

THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

Written by Alan Woods
Friday, 04 September 2009

Today we begin publication of an important new series by Alan Woods, which provides a Marxist explanation of the processes that led to the collapse of the Roman Republic. Here the method of historical materialism is used to shed light on an important turning-point in world history. For Marxists the study of history is not just a form of harmless entertainment. It is essential that we do study history for the lessons we can learn from it. To paraphrase the words of the American philosopher George Santayana: "He who does not learn from history is doomed to repeat it."



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In 1846 Weitling complained that the “intellectuals” Marx and Engels wrote only about obscure matters of no interest to the workers. Marx angrily responded with the following words, “Ignorance never yet helped anybody.” Marx’s response is as valid today as it was then.

The publication of the series [*The Class Struggle in the Roman Republic*](#) has aroused considerable interest among the readers of Marxist.com. According to the information that has just been passed to me by the editorial staff, there has been a record number of individual visits to these articles, about 2,200 hits, which is significantly higher than the average number of visits per individual article.



Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

This fact confirms the correctness of the policy of Marxist.com, which has established a strong reputation for the quality of its theoretical articles. At a time when the ideas of Marxism are coming under attack from all sides, our website stands out for its firm and consistent defence of Marxist theory in all its manifold richness. It shows that many people all over the world are interested in theory and enthusiastic about deepening their knowledge of Marxism.

Marxist.com has its critics, however. Some of our critics complain because we write articles about ancient Rome in the middle of the

biggest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s. In fairness to ourselves, Marxist.com has published a very great deal on the crisis, and will continue to do so. But we also have a duty to write about other matters, to raise the level of theoretical understanding of our readers, to provide a Marxist analysis, not just of economics but of history, science, art, music and every other sphere of human activity.

How do we answer those who demand that we narrow the scope of Marxism to fit into their limited mental schema? We do not have to answer them at all, because they were answered long ago by Lenin, who wrote: *Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement*. That is a fundamental truth that all the great Marxists have insisted on. Let us remind ourselves of this elementary fact by a few significant examples

No revolution without theory

Even before they wrote the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels (who, let us remember, began their revolutionary life as students of Hegelian philosophy) conducted a struggle against those “proletarian” leaders who worshipped backwardness and primitive methods of struggle and stubbornly resisted the introduction of scientific theory.



Wilhelm Weitling

The Russian critic, Annenkov, who happened to be in Brussels during the spring of 1846, has left us a very curious report of one meeting at

which a furious quarrel occurred between Marx and Weitling, the German utopian communist. At one point, Weitling, who was a worker, complained that the “intellectuals” Marx and Engels wrote about obscure matters of no interest to the workers. He accused Marx of writing “armchair analysis of doctrines far from the world of the suffering and afflicted people.” At this point, Marx, who was usually very patient, became indignant. Annenkov writes:

“At the last words Marx finally lost control of himself and thumped so hard with his fist on the table that the lamp on it rung and shook. He jumped up saying: ‘*Ignorance never yet helped anybody.*’” (*Reminiscences of Marx and Engels*, p.272, my emphasis, AW)

Weitling was opposed to theory and patient propagandistic work. Like Bakunin, he maintained that poor people were always ready to revolt. This advocate of “revolutionary action” as opposed to theory believed that as long as there were resolute leaders, a revolution could be engineered at any moment. We find echoes of these primitive pre-Marxist ideas even today in the ranks of the Marxists.

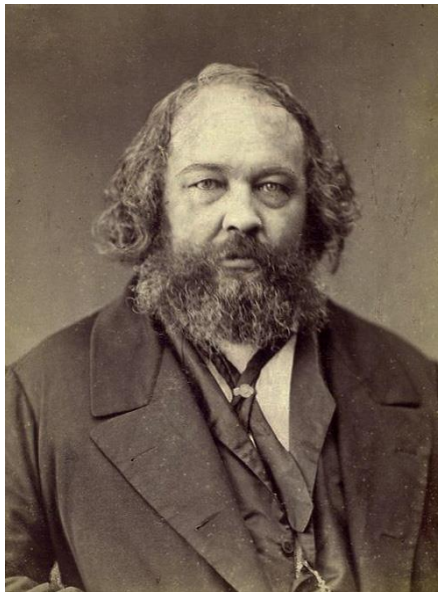
Marx understood that the communist movement could only advance by a radical break with these primitive notions and a thorough cleansing in the ranks. The break with Weitling was inevitable and came in May, 1846. Afterwards, Weitling left for America and ceased to play any noteworthy role. Only by breaking with the “worker-activist” Weitling was it possible to establish the Communist League on a sound basis. Yet the primitive tendency represented by Weitling constantly reproduces itself in the movement, first in the ideas of Bakunin, and later in the variegated forms of ultraleftism that still plagues the Marxist movement to this day.

In the *Collected Works* of Marx and Engels we find a real goldmine of ideas. Here we find Engels’ writings on the Peasant War in Germany, on the early history of the Germans, Slavs and Irish, his history of Early Christianity. In his article on the death of Engels, Lenin wrote:

“Marx worked on the analysis of the complex phenomena of capitalist economy. Engels, in simply written works, often of a polemical character, dealt with more general scientific problems

and with diverse phenomena of the past and present in the spirit of the materialist conception of history and Marx's economic theory."

A brief list of Engels' works immediately reveals the breadth of the man's vision. We have his magnificent polemical work against Dühring, which deals in great depth with philosophy, natural science and the social sciences. [*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*](#) deals with the earliest origins of human society. What has all this got to do with the working class and the class struggle, our "practical" critics will ask. Only this: that this was the work that laid down the basis for the Marxist theory of the state, which Lenin later developed in [*State and Revolution*](#), the book that laid the theoretical foundations for the Bolshevik Revolution.



Mikhail Bakunin

And what are we to say about [*Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of German Classical Philosophy*](#)? In this book, Engels deals not only with the "abstract and abstruse" ideas of Hegel, but also with the ideas of obscure minor German philosophers of the Hegelian Left movement. Especially in the Correspondence of Marx and Engels we find a treasure trove of ideas with an astonishing sweep. The two friends exchanged views on all manner of subjects, not just economics and politics but philosophy, history, science, art, literature and culture.

Here is a crushing answer to all the bourgeois critics of Marx who present a caricature of Marxism as a dry, narrow doctrine, which reduces all human thought to economics and the development of the productive forces. Yet even today there are people who like to call themselves Marxists who defend, not the genuine ideas of Marx and Engels in all their richness, breadth and profundity, but the very same “economist” caricature of the bourgeois critics of Marxism. This is not Marxism at all but, to use Hegel’s expression, “die leblosen Knochen eines Skeletts” (the lifeless bones of a skeleton), on which Lenin commented: “What is necessary is not *leblose Knochen*, but living life.” (Lenin, Philosophical Notebooks, Collected Works, Vol. 38)

Lenin and theory

Lenin always stressed the importance of theory. Even in the initial, embryonic phase of the Party, he conducted a pitiless struggle against the Economists, who had the narrow mentality of the “proletarian practico” and despised theory as the sphere of the intellectuals, not the workers. Answering this nonsense, Lenin wrote:

“Marx’s statement: ‘Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes.’ To repeat these words in a period of theoretical disorder is like wishing mourners at a funeral many happy returns of the day. Moreover, these words of Marx are taken from his letter on the Gotha Programme, in which he *sharply condemns* eclecticism in the formulation of principles. If you must unite, Marx wrote to the party leaders, then enter into agreements to satisfy the practical aims of the movement, but do not allow any bargaining over principles, do not make theoretical ‘concessions’. This was Marx’s idea, and yet there are people among us who seek in his name to belittle the significance of theory!

“Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement. This idea cannot be insisted upon too strongly at a time when the fashionable preaching of opportunism goes hand in hand with an infatuation for the narrowest forms of practical activity. Yet, for Russian Social-Democrats the importance of theory is enhanced by three other circumstances, which are often forgotten: first, by the fact that our Party is only in process of formation, its features are only just becoming defined, and it has

as yet far from settled accounts with the other trends of revolutionary thought that threaten to divert the movement from the correct path.” ([*What is to be Done?*](#) Dogmatism and “Freedom of Criticism”)

The Economist trend, like Weitling and Bakunin, posed as a “genuine proletarian” tendency fighting against the pernicious influence of the “intellectual theoreticians.” A sharp break with this trend, which combined “proletarian” demagoguery with reformist trade unionism in practice, was the prior condition for the formation of Bolshevism. But the struggle for theory, against the “practicos” was a constant feature long after that.

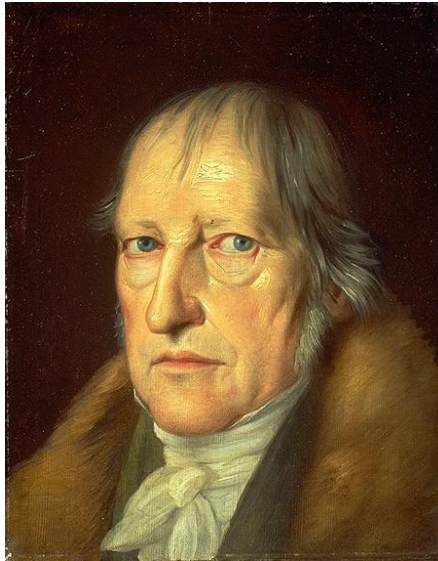
Lenin wrote in 1908:

“The ideological struggle waged by revolutionary Marxism against revisionism at the end of the nineteenth century is but the prelude to the great revolutionary battles of the proletariat, which is marching forward to the complete victory of its cause despite all the waverings and weaknesses of the petty bourgeoisie.”
(*Marxism and Revisionism*)

In his book *Stalin*, Trotsky describes in great detail the psychology of the Bolshevik “committeemen”, who also had the “practico” mentality. They made a whole series of blunders because of their inability to understand the real movement of the workers in 1905-6. The reason for their errors (usually of an ultra-left character) was their lack of understanding of dialectics. They had a completely abstract and formalistic idea of Party Building, which was not related to the real movement of the workers. That is why in 1905, to Lenin’s horror, the Bolsheviks in Petersburg walked out of the first meeting of the Soviet, because it refused to accept the Party programme.

In 1908, when he found himself in a minority of one in the leadership of the Bolshevik faction, which was led by the ultra-lefts, Bogdanov and Lunacharsky, he was prepared to split away on the basis of a difference on Marxist philosophy. It is no accident that in this difficult time, when the very existence of the revolutionary tendency was in danger, he spent a lot of time writing a book on philosophy: *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

One might ask what was Vladimir Ilyich doing writing books on such matters. What possible relevance can the study of the writings of Bishop Berkeley have to the Russian workers? One might also ask why Lenin thought it necessary to break with the Majority of the Bolshevik leaders on the question of philosophy. But Lenin understood very well the causal link between Bogdanov's rejection of dialectical materialism and the ultra-left policies adopted by the Majority.



Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (portrait by Jakob Schlesinger)

During the First World War, Lenin returned to philosophy, making a profound study of Hegel that was published many years later as the *Philosophical Notebooks*. One of his last works was *On the Significance of Militant Materialism*, in which he again stresses the need to study Hegel:

“Of course, this study, this interpretation, this propaganda of Hegelian dialectics is extremely difficult, and the first experiments in this direction will undoubtedly be accompanied by errors. But only he who never does anything never makes mistakes. Taking as our basis Marx's method of applying materialistically conceived Hegelian dialectics, we can and should elaborate this dialectics from all aspects, print in the journal excerpts from Hegel's principal works, interpret them materialistically and comment on them with the help of examples of the way Marx applied dialectics, as well as of examples of dialectics in the sphere of economic and political relations, which recent history, especially

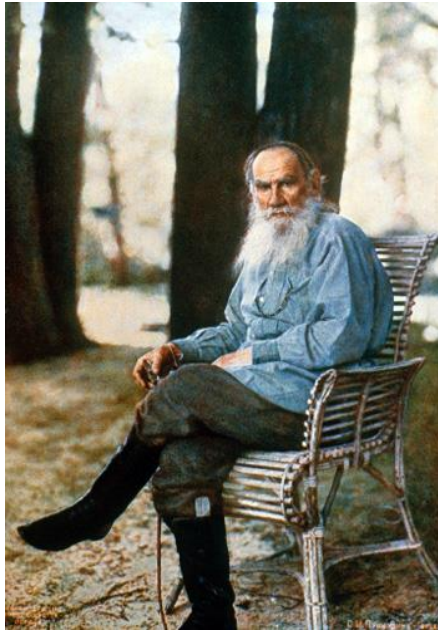
modern imperialist war and revolution, provides in unusual abundance.”

Trotsky and theory

Trotsky, like Lenin, devoted his entire life to an intransigent defence of Marxist theory. In his excellent article on Engels, he stresses the latter’s scrupulous attitude to theory:

“At the same time, the intellectual magnanimity of the master toward his pupil was truly inexhaustible. He used to read the most important articles of the prolific Kautsky in their manuscript form, and each of his letters of criticism contains precious suggestions, the fruit of serious thought, and sometimes of research. Kautsky’s well-known work, *Class Antagonisms in the French Revolution*, which has been translated into almost all the languages of civilized mankind, also, it appears, passed through the intellectual laboratory of Engels. His long letter on social groupings in the epoch of the great revolution of the eighteenth century – as well as on the application of the materialist methods of historical events – is one of the most magnificent documents of the human mind. It is much too terse, and each of its formulae presupposes too great a store of knowledge for it to enter into general reading circulation; but this document, so long kept hidden, will forever remain not only the source of theoretical instruction but also of aesthetic joy to anyone who has seriously pondered the dynamics of class relations in a revolutionary epoch, as well as the general problems involved in the materialist interpretation of historical events.” (Trotsky, *Engels’ Letters to Kautsky*, 1935)

In all of Trotsky’s works we see a breadth of vision and a broad interest, not only in history, but in art and literature and culture in general. Before the First World War he wrote articles on art and on writers like Tolstoy and Gogol. After the October Revolution, he wrote extensively on art and literature. His book *Literature and Revolution* is a product of that period.



Only color photograph of Leo Tolstoy (by Prokudin-Gorskii)

In 1923 he wrote: "Literature, whose methods and processes have their roots far back in the most distant past and represent the accumulated experience of verbal craftsmanship, expresses the thoughts, feelings, moods, points of view and hopes of the new epoch and of its new class." (Trotsky, [The social roots and the social function of literature](#)) In the middle of the stormy period of revolution and counterrevolution in the 1930s he found time to write on literature and art. In 1934, shortly after the German catastrophe, he wrote a review of Ignazio Silone's novel *Fontamara*. In 1938, he wrote the [Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art](#) together with the Surrealist writer Andre Breton.

