete. The result was the abandon of farms by many smallholders. Even in the immediate hinterland of Rome, where low transportation costs should help smallholders, farms were abandoned (Rosenstein, 2004: 7).

The integration of Rome into the Mediterranean markets did not only have negative effects, but it also presented opportunities to the elite, which was in a position to benefit with the Imperial expansion. The new markets opened vast opportunities for agribusiness, especially for the exportation of wine, oil and honey. Nevertheless, most farmers could not benefit from these opportunities. Smallholders grew a crop optimized to satisfy their own corn needs. To alter this optimum and favour a new equilibrium to get surpluses of oil or wine for exportation would expose the farmer to famine (Roberts, 2011: 1.2749). Therefore, his possibilities to adapt to this new scenario were meagre. Even more, the farmer lacked the capital needed for the conversion²².

The wars conducted outside Italy brought a huge influx of liquid capital, which came from the monetization of the riches accumulated by the Hellenistic kings, whose vast reserves of silver were minted²³. This influx reverted in the benefit of the Roman elite, who could acquire through purchase or simple violence, the farms that smallholders were in the process of abandoning. With this capital they could create new productive units that were

²² Nevertheless, some small farms were able to do it and produced surpluses for exportation (Roselaar, 2010: 155-156).

²³ For a detailed account see: Kay (2014: 87-106).

intended to produce surpluses for exportation and were majorly worked by slaves. These were the Roman villas. Appian puts some vivid colours to the situation²⁴:

“The rich, hogging most of the undistributed land, with time became confident that they were not going to be dispossessed. Partly buying through persuasive methods, partly seizing through violence, they acquired the neighbouring properties and all the others that belonged to humble peasants, to cultivate *latifundia*...”

A bit further he adds²⁵:

“For these reasons the rich became maximally wealthy and the slaves abounded in the countryside, while famine and scarce population afflicted the Italian people, decimated by poverty, taxes and military service.”

Besides the problems related to markets, war ceased to be of benefit for the general well being of citizenry. The devastating effects of the military occupation of Italy by Hannibal’s troops for nearly twenty years have being held responsible for the decline of the Italian smallholder (Brunt, 1962: 69-86 and 1988: 73), although they might have not had the importance traditionally attributed to them (Rosenstein, 2004: 26-62). An element that might have deeper consequences is the development of long distance conflicts of indefinite duration. Until Hannibal’s war, military campaigns were seasonal event that happened inside the Italian peninsula, relatively close to the citizen-soldier’s home, who could return to their properties in winter with the end of hostilities. War did not interfere with

²⁴ App. BC 1.1.7.18 οἱ γὰρ πλούσιοι τῆσδε τῆς ἀνεμήτου γῆς τὴν πολλὴν καταλαβόντες καὶ χρόνῳ θαρροῦντες οὐ τίνα σφᾶς ἐτι ἀφαιρήσεσθαι τὰ τε ἀγχοῦ σφίσιν ὅσα τε ἦν ἄλλα βραχέα πενήτων, τὰ μὲν ὠνούμενοι πειθοί, τὰ δὲ βία λαμβάνοντες, πεδία μακρὰ ἀντὶ χωρίων ἐγεώργουν, ὠνητοῖς ἐς αὐτὰ γεωργοῖς καὶ ποιμέσι χρώμενοι...

²⁵ App. BC 1.1.7.28 ἀπὸ δὲ τούτων οἱ μὲν δυνατοὶ πάνταν ἐπλούτουν, καὶ τὸ τῶν θεραπόντων γένος ἀνὰ τὴν χώραν ἐπλήθυε, τοὺς δ’ Ἰταλιώτας ὀλιγότης καὶ δυσανδρία κατελάμβανε, τρυχομένους πενία τε καὶ ἐσφοραῖς καὶ στρατεῖαις

agricultural labour. On the other side, the military campaigns for the conquest of the Mediterranean basin required a permanent estrangement of the peasant from his land to develop operations in distant war scenarios. The conquest of Hispania implied the creation of a permanent occupation force, as also happened later with other provinces and ended up transforming the old Mediterranean into a new *Mare Nostrum*. This kind of war is incompatible with the farmer-soldier, and it ruined a large portion of the Roman middle class. Plutarch left us an interesting description²⁶:

“The dispossessed poor did not enrol in the army, nor could feed their children. Italy was in risk of becoming completely deserted of free population and crowded with barbarian prisoners, for they worked the lands of the wealthy, excluding the citizens.”

