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Frontispiece:

A girl from the minority Yazidi sect, fleeing the violence of the ISIS in the Iraqi town of Sinjar, rests at the Iraqi-Syrian border in Fishkhabour, Dohuk province August 13, 2014. REUTERS/Youssef Boudlal/File Photo – stock.adobe.com

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Demagogy, Destruction and Manipulation: Putting the 2020 Riots into a Comparatist Historical Perspective

David Engels

Abstract

For many people in the Western world who have not immediately experienced any serious social or political upheaval since the end of the Second World War, the sheer violence of the current 2020 riots sparked by the death of George Floyd may come as a real shock. However, analysing the events through the mere lense of social and cultural resentments would be a superficial analysis, as it would focus only on the symptoms, but not on the real causes behind the present events. Indeed, in its long history, the West has often faced similar threats when confronted with its innumerable wars, revolutions or upheavals, but there has never been such a toxic mix of irrational self-hate and blatant cultural ignorance. If we want to understand the real reasons behind this vicious onslaught on our civilisation, we have to consider a further aspect: the cultural self-loathing so typical for all late civilisations. In order to do so, we will study in some detail another similar case of self-destruction, i.e. the crisis generated by the Tribune of Clodius during the last years of the Roman Republic, before rapidly sketching some further parallels with events from other civilisations and daring a rapid outlook on the events that may yet be to come.

Keywords: demagogy, Roman Empire, riots, decline

1. Introduction

For many people in the Western world who have not immediately experienced any serious social or political upheaval since the end of the Second World War (except, to a small degree, the student “revolution” of 1968),¹ the sheer violence of the 2020 riots sparked by the death of George Floyd may come as a real shock. There is, of course, the astonishing hate with which monuments of all ages and political or religious orientations are defiled and destroyed, shops plundered and innocent citizens attacked, even murdered – and this not only by those whose miserable living conditions, poor education or sad personal experiences may make such riotous acts more understandable (though still intolerable), but also by well-

¹ Cf. ENGELS 2018a.

to-do, smart and privileged young people acting as spearheads of the new “cultural revolution” and even by many leftist-liberal politicians hoping to benefit from the climate of unrest.

But there is also the omnipresence of the astounding and dangerous endeavour to re-interpret the entire history of the West in a way dwelling exclusively on its dark sides, such as war, genocide, inequality or intolerance, and without acknowledging the numerous impressive feats of progress, compassion, art, beauty or science, and conveniently ignoring that all other human civilisations have displayed a rather similar, all-too human ambivalence between darkness and light. The influence exerted by this ideological preparation on the immediate physical violence of the BLM riots cannot be underestimated: Only when an entire civilisation is imbued with the idea that its history is so criminal that it deserves only resentment and punishment can we expect such a total lack of collective reaction and outcry in front of the depredations operated by what is only an aggressive, though highly publicised and protected, minority of vandals and criminals.

Why such a hatred not only for the material, but also the immaterial aspects of our civilisation, from people who, very often, are not even the (alleged) victims of this same civilisation, but rather those who benefitted the most from its achievements? We could, of course, enumerate many factual reasons such as: a perverted, wholly misunderstood form of the Christian notion of original sin (transferred here from the faulty nature of humanity unto the Western civilisation as such, and without any possibility for atonement and redemption); the Herostratian hatred for an elite culture that so often characterises not only some iconoclast fringes of the populace, but also those members of the elite who feel excluded from power; the vandalism ultimately resulting from all forms of materialist thought; the resentment of all those members of foreign civilisations who have lost their previous power and self-assertiveness in the wake of the political, cultural and technological expansion of the West; and, of course, the elites’ age old cynical technique of increasing their own power by disorienting the people through violence and insecurity.

However, this would be a mere superficial analysis, as it would focus only on the symptoms, not on the real causes behind the present events. Indeed, in its long history, the West has already often faced similar threats when confronted with its innumerable wars, revolutions or upheavals such as the wars against the Muslim conquest, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution or the spread of Bolshevism, but without succumbing to the generalised fatigue, even indirect compliance with the riots, displayed by today’s citizens as well as politicians;

and though the West has undergone many re-appreciations of its past, there has never been such a toxic mix of irrational self-hate and blatant cultural ignorance. In order to understand the real reasons behind this vicious onslaught on our civilisation, we have to consider a further aspect: the cultural fatigue and self-loathing so typical for all late civilisations. Hence, in the following, we will try to underline this hypothesis by examining in some detail another similar case of self-destruction, i.e. the crisis generated by the Tribune of Clodius during the last years of the Roman Republic, before rapidly sketching some further parallels with events from other civilisations² and daring a rapid outlook on the events that may yet be to come.

