

OLIGARCHY AT ROME: A PARADIGM FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE

The language of politics knows “good words” and “bad”. One criterion is obvious. The former lend themselves to fraud and deception, the latter mean what they say. The prime specimen is oligarchy.

Terminology and categories avow an ancient tradition. For the Greeks it went back to Herodotus. He presents the notorious debate which a group of Persian noblemen brought up, ensued on the three forms of government, namely the rule of the one, the few, the many.

In the sequel that facile and popular definition was subverted by Aristotle in his *Politics*. Alert to facts and to varieties, Aristotle discovered four kinds of oligarchy, four of democracy. More important, a type that lay in between, combining the best features of each. He styled it *politeia*. That is, genuine republican government; the best of all in his verdict—and not a mere theory or ideal.

Before long emerged the notion of the “mixed constitution”. It comprised the three elements (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy), functioning by checks and balances and thereby conducive to stability. Thus the Spartan system, so some opined.

Polybius took up the notion and applied it to Rome when he analysed the institutions that brought success to the Republic in the Second War against Carthage and thereafter won dominion over the world. Cicero followed suit in the books *De re publica*, and the doctrine was destined to a long history. It acquired potency in the eighteenth century through writings of Montesquieu, and a visible culmination. In the year 1787 sagacious men constructed the Constitution of the United States.

Isolated criticism of the “mixed constitution” had intervened, it is true. Thus the historian Tacitus in curt dismissal: the thing was not easy to achieve or likely to last. Thomas Hobbes was hostile, ordaining that individual and ultimate sovereignty must exist in any commonwealth; and for Tocqueville *le gouvernement qu'on appelle mixte* had always seemed *une chimère*.

II

In forming his diagnosis, Polybius could benefit from the various experience of a general and a diplomat, enhanced by exile and a prolonged residence at Rome, and consorting with members of the governing class. Not so good, however, his addiction to theory. Polybius duly defined the three elements (Consuls, Senate, People) according to their powers and their functions. Excellent so far. But it would be requisite to ask pertinent questions. How were candidates for office selected, who determined the matters to be submitted to votes of the people? And further, who made decisions on policy, who gave instructions to the consuls?

In practice, the Senate, being a life-long body, had clear preponderance over magistrates and popular assemblies. But the Senate is not the adequate answer. As in later ages, the composition of that body has to be taken into account. In a total of about three

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hundred members it was dominated by two overlapping categories.

First, the high aristocracy, or *nobiles* by a convenient and valid distinction (although not a legal term). They belonged to families that had held the consulate and tried to keep it in monopoly. In which ambition the *nobilitas* was normally seconded by the voters, who tended to choose their patrons and the known names.

Second, the small company of the ex-consuls, whose enduring *autoritas* might outweigh *potestas*, the legal attribute of the annual magistrate. In their ranks may be detected the “real government” of the Republic. Those two categories fail to receive recognition in the analysis of Polybius (at least so far as extant). Or did he not perhaps take their significance for granted? He was much in the company of old Cato and the youthful Scipio Aemilianus. Nor would he remain unaware of *clientela*, pervasive in society and in the commonwealth.

That is not all. According to Cicero, Polybius found the institutions of the Romans defective on one count only: the State made no provision for the education of the young. In fact, the Greek writer was vulnerable himself. He did not allow for the informal apprenticeship in public life furnished by members of the family or the precepts of senior statesmen.

On military service followed the career of honours, in defined sequence and with minimum ages for office. Those regulations declared and enforced aristocratic equality. While inciting to competition, they curbed premature ambitions, they eliminated the unfit, painlessly. In consequence Rome exhibited a feature unique in the history of governing classes. Namely, regular training for the élite, all the way.

III

The imperial Republic broke the Kingdoms east of the Adriatic and in a short space (fifty three years, as Polybius stated more than once) acquired a world dominion. That was the achievement of an oligarchy, the governing order precisely, not merely the social upper class, the men of birth, wealth, education (Aristotle’s brief definition).

