The Storm Before the Storm: The Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic

(Mike Duncan)

August 3, 2018

How the Roman Republic ended is well known, even in these under-educated days, but all the attention focus goes to Julius Caesar. True, he was the pivot of the actual end of the Republic, but what came before and after was more important. What came after, during the long reign of Augustus, may not be as thrilling as story, but it dictated much of the later history of the West (and of the Roman East, now temporarily in thralldom). This book covers the other side of the transition, what came before—a period that nowadays is nearly forgotten, but is perhaps more critically important in what it can teach us today.

The author, Mike Duncan, explicitly claims that this period echoes ours, which is true, though echoes should not be thought deterministic. In his Introduction, he cites "rising economic inequality, dislocation of traditional ways of life, increasing political polarization, breakdown of unspoken rules of political conduct, the privatization of the military, rampant corruption, endemic social and ethnic prejudice, battles over access to citizenship and voting rights, ongoing military quagmires, the introduction of violence as a political tool, and a set of elites so obsessed with their own privileges that they refused to reform the system in time to save it." This phrasing implies more exact parallels than really exist, since Roman society was very different than ours, so that, for example, "ethnic prejudice" is a lot different in their context than ours. And these various factors are by no means equal in their impact, in Roman times or ours. But overall Duncan isn't wrong, and the rest of his book is an expansion on this basic theme—although he ultimately doesn't draw any specific parallels to today, perhaps wisely, since that is bound to annoy some of his readers, and he is a popularizer.

It's not that the time period covered by this book (roughly 145 B.C. to 75 B.C.) offers explicit instructions to us; it's that it teaches us the lesson that certain types of turmoil are not easily addressed or their causes fixed, and that the slide from shouting at each other to shooting at each other can be very quick, especially when combined with the classic human emotions of ambition, fear, and greed. Naturally, since

this is a popular history (Duncan achieved fame as a podcaster), much of the book is taken up with explanation and descriptions that would be lacking in an academic work (and in any work of the relatively recent past, when people were better educated). That's just the nature of the beast, and not a criticism of the book. If I had criticisms, they would be that it needs better maps, and also that Duncan is not all that engaging a writer, though he seems to think he is. On the other hand, an extremely positive facet of the book is that it spends zero time on ideological history. You will not find any commentary on Roman treatment of women or other supposedly oppressed groups; history is offered straight up, no chaser. This is refreshing when today most academics make such silly sidelines the main focus of their histories, or at least feel required to genuflect in the direction of oppression theory and other stupidities. Nor does Duncan waste time focusing on the lives of common people, which after all don't matter for history, except occasionally in their aggregate actions.

Duncan begins with the final defeat and destruction of Carthage, in 146 B.C., which he identifies as the height of the Republic. Critically, he identifies the Republic's strength not as mere military or economic power, but that "the Romans surrounded themselves with unwritten rules, traditions, and mutual expectations collectively known as *mos maiorum*, which means 'the way of the elders.' " It was the breakdown of the *mos maiorum*, not the erosion of the letter of Roman law, that most showed the breakdown of the Republic itself. This focus on the *mos maiorum*, while the traditional lens through which the Republic's virtue and death has been viewed for many centuries, has not been fashionable for the past hundred years. Marxists hate it, and they are very prominent among historians. More recently, they have been joined by more modern ideologically-driven historians, from feminists to Critical Theory devotees, in claiming that the *mos maiorum* is either irrelevant or overstated in importance. But as with most traditional views of history, it's undoubtedly the correct lens. Duncan's focus on it highlights the difference between him and some other historians—he's not an academic, and he draws for his sources almost exclusively on primary sources (in translation), used for what they state, not for some hidden meaning. I'm sure academics sneer at this, and also hate that Duncan's podcasts and their book get vastly more exposure than their tedious

screeds, but it makes Duncan's book both more interesting and more accurate.