2. A Look into the Past

2.1. A Republic in Decline

One of the most obvious parallels to the present situation are doubtless the riots and events characterising the reign of terror exerted by Publius Clodius Pulcher, one of the most interesting, though still only partly known politicians of the Late Roman Republic in the mid first century B.C.³

During the second century, Rome had changed drastically. While the Republic had now conquered most of the Mediterranean and provided the ruling elite with an astonishing influx of wealth, the simple people had suffered much from the numerous wars, as well as from the consequences of growing social polarisation. The farmers were driven from their land to the city; large semi-industrial estates owned by the elite took their place; the state, instead of finding employment for the new urban proletariat, sedated and corrupted them with a politics of bread and circuses; the traditional agrarian religion declined to the advantage of oriental cults and philosophical nihilism; politics became increasingly short-term-oriented; the need to bribe citizens and colleagues for political support brought forth an essentially debt-oriented financial economy; the Senate became nearly paralysed because of inner rivalries, and proved unable to impose the necessary reforms; law and tradition were gradually ignored in favour of improvised measures imposed by political urgency, thus establishing dangerous precedents; and the competition for

² On the theoretical background of the following explanations, cf. ENGELS 2018b and ENGELS 2018c.

³ Concerning the comparison between the Late Roman Republic and the crisis of the Western world in the 21st century, cf. ENGELS 2014.

political power started to involve physical violence between citizens, sometimes even parts of the army.⁴ The Romans themselves were fully aware of the extent of this nefarious evolution, and their politicians and historians went to great detail in order to describe the dilemma. However, the general tendency, namely the fear that only a monarchy could still assure the cohesion of a society drifting apart, seemed nearly unavoidable, as Sallust seems to have expressed in a letter addressed to Caesar:

*When, however, idleness and poverty gradually drove the commons from the fields and forced them to live without a fixed abode, they began to covet the riches of other men and to regard their liberty and their country as objects of traffic. Thus little by little the people, which had been sovereign and had exercised authority over all nations, became degenerate, and each man bartered his share of the common sovereignty for slavery to one man.*⁵

The general conflagration finally broke out in the late 2nd century, when a number of Roman politicians, both idealistic and ambitious, attempted to tackle the social, economic, political and military problems listed above with a comprehensive reform programme which, in the face of opposition from the Senate, they could only implement with the help of the goodwill of the Roman people - a momentous tactic that gave birth to the political party of the *populares*.⁶ Its founders, the brothers Tiberius and Gaius Sempronius Gracchus, who both held the office of tribunes of the people, tried in 133 and 123 to return state land (*ager publicus*), which had gradually fallen into the hands of the big landowners, to the most impoverished citizens. They also endeavoured to revolutionise the political constitution, which was traditionally based on the annuity and collegiality of all state offices, by seeking a second mandate as tribune immediately after the first, and by circumventing the veto rights of their respective colleagues. These coup-like measures inevitably led to a serious conflict with the more conservative forces, the *optimates*. The *optimates* finally defeated the Gracchi and their sympathisers by force of arms, but were unable to rebuild the dams once they had been torn down, so that the conflict between *populares* and *optimates* severely strained the political cohesion of the Roman elite in the following century, and contributed significantly to the collapse of the Republic.

The ensuing decades were increasingly marked by violent struggles, leading notably to the first civil war and the sole-rule of the *popularis* Marius, then the dictatorship

⁴ As general introduction to the history of the Late Republic, see BRUHNS – DAVID – NIPPEL 1997; PINA POLO 1999; DAVID 2000; CHRIST 2000; BRINGMANN 2003; HÖLKESKAMP 2009.

⁵ (Ps.) Sall., epist. 1.5.4-5 (transl. J.C. Rolfe, Loeb).

⁶ On social movements in Classical Antiquity, see BRINGMANN 1985; ENGELS 2011; FERGUSON 1975; NICOLED 1990; von PÖHLMANN 1912; TARN 1923; VOGT 1957.

of the *optimatis* Sulla, and even after an uneasy truce between both parties had been established after the death of Sulla in 78 BC, the situation remained extremely volatile, and the differences between the often armed supporters of the various political factions and the increasingly politicised big-city criminal gangs became gradually blurred.⁷ These struggles, which were difficult to overlook and which revealed both the weakness of the Senate and the inability of the Roman constitution to guarantee political freedom along with peace and order in a clear systemic crisis, were already evident in the insurgency plans of Catilina,⁸ whose political programme contained a dangerous mixture of cynical demagoguery, honest reform efforts, frustration over the reform backlog blamed on the *optimates* and the criticising of the intolerable economic and social polarisation of the Roman citizenry, as shows the following extract of a speech attributed to Catilina by Sallust:

*For ever since the state fell under the jurisdiction and sway of a few powerful men, it is always to them that kings and potentates are tributary and peoples and nations pay taxes. All the rest of us, energetic, able, nobles and commons, have made up the mob, without influence, without weight, and subservient to those to whom in a free state we should be an object of fear. Because of this, all influence, power, rank, and wealth are in their hands, or wherever they wish them to be; to us they have left danger, defeat, prosecutions, and poverty. How long, pray, will you endure this, brave hearts?*⁹

