

THE RATIONIST

TWELVE ESSAYS INTRODUCING A PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA TO PRESERVE THE DEMOCRATIC-REPUBLICAN MODEL OF GOVERNMENT.

ADDRESSED TO THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

BY GRACCHUS, A LOYAL CITIZEN.

NUMBER SEVEN: THAT EXTREME WEALTH CONCENTRATION DESTROYED THE ROMAN REPUBLIC.

To the People of the United States of America:

The causes which destroyed the ancient republics were numerous; but in Rome, one principal cause was, the vast inequality of fortunes.

Noah Webster

Having in our last three essays examined the lifecycle of democracy, we now consider its death sequence in Antiquity's leading state. The ancient Greeks witnessed the phenomena of Anacyclosis in hundreds of cities, including over three hundred democracies. But it was the Roman republic that first raised its final stages from the level of city-state to world-state, furnishing the most relevant historical parallel for today's prevailing superpower republic: the United States.

In view of the internal political strains presently encountering the leading Western democracies, at no time since the assassination of Julius Caesar has understanding how Anacyclosis brought down that ancient republic been more important. Though there is variance in the particulars, the essential dispositions and markers of political deterioration in both Rome and America are sufficiently similar to establish a recognizable pattern of middle-class decline and rising authoritarianism.

The Roman establishment seems to have been generally ignorant of the underlying processes driving Anacyclosis. Such ignorance not only cost the Romans their four hundred and fifty-year-old republic, it also exacted a great expense of human life. Tiberius Gracchus donated the first drops of what became a river of political bloodshed. Political stability was established with Octavian's inauguration as emperor a century later, though the executions and confiscations continued well into the imperial period, especially among Rome's upper crust.

While the American republic may be unique in having middling origins and sophisticated founders well-versed in the history of Rome and the lessons of Anacyclosis, nothing in its present circumstances preserves it from a Roman ending. Indeed, George Washington's Farewell Address with which we closed our prior essay apprehends just such a violent conclusion to America's republican experiment. And to consider the magnitude of replaying but one episode from the Roman saga today, if some future sequel to Sulla's reactionary proscriptions were scaled up to the current population of the United States, we could easily be counting the political dead in the tens of thousands or more. This describes a modest portion of what may await us as we continue down the path of Anacyclosis.

POLITICAL FACTION ARISING FROM MIDDLE INSECURITY DESTROYED THE ROMAN REPUBLIC.

The main reason for the Republic's failure is in retrospect clear: uncontrollable political faction arising from grotesque wealth concentration and extreme household insecurity. America's Founders well understood the social consequences arising from these factors. The Romans themselves also came to realize that it was these effects which destroyed their republic in the end. As Dr. Lintott determined:

Roman writers after the collapse of the Republic were ... united in believing that the operative factor throughout was a moral failure arising from the increase of wealth: this had led the governing class to seek riches and power without scruple, while at the same time economic inequality had made the lower classes desperate and ready for any crime against the state.¹

Rome's military escapades precipitated these economic and social circumstances. By the time Rome defeated Carthage, the smallhold farmers which were for centuries the Republic's citizen backbone were exhausted by the demands of protracted military service. For many, campaign duration extended from the summer to terms of several years. Perhaps ten to twenty percent of Rome's adult males were in service in the generations preceding the Third Punic War.

Rome's military victories brought even more pain for ordinary citizens: the already exhausted and increasingly indebted middling farmers were unable to compete with the influx of slave labor that flowed in from Rome's newly-conquered provinces. One instance from the Third Macedonian War alone introduced 150,000 slaves into Roman labor markets. By the end of the Republic, perhaps thirty percent of Italy's population was slaves.

These economic conditions diverted the immense profits of empire away from Rome's domestic middle class and into a few households who invested vast sums into the only respectable outlet for elites: land. These great households created vast estates and other slave-based commercial farming and ranching operations (*latifundia*) on the lands of Rome's destitute and depleted smallhold farmers. Moreover, as farming was hard labor, city life detached many Romans from their farming heritage and the middling habits that go with it. Many of the displaced and homeless fled to the urban center with what payouts they obtained from the distressed sales of their farms, where their funds, their prospects, and their plain republican virtues were rapidly diminished.