Duncan also offers a description of the traditional political system of the Republic, as it existed in 146 B.C. This sketch is necessarily elided in some areas; Duncan notes, for example, that he refers to the "Assemblies," when there were three different popular, "democratic" assemblies—but they are commonly not specifically identified by ancient historians, so it is hard to say which is at issue in a given instance. Essentially, as everyone knows, the Romans had a mixed system, with elements of oligarchy, monarchy, and democracy (the latter being viewed by all political theorists until recently as the worst possible unmixed system). Still, by the late Republic, the Senate had gained the most power, and so most political conflicts revolved around the Senate. Many different fracture lines existed, few ideological, but the biggest was the general conflict between the *optimates* and the *populares*—between those who wanted to preserve aristocratic control of the Senate, and those who wanted to gain power from, and give power to, those farther down the social scale.

Having laid the outlines, Duncan's first major focus is Tiberius Gracchus. As with all good popularizers of history, Duncan writes well, if a bit floridly, and does a good job of conveying the feeling of the times, or at least what it seems like the times must have felt like. Gracchus's main focus was land reform, since the old Roman ideal of yeoman farmers had decayed and the ancient equivalents of modern tech barons and lords of finance had monopolized all the sources of money, turning former yeoman farmers into wage slaves, or, in many instances, actual slaves. Partially this was just the result of their having more money so as to buy up land, but there was also a great deal of corruption, ignoring of the letter of the law (such as evading caps on landholding size), and of the *mos maiorum*. Combined with these economic matters was the question of full Roman citizenship for the Italian allies, so the major set of proposed reforms, the *Lex Agraria*, pushed by Gracchus's political faction, was potentially of far-ranging impact (and of great benefit to his political faction). Tiberius Gracchus was opposed by an important faction in the Senate, who used procedural maneuvers to block approval by the Assembly. Gracchus's response was to paint his opponents as malefactors of great wealth and whip up popular animus,

among other things deposing another tribune through popular vote and running for consecutive terms as tribune himself (which allowed him veto power and made his person, supposedly, inviolable), both not technically against the law but grossly violating the *mos maiorum*, the first time such violations had occurred. The response of the opposing faction, in 133 B.C., after the passage of the Lex Agraria and therefore the relaxation of Tiberius's support because his initial supporters had gotten what they wanted, and Tiberius's subsequent turning to the urban masses for fresh support, promising radical carrots, was for a mob of senators (including the *pontifex maximus*) and their clients to kill Tiberius, along with hundreds of his supporters, in front of the Temple of Jupiter, using improvised clubs because bringing weapons to those precincts was forbidden. This was, needless to say, an even greater breach of the *mos maiorum*, and the beginning of the regularization of political violence.

Duncan continues with the Sicilian slave revolt, the First Servile War, of 135–132 B.C., and the unrelated gain by Rome of the wealthy province of Asia. The former greatly unsettled the Romans, the latter brought a massive, continuing flow of riches, further corrupting the upper classes and increasing the prizes to be gained by being assigned to govern provinces. Next comes the career of Gaius Gracchus, the brother of Tiberius, another radical popularizer, who also ended up dead, in 121 B.C., also killed by a mob, but unlike the mob that killed his brother, this mob had legal sanction in the form of a new Senatorial decree—the *senatus consultum ultimum*, an instruction to a consul to do "whatever thought necessary to preserve the State." This radical departure was a harbinger of the future, since the decree was used repeatedly during later unrest, until the Empire was fully established by Augustus. Duncan also adds color by, for example, noting that the mob was promised an equal weight of gold in exchange for Gaius Gracchus's head, so a former supporter who found his body cut off the head, removed the brain, and poured in lead before turning in the head. Good times.