2.2. Clodius

The danger emanating from Catilina may have been averted by Cicero's much publicised uncovering in 63 BC of his plot to overthrow the Republic. But this was only the beginning of a new round of crisis. The increasing radicalisation of the struggles undoubtedly culminated in 58 during the tribunate of Clodius. Publius Clodius Pulcher, born 93 BC, was a Roman politician belonging to the *populares* and is chiefly known as a colourful personality, street agitator and Cicero's arch-enemy.¹⁰ Nevertheless, despite his alleged wish to defend the 'simple people', he was descended from the aristocratic *gens Claudia*, one of Rome's oldest patrician families, though he at least superficially rejected this heritage and managed to be adopted by an obscure plebeian in order to be eligible for the office of tribune of the people, an office reserved only to plebeians. While in charge, he convinced

⁷ Cf. NIPPEL 1981; NIPPEL 1982; LABRUNA 1991; WILL 1992.

⁸ On Catilina, see SCHWARTZ 1897; BRINGMANN 1972; VON UNGERN-STERNBERG 1997.

⁹ Sall., Cat. 20.7-9

¹⁰ On Clodius, cf. WHITE 1900; MOREAU 1982; SPIELVOGEL 1997; TATUM 1999; STABRYŁA 2006; FEZZI 2008.

the citizens to vote for a broad-scale series of laws, including a highly popular free of charge distribution of grain to every Roman citizen, and became one of the most important political forces in the context of the first triumvirate and thus the last years of the Roman Republic. Though it is difficult to reconstruct Clodius' exact aims, as most sources available are clearly oriented against him, the following aspects seem noteworthy and eerily reminiscent of the present riots of 2020.

First, Clodius tried to draw on the resentments of the gradually impoverished lower and middle classes against the rich and wealthy. The close connection between politics and the economic crisis is particularly evident in the fact that Clodius succeeded in increasingly combining his political power with the *collegia compitalicia*,¹¹ a series of local associations which had at first had mainly religious and administrative duties, then became a kind of neighbourhood watch organisation before finally transforming into an actor of popular terror themselves, terrifying the city of Rome and above all tyrannising the wealthier and richer. Clodius further extended his influence by recruiting slaves and gladiators and occupied central strategic positions in the city of Rome in order to create an atmosphere of insecurity, which was intended both to demonstrate the incapacity of conservative politicians and to strengthen the call for a fundamental reorganisation of the state in agreement with the requests of the populace:

In the presence and sight of these same consuls, a levy of slaves was held before the tribunal of Aurelius, under pretence of filling up the guilds, when men were enrolled according to their streets, and divided into decuries, and stirred up to violence, and battle, and slaughter, and plunder. It was while these same men were consuls, that arms were openly carried into the temple of Castor, and the steps of the temple were pulled up; armed men occupied the forum and the assemblies of the people; slaughters and stonings of people took place; there was no senate, no magistrates were left; one man by arms and piratical violence seized on all the power of all the magistrates not by any power of his own, but having bribed the two consuls to desert the republic by the treaty respecting the provinces, he insulted every one, domineered over every one, made promises to some held down many by terror and fear and gained over more by hope and promises.¹²

Furthermore, Clodius seems to have wished for a certain remodelling of the Roman collective memory, as he proceeded to destroy and replace monuments erected by his immediate political enemies or those representing the opposite, that is optimate, political ideology. Thus did he not only raze to the ground the house of Cicero, his arch-enemy, whom he managed to banish from Rome, but also

¹¹ Cf. BRENNER 1987; SPIELVOGEL 1997.

¹² Cic., Sest. 34 (transl. C.D. Yonge, Loeb).

erected, on Cicero's former property, a sanctuary dedicated to 'Liberty', suggesting thus that only by physically ridding the city of his enemies and even destroying their property, could the people whom Clodius claimed to represent gain their liberty. Cicero would describe the events as follows:

I was absent. I was even in your own opinion a citizen with all my rights as such unimpaired, when my house on the Palatine hill, and my villa in the district of Tusculum, were transferred one a-piece to each of the consuls; decrees of the senate were flying about; marble columns from my house were carried off to the father-in-law of the consul in the sight of the Roman people; and the consul who was my neighbour at my villa had not only my stock and the decorations of my villa, but even my trees transferred to his farm; while the villa itself was utterly destroyed, not from a desire of plunder, (for what plunder could there be there?), but out of hatred and cruelty. My house on the Palatine hill was burnt, not by accident, but having been set on fire on purpose. The consuls were feasting and revelling amid the congratulations of the conspirators, while the one boasted that he had been the favourite of Catiline, and the other that he was the cousin of Cethegus.¹³

However, Clodius did not only target Cicero's belongings. We have already seen how he managed to make his supporters squat in the temple of Castor and Pollux to establish an immediate power base right at the Forum Romanum, in the centre of Rome. We also know that he had the porticus of Catulus, erected out of the spoils of the war against the Germanic invasion of the Cimbri, destroyed, probably because Q. Lutatius Catulus had been one of the foremost representatives of the optimate resistance to the danger of the *populares*. Indeed, not only had Catulus sided with Sulla to expel Marius, Cornelius Cinna and their supporters from Rome, but he also committed suicide after Cinna and Marius re-occupied Rome in 87 BC and prosecuted him.¹⁴ The porticus itself was adjacent to Catulus' *domus* and located on a ground formerly confiscated from M. Fulvius Flaccus, a supporter of C. Gracchus condemned to death. Cicero would thus explain in his speech '*pro domo sua*':

