

**Henrik Mouritsen, *Politics in the Roman Republic*.** Key Themes in Ancient History, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017. 202 pp. \$23.99. ISBN 978-1-107-65133-3 (paper).

In this short book, part of Cambridge University Press' Key Themes in Ancient History series, Henrik Mouritsen addresses Roman politics from the mid second century through the mid first century BCE. The author's choice of period has to do with the quality and availability of evidence, but just as much to discuss recent trends in scholarship, primarily what he sees as the overemphasis on the "democratic" element of republican politics. Mouritsen positions himself with recent, primarily German, scholarship, that resets the balance of power between the *populus* and *nobiles* with the latter. His position is that, while popular support mattered, its expression was more through acclamation than true deliberation, and therefore was in practice more ceremonial and symbolic than authentic.

Mouritsen's argument proceeds in three chapters. In the first, "*Senatus Populusque Romanus*: Institutions and Practices," he reexamines the place traditionally given to Polybius' analysis of the Roman constitution (6.2–18), and recontextualizes this and Cicero's evidence with his appraisal of Roman political procedure. He discounts Polybius' significance in understanding how republican politics actually operated, noting that Polybius' perspective and vocabulary were skewed by their orientation towards Greek political theory, his omission of the religious element in Roman politics, and the sociopolitical role of the Roman aristocracy. Polybius is mistaken in seeing the popular assemblies of the Roman republic as democratic, that is, as more like the Athenian assembly. Rather, based on his analysis, which demonstrates just how rarely the assemblies voted against proposals, the better comparison is to the Spartan citizen assembly, which acted as a source of assent rather than a place of contention. Roman magistrates consulted the popular assemblies as a part of ritual confirmation, similarly to their consultation of the gods. True demonstrations of popular will were rare, and institutional structure and procedure effectively muted them. As influential as Polybius' discussion continues to be (this section is frequently assigned in undergraduate Roman history and Western Civilization courses), it distorts our perception of Roman political procedure. Mouritsen's argument provides a convincing and clear corrective.

Mouritsen considers Cicero's account of the Roman constitution in the *Res Publica* and *De legibus* preferable. Though Cicero's purposes were to correct and idealize, he still provides a far more nuanced account. Mouritsen's major concern is delineating the distinction between the ideal of *libertas* for the *populus* with its total lack of formal political initiative and independence. Especially significant is what Polybius overlooks, namely, the role of the *nobiles* in supervising religious and political institutions and procedures. The *populus* as gathered in *comitia* had only the right to listen and say "yes" or "no" in response to the narrowly defined questions magistrates put before them.

Further points include the use of the unit vote as well as the lack of quorum in every *comitia*. The popular will, so to speak, was expressed in its essence, and all real

maneuvering and debate took place outside of the assembly meeting. As with many modern organizations, elections ratify decisions already made. Other areas that seem to represent “popular” disruption, such as the “Struggle of the Orders,” the later reorganization of the *comitia centuriata*, and the institution of the *centuria praerogativa*, on closer analysis have more to do with the inherently hierarchical and parallel nature of the Plebeian state and Roman republic, as well as the desire to rein in elite ambition. Regardless of the persuasiveness of any individual point, overall the chapter effectively contextualizes Roman political institutions and distinguishes them from both Greek and modern political characterizations. Mouritsen does not address disruptive elements of the late republic, such as rioting and elite manipulation of the tribal assembly – these come up in chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2, “Leaders and Masses in the Roman Republic,” considers how *comitia* were organized. Mouritsen goes beyond the often-observed limitations to voting as Rome’s citizen population grew, and calculates the largest likely crowd based on assembly locations. In every case, this number is far smaller than anything that could be considered representative. Other factors suggest that this was not unintentional: *contiones* and *comitia* were never held on market days, when the number of citizens at Rome would likely be greater; voting venues were never enlarged, and there was never an effort to implement multiple voting locations. This corroborates the suggestions of Hopkins (“From violence to blessing: symbols and rituals in ancient Rome,” in *City States in Classical Antiquity and Medieval Italy*, Ann Arbor-Stuttgart, 2003), Flaig (*Ritualisierte Politik: Zeichen, Gesten und Herrschaft in alten Rom*, Göttingen, 2003), Jehne (“Integrationsrituale in der römischen Republik” in *Integrazione Mescolanza Rifiuto...* Rome, 2001), and Scheid (*An Introduction to Roman Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Edinburgh, 2003), that *comitia* served to provide ritual acclamation or consensus. This is not to say that popular opposition was not possible, nor, just as importantly, that such meetings, particularly *contiones*, were not ways to test the popular will. Rather, such a system functioned through the management of the *nobiles*, and if disruption suited them, it could be arranged. Moreover, a *comitia* “culture” likely existed and functioned for magistrates to manufacture approval. Too much deviation from the function of the *comitia* threatened the validity of the process and therefore the state itself. The unrest of the late republic reflected at least as much the willingness of the elite to break rank as popular discontent.

