

overall conclusion, that spaces of justice were themselves judicial actors, is amply demonstrated across time, space, and genre.⁵

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M. A. Robb, *Beyond Populares and Optimates: Political Language in the Late Republic* (Historia Einzelschriften 213), Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010. 225 pp. ISBN 978-3-515-09643-0.

M. A. Robb's study (henceforth R.) on the political language of the late Republic argues that 'the terms *populares* and *optimates* were not common and everyday labels used to categorise certain types of late Republican politicians. Instead it is proposed that the political language of the period reflected contemporary concerns about maintaining the aristocratic system' (167). Roman aristocracy, the author points out, defined itself on the basis of offices bestowed by the people, and notions of public service and respect for 'the sovereignty of the people' were at the heart of its self-image and presentation. Since all politicians had to claim that they were 'acting in the popular interest', 'public political discourse focused on whether a particular matter was in the interest of the people' (167). Under such conditions, *popularis* could not, in R.'s opinion, function habitually as a "party" label that distinguished a certain kind of politician from another, the *optimates* (the latter term signifying qualities claimed by all members of the elite and thus similarly ill-suited to serve as a label designating one of the two rival camps within it). Rather, the usual procedure was to claim — as Cicero does on various occasions — that while one was a 'true *popularis*' one's opponents were false ones. The usual term applied by members of the senatorial elite to those of their colleagues who "broke ranks" and undermined the aristocratic Republic by demagoguery was, according to the author, *seditioni* rather than *populares*.

After surveying various modern views on the significance of the labels in question in Chapter 1, R. examines, in Chapter 2, the passages in Cicero's *Pro Sestio* often considered as the "smoking gun" attesting to the existence and centrality of the popular/optimate political divide (96-135), and argues against this interpretation. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are dedicated to a 'lexicographical examination' of the way the terms *populares* and *optimates* are used in the Ciceronian corpus, as well as by Cicero's contemporaries and later Roman writers. R.'s conclusions challenge the usual political dichotomy associated with these terms. Chapter 6 deals with the terms *sedition* and *seditioni*. Chapter 7 examines the terminology of faction and political strife in the writings of Sallust, similarly seeking to 'deconstruct' the popular/optimate dichotomy. Appendix A lists the sources referred to in the book, categorised according to the various and diverse meanings of the two terms in question. Appendix B on G. Gracchus and his laws concludes that 'the most useful description for G. Gracchus and his unique programme of legislation seems to be "Gracchan"' (192). As for the last point, one wonders if anyone has ever called Gaius Gracchus an optimate. If not, then the labels in question were not, after all, wholly lacking in political significance of the kind usually attributed to them.

The book is learned and meticulous; it is certainly a useful contribution to the study of the language of late-republican politics. But the benchmarks set for the two terms in question, in order

⁵ I noticed no typographical errors affecting the sense, although a spot check of the bibliography found the 2005 *PBSR* article 'Pits and fora: a reply to Henrik Mouritsen' attributed to Giuseppe Camodeca as well as its true author, Filippo Coarelli.

to be recognised as political labels signifying two rival sides in Roman politics, are unrealistically high; hence, excessive significance is attributed to the fact that they often fail this test. It could never have been expected that these terms would function, straightforwardly, as ‘common and everyday labels used to categorise certain types of late Republican politicians’ — that is to say, as mutually recognised and identically employed (on both sides) markers of two clearly distinct political identities, similarly to the way the official name of a modern political party functions. The author notes that ‘it is now universally accepted that *populares* and *optimates* were not political parties or groups in the modern sense’ (12). Nevertheless, much of his deconstruction of the “party-political” meaning attributed to those terms hinges on a tacit assumption that unless Roman political labels can be shown to have had a “party-political” meaning in a sense that is more or less modern, they should not be understood as “party-political” in any significant sense. But Romans must have thought that they were referring to something politically significant when they spoke of *partes* or *factiones* or used such expressions as *duo genera eorum qui versari in re publica studuerunt* (Cic. *Sest.* 96) or *hanc is in re publica viam, quae popularis habetur, secutus est* (Caesar, according to Cicero in *Cat.* 4.9.). It is indeed important to note, and to bear in mind, that this *via popularis* should in no way be translated as the ‘Popular Party of the Roman Republic’ (PPRP). But it is equally important to note that this expression must have referred to something intelligible and politically significant to Cicero’s audience in the Senate. This remains true even if this term, and the category of people signified by it, was much less unambiguously defined and delimited than membership in a modern political party is (which is indisputable), and even if it was susceptible to various interpretative manipulations and hostile appropriations much more than modern political and ideological terms (as opposed to formal organizational labels) are — which is debatable.