You, O Quintus Catulus, chose the house of Marcus Fulvius, though he was the father-in-law of your own brother, to be the monument of your victories, in order that every recollection of that man who had embraced designs destructive of the republic should be entirely removed from the eyes and eradicated from the minds of men if, when you were building that portico, any one had said to you that the time would come when

¹³ Cic., *pro domo* 62 (transl. C.D. Yonge, Loeb) (see also *ibid.* 116; App., *bell. civ.* 2.15; Vell. 2.45; Plut., *Cic.* 33; Cass. Dio 38.17.6).

¹⁴ On Q. Lutatius Catulus, see LEWIS 1974; SUERBAUM 2002, pp 447–453.; WALTER 2009.

*that tribune of the people, who had despised the authority of the senate and the opinion of all virtuous men, should injure and overthrow your monument, while the consuls were not looking on only, but even assisting in the work, and should join it to the house of that citizen who as consul had defended the republic in obedience to the authority of the senate; would you not have answered that that could not possibly happen, unless the republic itself was previously overthrown?*¹⁵

The destruction was thus clearly targeted at fulfilling popular resentments, even more so as the porticus displayed many works of art and was considered by Pliny the Elder as one of the most impressive built in the late 2nd century BC, rivalling even with Marius' contemporary Temple of Honour and Virtue.

The allegation that Clodius seems to have displayed the statue of a deceased courtesan on the former ground of Cicero's house in order to be venerated as goddess 'Libertas'¹⁶ could be just a piece of Ciceronian polemic against his enemy, but it fits quite well with the systematic provocation of tradition and elite culture displayed by Clodius, and was doubtless hugely popular with the masses: This deliberate 'cultural bolshevism' was obviously meant to discredit the unwritten rules of behaviour, aesthetics and piety not only important for the Roman republican nobility, but also for the cohesion of the Roman society as a whole. Indeed, if we are to believe Cicero, Clodius tried for his entire life to insult the nobility through his scandalous lifestyle, which included not only an alleged incest with his own sister, but also the violation of the sanctity of the feast of Bona Dea, a religious ceremony reserved only for women, with the intention of seducing Caesar's wife Pompeia, who conducted these ceremonies.¹⁷

These deliberate insults are even more interesting as, after all, they targeted a social class to which Clodius himself belonged, as he was by no means an upstart, but a member of one of the oldest and most powerful patrician families. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that Clodius was not alone in his political actions and cultural provocations, but rather, exactly as Catilina before, accompanied by many members of the Roman 'Jeunesse dorée', as Cicero frequently suggests; a generation which, following Livy, had developed a '*passion for ruining themselves and everything else through self-indulgence and licentiousness*'.¹⁸ And we should also not forget that establishing an image as an 'enfant terrible' and provoking the *optimates* by ridiculing tradition was, as it is today, a practical means of standing out from the mass of would-be politicians and gaining the necessary notoriety and

¹⁵ Cic., pro domo 114.

¹⁶ Cic., pro domo 111–112.

¹⁷ On the Bona Dea scandal, cf. BROUWER 1989; MASTROCINQUE 2014.

¹⁸ Liv., pref. 12 (transl. C. Roberts).

attention from the crowd – at the prize, of course, of the long-term stability of the ‘*mos maiorum*’, the implicit canon of tradition and virtues on which the Republic was built, and whose gradual disappearance was bitterly deplored by politicians such as Cicero:

‘The commonwealth of Rome is founded firm / On ancient customs and on men of might.’ Our poet [i.e. Ennius] seems to have obtained these words, so brief and true, from an oracle. For neither men alone, unless a State is supplied with customs too, nor customs alone, unless there have also been men to defend them, could ever have been sufficient to found or to preserve so long a commonwealth whose dominion extends so far and wide. Thus, before our own time, the customs of our ancestors produced excellent men, and eminent men preserved our ancient customs and the institutions of their forefathers. But though the republic, when it came to us, was like a beautiful painting, whose colours, however, were already fading with age, our own time not only has neglected to freshen it by renewing the original colours, but has not even taken the trouble to preserve its configuration and, so to speak, its general outlines. For what is now left of the ‘ancient customs’ on which he said ‘the commonwealth of Rome’ was ‘founded firm’? They have been, as we see, so completely buried in oblivion that they are not only no longer practised, but are already unknown. And what shall I say of the men? For the loss of our customs is due to our lack of men, and for, this great evil we must not only give an account, but must even defend ourselves in every way possible, as if we were accused of capital crime. For it is through our own faults, not by any accident, that we retain only the form of the commonwealth, but have long since lost its substance.¹⁹

