NOT SO DEMOCRATIC AFTER ALL?

H. MOURITSEN: Plebs *and Politics in the Late Roman Republic*. Pp. vi + 164. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Cased, £37.50. ISBN: 0-521-79100-6.

Reacting against the 'democratic' interpretation of the Roman political system, M. presents an alternative and original picture of the workings of Roman society in the late republic. After an overview of the modern scholarship on the topic, M. identifies the subject of his investigation: it is not the *populus Romanus* as a constitutional concept, that had only formal powers, but 'the sum of individuals making up the citizen-body' (p. 16) that is at the centre of his study. In the second chapter, he investigates how large these crowds were and how their size affected their social composition. Drawing on these quantitative and qualitative studies, he then analyses the functioning of the *contio* (Chapter 3), of the legislative, and of the electoral assembly (Chapters 4 and 5). In his final chapter, he places the issues previously treated in their proper socio-economic context.

What emerges from M.'s analysis is certainly original. The forum, no more a centre of popular life, becomes 'the world of the élite' (p. 45). These 'men of substance', the *boni*, who, not belonging to the office-holding class, were able to dispose freely of their time, 'represented the natural political crowd in Republican Rome' (p. 43). The people, instead, whose economic situation was precarious, were politically inactive, if not depoliticized (p. 42). With the emergence of the *populares*, however, and the progressive loss of control of the senate over its own membership, a larger section of population became involved in politics.

Essentially M. adopts North's view, according to whom 'the popular will of the Roman people found expression in the context, and only in the context, of divisions of the oligarchy' (J. North, *P&P* 126 [1990], p. 18), but perhaps applies this model of interpretation in a manner that is too rigid. One sometimes has the impression that M. works on a priori assumptions (e.g. pp. 5, 42, 129) and that some literary sources are interpreted *ad hoc* to be fitted in his picture: e.g. Plautus *Curc*. 461–82 seems too easily dismissed as a 'comic exaggeration' (p. 43) or Cicero's *pro lege Manilia* is too univocally interpreted as 'above all an attempt at gaining Pompey's support' (p. 117). By hypothetical calculations and the support of inevitably biased literary sources, M. makes cautious speculations with extremely interesting results. He drastically reduces the estimate of the level of attendance to the voting procedure as previously valued by Taylor (*Roman Voting Assemblies* [Ann Arbor, 1966]) and MacMullen (*Athenaeum* 58 [1980], 454–7), and interestingly notes the absence of any mention of numbers of voters who attended the popular assemblies (pp. 33–4).

M. adopts a structural approach that considers the political system in its continuous practice and has the merit of trying to obtain a more articulated picture of Roman social strata; however, social and institutional developments are sometimes hard to follow. According to M., until the late second century B.C. the *boni* are the privileged constituency of the office-holding class, from whom they primarily differ only in wealth (p. 134). The people were too busy with their struggle for survival to be interested in politics; they were almost naturally apolitical, and consistently obstructed in their attempts at political activity. With the fracture in the élite and the emergence of the *populares*, the political potential of this larger section of the population is eventually exploited. Although on the one hand M. emphasizes that this happened largely through paid participation and corruption, he then admits that, when

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https://doi.org/10.1093/cr/53.1.158 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mobilized by politicians like Clodius, they were miserably paid (p. 60 n. 5), and, when corrupted, they were usually paid only after the announcement of the successful result (p. 111). The above picture seems too simplistic; also, it would be interesting to follow up the rôle of the *boni*.

Although not always convincing in his *pars destruens* of the 'democratic' reading of the Roman republic (very well taken, though, is the point about the non-identity of 'public' and 'democratic', p. 46), M.'s *pars construens*, especially in Chapter 5, is extremely interesting. The dismissal of *clientela* as a leading force of Roman socio-political structure, the technicalities of voting procedures—a subject not much discussed in modern scholarship—and a comprehensive picture of bribery (completed by the appendix on the *lex Licinia de sodalitatibus*) are amongst the most interesting and valuable parts of the book.

What M. seems to find difficult to insert in his picture is the relationship between ideology and political practice. Although sometimes he seems to argue that ideology is completely separated from political practice, and thus will not be able to tell us much about the working of politics (p. 15), he also admits the complexity of such a relationship and the centrality of *libertas* to Roman political identity. He is right in stressing the double nature of the *populus Romanus* as political concept and as real entity, but seems to fall into a methodological contradiction when discussing the people addressed by Cicero in the *de lege agraria* II (p. 55). But, to stay on M.'s ground, why was so much effort spent on rhetoric, if the audience were the *boni*, the speaker's supporters, and a very small number of common people who, in any case, would not have had a great say in the final result? In front of such a limited and apolitical crowd, would this eloquence and the meetings where it was delivered be useful in 'maintaining social peace and stability by offering the people a formal rôle in the political process' (p. 13)? Would it not have been easier to resort to a solution similar to that adopted for the *comitia curiata* and their 30 *lictores*?

This book, short but very densely packed, touching upon many issues currently under debate with an up-to-date bibliography, offers an innovative interpretation. Regardless of how many people will buy its arguments, this provocative book will certainly make people consider the Roman political system from a different perspective.

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PATER PATRIAE

M. STROTHMANN: *Augustus—Vater der res publica. Zur Funktion der drei Begriffe* restitutio—saeculum—pater patriae *im augusteischen Principat*. Pp. 320. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000. Paper, DM 98. ISBN: 3-515-07663-8.

The Augustan Age was a crucial period in Roman history because it brought to an end destructive civil wars that marked the end of the republic and also forged a new government that both imitated and yet was very different from the one that it replaced. Reassessment of Rome's first emperor and what he intended and achieved has been a major theme of classical scholarship for much of the past century. In the immediate past much of that work has been carried on by German scholars. The current work, a revision of the dissertation the author submitted at the

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