In this manner was Rome's middle class plundered and transformed into an underclass by its own moneyed class, its middling virtues annihilated, and the commonwealth built over many generations concentrated in few insatiable hands with astonishing speed. The persistence of these economic conditions eventually produced such extreme wealth concentration that by 104 BC Marcus Philippus announced that out of perhaps 400,000 citizens, only about 2,000 individuals held real wealth. Cicero later remarked that in the Centuriate Assembly, the single proletariat century nearly outnumbered the dozens of centuries comprising the first class of taxpayers. Historian Victor Duruy vividly portrayed the results of such rampant wealth concentration during the late republic:

¹ *Violence in Republican Rome.*

After having pillaged the world as praetors or consuls during time of war, the nobles again pillaged their subjects as governors in time of peace; and upon their return to Rome with immense riches they employed them in changing the modest heritage of their fathers into domains vast as provinces.

Which brings us to the symptoms of end-stage Anacyclosis, considered at length in our prior essay. Facing such intense household precariousness, middling Romans grew increasingly desperate and dependent. And their dependency engendered an inescapable system of economic patronage. The financial condition of ordinary Romans eventually degenerated so far that by 123 BC Gaius Gracchus was compelled to bring forth a law to permanently institutionalize the grain dole (*Cura Annonae*), a subsidy which was subsequently liberalized by Clodius in 58 BC to make grain free for a considerable part of the restive urban population. So critical was this grain dole to sustaining civic order and pacifying the underclass that by 22 AD the second emperor Tiberius predicted that its neglect would utterly ruin the Roman state.

And just as sure as economic insecurity leads to economic dependency and political patronage, ancient rights and liberties are quickly forgotten and forsaken by those who depend upon public support to survive. The republic, the middling virtues, and any hope for authentic popular government were all doomed the moment Rome's middle class was doomed. After the death of the republic, the whole Mediterranean world flowed into imperial monarchy, which then fractured and crumbled into the tribal chiefdoms of Western Europe, restarting the sequence of Anacyclosis anew.

THE ROMANS FAILED TO HALT ANACYCLOSIS BECAUSE THEY FAILED TO DE-CONCENTRATE HOUSEHOLD WEALTH.

The assassination of Tiberius Gracchus crossed the event horizon, the threshold to monarchy, from which the Roman republic would never return. As our third essay explained it is the diffusion and re-concentration of wealth which advances the wheel of Anacyclosis. After Gracchus's death, the Romans would summon no legislation, no policy, no political wisdom or willpower to de-concentrate wealth and turn back the wheel. Marius's military reforms of 107 BC did not alter circumstances, but merely acknowledged the new economic reality. Sulla's constitutional reforms in the 80s BC ultimately accomplished little other than to manifest reactionary outrage. Caesar's 46 BC edict that free labor comprise at least one-third of the workforce on otherwise slave-worked ranches came a century too late. Cato's rectitude, Cicero's conservatism, and Brutus's patriotism accounted for nothing in preserving the Republic. The simple fact is that Rome's middle class – and thereby not only Rome's republican future, but mankind's first great wave of experimentation with that thing we call democracy – died with Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus.

Tiberius Gracchus, whose illustrious and noble lineage makes his devotion and sacrifice to the republican cause all the more remarkable, gave Rome its last clear chance to save its middle class. His *Lex Sempronia Agraria* – which in 1776 John Adams acclaimed as “*a genuine republican Measure*,” and elements of which Thomas Jefferson emulated in his first drafts of the 1776 Virginia state constitution – revived and revised existing legal limitations on the amount of public land conquered by the legions (*ager publicus*) that could be occupied by any household. Renowned Classicist Dr. Abbott put the stakes plainly:

The republic had been at the outset, and for several centuries afterward, a commonwealth of free landowners. This great middle class was now swept out of existence, and with it went the foundation on which the state rested. The object of the movement connected with the name of Tiberius Gracchus was to build this class up again.

In an effort to de-concentrate household wealth and restore the middling census ranks, the *Lex Sempronia Agraria* (enacted in 133 BC) enforced provisions of the *lex de modo agrorum* of the *Licinian-Sextian* rogations (enacted in 367 BC) with some modifications. First, the law capped household use of public lands to 500 *iugera* (about 326 acres), along with an additional 250 *iugura* permitted for each male heir of affected households. Second, shares of 30 *iugera* (20 acres) of reclaimed public land were to be transferred to ordinary citizens, now made non-transferrable to prevent parcels from being swiftly reacquired and reconsolidated into *latifundia*. This prohibition was lifted after the death of Gaius Gracchus, leading to predictable results. Third, to mitigate the law's effects, covered households adversely impacted were to receive clear title for retained parcels and compensation for improvements made to transferred land.

