THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
POLITICAL POWER IN THE ANCIENT WORLD
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Note: This text contains a narrative of Roman history (drawn from across three successive chapters of the cited work) that highlights many of the key inflection points of Anacyclosis. While many portions of the original text have been omitted, all text below is presented in its original sequence. This text also explains how various Mediterranean civilizations, at least in their earlier historical stages, followed a similar pattern of political development, and faced similar internal socioeconomic conflicts, albeit on a staggered time scale.

Chapter Six. Rome and Italy

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Etruria changed from a monarchy to an oligarchy in the same way as all the Mediterranean peoples known to us, and probably for similar reasons or by example. The King's power waned as the importance of the upper classes increased through their control of land which had probably been held in the first place as collective property. This gave them the means of arming themselves and maintaining the horses they needed. The Etruscan monarchy was similar in its organisation to the monarchies of all the Mediterranean peoples, Indo-European or not. A class which held power by right of conquest possessed the means of production, land and animals, in common. The subject peoples worked the land and tended the animals on behalf of the rulers. In return they expected to be protected from human and animal attacks, and to benefit to some extent from the more elaborate quests for wealth and booty undertaken by the nobles.

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The development of the Roman state shows many characteristics in common with other Mediterranean countries, although the time sequence is sometimes different. The parallel with some Greek cities is particularly close. Similar social, economic and cultural traditions, as well as the exchange of ideas which affected especially the development of the Roman religion, help to explain the affinity of Greece and Rome as something like the affinity of the various Greek cities. But in both cases it is not always possible to trace exactly parallel courses of development, because of the different geographical, political and social conditions of the various centres.

The political conflicts resulting from changing social conditions in Rome reflected those that had occurred in Attica. Archaic laws on the protection of property and the individual contributed to poisoning the relations between the patrician and plebian classes. When precious metals became scarce, and shortages of raw materials led to frequent famines, following the collapse of the prosperous Etruscan domination, the situation worsened. The defaulting debtor was liable to personal enslavement or even death. Such laws as this were evidence of the political supremacy of the wealthy classes. They were incompatible with the increasing importance of the formerly poorer classes who no longer tolerated the existence of privileges which no longer had any justification.

The introduction of compulsory military service for the plebs made it perfectly clear that active participation in the life of the state no longer depended on birth into families of a certain inherited

position in the state, but on the possession of a certain income. The revolution in Roman politics closely resembled what happened in Athens, substituting the armed infantry for the cavalry and chariots of the warrior lords, so that the less wealthy classes could afford to equip themselves.

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The plebs had threatened many times to abandon Rome and withdraw their support of the patricians, and now they carried out their threat by retreating to the Mons Sacer. Having gained economic and political parity, they claimed legal equality next, demanding a written code of civil and criminal law, as the Greek lower classes had done before them. In this way they hoped to free themselves from the arbitrary judgments of patrician justice. It was the resistance to this demand that led to the revolutionary development of which the power of the state was vested in a group of ten patricians. Under their rule the patricians successfully secured the preservation of their privileges, and all the plebians got was a written code of laws, the Twelve Tables, which embodied the principles of ancient Roman law.

Much later on, the plebians were at last admitted to office as magistrates, and the transformation of the state reached a point at which the 'Concilium Plebis', called by the tribunes, could issue decrees which were binding on all citizens, including the patricians, on the lines of the Comitia Centuriata.

Recognition of the validity of the plebiscites led to another revolution. The timocratic system of the Comitia Centuriata, which gave the wealthiest citizens the greatest voting power, came into conflict with the system of the tribunal assembly, which revived the old Greek idea of one man, one vote, without reference to his birth or wealth. …

Once the validity of the plebiscites had been recognised, the deliberations of an assembly where men's votes did not depend on their incomes were often given greater weight than those of the Comitia Centuriata. The will of the plebs sometimes counted for more than the will of the patricians, and the poor sometimes prevailed over the rich. …

When the importance of the old patrician-plebian division, reflecting the archaic Roman state, had finally dwindled away, a powerful sector of Roman society took over complete control. Its power came from its wealth and its control of the means of production: land and capital. …

Chapter Seven. Rome and the Mediterranean

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The emergence of Rome as a world power brought with it profound changes in the political system and class relationships in the city. In particular, the oligarchy lost the firm hold that it had kept throughout the years of war. Before the war the attitude of the soldiers to their leaders had not created any problems, since under the political system then operating the men who held power were in fact the most important and influential members of society. But in the long wars, the longer periods of military service demanded of the contingents, the increasing importance of the commanders' personal influence with their armies, and of booty as an incentive to the troops, were all bringing about changes in the citizen-soldier's attitude to his commanders and his fellow citizens.

… The leaders, with the tacit consent of their troops, gained for themselves power and prestige far exceeding the bounds of tradition and law. In return, the soldiers attached themselves to their leaders in rather the same way as clients to their patron.