We can just imagine the indignation of the pseudo-Marxist philistine: "What's this? Comrade Trotsky is wasting his time at this revolutionary moment in history, writing about art? What has art got to do with the proletariat and the class struggle?" The philistine shakes his head sadly, and concludes that comrade Trotsky is not the man he once was. "This is not the Trotsky of *The Transitional Programme*! The Old Man must be losing his mental faculties!" Yes, we can just imagine it!

At a moment when Europe was convulsed by revolution and counterrevolution, when his supporters were being murdered and the Fourth International was struggling for its survival, why did Trotsky find time to devote to such questions as art and literature? When we have

answered this question we will be able to see the difference between genuine Marxism, genuine proletarian revolutionism, and the superficial caricature that passes for Marxism in some circles.

“Mere theoreticians”

During the faction fight that led to the split in Militant, the Majority faction said that Ted Grant and Alan Woods were “mere theoreticians”. This winged phrase says all that needs to be said about that tendency. For decades we had devoted our lives to building the tendency that turned out to be the most successful Trotskyist movement since the Russian Left Opposition. Starting from a very small handful in the early 1960s, we succeeded in building a big organization with solid roots in the Labour Movement.



Ted Grant

All these successes were the result of years of patient work. In the last analysis, they were the result of the correct ideas, methods and perspectives worked out by Ted Grant, that great Marxist thinker. Ted was head and shoulders above any of his contemporaries. He was thoroughly grounded in Marxist theory and knew the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky like the back of his hand.

When Ted Grant and I were expelled from the Militant, we found ourselves in a difficult position. The Majority had a huge apparatus, lots

of money and a team of about 200 full timers. We did not even have a typewriter. Yet Ted and I were not worried in the slightest. We had the ideas of Marxism, and that was all that mattered. All my experience has convinced me that if you have the correct ideas, you can always build an apparatus. But the contrary is not true. You can have the biggest apparatus in the world, but if you are working on the basis of incorrect theories and methods, you will fail.

We considered the position and came to the conclusion that in the [then] present situation, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, our most pressing task was to defend the basic ideas and theories of Marxism. The first result was the book [*Reason in Revolt: Marxist Philosophy and Modern Science*](#). Our former comrades had a good laugh about this book. Their sarcastic comment was: “You see! Ted and Alan have abandoned politics to write books about philosophy!” That was their attitude to Marxist theory – an attitude in the true tradition of Weitling and the Bolshevik Committeemen, but not at all in that of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.

Sooner or later, mistakes in theory are translated into a disaster in practice. The former Majority have paid the price for their mistakes. What was formerly a powerful tendency with serious roots in the Labour Movement has been reduced to a shadow of its former self. On the other hand, *Reason in Revolt*, played a key role in establishing the International Marxist Tendency. It has been translated into many languages and has been commended by many workers, socialists, communists, trade unionists, Bolivarians (including Hugo Chavez).

How can we explain this? The advanced workers and youth have a thirst for ideas and theory. They want to understand what is happening in society. They are not attracted by tendencies that merely tell them what they already know: that capitalism is in crisis, that there is unemployment, that they live in bad houses, earn low wages and so on. Serious people want to know why things are as they are, what happened in Russia, what Marxism is, and other questions of a theoretical character. That is why theory is not an optional extra, as the “practicos” imagine, but an essential tool of the revolutionary struggle.

The workers and culture

It is a slander on the proletariat to say that workers are not interested in the broad questions of culture, history, philosophy etc. In my experience over many years, I have found that among working people there is far more genuine interest in ideas than in many of the so-called cultured middle classes. I remember a long time ago, when I was giving lectures to workers in my native South Wales, I once came across a metal worker who had taught himself Portuguese in order to read the works of a Brazilian poet of whom I had never heard.



Leon Trotsky

The idea that workers are not interested in culture almost invariably comes from petty bourgeois intellectuals who have no knowledge of working class people and who confuse the workers with the lumpenproletariat. They therefore display contempt for the working class and their own middle class snobbery towards working people. This kind of person attempts to ingratiate himself or herself with workers by dressing in donkey jackets and affecting to imitate a “working class” accent. They use bad language, which they think improves their proletarian credentials.

I have seen too many cases of supposedly educated Marxists who think it is smart to imitate the language and habits of the lumpenproletariat, imagining that this will give them more credence as “real workers”. As a matter of fact, workers do not usually use such language in their homes or in polite company. To imitate the conduct of the lowest and most degraded strata of the workers and youth is

unworthy of a Marxist, and much less someone who aspires to be a leader. In his marvellous article [*The Struggle for Cultured Speech*](#), Trotsky described such language as the mark of a slave mentality, which revolutionaries should not imitate but strive to eliminate.

In this article, written in 1923, Trotsky praises the workers at the Paris Commune shoe factory for passing a resolution to abstain from swearing and to impose fines for bad language. The leader of the October Revolution did not regard this as an insignificant detail but a very important manifestation of the striving of the working class to break free of the slave mentality and aspire to a higher level of culture. “Abusive language and swearing are a legacy of slavery, humiliation, and disrespect for human dignity—one’s own and that of other people.” That was what the leader of the October Revolution wrote.

There are many different levels in the working class, reflecting different conditions and experiences. The most advanced layers of the proletariat are active in trade unions and the workers’ parties. They aspire to a better life. They take a lively interest in ideas and theory, and strive to educate themselves. These strivings are a guarantee of the socialist future, when men and women will have broken, not only the physical chains that bind them, but the psychological chains that keep them enslaved to a barbarous past.

Trotsky stressed the importance of the struggle for cultured speech:

“The struggle for education and culture will provide the advanced elements of the working class with all the resources of the Russian language in its extreme richness, subtlety and refinement.”

He explains that the revolution is “in the first place an awakening of human personality in the masses—who were supposed to possess no personality”. It is, “before and above all, the awakening of humanity, its onward march, and is marked with a growing respect for the personal dignity of every individual with an ever-increasing concern for those who are weak”. (ibid.)

The socialist transformation signifies not only the conquest of power: that is only the first step. The real revolution – humankind’s leap from

the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom - has yet to be accomplished. Engels pointed out that in any society where art, science and government are the monopoly of a minority, that minority will use and abuse its position to keep society in bondage.

By making concessions to the low level of consciousness of the most backward and illiterate layers of the working class, we do not help to raise their consciousness to the level of the tasks posed by history. On the contrary, we help to lower it, and this will always have retrograde and reactionary consequences. We can sum up the discussion in the following way: that is progressive and revolutionary which serves to raise the level of consciousness of the proletariat. That is reactionary which tends to lower it.

Marxists must be in the first line of the working class that is fighting to change society. Our duty is to educate and train the cadres of the future socialist revolution. In order to perform this task, we must stand on what is positive, progressive and revolutionary and decisively reject all that is backward, ignorant and primitive. We have our aim fixed on a very lofty horizon. We must raise the sights of the working class, beginning with the most advanced elements, to the horizon of which Trotsky spoke in [Literature and Revolution](#):

“It is difficult to predict the extent of self-government which the man of the future may reach or the heights to which he may carry his technique. Social construction and psycho-physical self-education will become two aspects of one and the same process. All the arts – literature, drama, painting, music and architecture will lend this process beautiful form. More correctly, the shell in which the cultural construction and self-education of Communist man will be enclosed, will develop all the vital elements of contemporary art to the highest point. Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.”

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”

“Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*)

“[...] when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” (George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*)

What is historical materialism?

For most people, history is something of merely academic interest. It may be studied for amusement, or possibly to draw this or that moral lesson. But that is the maximum that history seems to offer us. Even the use of history for the purpose of moralizing is limited. Edward Gibbon, the great English historian wrote: “History is little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind.” Hegel once commented wittily that the study of history only proves that nobody has ever learnt anything from history. Yet it is essential that we do study history, and precisely for the lessons we can learn from it. To paraphrase the words of the American philosopher George Santayana: “He who does not learn from history is doomed to repeat it.”

Until Marx developed the theory of historical materialism, the prevalent view was an idealist interpretation of history, which attributed everything to the actions of individuals. The key to history was the activity of kings, politicians, generals, and Great Individuals. If we accept this view, how is it possible to make sense of history? Individuals pursue a myriad of different aims: personal ambition, religious fanaticism, economic interests, artistic truth, political intrigue, the thirst for revenge, envy, hatred, and all the vast range of emotions, prejudices and notions known to human beings. With such a bewildering range of aims and interests, it would appear that it is no more possible to establish general historical laws than it is to determine accurately the exact position and momentum of a subatomic particle.

It seems very strange that human beings accept the possibility of providing a scientific explanation for everything in the universe, but deny the possibility of ever obtaining a rational insight into ourselves, our actions and our social evolution. We imagine that the human animal is so unique, our minds so complex, and our motivations so subtle, that any attempt to analyze the laws of human society is impossible. Such a view reflects the same stubborn egotism that in the past claimed that Man was a special Creation of the Almighty, or the ridiculous mysticism about an unknowable and immortal soul, which allegedly sets men and women apart from other animals.

In fact, any student of history can see at once that certain patterns do exist, certain situations are constantly repeated, and even certain types of personalities reproduce themselves under similar conditions. In the Introduction to Bolshevism – the Road to Revolution, I reflected on this fact: “There are many points of similarity between the October revolution in Russia and the great bourgeois revolutions of the past. At times these parallels seem almost uncanny, even extending to the personalities of the principal dramatis personae, such as the similarity between Charles I of England and Louis XVI of France and tsar Nicholas, together with their foreign wives.” There are other examples one could cite. The similarities between Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte as particular psychological types have been commented upon many times. They are separated by a very long period of history, and they rest upon entirely different class interests corresponding to entirely different socio-economic models. So how do we explain the similarities?

Here it is possible to establish an approximate analogy with the laws that govern animal morphology. Let us take three marine animals: 1) Ichthyosaurus (an extinct genus of ichthyosaur); 2) the shark and 3) the dolphin. The first named was a kind of marine dinosaur, the second a primitive fish and the third a mammal, like ourselves. They are separated by vast periods of time and evolved entirely separately. Yet the bodily shape of all three is practically identical. From this fact alone it is possible to deduce

that similar conditions produce similar results, and this is not only applicable to animal morphology but also to the history of our own species.

The constant repetition of the same patterns (and sometimes even the same types of personalities) indicates that history is not arbitrary, but that behind the appearance of chaos, there are definite laws at work, that these laws assert themselves amidst the seeming chaos – just as the chaotic movement of the waves is a reflection of powerful unseen currents beneath the surface of the ocean. In order to gain a rational understanding of history, it is necessary to penetrate beneath the surface and to examine the nature of the hidden currents that propel human society forward.

The whole of science is based on two basic assumptions: 1) that the world exists independently of ourselves and 2) that we are capable of understanding it. If science can explain the mechanisms that govern the social organisms of bees, ants and chimpanzees, why should it be impossible to explain the workings of human society and the forces that determine its development? Marxism rejects the view that history is a string of meaningless and incomprehensible events. Historical materialism asserts that the history of human society has its own laws, and that they can be analyzed and understood. The laws that govern social development were first laid bare by Karl Marx. In the famous introduction to *The Critique of Political Economy*, Marx explains the basis of historical materialism in the following terms:

“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that

determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.”

With these words, the founder of scientific socialism once and for all disposed of all metaphysical, idealist and subjective explanation of human history. In other words, Marx performed the same great service for human historical development that his great contemporary Charles Darwin did for the development of plants and animals. Darwin discovered in natural selection an objective process that is present in nature that explains the evolution of life in all its manifold forms without the need of any preconceived plan or supernatural “design”. In so doing, he banished the Almighty from biology, just as Newton had banished Him (in fact, if not in theory) from the workings of the universe.

The great achievement of Marx was that he discovered the ultimate mainspring of all social change and progress in terms of the development of the productive forces: agriculture, industry, science and technique. This does not mean, of course, that one can reduce everything to economics, as the ignorant critics of Marxism maintain. Men and women make their own history, but they do not do so independently of the existing conditions that shape their consciousness and, whether they are aware of it or not, determine their actions. In the same Introduction, Marx explains the precise nature of the relations between the development of the productive forces, the social relations that gradually crystallize on the basis of this, and the class struggle that expresses the contradictory nature of these relations:

“In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production. No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.

“Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.”

The class struggle

Here, the essence of the method of historical materialism is expressed with marvellous preciseness and concision. In the last analysis, it is the changes in the economic foundation that are the cause of great historical transformations, which we refer to as revolutions. But the relationship between the economic foundations of society and the vast and complex superstructure of legality, religion, ideology and the state that arises from it is not simple and automatic, but extremely contradictory. The men and women who are the true protagonists of history are by no means conscious of the ultimate causes and results of their actions, and the results of these actions are frequently at variance with the subjective intentions of their authors.

When Brutus and Cassius drew the daggers that struck down Julius Caesar, they imagined that they were about to re-establish the Republic, but in practice they brought about the destruction of the last vestiges of republicanism and prepared the ground for the Empire. Their republican illusions in any case were only a sentimental and idealistic fig-leaf to disguise their real class interests – which were those of the privileged Roman aristocracy that dominated the old Republic and was fighting to preserve its privileges. From this example we see the importance of carefully distinguishing what men say and think about themselves from the real interests that move them and determine their actions.

Marx explains that the history of all class society is the history of class war. The state itself consists of special armed bodies of men the purpose of which is precisely to regulate the class struggle, and to keep it within acceptable limits. The ruling class in all normal periods exercises control over the state. But there are certain periods, when the class struggle reaches a pitch of intensity that goes beyond the “acceptable limits”. In such revolutionary periods, the question of power is posed. Either the revolutionary class overthrows the old state and replaces it with a new power, or else the ruling class crushes the revolution and imposes a dictatorship – the state power in an open and undisguised form, as opposed to the state power in a “democratic” guise.

However, there is a further variant, which in different forms has been seen at different moments in history. Engels explains that the state in all normal periods is the state of the ruling class, and this is perfectly true. However, history also knows periods that are not at all normal, periods of intense class conflict in which neither of the contending classes can succeed in setting its stamp firmly on society. A long period of class struggle that does not produce a decisive result can give rise to the exhaustion of the main contending classes. In such circumstances the state apparatus itself – in the form of the army and the general who heads it (Caesar, Napoleon) – begins to raise itself above society and to establish itself as an “independent” force.