In the study of oligarchy through the ages Rome annexes primordial value. Yet Rome has not been accorded much attention by adepts of political history in the recent time. Toynbee abode under the spell cast on boy and youth by Hellas in the classical period. Again, when Popper wrote about *The Open Society and its Enemies*, he failed to see that Rome in its development from a city to an empire vouchsafed clear and manifold enlightenment.

The reason is not far to seek. There was a dearth of writers to write about. Distrust of abstract thought was ingrained in the Romans; and when books of philosophy came to be composed in the language of the Latins, they would not go very deep, or, if extending to political science, be much more than expositions of traditional wisdom.

Roman institutions were potently superior to anything the world had seen. Hence no use and no need for guidance from clever or sapient foreigners. As Cato proclaimed, single legislators produced in one act the constitutions of Greek cities whereas Rome was built on the sagacity of many statesmen and the long efflux of time.

That superiority became a necessary habit of thought. It was not called in question when the season of turmoil and instability arrived, and no impulsion arose to subvert it. When civil strife engendered the monarchy, the Caesars themselves conceived feelings of guilt and remorse; and few traces are discovered of any express and sustained apologia in terms of doctrine.

On the contrary approach, when facts and behaviour are inspected, the history of the Romans reveals and declares a remarkable coherence in what can be called "political thinking". Many of those who write about political thought in Antiquity glide with fatal ease from Aristotle to Augustine.

IV

As a subject of study, the Roman oligarchy conveys instruction on various counts.

1) The Senate maintained its rule for some four and a half centuries. Under the new order it kept nominal sovereignty and many functions; and, changing over in composition, it supplied magistrates and provincial governors.

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2) The long duration of ancient houses, notably in the Primeval aristocracy (the patriciate). Some of the most illustrious, for example Aemilii, Claudii, Fabii, lasted into the first imperial dynasty. As a class, patricians fared better than the plebeian *nobilitas* who had secured admission to the consulate towards the middle of the fourth century.

3) Extraneous recruitment. To begin with, the Romans were a mixed people, Latin, Sabine, Etruscan. Their dynamic city attracted immigrants. As the Republic expanded, so did the ambit of its citizen body, and patronage enlisted the better sort from the towns of Italy. The process went on, accelerated by rival leaders or factions in the Civil Wars and not abated when they ceased. On the contrary, the first dynasty shows senators and consuls from the provinces of the Roman West. Then at no long interval the lands of Greek speech made their entrance, the indigenous aristocracies quickly surpassing the descendants of Roman military colonists; and other regions came on in their turn, to produce in culmination emperors from the Danubian and Balkan lands.

4) Ease of study. Nomenclature was simple and constant, eschewing all titles taken from honour and rank in nobility or from inheritance of property. That is a welcome contrast to the variants and the complications that were paraded by aristocracies in countries of Europe from the early modern age onwards.

Moreover, the list of consuls yields visible instruction. The names publish the rise of families and their decline, their rivalries and their alliances, sometimes with noteworthy sequences or clusters. Thus, in a period when the patriciate was waning, the predominance engrossed by the Metelli, a dynastic house of plebeian origin: six in fifteen years (115 to 109).

5) The use of statistics. It is a question how and when such methods can raise a claim to be valid or valuable. The dearth of evidence for the ancient world (and its caprice) impairs a number of modern attempts to be "quantitative". Results are often obvious or trivial in the contribution they make to social history.

On the other side, the Roman Senate offers a restricted and remunerative field. Hitherto comprising about 300 members, the Senate was augmented to 600 by the ordinances of Sulla the Dictator. The magistracies supply the basis and structure, usefully

narrowing: 20 quaestors, 14 tribunes or aediles, 8 praetors, 2 consuls.

In normal seasons about 25 ex-consuls would be alive, and available to furnish a council of state, as previously. Sulla found only four surviving in the year 81. That was a consequence of the murderous insurrection of confederate Italy, of civil wars ensuing and pestilence. When towards the end of 71 the government had to face pressure from two army commanders, the consulars numbered only a dozen, some of them rather elderly. The total slowly rose. They were about 16 when in December of 63 the Senate pronounced sentence of death on the associates of Catilina, 24 in the year 50 (but three of them absent abroad, and three in exile). Finally, in December of 44, after Caesar's heir had raised his private army, with a new civil war on the way, the total of consulars had sunk to 17. Not an impressive company, so eloquent advocates of decision and action averred.