The close connections between the demagogic defender of the simple people and the highest circles of the Roman aristocracy also explain why Clodius’s political acts should not be interpreted in a political vacuum, but rather as an intrinsic part of traditional Roman party politics. Indeed, Clodius by no means acted against the common wishes of the entire Roman elite; to the contrary, many politicians, especially from the *populares*, openly or covertly supported his actions in order to further their own aims. One of the most important, albeit indirect supporters was certainly Cn. Pompey, without whom Clodius would have long since been expelled from Rome. Indeed, Clodius had systematically backed the positions of the triumvirate, the informal alliance between Pompey, Crassus and Caesar, which explains why Cicero’s fight against Clodius became most inopportune to these three men, who therefore did not hinder Clodius’ endeavour to exile Cicero. Only when Clodius, with the backing of Crassus, started to attack first Pompey and then Caesar, did the two men act in favour of recalling Cicero while at the same

¹⁹ Cic., rep. 4.1 (transl. C.W. Keyes)

time backing the establishment of a rival political gang under the tribunes Titus Annius Milo and Publius Sestius, leading thus to continual street-fights. Violence, terror and crime gradually became a permanent state of affairs, the politicisation of which made police intervention more and more difficult and began to block the Roman state completely, until, on the 18th January 52, the clashes finally culminated in a bloody battle between the two main protagonists, Clodius and Milo, in which Clodius was finally slain to the horror of the populace and the joy of the *optimates*; an act which gained sad notoriety in Cicero's defensive speech *Pro Milone* delivered for the benefit of his friend Milo and which eloquently underlines the general disorder.²⁰

However, the general uncertainty had already led to the inevitable realisation that domestic political chaos could not be dealt with while maintaining the traditional constitution, since the veto right common between magistrates of the same rank, which also allowed each of the two consuls, who usually belonged to different factions, to block the other in his official acts, prevented any effective intervention. In the year 52, the Senate finally had to agree, in order to at least prevent the establishment of a dictatorship, to an extraordinary appointment of Pompey, who had long been skilfully manoeuvring between the fronts of the *optimates* and the *populares*, as *consul sine collega*. There were rumours, however, that Pompey was by no means uninvolved in the general disorder, but rather had done everything possible to exacerbate the situation, so as to consolidate his power in Rome and obtain a third consul in view of the imminent expiry of the First Triumvirate and the deterioration of his relations with Caesar. Thus, Appian reports:

For these reasons good men abstained from office altogether, and the disorder was such that at one time the republic was without consuls for eight months, Pompey conniving at the state of affairs in order that there might be need of a dictator. Many citizens began to talk to each other about this, saying that the only remedy for existing evils was the authority of a single ruler, but that there was need of a man who combined strength of character and mildness of temper, thereby indicating Pompey, who had a sufficient army under his command and who appeared to be both a friend of the people and a leader of the Senate by virtue of his rank, a man of temperance and self-control and easy of access, or at all events so considered. The expectation of a dictatorship Pompey discountenanced in words, but in fact he did everything secretly to promote it, and went out of his way to overlook the prevailing disorder and the anarchy consequent upon the disorder.²¹

²⁰ Cf. the description in Cass. Dio 40.48.

²¹ App., *bell. civ.* 2.19–20 (transl. H. White, Loeb).

2.3. The Ideological Background

Of course, such a self-destructive political course would not have been possible without an adequate ideological atmosphere, making it possible to destroy Roman cultural heritage, ridicule religious traditions, plunder and destroy private properties and physically attack politicians. Without a doubt, it was the toxic combination between the social revendications of the impoverished lower and middle classes and the relativist, sometimes even nihilist tendencies of contemporary Hellenistic philosophy which provided the mental background for these events.

Thus, social criticism had become widespread everywhere in the Mediterranean since the 2nd century BC; a period filled with episodes where not only slaves, but also the lower classes, influenced by religious movements and philosophical schools, revolted against the oligarchic rule of wealthy landowners and merchants, and set up short-lived dictatorial regimes. These were characterised by the redistribution of land, the freeing of slaves, the banning or even extermination of the rich, the militarisation of society and the promotion of new civic religions, from the sun-state of Aristonikos and the Spartan revolution through the social stirrings within the members of the Achaian League and the Sicilian slave revolts up to the tribunate of the Gracchi in Rome who famously declared:

‘The wild beasts that roam over Italy,’ he [i.e. Tib. Gracchus] would say, ‘have every one of them a cave or lair to lurk in; but the men who fight and die for Italy enjoy the common air and light, indeed, but nothing else; houseless and homeless they wander about with their wives and children. And it is with lying lips that their imperators exhort the soldiers in their battles to defend sepulchres and shrines from the enemy; for not a man of them has an hereditary altar, not one of all these many Romans an ancestral tomb, but they fight and die to support others in wealth and luxury, and though they are styled masters of the world, they have not a single clod of earth that is their own.’²²

