The Roman Example

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Only once during dinner was there any conversation that included the young gentlemen. It happened at the epoch of the cheese, when the Doctor, having taken a glass of port wine and hemmed twice or thrice, said:
   "It is remarkable, Mr. Feeder, that the Romans—"
   At the mention of this terrible people, their implacable enemies, every young gentleman fastened his gaze upon the Doctor with an assumption of the deepest interest.
                    Charles Dickens: *Dombey and Son*, Chap. XII

I

THERE ARE MANY who believe that the counterparts of the remarkable and terrible Romans of antiquity are to be found in the no less remarkable and terrible Americans of the present. Among the alleged similarity or identity of traits, these have been mentioned: a psychology that is adaptive rather than creative, a distaste for speculative thought and a tendency to measure all values by practical effects, a genius for stupendous engineering projects, a love of grandiose spectacles, and an attitude of mingled contempt and humility toward older and less vigorous civilizations. There are, though, a few obvious differences. It is probable, for example, that a Roman of late republican or early imperial times would have been bored sick by such innocuous *ludi* as the Rose Bowl Festival or the Democratic National Convention; it is also probable that any well-bred American would be horrified by the kind of entertainments associated with the Circus Maximus and the Colosseum. The taste for cruelty and violence, however, is easily cultivated and was certainly not peculiar to the Romans or to pagan antiquity. Wherever public executions have been permitted or instituted they have attracted large crowds, and the more barbarous the mode of execution the more numerous the spectators. There is a record of a young French princeling whose tutor,

as a special reward for diligence in study, introduced him to the delight of seeing a malefactor broken on the wheel. It has been estimated that the number of hours devoted each year by our television networks to representations of violence and cruelty considerably exceeds the number annually assigned by the Roman emperors or their prefects to gladiatorial combats and other public games.

Another common characteristic of Romans and Americans, it is said, is a nostalgic yearning in times of affluence for the lost virtues of their ancestors, *pietas, probitas, gravitas, frugalitas* and so on, or in a word "the puritan ethic." In the history of both peoples we find the mood of steadfastness and resolution in times of weakness and danger contrasted with the mood of hesitation and insecurity in times of great prosperity and power. As Mr. Robert Strausz-Hupé has put it, the Romans of the age of Caesar, Cato, Cicero, and Catiline were "people like ourselves, mighty and unsure, possessed of great riches and discontented, engrossed in the rhetoric of the people's tribunes and deaf to the tread of the Praetorians." It was precisely when Rome had become supreme and unassailable throughout the Mediterranean world that she was in mortal peril from internal disorder and anarchy. Nor did this go entirely unnoticed by contemporaries. Never, wrote Sallust,

> has the condition of Rome been more miserable. The whole world, from the rising to the setting of the sun, had been subdued by her arms and now rendered obedience to her; at home there was peace and abundant wealth, which men deem the greatest of blessings. Yet there were citizens who from sheer perversity were bent on their own ruin and the ruin of their country . . .

Something of this seems to have been foreseen a generation earlier by Scipio Nasica, who in the senate had opposed the unceasing demand of the elder Cato for the utter destruction of Carthage; for, says Plutarch, Scipio Nasica,

> seeing his countrymen to be grown wanton and insolent, and the people made by their prosperity obstinate and disobedient to the senate and drawing the whole city whither they would after them, he would have had the fear of Carthage to serve as a bit to hold the contumacy of the multitude; he looked upon the Carthaginians as too weak to overcome the Romans, [but still] too great to be despised by them.

In the end, of course, it was Cato's view that prevailed, though the old man died without learning that his wish had been fulfilled, that Rome's old and hateful rival had at last been razed to the ground and the site sown with salt. It is said that when Scipio Aemilianus, the conqueror of Carthage, watched the destruction of the city, tears came to his eyes and some Homeric lines to his lips.

> This I know
> The day shall come when our sacred Troy
> And great Priam of the ashen spear
> And all of Priam's people shall perish . . .