V

Enquiries of this kind carry a signal advantage. They afford relief or escape from sundry topics much esteemed in the past by scholars and men of letters: "*Doktoren, Magister, Schreiber und Pfaffen*".

1) The role of institutions. In any age or clime the question abides: for whom devised, by whom exploited. For a long time Roman history laboured under an obsession with "*Staatsrecht*". Voltaire defined it in dispraisal as *l'étude du droit public, pour laquelle la nation germanique est si renommée*.¹ From that respectable source issued much schema and dogma, to the obscuration of behaviour or mere conventions.

Rome stands unmatched in precellence of law. Yet in this legalistic and conservative nation resides a firm paradox. The great lawyers disclose scant concern with constitutional matters, their ingenuity went rather to property and inheritance. That is peculiar since Rome did not benefit (or suffer) from a written constitution; and the last century of the Republic in fact threw up many

¹ Voltaire, *Le siècle de Louis XIV*, ch. II.

questions for sharp or pertinacious debate. Public law was the domain of politicians. They operated with two elements in the system, both equivocal and conducing to deception. One was the state religion, augury being invoked, and generally for obstruction. The other was appeal to precedent and to ancestral custom (*mos maiorum*). That was a good way to achieve consensus through connivance. In practice it meant anything that would not alarm the oldest living senators. Hobbes was not slow to express scorn for the term “precedent” and for the lawyers who “use this false measure of justice”. And he continued, “grown old and stubborn, they appeal from custom to reason and from reason to custom, as it serves their turn.”²

2) Notions coloured by modern beliefs about parliamentary government. The appellations of “Whig” and “Tory”, emerging in the eighteenth century were taken to correspond with political parties, based on divergent principles and unabating rivalry. The reality was something different and highly complex. That had often no doubt been assumed or suspected by men of understanding. It was not decisively exposed until the recent time.³

Meanwhile, the doctrine had been incautiously transferred to the field of political competition at Rome, with dire consequences. It supported belief in the existence of two rival parties, contrary in their persuasions as well as in their methods. Namely *populares* and *optimates*. The former party dissolves under brief inspection. The term *popularis* denotes a man, a measure, a policy—and the policy was often opportunistic. If, as so often happened, an ambitious aristocrat started off on that line, he might hope to end his days as a senior statesman (one of the “*principes*”), unless blocked or destroyed by a patriotic consensus of “good citizens”.

Thus words and names. *Optimates* by contrast stands for a solid and tangible group. In this context Cicero in his treatise comes out better than would be expected from orations delivered before Senate or People. As he concedes, “when certain persons hold possession of the *res publica* through wealth or birth or other

² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. XI.

³ L.B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 1929; *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, 1939. Hence much controversy. For a fair and lucid summary, see J.P. Kenyon, *The History Men*, 1983, p. 251 ff.

resources, they are styled *Optimates* but are in truth a *factio*".⁴

On this engaging notion, proffered by a writer normally "improving" in manner and purpose, *Optimates* emerge as the effective government. Family and faction, those elements link the competition for honour and power during the epoch of the conquering Republic to its final enhancement, embracing the resources of provinces and armies, when the old order went down.

3) Language and Rhetoric. In the domain of Classical Studies the orations of Cicero, the most versatile advocate of the day, could not fail to retain favour—and even inspire credence among the ingenuous. Some compensation availed on the other side from Sallust, a subversive historian who had put Thucydides to good employ. That model and his own experience of affairs, impelled Sallust to distrust of the fair-seeming pretexts, the *honesta nomina* that mask the facts of power. As he makes his Cato say in the oration, we have let words forfeit their meaning.⁵ For his own part, the historian avoids the word *Optimates*, preferring *factio* or *pauci potentes*.

4) Romanticism. Before the Republic ended they had been fabricating an ideal past. Dominion abroad brought change at home. But change could only be for the worse, for men interpreted the consequences in terms of a continuing decline in morality and religion. While the political class, especially the nobility, came under heavy incrimination, the heroes of old time were extolled and embellished.