Yet this logic does not account completely for the frequency of *contiones*. Mouritsen discounts assessments that seek to explain them as tests of or expressions of popular will, pointing out that we know of no proposal that was withdrawn due only to the negative response of the *populus*. I do not find this explanation *per se* sufficient, though this weakness does not disprove Mouritsen’s overall thesis. At the same time, Mouritsen admits that the amount of energy given to the *contio* vs. its ritual/formalistic function poses a “fundamental paradox” (p. 72). He concludes by positing a political culture where the reputation of the elite depended on the approval of the *populus*, even if only as a symbolic representation. Reference to modern political theory, in general a strength of Mouritsen’s approach, anchors his discussion.

Chapter 3, “Consensus and Competition,” continues the discussion of historical period begun in chapter 2, focusing first on the implications inherent in labels such as “late.” Mouritsen agrees with H. Flower (*Roman Republics*, Princeton, 2010) that this label loses any meaning for such a long period, and moreover, the likelihood the epithet “late” implies, that the republic worked well prior to 133 BCE, is far from certain. Another factor is the tendency of Roman authors, particularly Livy, to idealize the past, as well as to shape particular episodes to fit a narrative arc. Oligarchic republics, Mouritsen notes, are typically unstable. Membership in Rome’s *nobiles*, depending as it did on winning elections, contributed to this tendency.

Another misconception has to do with the labels “populares” and “optimates.” Mouritsen discusses the history of this “binary model” (p. 112), from its originator, Theodor Mommsen (*Römisches Staatsrecht*, Leipzig, 1887), who saw these groups as representing ideological stances. Meier’s later interpretation identified these two groups as based on preferences for political method, e.g. “optimates” with their allegiance to senatorial authority, yet never reconciled it with his understanding of the Roman political network, which he characterized as consisting of fleeting and functional associations (‘Populares’ *RE* suppl. 10: 549-615). Recent studies by Robb (*Beyond Populares and Optimates. Political Language in the Late Republic*, Stuttgart, 2010) and Russell (‘Speech, competition, and collaboration: tribunician politics and the development of popular ideology’ in *Community and Communication. Oratory and Politics in Republican Rome*. Oxford, 2015) complicate earlier understanding of “populares” and “optimates,” demonstrating both the fluidity of the term “populares” as well as its use as a convenient label by contemporaries. Returning to Meier, he suggests that these terms were used more to reflect tensions and rivalries among the elites.

Mouritsen deploys this argument to suggest that the political class was unified in its support of the senate’s *auctoritas*, and that the *libertas* of the *populus* was not by default opposed to it. Rather, *libertas* could be used as an appeal if the politician’s goals were not concordant with those of the political establishment. Here he builds on the position stated in the first chapter. The failure of the republic was not due to ideology; rather it was the result of the willingness of the political elite to break norms and the growing inability to keep such politicians in check. This is not a new argument, of course, but Mouritsen’s positions buttress what is to me an already persuasive explanation.

The book fills its intended purpose very well. It is succinct yet accessible to a learned audience, with clear summaries and assessments of recent scholarly trends. I would assign many portions to students in an upper-level Roman history course, would require it for all graduate students in Classics and Ancient History, and would recommend it without hesitation in general.

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