The Gracchi have been a beacon for various modern revolutionaries; Duncan treats them as neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but most definitely contributors to the erosion of the conventions and traditions that had safeguarded the political peace for hundreds of years. But, as Duncan shows, everyone was responsible for the erosion of the *mos*

maiorum. And the Gracchi were merely a warm up for the Roman Civil Wars, to which the story next turns. Duncan relates the background and career of Gaius Marius, a man of meager birth (*novus homo*, as the Romans referred to such men) who, in those unsettled days, still managed to rise through military success (especially the reduction of the Numidian king Jurgurtha) and attaching himself to the right *optimate* political faction, though he ultimately got much of his power from the *populares*. Marius parlayed this into the consulship, or rather an unprecedented (and highly non-traditional) seven consulships, along the way introducing various pernicious innovations, such as recruiting soldiers from among the landless poor. Duncan quotes Sallust on Marius, "[T]o one who aspires to power the poorest man is the most helpful, since he has no regard for his property, having none, and considers anything honorable for which he receives pay." Hey, isn't that what Mitt Romney said is the governing principle of the modern Democratic Party?

Next is Lucius Sulla, the great opponent of Marius, who was in essence a representative of the *optimates*, and who similarly had military success (serving initially under Marius and critical to the capture of Jurgurtha), but whose path to the top was eased by his patrician status and connections. He was also notoriously dissolute. Plutarch, who loathed him, claimed two hundred years later that Sulla "consorted with actresses, harpists, and theatrical people, drinking with them on couches all day long." Moreover, also according to Plutarch, Sulla had a male lover, a transvestite Greek actor named Metrobius, as well as innumerable female companions, although the Romans were notorious for making up nasty stories about people they disliked, and Plutarch is the only source for this, so it's not clear whether Sulla was really as dissolute as Plutarch claims. But it makes him more interesting than Marius, who mostly seems grumpy.

Duncan covers the continued degradation of the political process toward the year 100 B.C., where political violence, the ignoring of many traditional limitations, and pandering toward the lower classes for votes all became commonplace. "A [tribune's] veto had once been enough to grind the entire Republic to a halt; now it was simply wadded up and tossed aside." So it wasn't just the *mos maiorum* breaking down, it was the rule of law itself. In 100 B.C., Marius crushed former allies of his, the *populares* Lucius Saturninus and Gaius Glaucia, again by the simple

expedient of killing them (though they were guilty of killing their political opponents first, to be sure—things were really deteriorating fast by this point). The basic conflict, still, continued to be that between the insular, corrupt rich and the degraded poor.

Then came the Social War, the war with the Italian allies (actually, with only some of them, since there were different grades with different privileges of citizenship), from 91–88 B.C., in which both Sulla and Marius distinguished themselves, especially the former, but which devastated Italy, contributing to the erosion of order. Given that the Roman alliance with other parts of Italy had been the basis for the entire growth of the Republic, this must have been an existential shock to the Romans, changing their perceptions, and one of which it's hard for us to grasp the impact. It also had follow-on effects, such as a monetary crisis, further unsettling life for the average Roman. Following the successful conclusion of the war, Sulla and Marius fell out, when the aging Marius succeeded in having the Senate's award to Sulla of a military command, to the east to fight Mithradates VI of Pontus (roughly northeast Turkey), withdrawn and given to him. Like Julius Caesar, Sulla was a gambler who believed that Fortune favored him, something that encouraged throws of the dice (this seems to be characteristic of a lot of men critical to history; Napoleon is another example), so instead of taking this sitting down, given that he still had six legions handy and was extremely popular with his soldiers, he marched on Rome in 87 B.C., an unprecedented and catastrophic break with tradition. Sulla, naturally, claimed that his opponents were the ones who had spat on the *mos maiorum* and he was just acting to restore it.

When he had gained control of Rome, which he did easily, Sulla proceeded to introduce another innovation—proscriptions of his enemies, through posting lists of men who could be killed with impunity, with the killer rewarded with gold and the dead man's property going to Sulla. At the same time, he continued claiming, not without accuracy, that he just wanted things to go back to the way they used to be. But after establishing full control, Sulla left Rome, to proceed against Mithradates, who had arranged the massacre of every Italian resident in Pontus, about eighty thousand people. Marius returned, aided by the enigmatic Lucius Cinna, who played a crucial role as consul in this period, but about whose earlier life almost nothing is known. After

slaughtering various enemies, ratcheting up the new habit of political killing, Marius promptly died, leaving Cinna in control. Meanwhile, Sulla sacked Athens (ruled by Mithradates through an agent), and spent two years fighting Mithradates, winning but ending up with a negotiated peace. He marched back to Italy in 83 B.C. and engaged in a full-scale civil war with the forces of Cinna and his allies, ending in the Battle of the Colline Gate, just outside Rome, which killed fifty thousand men and which Sulla won decisively.