Since *populares* and *optimates* were not technical terms signifying a group with formal membership, nobody “bore a card” giving him a formal claim to such a designation. Both these terms had highly positive and non-controversial connotations — the Roman *populus* and its liberty being, as R. rightly stresses, at the heart of all legitimate Roman discourse, including, specifically, the aristocratic one, and *optimates* denoting moral excellence and civic/aristocratic accomplishment. Finally, it is clear that “parties” and “factions” as such were highly suspect, while harmony and unity were celebrated. Thus, even belonging to “the party of the best” was, in a sense, only second best to the ideal of being impartially patriotic, and many must often have preferred the latter self-designation. There was a natural tendency to refuse to acknowledge one’s opponent’s claim to be a friend of the Roman people — or, on the other hand, to be considered *optimus quisque*. Given all this, these terms could never have functioned as routine and mutually agreed-upon designations of two rival groups. Nevertheless, these, and similar terms, do appear to have played an important role in late-republican political discourse, that might bemoan the loss of erstwhile *concordia* but had to reflect — naturally, in a highly biased and manipulative way — contemporary realities.

Stressing the difference between the way in which the labels he is examining were used in Rome and modern party-political terminology, R. notes that however much a modern politician may sometimes claim to have transcended the Left/Right divide, modern political debates ‘do not result in a Conservative politician, no matter the issue under discussion, claiming to be a “true” Liberal and his opponent the “false” one’ (12). But this is true only for “capital L” liberals, and similar formal and quasi-formal labels. There are plenty of modern examples of conservatives accusing their liberal opponents of being illiberal, and claiming — typically, in the US — to represent the country genuine (“small letter”) liberal (and, certainly, liberty-loving) tradition, or of people claiming to be at least as patriotic and dedicated to the “true” national interest as their opponents, avowed nationalists. Conservatives are sometimes accused of being recklessly radical and revolutionary rather than cautiously conservative; Bismark’s “state socialism” was an open appropriation of his opponents’ brand (even as he was legislating punitive anti-socialist laws), and

Charles I stated before the court that would condemn him to death: 'I do stand more for the liberty of my people, than any here that come to be my pretended judges.'

Of course, he said that precisely because the people's liberty was a notion habitually associated with the other side. His appropriation of it does not at all mean that it was not, at the time, a significant political marker characteristic of one of the two rival camps; in fact, it indicates just the opposite. Indeed, until a relatively late stage, the king's opponents were no less insistent on their loyalty to the crown (while opposing the king's evil counselors) than he himself claimed to be devoted to the liberty of the people (and to the privileges of Parliament) — rightly understood. Is it then any wonder that Cicero (and also more die-hard *optimates*) would claim to be devoted to the true interests and the rightly-understood liberty of the Roman people, while the radical tribune Memmius is described by Sallust (*Jug.* 31.25) as 'specifically defend[ing] the authority of the senate' (171) — against the small and corrupt clique that has, he claims, betrayed it? Such mutual stealing of the other side's rhetorical clothes is part of the usual stuff of political controversy in many political cultures.

But however much it "invited" a manipulative appropriation, the term *popularis* might also be used in a much more straightforward "party-political" sense, denoting a political tendency, opposite to the *optimata* one, with which one disagreed — without necessarily claiming that it was "seditious". This is what Cicero does in *Pro Sestio*; and however much his treatment of the popular/*optimata* divide there may have been influenced by the exigencies of the particular case at hand, as R. insists, it could not have helped Cicero's case to describe Roman politics in a way that his audience would have found fundamentally unrecognizable. In the Fourth Catilinarian oration Cicero, having noted that Caesar was known to follow the *via popularis* in politics, praises him for the severity of his proposed punishments for the conspirators, and stresses the difference between Caesar and those other *populares* who had preferred to absent themselves from the crucial session of the senate: *Intellectum est, quid interesset inter levitatem contionatorum et animum vere popularem saluti populi consulentem* (*Cat.* 4.9). In this case, a *vere popularis* is not an *optimata* posing as the people's friend, but a real *popularis*, a respectable political opponent — "the right honorable gentleman opposite". The two labels examined in this book could mean different things in different contexts; among other things, they were certainly capable of denoting what they are usually assumed to denote.

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Marina Prusac, *From Face to Face: Recarving of Roman Portraits and the Late-Antique Portrait Arts* (Monumenta Graeca et Romana, Volume 18), Leiden: Brill, 2011. xxii + 202 pp. + 155 plates. ISBN 978-90-04-18271-4.

The practice of fashioning portraits from reused images (either portrait-statues or mythical figures) and architectural members, long occupies the study of Roman portraiture. Several important studies, among them those written and edited by Eric R. Varner¹ in the last two decades, deal with *damnatio memoriae*, the reuse of sculpture and *spolia*, and the recarving of imperial and private portraits. All these matters are referred to in the Introduction (1-11) and Chapter One (13-27) of Prusac's (henceforth P.) book. The definition of "style", discussed on pp. 7-10, points to the difficulties in specifying and interpreting the various artistic styles, and hence undermines, from the very beginning, the final conclusion 'that the influence of recarved portraits upon late-antique

¹ E.g. Eric R. Varner, 2004, *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture*, Leiden; *idem* (ed.), 2000, *From Caligula to Constantine Tyranny & Transformation in Roman Portraiture*, Atlanta, Georgia.