The economic developments which followed the wars increased the distance between the classes. Many small land-owners lost their farms and joined the ranks of the proletarians. This started the process of the concentration of capital in the hands of a few families in the form either of vast estates or of money earned by trade and investment. Any such large inheritance naturally became the focus of a group of smaller fortunes. This situation had its parallel in the world of politics, as the control of the Senate and the magistratures was concentrated in the hands of a few families.

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Although the distinction between plebians and patricians was no longer of any importance, a new distinction was appearing, between the men whose wealth was based on land and those who had made their money in business; between the senatorial caste and the 'equites'.

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The conservative party in Rome wanted to avoid any changes in customs or human relationships which might lead to changes in the balance of power between the social classes. …

The equestrian order continued to grow in importance. The number of slaves increased, and so did the number of freedman who had made fortunes; they were beginning to be a considerable feature of social and economic life. The small-scale land-owner, unable to face ever-rising prices and the loss involved in his long stretch of military service, was selling out to the great landed proprietors, who were growing richer every day on the profits of huge estates run by armies of slaves.

These changes in the pattern of economic life were inevitable, and attempts to restore the position of the small farmer by legislation were doomed to failure. It was an attempt by the political authorities to do this that caused the most serious crisis in the history of the ancient world …

The "Lex Agraria" [*of the Gracchi*] was designed to redistribute the public lands, taking them back from the landed proprietors who used them for pasturing their flocks, and restoring them to farmers for cultivation. The landowning capitalists reacted vigorously to the threat, and attempts to put the law into operation met with violent responses from both parties, and unleashed political hopes and grievances which until then had lacked a cause which would give them the strength of unity.

The general disturbance caused by the government's attempt to introduce economic reforms revealed the inadequacy of the senatorial oligarchy to the task of reorganising Roman political life. In particular the disturbances brought to light the mutinous state of the men who were forced to serve in the armies which had given Rome her power and wealth, and who claimed that their influence in the state bore no relation to their serves to it.

The Latin and Italian allies felt that they were excluded from any effective participation in the rights of citizenship, and that their importance in the life of the community was not sufficiently recognised. Even the Roman citizens of the lower classes realised that although in theory they enjoyed full legal rights, in fact this applied only to their rights as private persons, for their position in the census lists prevented them from having an effective part to play in the government of the state. The oligarchs kept all the power in their own hands, and made use of the lower classes as soldiers and labourers while denying them the political representation that their labour had earned them.

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… An attempt to extend full political rights to all the Italian allies by bringing in legislation that would alter the balance of power in favour of the masses, could not be implemented, and provoked a war with the Italians…

Rome defeated the Italians, ruthlessly suppressing the revolutionary movement. … although the Romans had won the war and taken bloody reprisals, they had been forced to make concessions which changed the political situation in the peninsula in a way that seemed to damage the sovereignty of their city-state.

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The conservatives signed their own death warrant when they first made use of the army to influence the course of internal politics. The troops realised the possibilities offered to them by their own strength, and the way was open to the revolutionary change that threatened the survival of the Roman empire and disrupted its traditions; the transformation of the army into a political party, outside the ranks of ordinary citizens, with its own policies and the means to see that they were carried out. A new factor had to be considered in the organisation of the state: the army, used as a political force by commanders who continued the tendency first noticed in the Punic wars [*which ended 146 B.C.*] of turning themselves into the leaders of political factions, and offering to lead their men to the realisation of their hopes, and give them the position in the state which their services to the new empire deserved. The introduction of the army into Roman politics prepared the way for the great change that came over the state, when political power was concentrated in the hands of a single man, who represented the interests and longings of all the various groups which made up the mass of the Roman political community, but were excluded from the rights and benefits which they considered to be their due.

Chapter Eight. The Roman Empire

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The man with an innate capacity for command had gifts and opportunities which he could not fulfil within the traditional oligarchy. … When the troops began to feel that the state had not treated them justly, but made use of their indispensable services without acknowledging their importance, it was to him that they turned to obtain restitution.

... in the end the soldiers and all the rest of the poor and dissatisfied turned to the "war lords" as to forces beyond the law and the constitution, who would realise their hopes in spite of conservative opposition.

The fate of the ruling class of landowners and aristocrats was sealed the moment they chose revolution, the denial of the discipline of law, and had recourse to violence rather than make financial concessions which would have meant a personal sacrifice but which would have enabled the valuable class of small farmers to be reconstituted after its destruction by the economic vicissitudes of the long wars. … the ruling class was not prepared to make any concessions to reality, and was interested only in preserving the privileges that it clung to all the more tenaciously for the knowledge that it no longer had any right to them. The upper classes found themselves in the situation which always precedes political revolution: they lost the adaptability and sensitivity needed to grapple with the task of government, and so had to entrench themselves in defensive positions which ensured their decline and downfall.

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