On a divergent estimate, the last generation of the Republic calls for redemption. It stands out as an epoch of energy, vitality, innovation. Those qualities, however, contributed to the catastrophe. Rome perished of her own vigour, so it was said.

When the new order was taking shape, when *dux* turned into *princeps*, the reforms he promulgated in reaction from the sinful epoch and the year of tribulation added a fresh layer of deceit and sentimentality to the worship of the past. Through demographic and matrimonial legislation Caesar Augustus sought to bring the upper order under the discipline of salubrious habits. Publicists and some of the poets duly lent their help.

⁴ Cicero, *De re publica* III. p. 23.

⁵ Sallust, cat. 52. II. "*vera vocabula rerum amisimus*".

With much success, that may well be doubted.⁶ The commerce of the sexes is not easy to regulate—still less to uncover. And on one count the advocates of “moral re-armament” encountered rapid and visible defeat. The return of material prosperity admitted no denial. Luxury grew and flourished uncurbed for a century, from the Battle of Actium to the fall of the dynasty. Such is the express testimony of the historian Tacitus.

5) Biography. That ancient art (of easy access) is applied with eager assiduity to emperors and to certain figures high in prominence during the last thirty years of the Republic. To Caesar and Cicero, but also to Pompeius and Crassus. Yet only for Cicero is the sort of evidence to hand that permits a genuine biographical treatment. Even for Caesar it hardly avails. The products presented look like slices of historical narrative—which they sometimes betray by the subtitle “a political biography”.

Now Cicero, while exercising influence (albeit intermittent) was not the leader of a defined group or an autonomous force. It was desirable instead to investigate the whole upper order in its composition and behaviour, with the *nobilitas* and the consulars as the central and unifying theme.

VI

Five topics have now been registered, which as preoccupations or fashions impede a proper understanding. Reaction from their dominance turned attention towards families and factions, towards the personal ties and obligations that pervaded social and political life.

Let one specimen suffice in passing. Aemilii and Scipiones avow a close affinity in the era of the great wars. The second Africanus was an Aemilius by birth, taken in adoption by a Scipio Aemilianus, destroyed Carthage and acquired a kind of primacy in the state. However, the party led by Aemilianus was split by his cousin Tiberius Gracchus: only a tribune of the plebs, it is true, but behind him can be discerned the potent support of three ex-consuls. Next, as the Scipionic group began to lapse and fail, ensued the predominance of the Metelli. One of them was Sulla's

⁶ P.A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower*, 1971, p. 566.

principal ally; and Metelli with linked families formed the core of the government which the Dictator inaugurated. Finally, the last member of the Scipiones who can be certified beyond doubt. He is Metellus Scipio, adopted by the testament of Sulla's ally. The dynast Pompeius married his daughter (in 52). Had Fortune reversed her decision in the African campaign (in 46), Rome might have known a ruler bearing the style *Imperator Scipio Invictus*.

VII

Preoccupation with families or factions entails obvious hazards. In the first place, schematism or other exaggerations in method. Although some groups survived through vicissitudes, they were still subject to rivalries or personal quarrels. A family might divide in peace or in the conduct of a war; and, the broader a party, the more fissiparous.

Large issues or vital principles tend to be obscured. Yet there is a path of salvation. Public life had a dual aspect, or two levels.

First, the normal and traditional competition among the *nobiles*. They were not inspired by ideals or intent on carrying out a programme. Instead, honour and prestige, to be won through the resources of birth and family, of allies and clients. Those habits contributed vitality to the commonwealth, and a kind of equilibrium. The aristocracy ruled through consensus, and any foreign menace found it cohesive.

Second, in the course of time, different and destructive issues supervened in domestic politics. Two aristocratic tribunes, the Gracchi, raised agrarian and social questions of extreme gravity and wide repercussions. Which on a standard view initiated a century of revolution, beginning in the year 133.