Scipio's friend and tutor Polybius who was standing beside him at the time asked what was meant by this strange show of sorrow at a moment of tremendous victory. The general replied that he was anguished by the knowledge that the fate that had in their turns befallen Troy, Carthage, and so many other proud and mighty cities, nations, and peoples must one day in the nature of things overtake even Rome herself. "Spoken like a philosopher and statesman!" said Polybius, or words to that effect.

II

MR. STRAUSZ-HUPÉ surmised that the purposeful neglect of classical languages and classical history in American schools is to make sure "that innocent minds shall not be troubled by the analogies lurking in the contemporary situation." On second thought he decided that in pouring classical subjects down the Deweyite drain the educationists really wanted to flush out of their own minds those "disturbing allusions" that some chapters of Roman history offer to the crises and controversies of our own age. Whatever the motives, the correspondences are certainly there, and Strausz-Hupé was by no means the first to have recognized them. Just a dozen years ago there appeared a book called *The Coming Caesars in America*, a title startling enough, one would think, to have earned it some attention. I recall that a chapter or two from it was republished in the *U.S. News and World Report*, and a review appeared in a now defunct bilingual magazine called *Western World*; but the rest, as far as I am aware, was utter silence, which may again support Mr. Strausz-Hupé's notion of a "great Freudian plunger," at work in the minds of editors as well as of schoolmasters. The author was a young Frenchman with the elegant name of Aumary de Riencourt, a devout disciple of Oswald Spengler and well practiced in the Spenglerian game of matching events, personalities, and social phenomena historically separated by several millenia. It was no trouble at all for M. de Riencourt to show that the American republic has been repeating with great precision, though perhaps at a much faster pace, the pattern of historical evolution of the Roman republic in the century or so that followed the last Punic War, or to draw the analogy between Mithridates Eupator of Pontus and Adolf Hitler and between those unmanageable Parthians of the Roman Middle East and the intractable Soviet Communists of our twentieth century. He could confidently identify Franklin Roosevelt as the modern Gaius Gracchus, could see in Harry Truman a gentler reincarnation of Gaius Marius, in Dwight Eisenhower a benevolent and unbloody Sulla, and even in the late General MacArthur the historical twin of Licinius Lucullus. One comforting difference, though—or so it seemed at the time—was this: whereas in Rome the transition from republic to empire had required a hundred years and more of assassinations, riots, civil wars, proscriptions, and wholesale massacres, here in the United States, because of our more flexible constitution and lack of an entrenched and powerful aristocracy, it would be accomplished peaceably and almost without being noticed, simply by continuing extensions of the federal executive power. But, alas, M. de Riencourt's reading of the historical auspices seems not to have revealed what lay ahead in the way of incendiary insurrections in American cities or in Catilinarian behavior on the college campuses, in the streets, and even in courts of law.

III

NEARLY SIXTY years ago the German social philosopher Robert Michels in his study of *Political Parties* formulated what he called "the iron law of oligarchy." The democratic currents throughout history, he found,

> resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal; they are ever renewed. . . . When democracies have gained a certain stage of development, they undergo a gradual transformation, adopting the aristocratic spirit, and in many cases also the aristocratic forms, against which at the outset they struggled so fiercely. [Then] new accusers arise to denounce the traitors; after an era of glorious combats and inglorious

power, they end by fusing with the old dominant class; whereupon they are once more in their turn assailed by fresh opponents who appeal in the name of democracy. It is probable that this cruel game will continue without end.