Because it sought to enforce existing laws and return Rome's social balance sheet to a prior condition while restoring the middling virtues – after all the idea was to get the people back on the land so they could get back into the legions to maintain Rome's burgeoning empire – Gracchus's plan was in truth more conservative than progressive notwithstanding some characterizations thereof as an early version of socialism. Gracchus did not aim to push Roman society forward to utopia, but back to the good old days.

But implementation of his reform was not possible without violating various Roman constitutional procedures and seizing property which had long ago passed into putative private ownership. Long neglect of the ancient limitations created bewildering complexity in the legal status of unique lands, titles, and improvements. The mob was fickle and easily manipulated. The plutocracy was enraged – many elites having paid market prices for these contested lots, or built improvements and buried relatives on them, or incorporated them into dowries and inheritances – and strenuously opposed Gracchus's reform.

In spite of all opposition the law took effect and managed to allocate some parcels of *ager publicus*. Rome's middling census numbers saw a brief and modest recovery. But the law was not finally implemented for the duration and with the force that would have been necessary to truly rehabilitate Rome's middle class. The campaign to save Rome's middle class was for all intents and purposes ended during the Tribune of Spurius Thorius a generation later, who Appian tells us abandoned the Gracchan project of transferring assets to ordinary Romans in favor of a sort of basic income. According to his description, Thorius:

Brought in a law providing that the work of distributing the public domain should no longer be continued, but that the land should belong to those in possession of it, who should pay rent for it to the people, and that the money so received should be distributed; and this distribution was a kind of solace to the poor, but it did not help to increase the population.

By leaving Rome's wealth-generating capital assets – land – in hands of the plutocracy, the *Lex Thoria* effectively signaled their ultimate victory, settling the hard-won republican legacy of Rome's forefathers in exchange for a short-lived promise of meager cash payments.

Short-lived, because as Appian also reports: “a little later the rent itself was abolished at the instance of another tribune. So the plebeians lost everything.”

THE FAILURE OF THE GRACCHAN PROJECT LED TO THE CONSUMMATION OF ANACYCLOSIS.

Noah Webster summarized the ultimate consequences of Rome’s failure to de-concentrate household wealth:

Rome, with the name of a republic, was several ages loosing the spirit and principle. The Gracchi endeavored to check the growing evil by an agrarian law; but were not successful. In Cesar’s time, the Romans were ripened for a change of government; the spirit of a commonwealth was lost, and Cesar was but an instrument of altering the form, when it could no longer exist.

As for Tiberius Gracchus himself, he did not live to see his genuine republican measure through. He was murdered during his reelection bid in 133 BC. The Senate was perhaps as much provoked by his perceived deviations from Roman custom as by the reform itself. His death at the hands of the senators commenced a century-long contest of popular leaders. From his younger brother Gaius – who met a similar tragic end – to Drusus, to Philippus, to Saturninus, to Marius, to Cinna, to Sulla, to Lepidus, to Catiline, to Rullus, to Flavius, to Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus, and to Mark Antony, Lepidus, and finally Augustus in 27 BC, Rome’s bloody tournament of demagogues reaped global hegemony’s final, poisonous harvest, so eloquently lamented by Sallust in the republic’s last moments:

When our country had grown great through toil and the practice of justice, when great kings had been vanquished in war, savage tribes and mighty peoples subdued by force of arms, when Carthage, the rival of Rome’s sway, had perished root and branch, and all seas and lands were open, then Fortune began to grow cruel and to bring confusion into all our affairs. Those who had found it easy to bear hardship and dangers, anxiety and adversity, found leisure and wealth, desirable under other circumstances, a burden and a curse. Hence the lust for money first, then for power, grew upon them; these were, I may say, the root of all evils. For avarice destroyed honour, integrity, and all other noble qualities; taught in their place insolence, cruelty, to neglect the gods, to set a price on everything. Ambition drove many men to become false; to have one thought locked in the breast, another ready on the tongue; to value friendships and enmities not on their merits but by the standard of self-interest, and to show a good front rather than a good heart. At first these vices grew slowly, from time to time they were punished; finally, when the disease had spread like a deadly plague, the state was changed and a government second to none in equity and excellence became cruel and intolerable.

History having recorded that the Constitution of the Roman republic was no match for Anacyclosis, our next essay considers whether the Constitution of the United States will fare any better.

GRACCHUS.