The creation of a legal framework to regulate the class struggle is by no means sufficient to guarantee a peaceful outcome. On the contrary, such an arrangement merely serves to delay the final conflict and to give it an even more violent and convulsive character in the end. The expectations of the masses are heightened and concentrated, and their aspirations are given ample scope to develop themselves. Thus, in modern times, the masses develop great illusions in their parliamentary representatives and the possibility of solving their most pressing problems by voting in elections. In the end, however, these hopes are dashed and the struggle takes place outside parliament in an even more violent manner than before – both on the side of the masses and on that of the propertied classes who do not cease to prepare illegal conspiracies and coups behind the backs of the democratic institutions. Though they swear by “democracy” in public, in reality the ruling class will only tolerate it to the degree that it does not threaten their power and privileges.

Where the contending classes have fought themselves to a standstill with no clear result, and where the struggle between the classes reaches a kind of state of unstable equilibrium, the state itself can rise above society and acquire a large degree of independence. The case of ancient Rome was no exception. In theory, the Roman Republic in historical times was “democratic”, in the sense that the citizens were the electorate and ultimate power resided in the popular Assembly, just as today everything is decided by free elections. In reality, however, the Republic was ruled by an oligarchy of wealthy aristocratic families that exercised a stranglehold over political power. The result of this contradiction was a lengthy period of class struggle that culminated in civil war, at the end of which the army had elevated itself above society and became the master of its destiny. One military adventurer competed with another for power. A typical example of this species was Gaius Julius Caesar. In modern times this phenomenon is known as Bonapartism, and in the ancient world it assumes the form of Caesarism.

In modern times we see the same phenomenon expressed in fascist and Bonapartist regimes. The state raises itself above society. The ruling class is compelled to hand power over to a military strong man, who, in order to protect them, concentrates all power into his hands. He is surrounded by a gang of thieves, corrupt politicians, careerists greedy for office and wealth, and assorted scum. Naturally, the latter expect to be well rewarded for services rendered, and nobody is in a position to question their acquisitions. The ruling class is still the owner of the means of production, but the state is no longer in its hands. In order to protect itself it has reluctantly to tolerate the impositions, thieving, insults and even the occasional kick from its Leader and his associates, to whom it is expected to sing praises from morning till night, while silently cursing under its breath.

Such a situation can only arise when the struggle between the classes reaches the point of deadlock, where no decisive victory can be won either by one side or the other. The ruling class is not able to continue to rule in the old way, and the proletariat is not able to bring about a revolutionary change. The history of the Roman Republic is an almost laboratory example of this assertion. In ancient Rome a ferocious class struggle ended precisely in the ruin of the contending classes and the rise of Caesarism, which finally ended in the Empire.

Early history

The whole history of the Roman Republic is the history of class struggle, beginning with the struggles between patricians and plebeians for admission to office and share in the state lands. The decay of the old gentile society led to the rise of antagonistic classes, leading to a vicious civil war between the Plebs and the Patricians that lasted, on and off, for 200 years. Finally, the patrician nobility merged with the new class of the great landowners, slave owners and money owners, who gradually expropriated the lands of the free Roman peasantry, which was ruined by military service. The mass employment of slave labour to cultivate the enormous estates (latifundia) eventually led to the depopulation of Italy and the undermining of the

Republic, paving the way for the victory, first of the emperors, the collapse of Rome and then the long dark night of barbarism, as Engels explained:

“The banishment of the last rex, Tarquinius Superbus, who usurped real monarchic power, and the replacement of the office of rex by two military leaders (consuls) with equal powers (as among the Iroquois) was simply a further development of this new constitution. Within this new constitution, the whole history of the Roman Republic runs its course, with all the struggles between patricians and plebeians for admission to office and share in the state lands, and the final merging of the patrician nobility in the new class of the great land and money owners, who, gradually swallowing up all the land of the peasants ruined by military service, employed slave labor to cultivate the enormous estates thus formed, depopulated Italy and so threw open the door, not only to the emperors, but also to their successors, the German barbarians.” (Engels, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*)

The origins of Rome are shrouded in mist. We can, of course, discount the mythological account that attempts to trace the founders of Rome to the legendary Aeneas, who fled from the burning ruins of Troy. As is the case with many ancient tribes, this was an attempt to attribute a noble and illustrious ancestry to what was a far more ignoble affair. Similarly, the name of the mythical founder of Rome (Romulus) simply means “man of Rome”, and therefore tells us nothing at all. According to the traditional belief, the date of the founding of Rome was 753 BC. But this date is contradicted by the archaeological evidence: too late for the first regular settlements and too early for the time of true urbanization.

The most celebrated historian of early Rome, Livy, mixes genuine historical material with a mass of legend, speculation and mythology, from which it is difficult to extract the truth. However, these myths are of tremendous importance because they furnish us with significant clues. By comparing the written record – confused as it is - with the evidence of archaeology,

comparative linguistics and other sciences, it is possible to reconstruct, at least in outline the origins of Rome. The pastoral economy of these tribes is probably true, since it corresponds to what we know about the economic mode of life of many of the Latin tribes, although by the beginning of the first millennium, they were already practicing agriculture and cultivated the soil with light ploughs.

One such group of shepherds and farmers migrated from the area of Mount Alban (Monte Cavo), some thirteen miles south-east of Rome in the early years of the first millennium, and built their huts on the banks of the Tiber. However, this particular group settled in an area that possessed a key economic importance. Rome's geographical position, controlling the crossing of the river Tiber, which separates the two halves of the Peninsula, was of key strategic importance for the nations seeking to control the destiny of Italy. Situated on a ford of the Tiber, Rome was at a crossroads of traffic following the river valley and of traders travelling north and south on the west side of the Italian Peninsula.

To the South of Rome lay the fertile agricultural lands of the Campanian Plain, watered by two rivers and capable of producing as many as three grain crops a year in some districts. Rome also possessed the highly lucrative salt trade, derived from the salt flats at the mouth of the Tiber. The importance of this commodity in the ancient world cannot be overstated.

To this day we say: "a man who is worth his salt." In ancient Rome, this was literally true. The word "salary" comes from the Latin word for salt *salarium*, which linked employment, salt and soldiers, although the exact link is unclear. One theory is that the word soldier itself comes from the Latin *sal dare* (to give salt). The Roman historian Pliny the Elder states in his *Natural History* that "[I]n Rome. . .the soldier's pay was originally salt and the word salary derives from it. . ." (Plinius *Naturalis Historia* XXXI). More likely, the *salarium* was either an allowance paid to Roman soldiers for the purchase of salt or the price of having soldiers conquer salt supplies and guard the Salt Roads (*Via Salarium*) that led to Rome.

Whatever version one accepts, there is no question about the vital importance of salt and the salt trade that must have played a vital role in the establishment of a prosperous settled community in Rome, which must have attracted the unwelcome attention of less favoured tribes. The picture that emerges of the first Roman community is that of a group of clans fighting to defend their territory against the pressure of other peoples (Latins, Etruscans, Sabines etc.).

Early Roman society

According to Livy, Rome was formed by shepherds, under the leadership of chieftains. He refers to the ancient tribes of Rome, the Ramnenses, Titienses, and Luceres, about which we know little. The first settlement was established by a number of Latin gentes (one hundred, according to the legend), who were united in a tribe; these were soon joined by a Sabellian tribe, also said to have numbered a hundred gentes, and lastly by a third tribe of mixed elements, again said to have been composed of a hundred gentes. Thus, the population of Rome itself seems to have been a mixture of different peoples. This was the natural consequence of Rome's geographical situation and long years of war. Over a long period, during which the original inhabitants were mixed with many other elements, they gradually succeeded in uniting the scattered inhabitants under a common state.

No one could belong to the Roman people unless he or she was a member of a gens and through it of a curia and a tribe. Ten gentes formed a curia (which among the Greeks was called a phratry). Every curia had its own religious rites, shrines and priests; the latter, as a body, formed one of the Roman priestly colleges. Ten curiae formed a tribe, which probably, like the rest of the Latin tribes, originally had an elected president-military leader and high priest. The three tribes together formed the Roman people, the *Populus Romanus*. In the earliest times the Roman gens (plural gentes) had the following features:

1. Mutual right of inheritance among gentile members; the property remained within the gens.
 2. Possession of a common burial place.
 3. Common religious rites (the *sacra gentilitia*).
 4. Obligation not to marry within the gens.
 5. Common ownership of land. In primitive times the gens had always owned common land, ever since the tribal land began to be divided up. Later we still find land owned by the gentes, to say nothing of the state land, round which the whole internal history of the republic centers.
 6. Obligation of mutual protection and help among members of the gens. At the time of the second Punic war the gentes joined together to ransom their members who had been taken prisoner; the senate put a stop to it.
 7. Right to bear the gentile name.
 8. Right to adopt strangers into the gens.
 9. The right to elect the chief and to depose him. Although this is nowhere mentioned, in the earliest days of Rome all offices were filled by election or nomination, from the elected "king" downwards. The priests of the *curiae* were also elected by the *curiae* themselves, so we may assume the same procedure for the chiefs of the gentes.
- Initially, it seems that public affairs were managed by the senate (the council of elders, from the Latin *senex*, an old man). This was composed of the chiefs of the three hundred gentes. It was for this reason that they were called "fathers", *patres*, from which we later get the denomination patricians. Here we see how the original patriarchal relations of the old equalitarian genes system gradually produced a privileged tribal aristocracy, which crystallized into the Patrician Order – the ruling class in early Roman society. As Engels explains:

"[...] the custom of electing always from the same family in the gens brought into being the first hereditary nobility; these families called themselves "patricians," and claimed for themselves exclusive right of entry into the senate and tenure of all other offices. The acquiescence of the people in this claim, in course of time, and its transformation into an actual right, appear in legend as the story that Romulus conferred

the patriciate and its privileges on the first senators and their descendants. The senate, like the Athenian boule, made final decisions in many matters and held preparatory discussions on those of greater importance, particularly new laws. With regard to these, the decision rested with the assembly of the people, called the comitia curiata (assembly of the curiae). The people assembled together, grouped in curiae, each curia probably grouped in gentes; each of the thirty curiae, had one vote in the final decision. The assembly of the curiae accepted or rejected all laws, elected all higher officials, including the rex (so-called king), declared war (the senate, however, concluded peace), and, as supreme court, decided, on the appeal of the parties concerned, all cases involving death sentence on a Roman citizen.

“Lastly, besides the senate and the assembly of the people, there was the rex, who corresponded exactly to the Greek basileus and was not at all the almost absolute king which Mommsen made him out to be. He also was military leader, high priest, and president of certain courts. He had no civil authority whatever, nor any power over the life, liberty, or property of citizens, except such as derived from his disciplinary powers as military leader or his executive powers as president of a court.” (Ibid.)

The divisions between patricians and plebs was not exclusively a difference between rich and poor. Some plebeians became very rich, but they remained plebeians and thus excluded from state power, which was originally monopolized by the clan aristocracy. The old Populus, jealous of its privileges, rigidly barred any addition to its own ranks from outside. It seems that landed property was fairly equally divided between populus and plebs. But the commercial and industrial wealth, though not as yet much developed, was probably for the most part in the hands of the Plebs. Thus, the old gentile legal forms entered into contradiction with the changed economic and social relations. The growing numbers of Plebs, and the growing economic power of its upper layer, led to a sharp class struggle

between Plebs and Patricians that dominated the history of Rome after the expulsion of the Etruscans.

The exact process by which the old gentile society was destroyed is unclear. The increased wealth derived from the salt trade must have played a role, strengthening the position of the old tribal aristocracy and creating a growing gulf between the aristocracy and the poor members of the gens. What is clear is that the rise of private property created sharp divisions in society from a very early date. The harshness of the property laws in early Roman society coincided with the form of the family, which in Rome was the most extreme expression of patriarchy. The (male) head of the family enjoyed absolute power over all other members of the family, who were also regarded as private property, a fact that was already noted by Hegel:

“We thus find family relations among the Romans not as a beautiful, free relation of love and feeling; the place of confidence is usurped by the principle of severity, dependence, and subordination. Marriage, in its strict and formal shape, bore quite the aspect of a mere contract; the wife was part of the husband’s property (in manum conventio), and the marriage ceremony was based on a coemptio, in a form such as might have been adopted on the occasion of any other purchase. The husband acquired a power over his wife, such as he had over his daughter; nor less over her property; so that everything which she gained, she gained for her husband [...].

“[...] The relation of sons was perfectly similar: they were, on the one hand, about as dependent on the paternal power as the wife on the matrimonial; they could not possess property – it made no difference whether they filled a high office in the State or not (though the peculia castrensia, and adventitia were differently regarded); but on the other hand, when they were emancipated, they had no connection with their father and their family. An evidence of the degree in which the position of children was regarded as analogous to that of slaves, is presented in the imaginaria servitus (mancipium), through which emancipated

children had to pass. In reference to inheritance, morality would seem to demand that children should share equally. Among the Romans, on the contrary, testamentary caprice manifests itself in its harshest form. Thus perverted and demoralized, do we here see the fundamental relations of ethics.” (Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of History, pp. 286-7)

The old gens system rested originally on common property of land. But the decay of the old system under the pressures of trade and expanded wealth undermined all the old social-tribal relations. The rise of inequality within the gens led to the domination of the privileged class of patricians. Private property established itself so firmly that wives and children were regarded as private property, over which the paterfamilias ruled with an iron hand. Hegel understood perfectly well the relationship between the family and the state:

“The immoral active severity of the Romans in this private side of character, necessarily finds its counterpart in the passive severity of their political union. For the severity which the Roman experienced from the State he was compensated by a severity, identical in nature, which he was allowed to indulge towards his family – a servant on the one side, a despot on the other.” (ibid. p. 287)

The new form of the patriarchal family, based upon the tyrannical rule of the paterfamilias, was at the same time a reflection of the changed social and property relations and a firm base upon which the latter rested. And gradually, the state as an organ of class domination raised itself above society. The history of the Roman Republic is merely the continuation, extension and deepening of these tendencies, which in the end destroyed the Republic itself.

The Etruscans

In his masterpiece *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Leon Trotsky explains one of the most important laws of history, the law of combined and uneven development:

“Unevenness, the most general law of the historic process, reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which, for the lack of a better name, we may call the law of combined development – by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of the separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms. Without this law, to be taken of course, in its whole material content, it is impossible to understand the history of Russia, and indeed of any country of the second, third or tenth cultural class.” (Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, volume 1, chapter I, *Peculiarities of Russia’s Development*.)