Although there were various attempts to implement agrarian reforms that could revert the disastrous results of Roman military expansion, none was able to reconstruct the old class of farmers that were the backbone of the Republican system. The necessity of reforms was evident during the second half of the 2nd century BC, when Gaius Laelius²⁷ makes such a proposal, which he eventually had to retire, under senatorial opposition. More important were Tiberius and Gaius Grachus reforms, which intended to rebuild the Roman smallholder class in order to increase the availability of recruits for the legions. They passed their laws even against the elite’s violent answer. Anyhow, these bills were unable to revert the decline of the smallholder. The demand for an agrarian reform was at the very heart of every revolutionary movement and civil war that stormed the Republic during its

²⁶ Plut. Gracch 8.4.1 - 8.5.1 ἐξωσθέντες οἱ πένητες οὔτε ταῖς στρατείαις ἔτι προθύμους παρείχον ἑαυτούς, ἠμέλουν τε παίδων ἀνατροφῆς, ὡς ταχὺ τὴν Ἰταλίαν ἅπασαν ὀλιγανδρίας ἐλευθέρων αἰσθέσθαι, δεσμωτηρίων δὲ βαρβαρικῶν ἐμπεπλήσθαι, δι’ ὧν ἐγεώργουν οἱ πλούσιοι τὰ χωρία, τοὺς πολίτας ἐξέλάσαντες.

²⁷ Plut. Gracch. 8.5.

last century (Brunt, 1962: 69-86). Finally, when Augustus transformed the old Republic into the Principate, Rome's participatory government ceased to exist, as the demand for an agrarian reform.

The decline of smallholders caused the displacement of countryside population to Rome, which experienced a rapid increase in population, unparalleled until the early 20th century's migratory movements. Rome increased its urban population from 200-300 thousand inhabitants, during the late 3rd century, to a million, during the Late Republic. Rome became a city of *favelas*, where the poor lived in slums over its hills, always fearing pestilence and fire.

It is almost impossible to quantify the process and to put some numbers on the decline of Roman middle classes. Nevertheless, we can grasp the effects of such crisis in the lack of eligible men for military service. During the late 2nd century, with a war burden significantly lower to the one experienced during Hannibal's war and a larger population, Rome was simply incapable of meeting the needs of the levy. Only with Marius' reform, which admitted for the first time the proletarians into the army²⁸, the legions could be recruited. From then on, the army became the refuge of the poorest citizens, who saw in the legions a way out of their misery and in the personal success of their generals, their only chance to ensure themselves some means of subsistence.

During the 2nd century BC Rome levied between 8 and 12 legions every year, that is to say, between forty and sixty thousand men²⁹. Citizen population had grown up to almost

²⁸ Plut. Marius 9.

²⁹ See the table included in Rosenstein (2004: 120-121).

four hundred thousand men, according to census³⁰. If we repeat the calculation previously made³¹ for Hannibal's war, we would get to the conclusion that, before Marius' reform, Rome was not able to stand a military burden that implied the existence of 15-18% of what we earlier called middle class.

The result is eloquent. Although the numbers are not precise and are affected by various *caveat*, the order of magnitude is probably correct. This would corroborate what tradition tells us about the decline of Roman middle class, which diminishes from covering almost two thirds of the population, to less than a fifth. The governance crisis was inevitable, and the destruction of the Republican political system, unavoidable.

Conclusions

Our conclusions are, to some point, a confirmation of North's theory. The costs of maintenance of political system are inversely proportional to its legitimacy. The viability of a participatory political system is directly related with the benefits the population acquires from it. If the system tends to the creation of a large middle class, the system will consolidate. If the real opportunities of personal advancement are reduced and it pauperizes the middle class, it will inevitably implode and succumb before the ambitions of the destabilizing elements of society that will try to replace it, either by a system that effectively distributes wealth or by a different system that asserts its stability in a deeper use of coercion and social control.

³⁰ The summary quotes 394.336 citizens in the census. See: Liv. Perioch. 63.

³¹ That is to say, taking the maximal number of the recruited (60 thousand), the number of *assidui* (that is, men over the property limit) would be about 240 thousand. If we add to the nearly 400 thousand men older than 14 years, the missing proportion of women and children we would arrive to a total population between 1,3 and 1,6 million citizens, depending of the life expectancy we choose. This would give a proportion of 18 to 15% of propertied citizens over the minimum census.

In the Roman case, it was the Principate that raised from the ashes of the Republic, a non participatory political system, which favoured commerce and social stability. The coercion level required to operate was higher than during the Republic, although much lower than the later despotisms.

Nowadays, the rise of inequality in income distribution experienced in the United States and Western Europe is rather alarming. If it deepens, the participatory nature of their political regimes might jeopardise. The fall of what we have called Roman middle class occurred in a relatively short period of time, less than a century, although its effects were obvious earlier. Populism was the result of the destruction of these middle classes. The effects of populism are not new; even the Romans knew them well. These are the first symptoms of social and political decomposition.

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