A generation later a crisis in the government's relations with the Italian allies issued in their secession and a great war. In common usage it is styled the "Social War". Better and more precise, the *Bellum Italicum*, the term that Cicero and Livy preferred. Next, Roman civil warfare itself, and the full impact of the Republic's foreign empire, ushering in the epoch of the dynasts, the "monarchic faction leaders", as a later Greek writer called them. The sequence runs Sulla, Pompeius, Caesar, Antonius, with

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Caesar's heir for conclusion.

The men of birth had regarded the *res publica* preserve and possession; and the system suited the ambitions of the dynasts. But the game of politics now involved provinces and armies and the whole world. When personal rivalries issued in a breakdown of Diplomacy, the majority of the ex-consuls rallied to the cause of Pompeius—and the authority of lent impulsion for action against the proconsul of Gaul.

Victorious in the wars, Caesar proved unable to conciliate the upper order; and prominent members of his own party joined in the conspiracy of Cassius and Brutus. Isolated in an autocracy that had not been the goal of his political career, Caesar ended as a splendid failure. Not the first of the emperors but the last of the *nobiles*.

VIII

To resume. The *nobilitas* has been assessed as the central theme in the history of the Republic, with indication of the reasons that delayed recognition for a long time. By good fortune the prime authors of the remarkable change stand on clear identity. Namely Gelzer in 1912 with the concise and economical *Nobilität*, Münzer in 1920 with his elaborate researches into the annals of aristocratic families.⁷

Those books conveyed pertinent and multiple instruction. Yet they missed either acceptance or contestation until a long interval elapsed, even in their own land. Elsewhere impressive publications of the thirties barely disclose traces of influence, such as *The Cambridge Ancient History* VIII and IX (1930 and 1932). It was only in September of the year 1939 that some compensation accrued, albeit imperfect, since brought forward in brief preface to a non-Republican exposition.⁸

⁷ F. Münzer, *Römische Adelsparteien und Adelsfamilien*, 1920. For Gelzer, see now *The Roman Nobility*, 1969: translation and a perceptive introduction by R. Seager.

⁸ *The Roman Revolution*. Published on September 7, 1939.

IX

So far the Republic. The new order ensuing opened a new chapter in the history of oligarchy. That *novus status* exhibits a double aspect. Caesar Augustus was the last in the line of the great “*imperatores*”. He established “an absolute monarchy under the disguise of a commonwealth”. Such was Gibbon’s verdict. In other words, no more division of sovereignty but centralized government based on delegation from *Senatus Populusque*. There was a different and visible form of continuity. Not the fair words and the legal definitions, but the return of the old families as necessary substance and adornment of the *res publica*. The autocrat needed allies, and aristocrats responded with alacrity. A new generation providentially available stands resplendent on the roll of consuls in the second decade of the reign; and several went on to command great armies.

At the same time the rules promoted men from the Italian towns, successors to those whom the wars had thrown up: generals, bankers, army-contractors. It was not possible or expedient to hold back classes or groups that had benefited from the Revolution. That term, by the way, has incurred dispraisal or denial from certain scholars who apply standards dictated by modern history or doctrines.⁹ Yet a violent transfer had occurred of power and of property, with a new type of government thence emerging. Such are the facts. No valid reason subsists for refusing the name.

X

In due sequence follows the role of oligarchy under the rule of the Caesars. As previously, the question arises how shall the subject be studied, and with what methods or purposes. To begin with, the dearth of prose literature surviving from the reign of Augustus is a grave impediment. It can be got round in part by recourse to the Annals of Tacitus which describe the comportment of the upper order and the decline of the ancient houses, from Tiberius Caesar to Nero. After the end of the dynasty, the written evidence

⁹ Thus several contributors to *La Rivoluzione Romana*. Biblioteca di Labeo, Napoli, 1982.

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becomes deficient. It is supplemented (or rather replaced) by epigraphy. Numerous inscriptions from Italian or provincial cities reveal the origins and careers of senators. On which can be constructed a political and social history, to modify and transcend mere biographies of emperors.

The necessary repertorium was to hand in the *prosopographia Imperii Romani*, comprising the period from the Battle of Actium to the accession of Diocletian. Begun under inspiration from Mommsen, the three volumes (over 1400 pages) were published in 1897 and 1898. Nevertheless, many years passed before the material found exploitation—at least in single books of any compass or resonance.