The historical development of Russia was shaped by its more advanced neighbours. It was not helped by its early contacts with the more backward Tartars and other nomadic steppe dwellers from the East who contributed nothing to its culture and barely left an imprint on its language. It was held back for centuries by its subjugation by the Mongols, although the latter left its imprint on Russian society and particularly the state, which had certain semi-Asiatic characteristics. But it received a strong impulse from its wars with the more developed Poles and Swedes. The case of Rome is analogous. What determined its course of cultural and economic development was not the long wars with the barbarian Latin tribes, but their contacts with other peoples that had reached a higher level of socio-economic development: the Etruscans, the Greeks of southern Italy, and the Carthaginians.

As a general rule backward nations tend to assimilate the material and intellectual conquests of the advanced countries, although this process can

often take the most complicated and contradictory forms, combining elements of extreme backwardness with the most modern innovations imported from external sources. This was true of ancient Rome. Like the Japanese in more modern times, the Romans showed a tremendous ability to learn from and assimilate the experiences of other nations, although these borrowings from other peoples were always coloured by a peculiar Roman outlook. Roman art began by copying Greek originals and never freed itself from Greek influences. But the flexibility and the free and cheerful spirit of Greek art was alien to the psychology of the Romans, who were originally small farmers and never completely freed themselves from a certain narrowness of mind, an unsmiling provincial practicality that expressed itself in art and religion by a stern and implacable austerity.

In the early days their gods were the simple deities of an agricultural people, though infused with a strong warrior spirit. Their most important god was originally Mars. But they were pragmatic about religion as about everything else, and regularly imported any foreign deity that seemed useful to them. When they conquered an enemy, they not only took his wealth and his women, but also his main gods, who were immediately installed in a new temple in Rome. This was a way of emphasising the completeness of their domination and also provided them with allies in Heaven, which they hoped would provide them with some assistance for the next war in this world. In this way, over a period, Rome acquired, alongside a wealth of loot, a superabundance of gods, which must have been quite bewildering at times.

The Romans succeeded in fighting off the neighbouring Latin tribes, whose level of socio-economic development was not so very different from their own. But to the North they were faced with pressure from a more advanced people: the Etruscans, who occupied most of the land in what was later known as Cisalpine Gaul in Northern Italy. The exact origin of the Etruscans is still a matter of controversy, since very little Etruscan literature remains and the language of inscriptions on their monuments has been only partially deciphered. We have gained most of our knowledge of the Etruscans from studying the remains of their city walls, houses, monuments, and tombs.

Some scholars think they were a seafaring people from Asia Minor. Others have speculated that they may have been an original Italian population, or of Semitic stock, like the Phoenicians and Carthaginians. We may never know.

At any rate, as early as 1000 BC they were living in Italy in an area that was roughly equivalent to modern Tuscany, from the Tiber River north almost to the Arno River. After 650 BC, the Etruscans became dominant in north-central Italy. According to tradition, Rome had been under the control of seven kings, beginning with the mythical Romulus who along with his brother Remus were said to have founded the city of Rome. Of the last three “kings”, two were said to have been Etruscan: Tarquinius Priscus and Tarquinius Superbus. Although the list of kings is of dubious historical value, it is believed that the last-named kings may have been historical figures. This suggests that Rome was under the influence of the Etruscans for about a century. The early histories state that Rome was at one time under the rule of Etruscan “kings”, and the archaeological record shows that Rome was indeed at one stage an Etruscan city.

The Etruscans were interested in Rome for both economic and strategic reasons. South of Rome, Italy was dominated by powerful and prosperous Greek colonies. Indeed, the ancients referred to southern Italy and Sicily as Magna Graecia (Greater Greece). Etruscan expansion brought them into contact with the Latins, and eventually they reached the very frontier of Magna Graecia, where they began to establish colonies. This opened up a new period of conflict between the Etruscans and Greeks for the domination of Latium. It was impossible for the Etruscans to hold Latium unless they took Rome, which lay between Latium and themselves. In addition to its strategic importance, the salt from the mouth of the Tiber was essential to Etruscan cities, which had no other source of this important commodity.

Rome was surrounded by prosperous Etruscan city states like Tarquinii, Cere and Veii, and that it was under their influence that Rome was transformed. They were on a higher plane of economic and cultural

development than the Romans, with whom they traded, and whom they eventually dominated. The fact that the Etruscans were on a higher level explains why they succeeded in establishing this superiority. They were organised, like the Greeks, in city states, and their art and culture showed strong Greek influences. Weapons and other implements, exquisite jewellery, coins, statues of stone, bronze, and terra-cotta, and black pottery (called bucchero) have been found. The Roman sources never actually state that the Etruscans conquered Rome, but that may be for reasons of national pride. But it is clear that, in one way or another, they took control of the city.

Before the arrival of the Etruscans Rome was a small conglomeration of villages approaching what Engels would have called the higher stage of barbarism. From an economic, cultural and technical point of view, the Etruscans had a tremendous impact on Roman development. They must have had a profound effect on the economic life of Rome, its culture and social structure. Only the later influence of the Greeks of southern Italy was greater. Contact with a more advanced civilization would have finally put an end to whatever was left of the old gentile constitution, strengthening the position of the old tribal aristocracy, undermining the old clan solidarity and preparing the ground for a transition to new legal and class relations.

The Etruscans are said to have been great engineers, and were probably responsible for the transformation of Rome from a relatively primitive tribal centre to a thriving city around 670-630 BC. It was under the new masters that, according to tradition, the first public works such as the walls of the Capitoline hill were constructed. Until then the Tiber was crossed by ford and Rome itself was not more than a collection of poor huts. During this period a bridge called the Pons Sublicius was built. It was also at this time that we can date the construction of the impressive sewerage and draining system, the Cloaca Maxima.

Assembly and Senate

The Romans eventually succeeded in driving out the last Etruscan ruler, Tarquinius Superbus (Tarquin the Proud). Actually, the use of the word “king” is incorrect. Engels points out that the Latin word for king (rex) is the same as the Celtic-Irish rígh (tribal chief) and the Gothic reiks, which signified head of the gens or tribe:

“The office of rex was not hereditary; on the contrary, he was first elected by the assembly of the curiae, probably on the nomination of his predecessor, and then at a second meeting solemnly installed in office. That he could also be deposed is shown by the fate of Tarquinius Superbus.

“Like the Greeks of the heroic age, the Romans in the age of the so-called kings lived in a military democracy founded on gentes, phratries, and tribes and developed out of them. Even if the curiae and tribes were to a certain extent artificial groups, they were formed after the genuine, primitive models of the society out of which they had arisen and by which they were still surrounded on all sides. Even if the primitive patrician nobility had already gained ground, even if the reges were endeavoring gradually to extend their power, it does not change the original, fundamental character of the constitution, and that alone matters.” (Engels, *Origin of the Family, State and Private Property*, Chapter VI, The gens and State in Rome)

According to tradition, this last Etruscan “king” of Rome, Tarquin the Proud, was expelled by the Roman people. It may be that he tried to change the status of a tribal chief (rex), to which the Romans were accustomed, into something resembling an actual king and thus came into collision with the Roman aristocracy. In any case, it is clear that the revolt against Etruscan rule coincided with a sharp decline in Etruscan power. As we have seen, the southerly expansion of the Etruscans brought them into direct conflict with the wealthy and powerful Greek city-states. This encounter proved fatal. After some initial successes Etruria suffered defeat and its fortunes were

eclipsed. It was this weakening of Etruscan power that enabled the Romans, around 500 BC, to carry out a successful rebellion against the Etruscans and gain their independence. This prepared the way for their future development.

It is at this point that Rome abandoned monarchy in favour of a republican system. The banishment of the last rex, Tarquinius Superbus, led to the replacement of the office of rex by two military leaders (consuls) with equal powers. The new republican constitution was based on a Senate, composed of the nobles of the city, along with popular assemblies which ensured political participation for most of the freeborn men and elected magistrates annually. The public power consisted of the body of citizens liable for military service.

The two consuls were elected and possessed almost absolute powers (imperium). They controlled the army and interpreted and executed the laws. But the consuls' powers were limited by two things: firstly, they were elected for only one year; secondly, each could veto the decisions of the other. In theory, the Senate possessed no executive powers. It merely advised the consuls on domestic and foreign policy, as well as finance and religious matters. But since the senators and consuls all came from the same class, they almost always acted in the same spirit and followed the same class interests. In fact, Rome was ruled by an exclusive and aristocratic club.

This new constitution was simply the recognition of a change in the social order that had already taken place before the expulsion of Tarquin. The old gentile order of society based on personal ties of blood was in open contradiction to the new economic and social relations. It was already irremediably decayed and in its place was set up a new state constitution based on territorial division and difference of property and wealth. This constitution excluded not only the slaves, but also those without property who were barred from service in the army and from possession of arms, the so-called proletarians. Apart from this fact, the popular assembly, while

democratic in appearance, was in reality a fraud that served to disguise the real domination of the patrician aristocracy.

The whole male population liable to bear arms was divided into six classes on a property basis. The cavalry was drawn from the wealthiest men, who could afford to provide their own horses. And the cavalry and the first class alone had ninety-eight votes, an inbuilt majority; if they were agreed, they did not need even to ask the others; they made their decision, and that was the end of it. On this point Livy writes:

“The rest of the population whose property fell below this were formed into one century and were exempt from military service. After thus regulating the equipment and distribution of the infantry, he rearranged the cavalry. He enrolled from amongst the principal men of the State twelve centuries. In the same way he made six other centuries (though only three had been formed by Romulus) under the same names under which the first had been inaugurated. For the purchase of the horse, 10,000 lbs. were assigned them from the public treasury; whilst for its keep certain widows were assessed to pay 2000 lbs. each, annually. The burden of all these expenses was shifted from the poor on to the rich. Then additional privileges were conferred. The former kings had maintained the constitution as handed down by Romulus, viz., manhood suffrage in which all alike possessed the same weight and enjoyed the same rights. Servius introduced a graduation; so that whilst no one was ostensibly deprived of his vote, all the voting power was in the hands of the principal men of the State. The knights were first summoned to record their vote, then the eighty centuries of the infantry of the First Class; if their votes were divided, which seldom happened, it was arranged for the Second Class to be summoned; very seldom did the voting extend to the lowest Class.”
(History of Rome, 1.43)

Theoretically, ultimate power resided in the popular Assembly, which elected the consuls on a yearly basis. But just as in our modern bourgeois

democracy the power of the electorate remains in practice a legal fiction to a large extent, so in Rome, the power of the Assembly of Roman citizens (comitia centuriata) was effectively annulled, as Michael Grant points out:

“However, this Assembly had been weighted from the beginning so that the centuries of the well-to-do possessed far greater voting power than the poor. Moreover, candidates for the consulship were proposed in the Assembly by the senators, from their own ranks. The Assembly, it was true, enacted laws and declared war and peace, and conducted trials (iudicia populi). Yet the senators, with their superior prestige and wealth, controlled its votes on all such occasions. In many respects, therefore, the legal appearance of democracy was sharply corrected by what in fact happened.” (Michael Grant, History of Rome, p. 58)

Patronage

There was yet another factor that undermined the power of the Assembly. In the fifth century BC there were around 53 patrician clans (gentes) that are known to us, although the actual number may have been greater. This would mean that a closed body of not more than a thousand families ruled Rome. In turn, a smaller body of especially powerful clans exercised supreme control: the Aemili, the Cornili, the Fabii, and later on, the Claudii. This means that the patricians comprised less than one-tenth of the total citizen population, and possibly not more than one-fourteenth. The question is: how was it possible for such a small number of people to dominate Rome?

In any society the ruling class is too small to exercise its class domination without the aid of a larger class of dependents. There is always a large number of sub-exploiters, sub-sub-exploiters and parasites who are at the service of the rulers of society. The relationship between patrons and clients has its roots in the basic division of early Roman society between patricians and plebeians. The Senate was composed of the heads of families (patres familias) and other prominent citizens. The power of the patricians was partly based on tradition (the age-old memory of clan loyalties), partly on

their monopoly of religious rites (which were inherited) and the right to consult the auguries, and the calendar (also a religious practice), but also through their inherited clients.

In ancient Rome, in addition to ties of blood and marriage, there existed an extensive system of patronage. The rich and powerful *patroni* were surrounded by a large number of dependent clients (*clienti*), who looked to them for protection and help. The client was a free man who entrusted himself to the patronage of another and received favours and protection in return. It was similar to the kind of relation found in societies dominated by the Mafia, and it is not impossible that it is the distant historical ancestor of the latter. But in ancient Rome, *clientela* was all-pervasive. It was also hereditary. Though not enforceable by law, the obligation of the *patroni* to their clients was regarded as absolute. A law of the mid-fifth century BC damns any patron who fails to meet his obligation to his clients.

The system of *clientela* succeeded to some extent in blunting the sharp differences between the patricians and the plebs. As long as the latter was kept happy by the concessions and favours provided by their *patroni*, they were willing to accept the leading status of the patricians. But although all clients were plebeians, not all plebeians were clients. For example, immigrant traders were left out in the cold. Moreover, the total exclusion of the plebs from political power constituted a constant source of discontent. The lower orders were excluded from the consulship or, initially, from the Senate.

To the poor majority of plebeians, this was an academic question, since they could not afford to take up public office anyway. But to the minority of the plebs who had acquired a certain level of wealth, this exclusion from public office and what is known as “the fruits of office” was a very sore point. This was the social layer that put itself at the head of social protest, either for genuine reasons or to further its own advance. Their position was comparable to that of the reformist labour leaders of today, who use the labour movement as a means of personal advancement. As one British

Labour leader put it: “I am in favour of the emancipation of the working class, one by one, commencing with myself.” Such a mentality has been present throughout the history of class struggle, beginning with the Roman Republic, although not all the popular leaders were cynical careerists, then or now.

Debt slavery

This was a time when famine was a permanent threat. Grain shortages occurred at regular intervals. In order to prevent such disasters (and distract the attention of the plebeians) the Roman ruling class established the cult of Ceres, the goddess of grain, about 496 or 493 BC. This, for obvious reasons, was a cult of the plebeians, who knew all about the lack of bread. The number of plebeians who were falling into debt rose inexorably. And if a man did not have the means of settling his debts, his only solution was to offer his own body to his creditors. He became a “man in fetters” (nexus). He was not formally a slave, but in practice the difference was academic. It was similar to the bonded labour in the West Indies in the 18th Century or on the South-Asian Subcontinent today.