Democracy, of course, is a Greek not a Latin word, and a Roman no doubt would have substituted some such term as the *ratio popularis*. Nevertheless, there is much in Roman history that illustrates the Michels thesis. In the earlier republic, as all schoolboys used to learn, the citizens were divided into the *patricii*, who had a complete monopoly of public offices, and the *plebs*, who though liable to military service had no voice at all in the conduct of affairs. The origin of this division is obscure, but it has been plausibly surmised that the *plebs* were descended from immigrants or perhaps freedmen who had attached themselves as clients to the patrician *gentes*. A difference of race is suggested by the fact that intermarriage was long forbidden, but was eventually sanctioned under the famous *lex canuleia*. Gradually, all the other inequities of caste were removed: plebeians became eligible to every office, even to the college of augurs, which was last to remain an exclusively patrician preserve. Legally, indeed, the *plebs* came to have somewhat the better of it, since their tribunes possessed the power of veto over decrees of the senate and orders of the consuls and held powers of life or death in certain criminal cases. The plebiscites, or enactments of the tribal assemblies, were given the force or law, and where plebeians might on occasion hold *both* consulates the patricians were restricted to one. Out of all this came the "mixed constitution" of checks and balances which so won the admiration of Polybius, For three and a half centuries, observed Ortega, the power of the tribunes and the concord between patricians and plebeians "kept Rome from sliding down the *montagne*

Russe of revolution." "And who knows," he went on, "whether Roman concord might not have lasted much longer, had Rome continued to live enclosed in herself and true to her own spirit? But her unequaled triumph over the world around her had laid her open, *intellectually undefended*, to foreign influences of perilous potency."

Presently, though, a new class division had arisen, this time between the nobility, or persons of note, and the generality of citizens. The nobles were members of families, patrician and plebeian, which at one time and another had occupied the consulate or other offices of the highest rank; thus it was possible for a political gangster like Catiline to sneer at Cicero as a *novus homo*, or a man without distinguished ancestry. By about the middle of the second century before Christ the nobility had divided itself into Optimates and Populares. The Optimates, who seem to have adopted the name in imitation of the Greek *Aristoi*, were the controlling oligarchy of the senate, which throughout the wars of the third and part of the second century had exercised an uncontested leadership. The Populares were those who sought to transfer the leadership to the plebeian tribunes and the popular assembly as a means of breaking the senatorial supremacy and so of advancing their own schemes of power. It is interesting, though possibly irrelevant, to find that many, perhaps most of the Optimates were, like Cato, of plebeian origin and that leading Populares were, like Caesar, patricians. Caesar, indeed, claimed to be descended from Venus, and although, as Bagehot remarked, he may not have believed it himself, he certainly wished others to believe it.

IV

THE CONFLICT, or as we should say nowadays, confrontation, of Optimates and Populares, which hastened the collapse of

the republic, was not so much a case of conservatives *versus* reformers, or of reactionaries *versus* radicals, as a struggle for personal power—for the retention of it on the one side and the acquisition of it on the other. No doubt there were some among the former who believed with Cato that the preservation of freedom was bound up in the issue, and among the latter some besides Tiberius Gracchus who were genuinely concerned about the desperate condition of the poor; but altruistic motives can hardly be claimed for adventurers like Catiline and Clodius, both of whom were encouraged by Caesar for his own purposes. Meanwhile two other groups had become important factors in Roman politics. One of these was the Equites, or Knights; originally this was a military rather than a social category, but it had grown into a rich and powerful order corresponding to the modern bourgeoisie. The Equites were the bankers, money lenders, and entrepeneurs, since senators were forbidden by the *lex claudia* to engage in any form of commerce or finance. The tribune Gaius Gracchus had awarded them a contract for the collection of taxes from the provinces, so that from their ranks came the notorious *publicani* who were to make themselves odious in all parts of the empire. The other group was the proletariat (*proletarii*), persons without property and mostly without any source of livelihood except the sale of their votes to the highest bidder. Polybius had warned that the existence of such a class would offer a heady temptation to rich men avid for office and reputation. They will, he wrote, "in every possible way entice and corrupt the common people," and when these have become greedy for doles, benefactions, and entertainments

> the virtue of democracy is destroyed, and it is transformed into a government of violence and the strong hand. For the

mob, habituated to feed at the expense of others, and to have its hopes of a livelihood in the property of its neighbors, as soon as it has got a leader sufficiently ambitious and daring, being excluded from the sweets of official honors, it produces a reign of raw violence. Then come the tumultuous assemblies, massacres, banishments, redivisions of land, until after losing all trace of civilization the mob has once more found a master and a despot.