At the same time, resistance to the Roman Empire, where the area of Roman political dominion and the life space of Greco-Roman culture merged so that state and civilisation became inseparable, grew inexorably, as did the hatred of those who did not belong to the empire and wanted to retain their individuality, grew. This, of course, applied first of all to the ‘barbarians’, to whom the Romans themselves ascribed an ideological criticism of their empire that revealed the utter fragility of their own ideology of civilisation. Even though Tacitus, writing under the empire, is a fairly late source, his description of the speech the rebellious Briton Calgacus

²² Plut., Tib. Gracch. 9.4 (transl. B. Perrin, Loeb).

allegedly pronounced before the battle of Mons Graupius certainly reflect many aspects of the lucid self-criticism already in use during the Late Republic:

*Robbers of the world, having by their universal plunder exhausted the land, they [i.e. the Romans] rifle the deep. If the enemy be rich, they are rapacious; if he be poor, they lust for dominion; neither the east nor the west has been able to satisfy them. Alone among men they covet with equal eagerness poverty and riches. To robbery, slaughter, plunder, they give the lying name of empire; they make a solitude and call it peace.*²³

But even from the ranks of the Greeks came resistance to the Roman idea of imperial civilisation and peace, as is demonstrated by the rebellion of the Greeks of Asia Minor against Rome led by Mithridates, the King of Pontus,²⁴ which was comparable in its consequences only to 11th September 2001. The so-called Vespers of Ephesos cost the lives of 80,000 Romans and Italians in Asia Minor, and confronted Rome for the first time in its history with the full extent of the hatred which the provincial inhabitants were able to bring to their administration,²⁵ so that the Romans had to abandon their previous idea of indirect rule over the Orient and, in the following decades, systematically reorganised the entire Levant by founding numerous new cities, establishing provinces and, above all, raising to power new kings and dynasties.²⁶ The hatred was naturally directed on the one hand against the Roman tax collectors, but on the other hand also against the Roman claim of not governing their provinces on the mere basis of the right of the strongest, as had been customary until now, but as a result of justly fought wars and for the benefit of their subjects - a combination of power politics and the claim to justice which had already met with massive criticism from philosophers in Antiquity, as is shown, for example, by the speech reproduced in Lactantius, which the Academic philosopher Carneades gave in 156 BC., to the horror of the senatorial upper class in Rome, and which may explain why not only the subjects, but also the poorer Roman citizens themselves came to loathe the empire and the senatorial elite:

The substance of his disputation was this: 'That men enacted laws for themselves, with a view to their own advantage, differing indeed according to their characters, and in the case of the same persons often changed according to the times: but that there was no natural law: that all, both men and other animals, were borne by the guidance of nature to their own advantage; therefore that there was no justice, or if any did exist, it was the greatest folly, because it injured itself by promoting the interests of others.'

²³ Tac., Agr. 30 (transl. S. Bryant).

²⁴ See in general MCGING 1986; MAYOR 2009.

²⁵ App., Mithr. 85–88 und 91s.

²⁶ Cf. KALLET-MARX 1995.

*And he brought forward these arguments: 'That all nations which flourished with dominion, even the Romans themselves, who were masters of the whole world, if they wish to be just, that is, to restore the possessions of others, must return to cottages, and lie down in want and miseries.'*²⁷

Finally, it should be mentioned that such a critical, alternative view of Roman history was not limited to social revolts and Hellenistic philosophy alone: it also entered certain strands of Roman historiography and thus political thought. Unfortunately, most of what is called the Roman 'Annalistic' has been lost, but the fragments of these studies, conserved through quotations in other authors, make it possible to at least reconstruct the general attitude of some of its more important proponents. One of the clearest examples seems to have been Gaius Licinius Macer,²⁸ born around 110, tribune in 73 and praetor in 68, who died shortly after having been accused of corruption by Cicero. He is the author of a probably unfinished 'History of Rome' which was renowned for its tendency to project much of the popular dissatisfaction with the ruling elite unto the city's remote past. Sallust ridicules him in his own 'Histories', where he renders a speech allegedly given by Macer, and it is no surprise that he not only insists on the latter's endeavour to instrumentalise, and probably even largely invent, past events to promote political agitation in the present, but also ascribes to him an inflationary use of the word '*libertas*', whose importance we already saw when discussing Clodius' propaganda:

*If you did not realize, fellow citizens, what a difference there is between the rights left you by your forefathers and this slavery imposed upon you by Sulla, I should be obliged to make a long speech and to inform you because of what wrongs, and how often, the plebeians took up arms and seceded from the patricians; and how they won the tribunes of the commons as the defenders of their rights. But as it is, I have only to encourage you and to precede you on the road which, in my opinion, leads to the recovery of your liberties. I am not unaware how great is the power of the nobles, whom I alone, powerless, am trying to drive from their tyranny by the empty semblance of a magistracy; and I know how much more secure a faction of wicked men is than any upright man alone. But in addition to the fair hopes which you have inspired and which have dispelled my fear, I have decided that defeat in a struggle for liberty is for a brave man better than never to have struggled at all.*²⁹

²⁷ Cic., rep. 3.7.21 (in: Lact., inst. 5,17) (transl. W. Fletcher).

