

**Valentina Arena, *Libertas and the Practice of Politics in the Late Roman Republic*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. viii, 324. ISBN 978-1-107-02817-3. Hardback. \$ 99.00.

This book is a reworked version of Arena's doctoral dissertation and attempts (p. 1) 'to study the conceptualisations of the idea of *libertas* and the nature of their connection with the practice of politics in the late Roman Republic'; this period, for the purposes of the book, runs from 70 to 52 BC. The first chapter, 'Roman *libertas*', discusses the definition of freedom in the political context of the late Republic. As Arena demonstrates, *libertas* was defined throughout the ancient period as 'the status of non-subjection to the arbitrary will of another person or group of persons' (p. 6), in opposition to slavery. The first chapter discusses the exact status of various groups in society, e.g. freedmen, *filiifamilias*, and women. In general only those with full citizenship of the Roman state were truly free, since they could participate in the direct ruling of the state through the elective and legislative processes. This freedom was expressed through several symbols, e.g. the *pilleus* (cap of liberty) and through buildings such as the *Atrium Libertatis* and the temple of Libertas.

The second chapter, 'The citizens' political liberty', discusses how the concept of freedom informed the political process. Not only an individual's status safeguarded his liberty, but also the arrangement of the commonwealth. The most important instruments for protecting the citizens' liberty were *provocatio*, the right to appeal decisions by magistrate to the people's assembly, *appellatio* to a tribune of the plebs, and *suffragium*, the right to vote. Furthermore, the laws protected the people's freedom, as long as they were achieved by a free vote which was accessible to all. This led to *aequitas*, 'equality before the law', i.e. the idea that every citizen was subject to the same laws regardless of their socio-economic status.

However, a problem in the discussion is the idea that, as Arena argues, *libertas* was equal to the common good of all citizens of the state, who through the elective and legislative process decided what the laws of the state should be. However, it is not explained how the people could ascertain what the common good was — they could listen to politicians, but were there any other ways in which citizens could be politically active? Furthermore, votes are hardly ever unanimous, meaning that many people do not agree with the laws that are set in place or do not support the politicians who are elected. Thus, people who had voted against a law were not free according to the definition used in this book — they had to submit to the will of others. Furthermore, many were not engaged in political decision-making at all, either because they did not vote or because their votes were worthless, e.g. freedmen in the urban tribes. Arena does not discuss this problem at all, instead presenting 'the people' as a unanimous group. Neither did all citizens have equal opportunities to approach the law courts, e.g. through lack of time or money, so that *aequitas* in practice was more limited than the ancient writers suggest.

In chapter 3, 'The liberty of *the* commonwealth', Arena discusses how the state could lose its freedom, e.g. through foreign domination (although this receives only brief attention) or through the dominance of a faction or an individual. Within the Roman state, there were two political traditions, the *optimates* and the *populares*, who held divergent views on what the freedom of the commonwealth entailed. Both were based on Greek political philosophy, which Arena discusses in detail. One problem here is that it is, again, not clearly explained whose liberty was supposed to be protected: in general the definition used suggests that this was 'the Roman people', but how this related to the activities of politicians is not explained. Arena does not explain how politicians determined which course of action would be most conducive to maintaining *libertas* and how they communicated this to the people. In the examples that she cites, politicians often seem to act in their own direct interests and to adapt their rhetoric to the circumstances, rather than acting from any kind of political ideal (as Arena points out, factions were not permanent, and one politician could easily oppose a measure which he had supported the year before). Thus, many claimed that they were defending the *libertas* of the state, but in practical politics this often seems to have been an empty slogan rather than a well-formulated policy based on philosophical ideas.

The next chapter, 'The political struggle in the first century BC', focuses on three issues which often caused debate between *optimates* and *populares*: extraordinary commands, agrarian laws, and the *senatus consultum ultimum*. *Populares* often proposed land distributions or wanted to give an individual extraordinary powers, which the *optimates* opposed, arguing that to give too much power to one man would destroy the liberty of the Republic. On the other hand, the *populares* argued that such measures were in the interest of the people and therefore promoted *libertas*. The *optimates* often tried to stop violence and revolution, which they saw as a threat to the freedom of the Republic, by passing the *senatus consultum ultimum*, which gave magistrates full powers to deal with a crisis. The *populares*, on the other hand, argued that this abolished the power of the people to direct the political process and thus destroyed the freedom of the Republic. Thus, although both groups agreed on the definition of *libertas*, they disagreed on how best to safeguard the freedom of the Republic and its citizens.

Since chapter 4 focuses especially on the optimate view, it would make sense if chapter 5, 'Political response and the need for legitimacy' would focus on the *populares*. Indeed Arena discusses the accusations of *dominatio* voiced by populist politicians against the *optimates*, who hindered any action that could be seen as assisting the people, e.g. land distribution. Unfortunately, she does not discuss exactly how the *populares* justified their proposals, possibly because almost all sources are written from the optimate view.

The book ends with an epilogue, which has no clearly stated purpose. Nevertheless, Arena brings up the interesting suggestion that the definition of *libertas* changed in the 40s BC; it could now be applied to a situation in which the laws were not upheld, whereas earlier the laws had been the mainstay of the people's freedom. Instead the term could now be applied — at least by Cicero — to a situation in which specific individuals

defended the state, as Brutus and Cassius did in the aftermath of Caesar's murder. Unfortunately much of the philosophical theory discussed by Arena comes from Cicero's works, in which he describes his ideal constitution; however, Cicero himself had seen how the political process had failed during his lifetime. His theories can therefore only have been describing an ideal, of which he himself might have doubted the reality. Unfortunately, Arena does not acknowledge this; she ends by concluding that the meaning of the term *libertas* changed by the 'common consent of the language users', although Cicero is the only source of this change in meaning; it may be doubted whether he even agreed with it, since his views on the position of Brutus and Cassius differed from what he describes in the *De re publica* and elsewhere.

The book is overall well written; it sometimes suffers from the tendency to repetitiveness of a PhD thesis — the fact that *libertas* meant 'freedom from domination' is stated dozens of times. Nevertheless, this book has many important ideas to offer, although it does not, despite the title, engage much with the *practical* side of politics — most of it focuses on political philosophy, rather than the use of the idea of *libertas* in political activity. It would therefore probably appeal mostly to those interested in ancient philosophy and the history of politics rather than to historians of the late Roman Republic in itself.

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