Needless to say, fresh evidence accumulates.¹⁰ Industry and perspicacity have now achieved notable results in this science and art.

XI

With the monarchy, the government changed, but not the social structure; and early imperial history runs continuous from the last epoch of the Republic. The pursuit of imperial prosopography might well dispose a scholar to look backwards, thence to derive support and encouragement.

Caesar Augustus in his dynastic policy perpetuated the habits and practices of the old aristocracy.¹¹ He had no son, only stepsons and a nephew. But the marriages of his sister had equipped him with no fewer than four nieces. Each and all were put to good employ in the early years of the reign. Then and in the sequel alliances formed, notably with the same of the most illustrious houses of the patriciate: Aemilii, Claudii, Fabii. In short, the first dynasty is a nexus of noble families—engendering fateful complications and many deaths. Those families perished, not all (it is true) from propinquity with the Caesars.

The descendants of the Augustan *novi homines* duly accrued to the high aristocracy through marriage alliances. Their successors, the clients and agents of the Caesars came out as claimants for the

¹⁰ The second edition, begun in 1933, has now reached the letter M.

¹¹ See now *The Augustan Aristocracy*, Oxford, 1986.

power after Nero's end. Vespasian, one of the army commanders, was able to found a dynasty, brief in duration.

The provincial emperors of the third dynasty were socially superior to Vespasian. Senators issuing from cities in Southern Spain and Southern France, choice products of birth, wealth and education, met and coalesced at the capital.¹² Trajan and his successor had Italica for *patria*, an old settlement near Seville. But Trajan's wife came from Nîmes, and there is a strong infusion from Narbonensis in the nexus. Both grandfathers of Antoninus Pius were Nîmois—and both consuls for the second time.

The process furnishes solid testimony to an "open society". It was not the only manifestation which that age witnessed. As advertised by Hadrian when a century and a half had elapsed since the defeat of Marcus Antonius and the Queen of Egypt, the Empire had become Greco-Roman. During the reign of his predecessor, Plutarch conceded parity in the two civilizations by composing parallel biographies of Greeks and Romans. More significant, the advent of Greeks in the governing order, soon to conspicuous effect. Through the friendship and patronage of Trajan, the year 105 opened with a pair of consuls from western Asia, each a "bis consul". The imperial Senate in the age of the Antonines represents an alliance and concordance between the propertied and educated classes of the cities throughout the wide world.

XII

So far, on summary indications, the long process that illustrates the permanence of oligarchy, the necessities inherent in autocracy, the nature of a government that endured, even were the ruler infant or senescent, a scholar or a buffoon. The phrase *longue durée* enjoys much favour and acclaim these days—as though it were a recent discovery.

Another fashionable notion can serve. It may afford instruction on the flank if a passing glance is cast on comparative history. As Lucien Febvre proclaimed, "*cette grande dame chère à Pirenne*,

¹² The process was set forth in Tacitus, 1958, ch. XLIV.

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chère à Marc Bloch, chère à nous tous ici, qui s'appelle l'histoire comparée."¹³

A procedure of this kind entails extreme caution and certain provisos. It is advisable to keep off wide-ranging speculations or ambitious doctrines; and it is expedient at the lowest count that any society adduced be strictly comparable with Rome (both Republican and Imperial).

History was split by the French Revolution—or by Industrial Revolution, so it has been said. The notion attracts although ragged at the edges, variable according to countries, and necessitating constant resort to “ages of transition”. None the less, it permits a bold conception, to envisage all that went before as Ancient History; and in consequence to embrace in one and the same category Greece and Rome, Middle Ages, Renaissance. Advantage accrues in general estimates of the writing of history. Thucydides, Livy and Tacitus can be seen as forerunners of Machiavelli and Guicciardini (not merely as models for those who wrote in Latin), while even Voltaire and Gibbon (although precursors of Macaulay) can be admitted without discomfort.¹⁴

Developing that assumption, European aristocracies stand on offer, from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth. They declare patent and even striking resemblances to Rome. In the first place, epochs which in France and in England annexed the appellation of “Augustan”. Each, by the way, being stable and confident, was marked, like Rome, by the dearth of political theory at all original.¹⁵

Following on the factional strife of the Fronde, Louis XIV directed his efforts to taming the high aristocrats. He reduced their territorial power, mustered them at Versailles, bound them in chains of gold and subservience. And the autocrat had learned another lesson from recent transactions. The predominance exercised by Richelieu and by Mazarin, each in his way comparable to Sejanus in relation to Tiberius Caesar, deterred the

¹³ L. Febvre, *Combats pour l'Histoire*, 1953, 115.