The phenomenon of debt slavery became increasingly common. “If a debtor to the state did not fulfill his obligations, he was without ceremony sold with all he had; the simple demand of the state was sufficient to establish the debt.” (Mommsen, History of Rome, vol.1, p. 154). Once a man had sunk into debt slavery, there was little or no possibility of ever regaining freedom. This problem was at the heart of the bitter class antagonism that emerged in the first century of the Republic, and the blind hatred of the plebeians towards the patrician governing class. This problem had been present from the earliest times. Livy’s History is full of examples of the class struggle in the early period of the Republic. He says:

“But a war with the Volscians was imminent, and the State was torn with internal dissensions; the patricians and the plebeians were bitterly hostile to one another, owing mainly to the desperate condition of the debtors. They loudly complained that whilst fighting in the field for

liberty and empire they were oppressed and enslaved by their fellow-citizens at home; their freedom was more secure in war than in peace, safer amongst the enemy than amongst their own people.”

He cites the example of a veteran, a former centurion, who had not only been deprived of the produce of his land in consequence of the depredations of the enemy, but his residence had also been burned down, all his effects pillaged, his cattle driven off, and a tax imposed on him at a time when it pressed most hardly upon him, he had got into debt: that this debt, increased by exorbitant interest, had stripped him first of his father's and grandfather's farm, then of all his other property:

“lastly that, like a wasting sickness, it had reached his person: that he had been dragged by his creditor, not into servitude, but into a house of correction and a place of torture. He then showed his back disfigured with the marks of recent scourging. At this sight and these words a great uproar arose.” (Livy, History, 2:23)

The angry mood of the populace is described here in vivid terms. This incident provoked a riot, which spread everywhere through the entire city. But from a very early period, the Roman ruling class learned how to make use of the services of certain popular leaders to quell the revolt of the masses. In this case, the conduct of the consul Publius Servilius reminds us very strikingly of the behaviour of certain “moderate” trade union leaders today.

These popular tumults continued unabated for a long time. The ruling class responded to the threat from below with the usual methods – a combination of trickery, deceit and bloody repression. The leaders of the plebs were invariably drawn from the ranks of the Roman capitalists, who were always willing to betray the interests of the poor in return for political concessions from the patricians. The latter gave concessions to the wealthy plebeian leaders. They first allowed selected representatives of this layer to enter the Senate.

The American Marxist Daniel de Leon gives quite a good description of the position of the latter, which he compares to that of modern labour leaders in bourgeois parliaments:

“But there, among the august and haughty patrician Senators, the plebs leaders were not expected to emit a sound. The patricians argued, the patricians voted, the patricians decided. When they were through, the tellers turned to the plebs’ leaders. But they were not even then allowed to give a sign with their mouths. Their mouths had to remain shut: their opinion was expressed with their feet. If they gave a tap, it meant they approved; if they gave no tap, it meant they disapproved; and it didn’t much matter either way.” (Daniel de Leon, Two Pages from Roman History, pp. 24-5).

Every military victory purchased with the blood of the plebeian soldier, merely served to strengthen the position of the patricians and the plebeian capitalists, who were increasingly bound together by economic interests and fear of the poor plebeians and proletarians. At the other extreme, the problems of the poor continued to worsen, in particular debts and debt slavery, which led to renewed calls for relief. The resulting tensions between the classes flared up in a series of rebellions, where the plebs refused to fight in the army, and at one point threatened to secede from Rome altogether and found another Republic.

The first recorded strike in history was that of the Egyptian workers engaged on the construction of the pyramids. But the first record of what amounted to a general strike was in the early period of the Roman Republic. The Roman plebs of this period was that nameless majority who from time immemorial have ploughed the fields, planted the grain, baked the bread, fought in the wars. And this fact was brought to the attention of the noble patricians in a very novel way. On at least five occasions, in fact, the plebs threatened to “secede” by withdrawing from Rome altogether. The problem was that,

whereas the plebs could do very well without the patricians, the latter could not do without the plebs at all.

The result was an uneasy compromise in which the plebs was allowed to elect two People's Tribunes (tribuni plebes) who represented their interests and existed side by side with the two patrician consuls. This was the first victory of the plebs. The People's Tribune had extensive powers, and could veto the consuls, while he was supposed to be inviolate. He could also seal the Public Treasury, and thus bring the whole business of the State to a grinding halt. However, as usual, the Senate found ways and means of getting round this. In the first place, the Tribune had no salary, and therefore the office could (yet again) only be held by a citizen of independent means. When the Roman capitalists occupied high office, they invariably used it for their own interests, while leaning on the mass of poor plebeians to strike blows against their aristocratic opponents.

The New Oligarchy

The patricians, as we have seen, were descended from the original Roman tribal aristocracy and constituted a privileged class that exploited and oppressed the rest of the population, the plebeians. The influx of immigrants from other tribes may be part of the explanation for the sharp line of differentiation between the patricians and plebs in early Roman history. Hegel, who was well aware of these class contradictions in Roman society, thought that they might be explained by the fact that the plebs was a different people to the patricians, who regarded them as racially inferior:

“The weaker, the poorer, the later additions of population are naturally underrated by, and in a condition of dependence upon those who originally founded the state, and those who were distinguished by valour, and also by wealth. It is not necessary, therefore, to take refuge in a hypothesis which has recently been a favourite one – that the Patricians formed a particular race.” (Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of History, p.285)

Whether or not one accepts the hypothesis that the original difference between patricians and plebs can be explained by different ethnic origins, one thing is certain: that throughout the history of class society, the ruling class has always looked upon the poor and labouring classes with contempt, and in fact regards them as something like a different species, an inferior class of people, unfit to rule society or run industry – a class of inferior beings whose sole purpose is to work to keep their “betters” in luxury, and to breed new generations of slaves for the same purpose. The very word “aristocracy” signifies “the best” in the Greek language, and the Latin word “proletarians” means precisely a class that is only fit for the task of reproduction, like any farmyard animal.

At the same time that the majority of the population was falling into poverty, the long series of Roman victories in the wars created enormous wealth at the other end of the social spectrum. Huge sums of money flowed into the capital, creating a new class of Roman capitalists, many of whom were “new men”, upstarts from plebeian families, whose rise was bitterly resented by the old noble Roman families. The old aristocracy initially closed ranks to defend their privileges and “rescue the consulate from the plebeian filth”. Eventually, however, the patricians had to grit their teeth, move over and find room for the class of nouveaux riches, anxious to add political power to their wealth.

Despite the sharp conflict between the upper layers of the plebs and the old aristocracy, these two social groups, as the chief holders of property, had far more in common than they had with the propertyless proletariat. By degrees, the old patrician aristocracy came to understand that the Tribunes could be useful to control the “excesses” of the masses, in whose eyes they enjoyed great authority. The plebs’ leaders succeeded in obtaining concessions from the patricians by leaning on the masses, and the patricians were usually flexible enough to give concessions and reforms in order to preserve their class rule and privileges. Eventually, this led to a process of fusion that created a new oligarchy.

The plebian agitation led to a series of reforms, which gave the Roman capitalists the right to initiate certain measures. The violent social agitation around this issue forced the Senate in 471 BC to accept the establishment of a special council, composed exclusively of plebeians (*concilium plebis*). This was to be convened by the Tribunes, and had the right to adopt certain measures (*plebiscita*). But this was yet another trick, since these decisions did not have the status of law.

At this time the laws were not written down but were interpreted by a Council of Priests (*pontifices*), who were all still patricians. The background to this unrest was war, famine and pestilence, in which the brunt of the fighting and suffering was borne by the poor plebeian small farmers. None of the economic problems of the poor plebeians was addressed. The central issue was land owned by the State (*ager publicus*), which the patricians wished to keep for themselves, while the plebs wanted to have it distributed among themselves.

The result was another period of turbulence, which in 451 BC swept away both the Consuls and Tribunes, and ended in the establishment of the Decemvirate (Council of Ten). Out of the ten decemvirs, two were wealthy plebeians. But once again, the latter were completely dominated by the patrician majority. The result was the famous Twelve Tables, where the laws were written down for the first time and set up in stone in the Forum. This is traditionally seen as a decisive turning point in the history of Rome and a great advance for democracy. But as a matter of fact, it left the fundamental social and political relations virtually untouched.

The ferocious severity of the laws on debt was only slightly mitigated. The execution of the laws was delayed for 30 days, during which the creditor was obliged to feed the debtor “adequately”. But that was not much comfort for a man who could not pay his debts, and in the end the creditor still had the right to make the debtor a *nexus*, that is, to enslave him. And the fact that the Twelve Tables wrote this down for the first time meant that these harsh laws were literally “set in stone”. This was a finished recipe for a

further intensification of the class struggle in Rome, which would later enter onto an unprecedented level of ferocity.

The overthrow of the Decemvirate

The internal commotions and civil strife caused by the quarrels of patricians and plebeians were followed by a temporary truce. But this broke down again when the college of tribunes attempted to check the power of the consuls by restricting their right to punish plebeians. The patricians were alarmed at what they regarded as an attempt to undermine their hereditary rights, and a long and bitter struggle began.

In the year 452 BC a compromise was reached when a commission of ten men, called decemvirs, constituting the decemvirate, was chosen to write up a code of law defining the principles of Roman administration. During the decemvirate's term in office, all other magistracies would be suspended, and their decisions were not subject to appeal. Originally, all the decemvirs were patricians.

A concession was made when, in the year 450 BC, several plebeians were appointed to the new decemvirate, but this solved nothing, since the patricians still dominated. The peasantry was being ruined by constant wars with the neighbouring nations. Compelled to make good their losses by borrowing money from patrician creditors, they were liable to become bondsmen if they defaulted on their repayments. None of the problems were addressed by the decemvirate, which became increasingly violent and tyrannical. To make matters worse, when its term of office expired, its members refused to leave office or permit successors to take office.

The conduct of the decemvirs had brought matters to the verge of civil war, and finally provoked an uprising in 449 BC. At first the ruling class resorted to the old trick of prevarication. But when the common soldiers saw that the endless discussions of their problems were getting nowhere, they decided to take drastic action. Led by an ex-tribune called Marcus Duellius, they simply left the City and moved to the Sacred Mount, and the whole of the

civilian population followed them. They said that they would only return on condition of being protected by tribunes of their own. The scene is vividly conveyed in the words of Livy.

“The plebeian civilians followed the army; no one whose age allowed him to go hung back. Their wives and children followed them, asking in piteous tones, to whom would they leave them in a City where neither modesty nor liberty were respected? The unwonted solitude gave a dreary and deserted look to every part of Rome; in the Forum there were only a few of the older patricians, and when the senate was in session it was wholly deserted. The angry citizens taunted the magistrates, asking them: ‘Are you going to administer justice to walls and roofs?’.”

It was an incredible situation. A city that shortly before had been bustling with vibrant life stood empty, its streets as silent as a desert. One can envisage a factory without capitalists, but never a factory without workers. The same was true in ancient Roman society. The ruling class was suddenly seized by panic. Faced with the prospect of losing the people who did all the work in peacetime and all the fighting in the wars, the decemvirate backed away. It is always the same story: faced with losing everything, the ruling class will always be prepared to give something. This threat tore concessions from the ruling class, which attempted to defuse the conflict by compromise.

At last the decemvirs gave way, overwhelmed by the unanimous opposition. They said that since it was the general wish, they would submit to the authority of the senate. “All they asked for was that they might be protected against the popular rage; they warned the senate against the plebs becoming by their death habituated to inflicting punishment on the patricians.” (Livy, 3.52) As always the concessions of the ruling class were dictated by fear.

The people regained the right to elect their tribunes. This caused panic among the patricians. Livy writes: "Great alarm seized the patricians; the looks of the tribunes were now as menacing as those of the decemvirs had been." The tribunes did take action against some of the most hated patricians, such as Appius Claudius, a particularly extreme reactionary who led the opposition to the Publilian law. When he took the field against the Volsci, his soldiers would not fight, and he had every tenth man in his legions put to death. For these acts he was brought to trial by the tribunes M. Duillius and C. Sicinius. Seeing that conviction was certain, he committed suicide.

However, the ruling class need not have worried. Most of the people's tribunes were like our modern reformists, as the following words of Duillius show quite well:

"M. Duillius the tribune imposed a salutary check upon their excessive exercise of authority. 'We have gone,' he said, 'far enough in the assertion of our liberty and the punishment of our opponents, so for this year I will allow no man to be brought to trial or cast into prison. I disapprove of old crimes, long forgotten, being raked up, now that the recent ones have been atoned for by the punishment of the decemvirs. The unceasing care which both the consuls are taking to protect your liberties is a guarantee that nothing will be done which will call for the power of the tribunes.'"

To which Livy adds: "This spirit of moderation shown by the tribune relieved the fears of the patricians, but it also intensified their resentment against the consuls, for they seemed to be so wholly devoted to the plebs, that the safety and liberty of the patricians were a matter of more immediate concern to the plebeian than they were to the patrician magistrates." (Livy, 3.59)

These lines might have been written yesterday! They accurately convey the conduct and psychology of the kind of individuals who, while trying to mediate between irreconcilable class interests, invariably abandon the

struggle for the interests of the poor and oppressed and assume responsibility for defending the interests of the rich and powerful.

The Temple of Concord

As a concession to the plebs (that is, to the wealthy plebs – the Roman capitalists), it was agreed that in future, one of the two consuls would always be a plebeian. By 351 the Censorship was also opened to plebeians, and later it was agreed that a censor must always be a plebeian. This meant that the patricians had understood that in order to keep the masses in check, it was necessary to buy off their leaders by giving some of them access to positions of power. About this time a new temple was established at Rome – the Temple of Concord. A kind of concord had indeed been established in Rome, but not between rich and poor. As Michael Grant points out:

“The effect of these changes was to create a new ruling class, no longer an entirely patrician aristocracy but a nobility consisting of those men, patricians and plebeian alike, whose ancestors had included consuls or censors or dictators – which is what the term ‘noble’ came to mean. And within the next century plebeian clans such as the Marcii and Decii and Curii, in addition to those who had come from Tusculum and elsewhere, succeeded in establishing themselves among the leaders of this new oligarchy of nobles.” (M. Grant, *History of Rome*, p. 68)

Throughout the history of the Republic there were many attempts to carry out an agrarian reform and alleviate the plight of debtors. The tribunes Linius and Sextus tried to pass a law whereby the interest that a debtor had already paid should be deducted from the amount of debt he still owed. Even so, they moderated this demand by adding that, in order not to cause too much distress to the creditors, the balance must be repaid in annual instalments in a period not greater than three years. Nevertheless, it is clear that this was completely ineffective, since we hear of no fewer than four new proposals to relieve debt hardship over the next 50 years. Linius and Sextus

also attempted to limit the amount of land that could be owned by one person. This was intended to satisfy the land hunger of the poor. But, like the measures on debt, it soon became a dead letter.