Sulla proceeded to revive the office of dictator, rarely used and dormant for over a hundred years—but made it unlimited in time, whereas it had always been strictly limited to six months. He used this to proscribe all his enemies, not just a few like the first time he had marched on Rome, resulting in the killing of thousands—largely because once all the enemies were gone, the proscriptions were extended to those who had a lot of property, so it could be confiscated to Sulla's benefit. It was at this time that Julius Caesar was nearly killed (he was Cinna's son-in-law and his family was associated with Marius), but he had Sullan friends, and so Sulla spared him (an action he later supposedly said he regretted, though his twenty-two volume autobiography is sadly lost). Surprisingly, perhaps, a year later Sulla resigned his dictatorship, disbanded his legions, and was elected consul for one year, during which he walked around without bodyguards, telling anyone who would listen he was happy to explain all his past actions. Then he retired to his estate, dying in 78 B.C.

Pretty much everyone's major actions in all this were both completely illegal and in violation of all the traditions of Rome. Sulla's main program was reform through rollback—restoring the senatorial aristocracy of the *optimates*, and restoring virtue in general (always a thankless and unlikely task, if attempted through legislation). But, as Duncan says, it wasn't just mindless rollback—Sulla "believed that he was building a regime to address specific problems of the present that had plagued the Republic, and with his reforms they might not plague the Republic in the future." And Sulla had the courage of his convictions, to give up his own power. Still, the net effect of Sulla was pernicious—"The facts of Sulla's career spoke louder than his constitutional musings. As a young man he had flouted traditional rules of loyalty and deference to spread his own fame. When insulted, he marched legions on Rome.

When abroad, he ran his own military campaigns and conducted his own diplomacy. When challenged back in Rome, he launched a civil war, declared himself dictator, killed his enemies, then retired to get drunk in splendid luxury. The biography of Sulla drowned out the constitution of Sulla, and the men who followed him paid attention to what could be done rather than what should be done."

Thus, Sulla was the template for Julius Caesar, along with lesser lights such as Pompey involved in the destruction of the Republic. All this used to be a commonplace because the ruling classes were educated; now that knowledge is no longer common knowledge, so a book like this serves a purpose. Duncan's project is really to resurrect what used to be known to everyone—that erosion of traditional methods of government necessarily takes on a life of its own, and that each dubious change or outrage becomes the pattern and springboard for worse to follow. Certainly, in the erosion of the rule of law we've seen over the past several decades, and especially in the past decade, we see the groundwork being laid for the rise of new men of an opportunistic bent, although as of yet private armies are not on the horizon, at least. And whatever you may think of Trump, he certainly spends a lot of time furthering the decay of the American *mos maiorum*; this may be inevitable or even necessary, but the consequences will be, as this book shows, unpredictable and unlikely to be pleasant, at least in the short and medium term.

For us, there is also a bigger lesson—that a mere rolling back of the times is inadequate. All Sulla succeeded in doing was increasing the pressure on the Republic and delaying its implosion by a few decades. It took Augustus, and his program of remaking the polity with new structures for new times, but informed by and using the nomenclature of the past, to build a secure new footing for Rome—a footing often denigrated now, because of a focus on the spectacularly bad emperors and the widespread (but false) conviction since the Enlightenment that monarchy is an inferior form of government and more democracy is better. We've probably come to an end of that line of thought, though, so the prime benefit of understanding the Sullan wars and their context is to realize that something like it will probably characterize our future, maybe our immediate future, whether we like it or not. Ultimately there will be a new order, and it is not likely to be one of liberal democracy. The trick is making sure that new order is more like Augustus, a non-ideological

turn to a new form of government informed by pre-modern forms of government, and less like the new orders of the twentieth century.