The *proletarii* were in prerevolutionary times excluded from military service, perhaps on the ground that having no stake in society they could not be trusted to defend it. Their only service to the state, said Cicero, is "the begetting of families." Marius, it seems, was the first to recruit them into his legions, and the other great politico-military adventurers followed his example. Thus the legions became in effect private armies, owing allegiance to their commanders rather than to the senate and people whose monogram they carried on their standards. By the year 100 B.C., as Spengler observes, there were no more Roman armies, only the armies of Marius, Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar. After the Social War and the extension of citizenship to all Italians, the *socii*, or allied troops, were converted into legionnaires. The prospect of loot became an incentive in recruiting. Sallust tells us that Sulla

> in order to secure the loyalty of the army which he led into Asia had allowed it a luxury and license foreign to the manners of our forefathers. . . . There it was that a Roman army first learned to indulge in women and drink, to admire statues, paintings and rich vases, to steal them from private houses and public places, to pillage shrines and to desecrate everything sacred and profane. These soldiers, after they had won the victory, left nothing to the vanquished. . . .

Sulla's veterans are said to have provided Catiline with a considerable part of his following; their example and influence, if we may trust Sallust, had already corrupted the youth of Rome, who were all too willing to make "a revolution for the hell of it" and for the prospect of pillage.

> Many who recalled Sulla's victory when they saw common soldiers elevated to the rank of senators, and others become so rich that they feasted like kings, hoped each for himself for like fruits of victory. . . . The young men who had maintained a wretched existence by manual labor in the country, tempted by public and private doles, had come to prefer idleness in the city to their hateful toil; these like all the others battened on the public ills. . . . [Meanwhile] after tribunician power had been restored . . . various young men whose age and disposition made them aggressive, attained that high authority, whereupon they began to excite the common people against the senate and then to inflame their passions still more by doles and promises, thus making themselves conspicuous and influential. . . .

Some of these aggressive young tribunes had little private armies of their own, consisting of their clients and freedmen and an assortment of gladiators and thugs. One such gang belonging to Caesar's dissolute and disreputable henchman, Clodius Pulcher, kept the city in a state of anarchy and terror. At one point even the great Pompey was unable to leave his house for dread of them, whereupon another tribune, Annius Milo, organized a rival gang of cutthroats and bully boys; thereafter brawls between the two were of almost daily and nightly occurrence. In one such encounter on the Appian Way, Clodius was slain and in retaliation his followers burned down the Senate House. Milo was brought to trial, convicted, and exiled. Cicero had prepared a brilliant defense for him, but was too frightened to deliver it. In 48 B.C., when Caesar was in Egypt, Milo returned to Rome where along with the praetor Caelius Rufus he perished in a rumble with the Caesarians. It is difficult to think of any prominent politician of that epoch who escaped a violent death.

V

BY THE END of the Second Punic War (201 B.C.) tremendous changes had taken place in the structure of the Roman economy as well as in the character of the people. The invasion by Hannibal and his armies had devastated much of the countryside, and veterans returning to their homesteads found them ruined beyond repair. The new class of speculators was buying up the best land for conversion into the great latifundia to be worked by slave labor of which the conquests had provided a vast abundance. There was thus no market for free agricultural labor and nothing for the peasants to do, after selling their land if they could, but to migrate to the provinces as *coloni* or, as was more frequently the case, to the city or the larger towns to swell the ranks of the proletariat. In some ways, perhaps, the phenomenon was similar to the great migration from our rural South to the Northern cities during the Great Depression and after the mechanization of Southern agriculture. While the poorer citizens were reduced to indigence, the upper and middle classes were waxing rich and richer on the spoils from the Eastern provinces. The social disease that the Romans called *luxuria* was spreading as nobles and equestrians strove to outdo one another in extravagance, ostentation, and the pursuit of exotic pleasures.