Michael Grant neatly sums up the whole process:

“In the first place, whatever means Hortensius may have taken to clear up the debt situation did not prove permanently effective, any more than the enactments that had gone before them; so that democracy in the economic and social fields was still out of the question. Secondly, the plebeian council, though it could, on occasion, be swayed by agitators opposed to the establishment, was normally controlled by its richest members, just as thoroughly as the national Assembly was. And thirdly, the council’s guiding spirits, the tribunes of the people, who possessed the power of vetoing the actions of all Roman magistrates, were cleverly won over by the other side. This happened by gradual stages. First (the dates are uncertain) they were allowed to sit in the Senate and listen to debates. Next, they received the right to put motions to the Senate. And finally – and this had happened before the end of the century – they were even authorized to convene the Senate and preside over its sessions. None of this was unacceptable to the tribunes themselves, for they were often men who wanted to pursue official careers: as they were finally in a position to do, now that Rome possessed a dominant nobility composed of plebeians as well as patricians.

“If things had gone the other way, and the tribunes of the people had continued to develop their formal powers of obstruction, the whole machinery of government might well have been paralyzed, and that, at least, was a result which this hampering of their obstructive capacity prevented. Yet, from the standpoint of the oppressed proletarians, this transformation of the tribunes from protesters into henchmen of the government signified that the struggle between the orders, though won in the formal sense, had in other and more important respects been

lost. It proved harder for the poor, henceforward, to find champions; for the new sort of pro-government tribunes placed their vetoes at the disposal of the Senate instead – and the Senate was glad to use them for its own purposes, not only to keep their fellow plebeians down, but to prevent ambitious state officials from getting out of hand.” (M. Grant, History of Rome, pp. 71-2)

The Gauls sack Rome

The Roman state was born out of war, and was in an almost perpetual state of war with the neighbouring tribes. The struggle with tribes like the Volsci, the Aequi and the Sabines were a matter of national survival for Rome. The wars against these peoples gave the Roman citizen's army a great deal of experience. It perfected its tactics. A new spirit was engendered in the Roman people, a spirit hardened by the trials and tribulations of war. The traditional Roman virtues: valour, discipline and submission to the state, thus reflects the real conditions in which Rome was forged.

From the first conflicts with more backward Latin tribes, Rome was preparing for greater things. The later wars were waged against more advanced, civilized nations, such as the Etruscan colony of Veii. It was in this war that Camillus first compelled the Romans to accept continuous military service. Previously, the peasant soldiers had been allowed to interrupt their military service for harvesting. Now Camillus ended this tradition, substituting it for pay. The campaign was successful, and marks a turning point. For the first time, the soldiers of Rome had conquered a great Etruscan city state.

These conquests prepared the way for the inexorable expansion of Rome. The defeat of Veii removed an important obstacle in the path of this expansion. Overnight, it almost doubled the territory of Rome. Land in the newly-conquered lands, linked by the excellent Etruscan road system, could be given to the Roman citizen-farmer/soldier as individual allotments. This system of obtaining land through conquest was a very important element in the history of the Roman Republic, but the biggest question of all was: who

would get control of this conquered land. It proved to be the central question of the entire history of the Republic.

However, in 387 BC the seemingly inexorable advance of Roman arms received a sudden and shocking reverse. This was a period of huge migrations of the peoples, mainly the Celtic and Germanic peoples, moving inexorably from east to west in search of new lands to settle. These mass migrations, which transformed the face of Europe forever, only ended in the centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. By the eighth and seventh centuries BC, the migration of the Celtic-speaking peoples was in full swing. They moved in huge numbers out of Central Europe as far as Spain and Britain. They occupied what is now France and gave it its name: Gaul.

From there in the fifth century they gradually spread across the Alps and drove out the Etruscans who were settled there. From this time on the North of Italy was called “Gaul this side of the Alps” (Cisalpine Gaul). The Gauls who occupied the valley of the Po had developed the art of war to the point where they possessed a formidable military machine. They had the first cavalry to use iron horse shoes and their infantry was skilled in the use of finely-tempered slashing broad-swords. Few could resist the mass onslaught of these ferocious warriors, their bodies painted and tattooed, who decorated their horses with the skulls of fallen enemies. To make their attack more terrifying, they accompanied the charge with a deafening cacophony of trumpets and war-cries that struck terror into the hearts of the most hardened Roman soldiers.

In the late fourth century BC, one group of Gauls drove southwards from the Po Valley into the Italian Peninsula in the direction of Rome. At a distance of only eleven miles from the city they were met by an army of ten to fifteen thousand Romans – the largest force Rome had ever put into the field. What followed was the greatest catastrophe in Roman history. The Roman phalanx of heavily-armed spear-carrying troops was overwhelmed by the faster-moving Gaulish cavalry and infantry, which rushed on them with an

unstoppable impulse, shouting their terrifying war-cries. The Roman ranks were shattered and the army routed. Most of its soldiers plunged into a nearby river in a desperate attempt to save themselves and were drowned. Rome was left defenceless in the face of the enemy.

The Gauls entered the City and camped in the streets of Rome. Meeting no opposition, they murdered, plundered and burned, although they lacked the siege weapons to take the Capitol. Even today, traces of the devastation can be seen in the edges of the Forum, in a layer of burnt debris, broken tiles and carbonized wood and clay. The Gauls finally got tired of besieging the Capitol, and were eventually persuaded by bribery to leave the City, for which, in any case, they had no use. But the memory of this horrifying experience remained to haunt the Romans long after the events had receded into that misty area of consciousness where historic memory becomes blurred by myth and legend.

The Roman historians have left us the story that the terrified Romans emptied their temples of gold to pay the Gauls to leave the City. The gold was brought to the place appointed by the Gauls, and when the weights proved not to be equal to the amount that the Romans had with them, the Gaulish leader Brennus threw his sword onto the other scale, uttering the chilling words: "Væ victis"—"Woe to the conquered." This story may or not be founded on fact, but it left a strong imprint on the national psychology of the Romans forever, and in particular coloured their attitude to the people of Gaul, who later learned the true horror behind the words that Roman legend attributes to Brennus.

The Samnite wars

Despite this setback, Rome soon revived and continued its march to domination, extending its sphere of influence into the fertile plains of Campania. This brought them into conflict with one of the most warlike of all the Latin peoples and dragged Rome into the longest and bitterest wars in its history. The Samnites were peasants and herdsmen, living in the barren limestone uplands of the Apennines in central Italy. They were barbarians at

a stage of social and economic development not unlike the one that characterized Rome in its initial stages. As happened with the Gauls and many other barbarian tribes in antiquity, pressure of population and the lack of agricultural land to feed it brought about a mass migration.

The result was a headlong collision with Rome, which was strengthening its position on Campania, now threatened by a wholesale Samnite invasion. The Romans constructed the Appian Road for the purpose of transporting large numbers of troops towards the theatre of military operations. However, the Samnites proved to be tough opponents and Rome suffered more than one costly defeat in the course of three separate wars. The first lasted from 343 to 341 BC. The Second (or Great) Samnite War lasted from 326 to 304 BC. And the third war lasted from 298 to 290 BC. This represented a titanic effort that seriously drained the resources of Rome. The second war alone lasted twenty years and in the first half of the war Rome suffered serious defeats, but the second half saw Rome's recovery, reorganization, and ultimate victory.

This was not a defensive war for Rome, which for the first time found itself involved with the powerful and wealthy Greek city states of southern Italy. They had appealed to Rome for help against the Samnites. Victory in this costly war made Rome the master of the whole of Italy except for Sicily. The final defeat of the Samnites therefore decided the fate of Italy and changed world history. It also gave a powerful impulse to the class struggle in Roman society.

Class contradictions in Rome

As the territory of Rome enlarged by conquest, there was a considerable increase in population. This was achieved partly through immigration, partly through the addition of inhabitants of the subjugated tribes (mainly from the Latin districts). But since all these new citizens stood outside the old gentes, curiae, and tribes, they formed no part of the *Populus Romanus*, the Roman people. Although they were personally free, could own property in land, and had to pay taxes and do military service, they could not hold any office, nor

take part in the assembly of the curiae. More importantly, they were not allowed to have any share in the distribution of conquered state lands. In this way there emerged an oppressed class that was excluded from all public rights.

As we have seen, the first period of the Roman Republic was characterized by a continuous expansion that established the hegemony of Rome in all Italy after the victory over the Samnites. After the long wars of defence against neighbouring Latin tribes and marauding Gauls, the Romans passed over to wars of offence and conquest. In the process, the Roman army had been transformed. It was far bigger than before, consisting of two legions. Michael Grant describes this:

“Each legion was a masterpiece of organization, more mobile than the Greek phalanx which had served as the original model because a legion contained an articulated group of thirty smaller units (maniples), each of which could manoeuvre and fight separately on its own, in rough mountainous country as well as on the plains, either in serried ranks or open order, thus combining compactness with flexibility.”
(Michael Grant, *The History of Rome*, p.54.)

The Romans perfected a kind of warfare that was well suited to the peculiarities of a citizen's army: the disciplined legions, fighting with the throwing spear and the short sword created a formidable military machine that swept all before it. These new weapons were probably introduced during the Samnite wars. They completely changed the nature of warfare. The withering hail of javelins, followed by a charge and the employment of the short stabbing sword wielded from behind a solid barrier of shields has been likened to the combination of the musket and bayonet in 18th century warfare. No other army could withstand it.

The main factor that ensured the success of Roman arms was the free peasantry that formed the backbone of the Republic and its army. Under the early gens system, land was held in common by the gens itself. But with the

break-up of the gentes, and the emergence of private property of the land, a class of free small peasants was created. Alongside the class of small peasants (assidui) there was the poorest layer of society, the proletarii – the “producers of children”. But it was the class of small proprietors that supplied the troops for military service. The Roman peasant was a free citizen who had something to fight for. He had the right to bear arms and the duty of military service. The very word for the people comes from the Latin populus, which originally meant “a body of warriors”, and is related to the word populari, to devastate, and popa, a butcher.

The plebs had a strong card to play: they constituted the majority of the army. On more than one occasion the plebs turned this weapon against them by refusing to fight or sabotaging recruitment. Livy notes that the Roman commanders in the field were sometimes more afraid of their own men than they were of the enemy. This brings to mind the words of the Duke of Wellington when passing review of his troops on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo, when he commented to a fellow officer: “I don’t know what effect they will have on the enemy, but by God they frighten me!”

On the eve of the war with Veii, it is reported that the tribunes were stirring up discontent in the army:

“This disaffection amongst the plebs was fanned by their tribunes, who were continually giving out that the most serious war was the one going on between the senate and the plebs, who were purposely harassed by war and exposed to be butchered by the enemy and kept as it were in banishment far from their homes lest the quiet of city life might awaken memories of their liberties and lead them to discuss schemes for distributing the State lands amongst colonists and securing a free exercise of their franchise. They got hold of the veterans, counted up each man's campaigns and wounds and scars, and asked what blood was still left in him which could be shed for the State. By raising these topics in public speeches and private

conversations they produced amongst the plebeians a feeling of opposition to the projected war.” (Livy: 4:58)

Livy thus attributes the mutinous mood in the army to the agitation of the tribunes. But it is more likely that the discontent was already present, and the tribunes were merely giving it a voice: a sufficiently serious crime from the standpoint of the Senate. Again, the crafty patricians took the necessary measures to pacify the plebs. The Roman generals were careful to allow the soldiers to plunder the town of Anxur, where 2500 prisoners were taken:

“Fabius would not allow his men to touch the other spoils of war until the arrival of his colleagues, for those armies too had taken their part in the capture of Anxur, since they had prevented the Volscians from coming to its relief. On their arrival the three armies sacked the town, which, owing to its long-continued prosperity, contained much wealth. This generosity on the part of the generals was the first step towards the reconciliation of the plebs and the senate. This was followed by a boon which the senate, at a most opportune moment, conferred on the plebeians. Before the question was mooted either by the plebs or their tribunes, the senate decreed that the soldiery should receive pay from the public treasury. Previously, each man had served at his own expense.” (Livy, 4:59, my emphasis, AW)

Livy describes the scenes of rejoicing at the unexpected “generosity” of the Senate, which was preparing for war with the powerful Etruscan city state of Veii, and needed to avoid a conflict with the soldiers:

“Nothing, it is recorded, was ever welcomed by the plebs with such delight; they crowded round the Senate-house, grasped the hands of the senators as they came out, acknowledged that they were rightly called ‘Fathers,’ and declared that after what they had done no one would ever spare his person or his blood, as long as any strength remained, for so generous a country. They saw with pleasure that their private property at all events would rest undisturbed at such times as

they were impressed and actively employed in the public service, and the fact of the boon being spontaneously offered, without any demand on the part of their tribunes, increased their happiness and gratitude immensely. The only people who did not share the general feeling of joy and goodwill were the tribunes of the plebs. They asserted that the arrangement would not turn out such a pleasant thing for the senate or such a benefit to the whole community as they supposed. The policy was more attractive at first sight than it would prove in actual practice. From what source, they asked, could the money be raised; except by imposing a tax on the people? They were generous at other people's expense.” (Livy, 4:60)

The concerns of the tribunes were well founded. The Senate did impose a tax, and the tribunes publicly announced that they would defend anybody who refused to pay it. Livy records that the Senate emptied the treasury of bronze coins to keep the army happy, an aim which they succeeded in achieving – for the time being.

The ruling class understood the need to ensure that Rome's plebeian soldiers would continue to fight. Appius Claudius, known as “Caecus”, “the Blind” – which he was in his old age – was a patrician who became Censor in 312 BC. His main aim appeared to have been to improve the position of discharged soldiers, who by this time were increasingly landless peasants flocking to Rome. No reformer had ever before taken up the cause of the Roman proletariat. His intentions may have been motivated by genuine concern, but more likely his main aim was to avoid disturbances in the Capital. These measures, however timid, irritated the Senate, which took steps to undermine and sabotage them.

The third and last Samnite war began in 298 and lasted for eight years. This ferocious conflict ended in victory but also in financial exhaustion. The plebeians of middle rank who spent years fighting in the army had returned home to find themselves ruined. The influx of cheap grain from the conquered lands undermined them. So, despite all the laws passed to

protect them, a large number of small peasants fell into debt. A new period of instability ensued.