¹⁴ And in one aspect their age can be regarded as the rise of “néo-paganisme”. Thus P. Gay, *The Enlightenment*, 1967.

¹⁵ For English reservations about the ruler himself, see H.D. Weinbrot, *Augustus Caesar in “Augustan” England*, 1978.

young king from succumbing to a prime minister. Those potentates had been initiating dynasties of their own. Richelieu acquired Condé (a grandson of Henri IV) as husband for his niece; and Condé's brother married a niece of Mazarin (one of a company of five). Instead, the monarch chose agents of bourgeois extraction—whose families however rose in rank and intermarried with the aristocracy of birth.

Any who frequent Caesar Augustus and his entourage will look not in vain for guidance from the pages of Saint-Simon. Actors change but not scene and behaviour. Thus the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, in curt comment on the court of Hadrian and of other rulers.

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In the next century oligarchs in England were more fortunate than the subjects of the *Roi Soleil*. Retaining liberty and power under the guise of parliamentary government, they were able to exploit for convenience kings whom they imported from Hanover; and they were happy to acknowledge an affinity with Augustan Rome, authentic and highly congenial as well as lavishly advertised in all ways. Tacitus and Pliny, the subversive analyst and the elegant social commentator, would have felt at home in this company.

XIII

If Rome is adduced for parallels in behaviour, sharp and distinctive contrasts should not be omitted, not all of them deriving from the absence of monarchy as the fount of honour. They bring out the civic stamp in what began as a military aristocracy and subsisted in a governing class, the like of which the world has not seen. As elsewhere, negative criteria impart instruction¹⁶. Half a dozen specimens may be briefly registered.

¹⁶ See, for example, "Marriage Alliances and Avoidances at Rome", *Diogenes* n. 135, Fall 1986.

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First, the Republic knew no titles taken from the holding of property or otherwise variable.

Second, no heraldry, no ornamental attire—and no wearing of uniforms within the precincts of the city. Only the broad purple stripe on the toga for senators, the narrow stripe for the second order in society (the *Equites*). The service of the state determined rank.

Third, no duelling. Anger and quarrels found an outlet in the courts of law or in senatorial debates.

Fourth, no capital punishment for offences against religion or the state. Instead, voluntary retreat into exile was permitted.

Fifth, no insistence on descent by blood. Failing sons, heirs were taken from families on social parity.

Sixth, no bastards in high office, like the dukes or cardinals on show in France and Spain. The offspring of irregular unions lapsed to the plebs. But the consequences of adultery among the eminent might be masked by connivance—or suspected in an adoption or a testament.

XIV

In the course of a disquisition both selective and concise, emphasis was laid on the reasons that retarded the emergence of Roman oligarchy as a subject of remunerative study. That theme leads on to other climes and to recent developments. Various factors contributed to a general and growing concern with prosopography, as it has now come to be called.¹⁷ Among other phenomena may be noted:

1) Aversion from elaborate or pretentious systems, especially if they betray a theological motive. The names of Spengler and Toynbee occur.

2) Hostility towards political or social doctrines, combined with a sharper scrutiny of language.

3) Suspicion about institutions. It was intensified, for some at least, when in 1936 a constitution was promulgated for the Soviet Union.

¹⁷ As presentation in clear and detailed exposition by L. Stone, *The Past and the Present*, 1981, ch. 2, "Prosopography".

4) Distrust of the labels attached to parties. It took little insight to discern in French deputies a “*république des camarades*” or to discover conservatives in many of “*les Radicaux*”.