Another great factor of change was the adoption of Greek manners, against which the elder Cato raged so vehemently and vainly, and the "unsettling of minds" by the dissemination of Greek ideas. The ef-

fect was much like that wrought in the eighteenth century by the French *philosophes*. Ortega reminds us that Tiberius Gracchus, "the first Roman revolutionary, kept in his household a Graeculus called Blossius, a rationalistic philosopher of barren ways, an intellectual spider, spinning the web of unprofitable utopias"; but every important household had a Greek tutor and perhaps also a Greek librarian. Medicine was virtually a Greek monopoly, and Greek rhetors and grammarians never lacked pupils. The Romans had not been a profoundly religious people like the ancient Hebrews, but they had venerated and feared their gods; but now the official religion had become no more than an empty formality. Among the educated it had been supplanted by Greek philosophies, especially Epicureanism and Stoicism, and among the ignorant by frenetic Eastern cults like those of Bacchus, Isis, and the Magna Mater. With the pursuit of wealth and the decline of religion came an erosion of both public and private morals. Polybius in a well-known passage had contrasted the probity of Roman magistrates and ambassadors with the corruption and venality of Carthaginian and Hellenistic officials.

> . . . What in other nations is looked on as a reproach—I mean a scrupulous fear of the gods—is the very thing that holds the Roman commonwealth together. To such an extraordinary height is this carried among them, both in private and public business, that nothing could exceed it. . . . To my mind the ancients were not acting without purpose or at random when they brought in among the vulgar those opinions about the gods, and the belief in the punishments in Hades: much rather do I think that men nowadays are acting rashly and foolishly in rejecting them. This is the reason why, apart from anything else, Greek politicians, if entrusted with a single talent, though protected by ten checking

clerks, as many seals and twice as many witnesses, cannot be induced to keep faith: whereas among the Romans . . . men may have the handling of great amounts of money, and yet from pure respect to their oath keep their faith intact. In other nations it is a rare thing to find a man who keeps his hands out of the public purse . . . but among the Romans it is a rare thing to detect any man in the act of such a crime.

This testimony is often compared with Cicero's indictment of Gaius Verres, the cruel and rapacious propraetor of Sicily, to show how far the standard of public morality had deteriorated in the course of only two or three generations; but if, as is sometimes said, the case of Verres was extreme, it was hardly an exception. Even the austere Brutus, that "noblest Roman of them all," the son-in-law of Cato and the great hero of the French revolutionary regicides, is said to have practiced usury on a grand scale at 48 percent and to have allowed his collectors to lock up some eminent Cypriots and to keep them without food and water in an effort to force payment of the arrears of interest on a municipal loan to Salamis. Even that strongest of Roman institutions, the family, was weakened by the general moral decay, especially among the aristocracy. The older form of marriage with *manus,* whereby the bride became subject to the *patria potestas* of her husband, had fallen into disuse; women now controlled their own property, engaged in litigation, dabbled in political affairs, cultivated celebrities, and in general behaved like the emancipated women of our time. One, Hortensia, daughter of the famous orator, made a speech in the forum, successfully opposing a proposal to tax her wealth. The notorious Clodia, sister of Clodius and his match in profligacy, paramour for a time of the unhappy Catullus, is said along with Sempronia, the wife of Decimus Brutus, to

have been deeply involved in the conspiracy of Catiline. In all ages, including our own, patronizing subversives and revolutionaries seems to have been a diversion of the fast sets.

VI

WHAT IT ALL amounted to was the loss of the *mos majorem*, or the authority of tradition and custom which provide the cohesive force in every society. In custom, Pascal tells us, resides the whole of equity.

> Custom creates equity, for the sole reason that it is a thing accepted; that is the mystical basis of its authority. To take it back to first principles is to destroy it. Nothing is so faulty as the laws which correct faults. . . . The art of willful opposition and of revolution is the shaking of established customs, exploring them to their source in order to bring to light their want of authority and justice. . . . It is a game leading straight to ruin; for nothing will be found just on balance. Yet the people lend a ready ear to such talk. They shake off the yoke as soon as they are aware of it, and the great profit by their collapse as by that of these curious critics of established customs.

What he seems to be saying here is that where custom prevails there is no need of coercion, and where coercion is absent there is freedom in the only sense in which freedom is possible.