Within the community from the very beginning there were the elements of class contradiction. But the rapid increase of inequality and the encroachments on the rights of the plebs by the wealthy patricians placed a growing strain on the social cohesion of the Republic. The wealthy classes encroached on the common lands and oppressed the plebs in different ways, causing rising tension between the classes. The constant need to defend the Roman state against external enemies provided the Patricians with an invaluable instrument whereby to keep the plebs in check, as Hegel points out:

“In the first predatory period of the state, every citizen was necessarily a soldier, for the state was based on war; this burden was oppressive, since every citizen was obliged to maintain himself in the field. This circumstance, therefore, gave rise to the contracting of enormous debts – the Patricians becoming the creditors of the Plebeians. With the introduction of laws, this arbitrary relation necessarily ceased; but only gradually, for the Patricians were far from being immediately inclined to release the plebs from the cliental relation; they rather strove to render it permanent. The laws of the Twelve Tables still contained much that was undefined; very much was still left to the arbitrary will of the judge – the Patricians alone being judges; the antithesis, therefore, between Patricians and Plebeians, continues till a much later period. Only by degrees do the Plebeians scale all the heights of official station, and attain those privileges which formerly belonged to the Patricians alone.” (Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of History, p.286.)

Here the inner workings of every state in history are laid bare, exposing the organized violence and class oppression that lies beneath the thin veneer of “impartiality” and “justice” that is expressed in the Majesty of the Law, and

serves as a fig-leaf to obscure the crude reality of the state as an organ for the oppression of one class over another:

“In order to obtain a nearer view of this Spirit, we must not merely keep in view the actions of Roman heroes, confronting the enemy as soldiers or generals, or appearing as ambassadors – since in these cases they belong, with their whole mind and thought, only to the state and its mandate, without hesitation or yielding – but pay particular attention also to the conduct of the plebs in times of revolt against the patricians. How often in insurrection and in anarchical disorder was the plebs brought back into a state of tranquillity by a mere form, and cheated of the fulfilment of its demands, righteous or unrighteous! How often was a Dictator, e.g., chosen by the senate, when there was neither war nor danger from an enemy, in order to get the plebeians into the army, and to bind them to strict obedience by the military oath!” (Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of History, p.288)

The campaign for land reform was repeatedly interrupted by the threat of foreign invasion. The patricians made good use of the external threat to defuse the class struggle. How well the old Idealist Hegel understood the workings of class society! And how brilliantly he exposed the tactics with which the rulers of the State make use of the “external enemy” to fool the masses and whip up patriotic sentiment in order to divert their attention from the self-evident fact that their worst enemies are at home.

The transition to a slave economy

The underlying motor force of history is the development of the productive forces, or, to put it another way, the development of humankind’s power over nature. In the last analysis, the viability of a given socio-economic system will be determined by its ability to provide people with food, clothing and shelter. It is obvious that in order to think beautiful thoughts, invent clever machines, develop new religions and philosophies, one first has to eat.

Long before Marx, the great Aristotle wrote that “Man begins to philosophise when the needs of life are provided.” And Hegel pointed out:

“The first glance at History convinces us that the actions of men proceed from their needs, their passions, their characters and talents; and impresses us with the belief that such needs, passions and interests are the sole springs of action — the efficient agents in this scene of activity.” (Lectures on the Philosophy of History, Introduction)

Marx and Engels explained at great length that the connection between the economic base of a given society and the immense superstructure of the state, laws, religious beliefs, philosophical tendencies and schools of art, literature and music is not a direct and mechanical one, but an extremely complex and contradictory dialectical relation. However, in the last analysis, the causes of all great historical transformations must be traced back to changes in the mode of production, which give rise to profound modifications in society.

On one occasion the English socialist Ernest Belfort Bax challenged Engels to deduce the appearance of the Gnostic religious sect in the second century from the economic conditions in Rome at the time. The question showed a complete lack of understanding of historical materialism on Bax's part, but Engels was patient and answered that one could not do such a thing, “but suggested that by tracing the matter further back you might arrive at some economic explanation of what he granted was an interesting side problem in history.” (Reminiscences of Marx and Engels, p. 306)

It is impossible to understand the fall of the Roman Republic unless we take the trouble to “trace the matter back” to its origins, which are the direct result of a change in the mode of production, which in turn produced profound changes in the relations between the classes in Roman society, the nature of the state and the army. The decisive change in this case was the rise of slavery, which led to the liquidation of the class of free peasants that was

the backbone of the Republic and its army. All subsequent developments are contingent on this fact.

Each stage in the development of human society is marked by a certain development of the productive forces, on a higher development of labour productivity. This is the secret wellspring of all progress. Greece and Rome produced marvels of art, science, law, philosophy and literature. Yet all these intellectual marvels were based, in the last analysis, on the labour of the slaves. Subsequently, slavery entered into decline and was replaced by feudalism, where the exploitation of labour assumed a different form. Finally, we arrive at the capitalist mode of production, which remains dominant, although its contradictions are now clear to all.

To us, slavery appears as something morally repugnant. But then we are left with a paradox. If we ask the question: where did all our modern science and technology come from, we are forced to answer: Greece and Rome (we leave aside the important contributions later made by the Arabs, who preserved and developed the ideas of antiquity and transmitted them to us). That is to say, the achievements of civilization were the products of slavery.

Despite all the barbarous and bloody features that naturally arouse indignation and disgust, each stage of social development marks an advance on the road to the final emancipation of the human race, which can only be achieved on the basis of the fullest development of the productive forces and of human culture. It was in that sense that Hegel wrote that it is not so much from slavery as through slavery that humankind reaches emancipation.

The Punic Wars

The history of class society is studded with wars and revolutions. Pacifists and moralists may lament this fact. But, sad to say, even the most superficial examination of history shows that it has never been guided by moral considerations. It is as inappropriate to approach history from a moralistic standpoint as it would be to do this in relation to the workings of

natural selection in the evolution of species. We may regret that carnivorous animals are not vegetarians, but our feelings on the subject will not affect the ways of nature in the slightest degree.

It is self-evident that wars and revolutions have an important – even a decisive effect – on human history. They are, to use the Hegelian expression, the nodal points where quantity becomes transformed into quality, the boundaries that separate one historical epoch from another. Thus we refer to the period before and after 1789, 1815, 1914, 1917, 1945 and so on. At these critical points, all the contradictions that have been slowly accumulating emerge with explosive force, impelling society forward – or back. In the case of the Roman Republic we see a dialectical process in which war leads to a change in the mode of production, and the change in the mode of production leads to a change in the nature of war and the army itself.

The formative period of the Roman Republic was an age of almost permanent warfare: wars against the Etruscans, the Latins, the Gauls, the Samnites, the Greek colonies in Italy, and finally, against Carthage. This last chapter was a decisive turning point in Roman history. Carthage was the main trading power in the Western Mediterranean. It possessed a great part of the coast of northern Africa and southern Spain and had a footing in Sicily and Sardinia.

It was the Carthaginians' involvement in Sicily that first brought them into conflict with Rome. This wealthy island was occupied by prosperous Greek city states, which habitually made war on one another. One such state appealed to Rome to intervene on its behalf against some rebellious mercenaries. It later changed its mind, but it was too late. The Romans were now involved in the affairs of Sicily, where the Carthaginians were already well installed. A complex web of alliances and trade interests caused a chain reaction that led inexorably to war between the two powers for control of this key island.

Roman historians like Polybius liked to portray this as a defensive war, but there is little evidence to support the idea that at this stage Carthage was a serious threat to Rome. The fact is that Rome was now an aggressive power that was fighting to achieve total domination of the whole of Italy – including Sicily. Thus, a conflict with Carthage was inevitable. But this conflict was to turn Rome into a power, not just in Italy, but throughout the Mediterranean. And if we recall that that word mediterraneus in the Latin language signifies “the centre of the world”, then what is meant is a world power, in the understanding of those times.

There were three wars with Carthage – the Punic Wars (264-41, 218-201 and 149-146 BC). In comparison to this conflict, all previous wars seemed like child’s play. This was a deadly, bloody slogging match, which lasted decades. The human and economic cost of the war was immense. In the first Punic war alone, in a five-year period, the census of Roman citizens fell by about 40,000 – one sixth of the total population. And these figures do not include the losses suffered by Rome’s allies, who suffered big losses at sea.

But though the Romans won the first war with its most powerful enemy, the conflict was not resolved. Carthage soon rebuilt its power, drawing on the rich silver mines of Spain. A second 16-year war followed – a war that is forever associated with the name of Hannibal. The Romans had watched with alarm as the Carthaginians consolidated their power in Spain. This was dangerous and had to be stopped at all costs. The Romans needed a pretext to intervene in Spain and they got one when Carthaginian forces led by Hannibal besieged the city of Saguntum (the modern Sagunto), which was under Roman protection. The Romans claimed that there was an agreement that the Carthaginian army should not go south of the river Ebro, and that Hannibal had broken this agreement.

Whether the claim made by Rome was true or false is a question of third-rate importance. One must never confuse the causes of war with the diplomatic pretexts or accidental factors that provoke the commencement of hostilities. The First World War was not caused by the assassination of the

Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, as the old history books used to claim. It was the inevitable result of the conflict of interests between the rising imperialist power of Germany and the older, established imperialist powers of Britain and France, which had carved up the world between them. Here we have an analogous case from the world of antiquity.

Polybius recognised the fact that:

“Some of those authors who have dealt with Hannibal and his times, wishing to indicate the causes that led to the above war between Rome and Carthage, allege as its first cause the siege of Saguntum by the Carthaginians and as its second their crossing, contrary to treaty, the river whose native name is the Iber [Ebro]. I should agree in stating that these were the beginnings of the war, but I can by no means allow that they were its causes.” (Polybius, 3:6)

This is very true. The Romans were determined to prevent Carthage from restoring her economic and military power, and therefore used this incident as a pretext to send an army into Spain.

The Romans were determined to start a war and were just looking for an excuse. Therefore they made the Carthaginians an offer they could not accept (this is another typical diplomatic trick to start a war). They demanded that they either hand over Hannibal for punishment or else accept war with Rome. Hannibal had in fact been trying to avoid a war with Rome, because he was not yet ready. But once he understood that war was inevitable, he boldly seized the initiative. He went onto the offensive.

The Romans never imagined he would take the step of invading Italy. Even less did they imagine he would lead his army out of Spain, march through Gaul and cross what seemed to be an impassable barrier – the Alps – to enter Italy from the North. But he did all these things, and took the Romans by surprise. And surprise can be a decisive element in war. Rome suddenly found itself invaded by a foreign army fighting on Italian soil. This

extraordinary general, with very little support from outside, harried the Roman armies and came within a hair's breadth of destroying Roman power altogether.

Hannibal calculated that his relatively small army would be supported by an uprising of the Latin peoples who were under Roman domination (though technically "allies"). He did get support from the Gauls of Northern Italy. But in general the Latin peoples remained loyal to Rome. Thus, although his spectacular military victories at Trebbia, Trasimene and Cannae brought Rome to its knees, he lacked sufficient strength to deliver the knockout blow. The Romans could always rebuild their armies, while Hannibal, deprived of outside help, could not afford to lose men. Therefore, in the long run, even Hannibal's great talent as a general could not bring victory.

Learning from their earlier mistakes, the Romans simply avoided direct battles and waited for the Carthaginian forces to exhaust themselves. Then a Roman army led by Scipio invaded Spain and conquered it. Then Rome turned its attentions to Carthage itself. They organised an intrigue with Carthage's African vassals and got them to rise up against their masters. This revolt compelled Hannibal to return to Africa to defend Carthage. Once again, the might of Rome prevailed. In the end Carthage was decisively beaten at the battle of Zama.

After this, the Romans no longer felt any need to pretend that their wars were of a defensive character. They had developed a taste for conquest. But this was merely a reflection of a fundamental change in property relations and the mode of production. The same year (146 BC) they destroyed Corinth, another trading rival. By order of the Senate, the city was razed to the ground, its entire population was sold into slavery and its priceless art treasures were shipped off to Rome. The destruction of Corinth was partly to prevent social revolution: the Romans always preferred to deal with oligarchic governments, whereas Corinth was a turbulent democracy.

The final Punic War was deliberately provoked by Rome. The war party was led by Cato, who always ended his speeches in the Senate with the celebrated slogan: “delenda est Carthago” – Carthage must be destroyed. After a three-year siege in which the inhabitants suffered terrible famine, the city was taken by storm. In a display of extreme vindictiveness, the Romans broke their promises to the Carthaginians and sold the population into slavery. They then demolished the city stone by stone and sowed the ground with salt so that nothing could grow there. The defeat of Carthage changed the destiny of Rome. Until it was compelled to take to the sea in the war with Carthage, Rome had never been a sea power. Carthage had always blocked her way. Now, with this mighty obstacle removed, Rome was free to launch herself on a career that was to end in complete domination of the Mediterranean.

The Roman victory added new territories to its growing empire, including the prosperous Greek and Phoenician colonies on the coast of Spain. This gave a further impetus to the class of Roman capitalists, involved in trade in the Mediterranean. Spain opened up her valuable iron and silver mines – which were also worked by slave labour in terrible conditions. Rome simply took over this business from Carthage. It also led to a further development of trade and exchange and therefore the rise of a money economy. Thus, war played an important role in bringing about a complete transformation of the mode of production – and therefore of social relations – in Rome.

Effects on the army

The armies of Rome were victorious on all fronts. But in the midst of these foreign triumphs, intense contradictions were developing at home, where a new and even more ferocious war was about to break out – a war between the classes. Stripped of all non-essentials this was a war for the division of the loot. This was already pointed out by Hegel, who wrote: “The Roman state, drawing its resources from rapine, came to be rent asunder by quarrels about dividing the spoils.” (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p.309, my emphasis, AW). This is a very precise, and wholly materialist, account of the basis of the class struggle in Rome at this time.

The Punic Wars also marked a change in the nature of the Roman army. Until now the army was based on the property owning citizens and was drawn mainly from the mass of free peasants. But in the course of the Punic Wars, when the fate of the Republic was in the balance, it was no longer possible to maintain the old situation and the property qualifications were greatly reduced. For the first time a large number of proletarians between the ages of 18 and 46 were recruited into the army and served for an average of seven years and paid for out of the public funds. This was a further step in the transformation of the Roman army from a citizens' militia to a professional army. It created a new type of general in the person of Scipio Africanus, the first Roman general who was named after his military conquests.

With every military conquest, Rome acquired a huge amount of land confiscated in the conquered territories. This land became the property of the Roman state – the *ager publicus* (public land). But since the state itself was in the hands of the patricians, in practice they treated the *ager publicus* as their own property and leased it out to people of their own class. The mass of propertyless plebeians had no access to the conquered lands. This was a constant source of intense discontent.