5) Revulsion from military and diplomatic history of a traditional type.

6) Fatigue with the families’ biographies that concentrated on the most prominent personages, to the obscuration of significant groups.

7) Analysis of the personnel of government. For example, its composition and recruitment. The proportion of old Etonians in cabinets presided over by Eden and by Macmillan could not elude; and the company of agents enlisted by Roosevelt furnished various instruction.

8) Recognition of regional diversities. Thus study of the French provinces proved attractive—or the contrast between the “first families” of Virginia and Boston.

9) The appeal of local or urban history, notably in relation to the central government of a country.

10) The search for dynamic minorities among members of learned or scientific societies.

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Above all, while studies deepened horizons widened. Curiosity extended to distant continents and to diverse civilizations. Inspection of elites in Latin America brings benefit to comparative history. In China may be discovered a theme relevant to Rome, namely the mandarin class. They match imperial administrators in the age of the Antonines (most of them highly educated)—and they evoke the civil service as it took shape in England, based in the first instance on classical studies.¹⁸

XV

Epilogue. Equity demands brief allusion to the limitations inherent in preoccupation with minorities and the pursuit of

¹⁸ Benefit can be got from consulting R. Wilkinson (ed.), *Governing Elites. Training and Selection*, 1969.

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detailed enquiries. Criticism arises on several counts.

In the first place, the wider issues tend to be passed over, and with them the “higher things” and the more creditable provinces of human behaviour. The substance of politics narrows into competition for wealth or power, it dissolves into faction and petty intrigue for office or influence. An aphorism invented by Stendhal comes in handy: “*Des talents! du mérite! Bah, soyez d’une coterie.*”¹⁹

The ultimate assumptions are often austere if not repellent. Recourse to Hobbes brings some comfort. Men, he says, “naturally love liberty, and dominion over others.” They act for gain, for safety, for reputation.²⁰ Hobbes reproduced a maxim of Thucydides. In defence of their imperial power the Athenians declare (not once but twice in the same speech) a law ordained by nature: fear compelled them, and honour and profit.²¹ For Hobbes, the Greek historian meant much more than a task of translation. He conceived a congeniality.²²

Next, intellectual history suffers neglect. No surprise, since it is far from easy to link ideas to words, concepts to events.

Again, world history, enjoying high esteem but not always managed with success by exponents from Bossuet down to the modern time. It was not merely divine providence that bothered Voltaire. He fastened eagerly on the omission of China: Bouvard and Pécuchet echoed him in Flaubert’s novel when surveying history for a subject: “*L’aigle de Meaux est un farceur! il oublie la Chine.*” Thus Bouvard. Pécuchet concurred, and advised him to read Vico (an author not yet emergent to fame and favour). Pécuchet was also alert to prosopography. As he pronounced, “*Les personnages de second plan ont parfois une influence énorme.*”

Nor had Voltaire been negligent. In appendices to the *Siècle de Louis XIV* he registered the marshals and admirals of France and

¹⁹ The epigraph to *Le Rouge et le Noir*, ch. XXVII. He cited Télémaque as the source.

²⁰ *Leviathan*, ch. XIII.

²¹ Thucydides I. 75.3; 76.2.

²² The translation preceded the publication of *Leviathan* by thirteen years. Influence on the author is seldom recognised in modern books. See the pertinent remarks of G.E.M. de Sainte Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, 1972, 26 ff.

likewise the children of the monarch (including eleven illegitimate). Further, and in copious detail, catalogues of artists and men of letters.

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Finally, and a grave reproach, neglect of the lower classes and mass movements. Like slavery, those elements were taken for granted by historians in the past or regarded as irrelevant to the design of their narrations. Not that they were oblivious. Thus Gibbon, in casual and passive comment somewhere: “the largest and more useful portion of mankind”.

Until the recent time that portion had not been easy to write about, being neither active nor vocal. Reversion to social and political behaviour as manifested in individuals and defined groups may allow the writing of history to come back to action and change, and to narrative. Fancies pass and fashions modify.

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²³ L. Stone, *The Past and the Present*, 1981, ch. 3, “The Revival of Narrative”.