²⁸ On Licinius Macer, see WALT 1997; CORNELL et al. 2013. nr. 27.

²⁹ Sall., hist. 3.48 Maurenbrecher (transl. P. McGushin).

2.4. Further examples

Not only would it lead much too far in this context to dwell extensively on other examples from history; it would also be problematic from a scholarly point of view, as our source material is not nearly so extensive as in the case of the Roman Republic, so that it would be quite hazardous to flesh out our meagre information with suppositions which might very well be true, but cannot be immediately confirmed through direct testimonies. Nevertheless, in order to show that the Late Roman Republic was by no means the only civilisation witnessing a comparable period of crisis of tradition and memory, let us quickly refer to three further cases.³⁰

Thus, already in Egypt in the late 14th century B.C., Akhenaten,³¹ whose totalitarian characteristics have often been stressed in research, not only attempted to strip the Amun-clergy of its wealth by disbanding all cults and/or diverting their income to his new, quasi-monotheist cult of Aten, but also defaced inscriptions mentioning other gods, re-wrote the history of the past and imposed himself as sole mediator between Aten and the masses, to bypass the traditional religious elites. Despite utopian claims of having inaugurated an ideal age of universal bliss, his regime was characterised by the corruption of officials, failures of the new centralism, the expense of gigantic projects such as the construction of Amarna, as well as the increasing influence of the army, and left a longstanding memory of trauma. The shortcomings of Atenism led to the downfall of Akhenaten's regime and beliefs after his death, and the short restoration of the exploitive economic structures of the priesthood of Amun under the reigns of the kings of the late 18th dynasty. However, the Amarna period left deep scars, and explains the ultimate rise to power of the 19th dynasty and thus the Ramesside era in the 13th century BC, combining a traditionalist outlook on Egyptian culture and religion with social preoccupations and strong centralism.³²

A further, though generally less well-known example, comes from the early 6th century A.D. in Sasanian Iran. Here, it was the religious movement of the Mazdakites³³ which rose against the wealthy land-owning elite that controlled the

³⁰ See also ENGELS 2018d.

³¹ On Akhenaten, cf. BERTRAM 1953; DODSON 2014; HOFFMEIER 2015; HORNUNG 1995; LABOURY 2010; REEVES 2000.

³² On the post-Amarna and Ramesside restoration, cf. DODSON 2009; JAMES 2002; KITCHEN 1983.

³³ On the Mazdakites, see CHRISTENSEN 1925; CRONE 1991; KLIMA 1957; WIESEHÖFER 2009; YARSHATER 1983.

major state structures. With the initial support of the ruling king, Kavadh I, who hoped to strengthen his empire against the very influential nobility of the time, the Mazdakites abolished private property, imposed a 'community of women' and thus made patrilineal heredity impossible. They confiscated land and riches, and challenged the Zoroastrian clergy in order to set up a utopian and egalitarian state. Here too, the experience of violence, social disorder and anti-traditionalist iconoclasm left Iranian civilisation scarred. The counter-revolution of the wealthy classes led to a long period of political chaos, from which it could only be saved by the authoritarian reforms of king Chosroes I in the 6th century AD.³⁴ Chosroes endeavoured to restore the ancestral social and religious order, while improving, at the same time, the living conditions and moral education of the simple people and fortifying the political position of the 'king of kings'.

In the Islamic world as well, the extreme social injustice of the late Abbasid era was contested by numerous communist movements, most notably the Qarmatians.³⁵ Influenced by the increasingly popularised social doctrines of the Isma'ili movement, the Qarmatians promoted the redistribution of land, preached an egalitarian, communist society based on collectivised slave labour forces, successfully founded a state which controlled much of southern Iraq and the Persian Gulf Coast in the 10th century, and opposed many traditional religious rituals such as pilgrimage, fasting and Friday prayer; even closing down mosques and pillaging Mecca, which lastingly discredited them in the eyes of all Muslims. In the post-Classic Islamic world, the Qarmatian State gradually declined during the 10th century AD, through the endeavours of the rich merchants who controlled the Arabian trade routes, and who were endangered by the Qarmatian raids and social reforms. However, the new hegemonic power of the Islamic world, the Fatimids, who, after an initial alliance, were instrumental in the Qarmatians' final demise, took over many of the latter's ideological features and social claims, though they restored most of the traditional ritual forms of Islam and its society, despite their own Isma'ili identity.³⁶

³⁴ On Chosroes, compare BÖRM 2008; HOWARD-JOHNSTON 2008; JULLIEN 2015; RUBIN 1995.

³⁵ On the Qarmatians, see DE GOEJE 1886; IVANOW 1942; LEWIS 1940; RAMAHI – QUINTERN 2005.

³⁶ On the end of the Qarmatians, see DE GOEJE 1895; MADELUNG 1959. On the Fatimids, see BRETT 2001; HALM 1991; HALM 2003; LEV 1992.

3. Conclusions

To sum up, it would appear that the events happening presently throughout the Western World can by no means be considered as unique or exceptional, but correspond broadly to a phase of dangerous crisis and transformation which has also affected many other civilisations. Thus, the rise of an egalitarian ideology, the re-writing of history, the attacks on the spiritual as well as material heritage of the past, the instrumentalisation of historical guilt, civil unrest and the endeavour to grab absolute power, often in cooperation with parts of the ruling elite – all these features seem by no means unusual, but rather describe a standard stage in the development of many late civilisations.

If this is the case, what can we learn from such an observation? On the one hand, we can understand that the current evolution is not a passing accident in the history of the West, but an evolution that seems to be an intrinsic part in the developmental dynamic of many civilisations. This should, of course, not deflect our vision from the individual responsibilities behind the nefarious evolutions our society is suffering just now, but it could at least help us to understand their meaning, and perhaps even their necessity as a mere transition. Another important point to realise is that the comparison with other civilisations may help us to predict at least broadly the further evolution caused by the current crisis. Unfortunately, this does not imply good news. Instead of coming again to its senses and re-establishing a new concord between the fighting factions of society, the unrest will increase still further and, at one point or another, lead to a major disruption and trauma for the entire civilisation, before, at the end of a decade-long process, provoking general exhaustion, or, in the words of Appian:

Repeatedly the parties came into open conflict, often carrying daggers; and from time to time in the temples, or the assemblies, or the forum, some tribune, or praetor, or consul, or candidate for these offices, or some person otherwise distinguished, would be slain. Unseemly violence prevailed almost constantly, together with shameful contempt for law and justice. As the evil gained in magnitude open insurrections against the government and large warlike expeditions against their country were undertaken by exiles, or criminals, or persons contending against each other for some office or military command. There arose chiefs of factions quite frequently, aspiring to supreme power, some of them refusing to disband the troops entrusted to them by the people, others even hiring forces against each other on their own account, without public authority. Whenever either side first got possession of the city, the opposition party made war

*nominally against their own adversaries, but actually against their country. They assailed it like an enemy's capital, and ruthless and indiscriminate massacres of citizens were perpetrated. Some were proscribed, others banished, property was confiscated, and prisoners were even subjected to excruciating tortures.*³⁷

Only at the final end of this ordeal, the people as well as its elite will finally submit to those parties and leaders who have successfully displayed their ability to attract a sufficient number of armed followers, to create law and order, to build up solid political alliances and, most importantly, to succeed in winning the war of propaganda.

Augustus, Ramses II, Khosroes or the Fatimids: They all managed not only to establish their rule on the basis of military power or economic success, but also to present themselves as defenders of a cultural restoration, building thus a new civilisational cohesion by fully endorsing the legacy of tradition and history without, however, excluding all those citizens and allies who, though from a foreign background, wished to integrate and assimilate. Thus, history, from an object of shame, loathing and hate, became once again a central element in the self-identification of the respective civilisations, and many of those witnesses of the past previously destroyed, defiled or forgotten were restored to their old glory, at least outwardly.

Of course, as is most obvious in the case of Augustus, such a restoration was usually accompanied by a centralisation of power in the hands of a ruler or magistrate able to wield it not in the short but in the long-term, and this was barely feasible in republican, oligarchic or aristocratic systems characterised by short-term legislative periods, collegial vetoes and the paralysis often induced by check and balances. However, it is to be noticed that, at least in the case of the Roman Republic, the civil disorder and discredit that the Senatorial Republic had brought upon itself were such that nobody, not even the members of the elite, seems to have seen the transformation of the Republic into the Principate as a major loss, as they were only too aware that the end of the Republic was not an accident, but the inevitable consequence of its numerous inherent contradictions which, for a time, were the very roots of its success, but then became the reasons for its depravation and downfall.

It may thus be a further lesson of history to realise that, as is the case for a living organism, great civilisations have their developmental stages too, and that, just as with life itself, history is not an 'open' process, but rather subject to a series of

³⁷ App., bell. civ. 1.2 (transl. H. White, Loeb).

contingencies which we may have to accept – however grudgingly – as the ancient Romans did. This need can be most clearly exemplified when considering the Augustan historian Livy who, in the preamble to his work, wrote the following description of the fundamental tragedy of his own times, where political order, social harmony and cultural pride could only be restored at the price of accepting the fact that their balance had henceforth to be guaranteed by the authority of the princeps; a political ‘remedy’ as intolerable, though inevitable, as the previous, self-inflicted disorder:

*I would have every man apply his mind seriously to consider these points, viz. what their life and what their manners were; through what men and by what measures, both in peace and in war, their empire was acquired and extended; then, as discipline gradually declined, let him follow in his thoughts their morals, at first as slightly giving way, anon how they sunk more and more, then began to fall headlong, until he reaches the present times, when we can neither endure our vices, nor their remedies.*³⁸

³⁸ Liv., pref. 7-8 (transl. D. Spillan).

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