The discontent of the plebeian farmer-soldiers was further intensified by the fact that the length of compulsory military service was continually being increased as the wars became longer. Initially, the citizen's militia was fighting defensive wars on its own territory. But the Samnite wars, which were fought a long way from home, extended over half a century, involving almost all the states of Italy. The long periods of military service often meant that the plebeian Roman soldier returned home to find his farm in ruins, and himself and his family deep in debt. The long years of war led gradually, on the one hand, to the rise of slavery and the big estates, on the other hand, to the rapid increase of a landless population of proletarians.

The tendency of the Senate to treat the lands of the conquered territories as their personal property has already been noted. But after the long and bloody slugging match with Hannibal, there was a feeling that the Senate had saved Rome, and the military victory over Rome's most dangerous enemy greatly boosted the Senate's authority and undermined any potential opposition – at least for a time. Victory meant Roman control over vast new territories with immense riches. As the third century passed into the second, the Senate strengthened its grip on the new territories by the appointment of governors, who had a virtual license to coin money at the expense of the provinces.

All the time the position of the Roman and Italian small farmer was being inexorably eroded by a fatal combination of debt, slavery and the encroachment of the big estates. The free peasantry entered into a process of decay, being unable to compete with slave labour. Constant wars, debt and impoverishment ruined them. Despite attempts to force through legislation to protect the peasants, slave labour on a large scale drove out free labour. All the laws designed to halt this process were in vain. Economic necessity tore up the laws before they could be enacted. The Licinian laws stipulated that the landlords had to employ a certain proportion of free labourers alongside the slaves and that the burden of debt was to be reduced. But it was impossible to reverse the process.

The former peasants fled the countryside to seek a life of leisure in Rome where they lived at the public expense. The Roman proletariat was in fact a lumpenproletariat. They produced nothing but lived on the backs of the slaves. They did not feed society but were fed by it. They no longer had the land, but they still had the vote and this gave them a measure of power. Thus, over a long period of time, increasing numbers of dispossessed peasants flocked to Rome, and although they were reduced to the status of proletarii – the lowest layer of propertyless citizens, they remained Roman citizens and had certain rights in the state. This presence of a large number of impoverished citizens gave a fresh impetus to the class struggle in Rome. There were violent insurrections against the burdens of debt.

It is important to note that the class struggle in ancient Rome was not identical with the struggle between plebeians and patricians. That was a difference of rank – roughly the same as the difference between “commoners” and “nobles”. But there were also wealthy plebeians – who invariably took the side of the patricians against the plebeian masses. Thus, the old struggles of Plebeians against Patricians became transformed into the struggle of rich against poor.

The rise of slavery

The Roman Republic in 100 BC controlled the whole of North Africa, Greece, Southern Gaul and Spain. Wealth was pouring in from all sides. But these conquests undermined the Republic fatally. Before the Punic Wars started, a new oligarchy was formed when the tribunes went over to the side of the Senate. The wealthy plebs (the Roman capitalists) gradually fused with the old aristocracy to form a powerful bloc of big property owners. The first two Punic Wars greatly strengthened the hold of the slave-holding oligarchy on Roman society. This was the social and political reflection of a fundamental change in the mode of production from an economy based on free labour and small peasant agriculture to an economy based on slave labour and big landed estates (latifundia).

Until the Punic Wars, slavery was not the decisive mode of production. True, there were probably always some slaves in Rome, and the phenomenon of debt slavery was present from the earliest recorded times. But in the beginning the number of slaves working in the fields was far less than that of the free peasants, and the lot of slaves was not as bad as in later times. The slave worked alongside his master and was almost like a member of the family. Slaves could be freed through manumission and this was a fairly common occurrence. In *The Foundations of Christianity*, Karl Kautsky writes:

“From the material point of view the situation of these slaves was not too hard to start with; they sometimes found themselves well enough

off. As members of a prosperous household, often serving convenience or luxury, they were not taxed unduly. When they did productive work, it was often – in the case of the wealthy peasants – in common with the master; and always only for the consumption of the family itself, and that consumption had its limits. The position of the slaves was determined by the character of the master and the prosperity of the families they belonged to. It was in their own interest to increase that prosperity, for they increased their own prosperity in the process. Moreover the daily association of the slave with his master brought them closer together as human beings and, when the slave was clever, made him indispensable and even a full-fledged friend. There are many examples, in the ancient poets, of the liberties slaves took with their masters and with what intimacy the two were often connected. It was not rare for a slave to be rewarded for faithful service by being freed with a substantial gift; others saved enough to purchase their freedom. Many preferred slavery to freedom; they would rather live as members of a rich family than lead a needy and uncertain existence all by themselves.” (Karl Kautsky, *The Foundations of Christianity*, 2:1 *The Slave Economy*)

The rise of the big estates changed all that. The mode of production was transformed. The rising population of the towns meant an increased demand for bread and an increased market for other agricultural products. On the other hand, the destruction of Carthage meant that Italy was now the main producer of wine and olive oil. The small peasant subsistence agriculture was now rapidly displaced by large-scale intensive agriculture using new techniques: crop rotation, the use of manure and new deep-cutting ploughs and the selection of seeds. In southern Italy there were big ranches for the raising of cattle and sheep. In turn there were new industries for the working of wool and leather and the production of meat and cheese. Only the biggest estates could do this, since they alone had access to both the upper and lower pastures required for seasonal migration. Naturally, they were worked by slave labour.

The use of large-scale slave labour probably began in the mines. Victory in the Punic Wars meant that Rome now had possession of the valuable silver mines in Spain that had been exploited by the Carthaginians. Since the Romans had a huge supply of extremely cheap slaves, who could be worked to death, these mines could show a very decent profit for a relatively small outlay. The Spanish silver mines became among the most productive of antiquity, as ancient authors confirm:

“In the beginning,” writes Diodorus, “ordinary private citizens were occupied in the mining and got great riches, because the silver ore did not lie deep and was present in great quantity. Later, when the Romans became masters of Iberia (Spain), a crowd of Italians appeared at the mines, who won great riches through their greed. For they bought a throng of slaves and handed them over to the overseer of the mines... Those slaves that have to work in these mines bring incredible incomes to their masters: but many of them, who toil underground in the pits day and night, die of the overwork. For they have no rest or pause, but are driven by the blows of their overseers to endure the hardest exertions and work themselves to death. A few, that have enough strength and patience to endure it, only prolong their misery, which is so great it makes death preferable to life.” (Diodorus Siculus, V, 36, 38.)

Slave labour tended to drive out free labour, destroying not only the class of free peasants but also preventing the development of handicrafts, which were undermined by the industries run by gangs of slaves in the cities and on the latifundia. By degrees the free peasants found themselves displaced by slave labour, as Mommsen explains:

“The burdensome and partly unfortunate wars, and the exorbitant taxes and taskworks to which these gave rise, filled up the measure of calamity, so as to deprive the possessor directly of his farm and to make him the bondsman if not the slave of his credit-lord, or to reduce him through encumbrances practically to the condition of a temporary lessee to his creditor. The

capitalists, to whom a new field was here opened of lucrative speculation unattended by trouble or risk, sometimes augmented in this way their landed property; sometimes they left to the farmer, whose person and estate the law of debt placed in their hands, nominal proprietorship and actual possession. The latter course was probably the most common as well as the most pernicious; for while utter ruin might thereby be averted from the individual, this precarious position of the farmer, dependent at all times on the mercy of his creditor – a position in which he knew nothing of property but its burdens – threatened to demoralise and politically to annihilate the whole farmer-class.” (Mommsen, History of Rome, vol.1, p. 268.)

Kautsky develops the same point:

“If the slaves were cheap, their industrial products would be cheap too. They required no outlay of money. The farm, the latifundium provided the workers’ foodstuffs and raw materials, and in most cases their tools too. And since the slaves had to be kept anyway during the time they were not needed in the fields, all the industrial products they produced over and above the needs of their own enterprise were a surplus that yielded a profit even at low prices.

“In the face of this slave-labour competition it is no wonder that strong free crafts could not develop. The craftsmen in the ancient world, and particularly so in the Roman world, remained poor devils, working alone for the most part without assistants, and as a rule working up material supplied to them, either in the house of the client or at home. There was no question of a strong group of craftsmen such as grew up in the Middle Ages. The guilds remained weak and the craftsmen were always dependent on their clients, usually the bigger landowners, and very often led a parasitic existence on the verge of sinking into the lumpenproletariat as the landowner’s dependents.” (ibid.)

A fundamental change was taking place in Italy itself. The huge influx of slaves meant that slave labour was now extremely cheap. There was no way the free Italian peasantry could compete with it. The rise of slavery undermined the free peasantry that had been the backbone of the Republic and the base of its army. Italy was now full of big landed estates worked by slave labour, as described by Mommsen:

“The human labour of the field was regularly performed by slaves. At the head of the body of slaves on the estates (*familia rustica*) stood the steward (*vilicus*, from *villa*), who received and expended, bought and sold, went to obtain the instructions of the landlord, and in his absence issued orders and administered punishment.” (Mommsen, vol. 2, p. 344.)

Incidentally, our word family comes from this word for a community of slaves. He continues:

“The whole system was pervaded by the utter unscrupulousness characteristic of the power of capital. Slaves and cattle were placed on the same level: a good watchdog, it is said in a Roman writer on agriculture, must not be on too friendly terms with his ‘fellow slaves’. The slave and the ox were fed properly so long as they could work, because it would not have been good economy to let them starve; and they were sold like a worn-out ploughshare when they became unable to work, because in like manner it would not have been good economy to retain them longer.” (ibid., pp. 346-7.)

The changes in the mode of production in the Roman Republic after the Punic Wars required greater and greater use of slave labour. This forced Rome into war after war as it sought to replenish its supply of slaves. This abundant supply of cheap labour explains why there was no incentive to invest in labour-saving technology. It also explains the brutal treatment of the slaves and the subsequent mass revolts that broke out.

Productivity and culture

It is possible to describe the whole course of human history in terms of the struggle to raise the productivity of labour. This is the secret motor-force of all progress: the way in which humankind achieves power over its natural environment and society gradually lifts itself from a lower to a higher stage of development. The transition to a slave economy undoubtedly raised the productive powers of society, and was accompanied by a notable advance of art, literature and culture.

Before the Punic Wars, the Romans were not at all interested in the fine arts. Learning was not highly regarded, and the top statesmen devoted most of their energies to agriculture. This was very different to Athens. Among the Romans fine talk was regarded with suspicion. Romans tended to speak in practical terms of what they had to do, preferring substance to style. Fine writing was no better regarded: the literature of the early Republic was confined to purely factual annals. But the latter phase of the Republic was characterised by the rise of new literary trends and philosophical schools: poets like Catullus and Lucretius became fashionable. This reflected a change in the lifestyle and outlook of the ruling class. Conservatives like Cato railed against these tendencies, but he was already regarded as a crank by his contemporaries.

All this elegance and culture was based on the labour of the slaves, whose conditions steadily deteriorated. A vast gulf opened up between the wealthy elite and the mass of poor Romans, not to speak of the slaves. There are certain parallels between the transformation of the mode of production in the Roman Republic after the Punic Wars and the rise of capitalism in Europe in the 18th century. Indeed, the word “capitalism” is frequently used when speaking of this phase of Roman development. Yet, though there are certain analogies, the comparison is not exact. Modern capitalism depends on a free market for goods and labour. Large-scale slavery is incompatible with modern capitalism, which abolishes slavery as it develops. The American Civil War is sufficient proof of this assertion.

The basic mode of production of the Roman Republic was agriculture. Other parts of the economy (mining, crafts and trading) were dependent on this. The small peasants produced mainly for self-consumption. Only the surplus (if there was any) could be sold. Production for exchange (commodity production) was not developed until after the Punic Wars. All this changed with the rise of the big estates (latifundia) and the large-scale use of slave labour. Gradually the old order was subverted by slave labour that ruined the free Roman peasantry.

The Roman capitalists continued to buy up the small landholdings, and where the peasants proved obstinate, simply seized their land without even the pretence of a sale. According to Mommsen (Roman History, vol. 3, p. 79) in Etruria by the year 134 BC there was not a single free farmer left. The following extract from The Complaint of the Poor Man against the Rich Man from the pseudo-Quintilian's collection of declamations, describes the spread of the latifundia in the complaint of an impoverished peasant:

“I was not always the neighbour of a rich man. Round about there was many a farm with owners alike in wealth, tilling their modest lands in neighbourly harmony. How different is it now! The land that once fed all these citizens is now a single huge plantation, belonging to a single rich man. His estate has extended its boundaries on every side; the peasant houses it has swallowed up have been razed to the ground, and the shrines of their fathers destroyed. The old owners have said farewell to their tutelary gods and gone far away with their wives and children. Monotony reigns over the wide plain. Everywhere riches close me in, as if with a wall; here there is a garden of the rich man's, there his fields, here his vineyard, there his woods and stacks of grain. I too would gladly have departed, but I could not find a spot of land where I would not have a rich man for my neighbour. Where does one not come up against the rich man's private property? They are not content any longer to extend their domains so far that they are bounded by natural boundaries, rivers and mountains, like whole countries. They lay hold even of the furthest mountain wildernesses and forests. And

nowhere does this grasping find an end and a limit until the rich man comes up against another rich man. And this too shows the contempt the rich have for us poor, that they do not even take the trouble to deny it when they have used violence on us.” (II, p. 582f., quoted by Kautsky, op. cit.)

Contradictions of slave economy

In this period we see a considerable strengthening of the ruling oligarchy, which increases its grip on society and the state. Together with the old aristocratic families we see the rise of the Roman capitalists: the new rich, big landowners, merchants and usurers. But in the last analysis, all the wealth of these layers was derived from the products of agriculture. Since land was the main source of all wealth, everybody strove to get land, and to add to the land they already possessed. But in order for it to be profitable, someone has to work the land. This was provided by slave labour. The Carthaginians had developed slavery on a large scale, and the Romans learned it from them. When they seized the provinces owned by Carthage in Sicily, Sardinia, Spain and North Africa, they also took over the large-scale farms, which they found there, and developed and extended them further.

In the slack times between harvesting and Spring ploughing, the slaves were put to work weaving, tanning and leather working, making wagons and ploughs, pottery making of all sorts. But commodity production was so far advanced that they produced not only for the individual farm, but also for sale. The only cost to the slave-owner was the price of purchasing the slave in the first place, and the minimal costs of keeping him or her alive afterwards. Kautsky says:

“There could be no question at that time of any technical superiority of large-scale agriculture; on the contrary, slave labour was less productive than the labour of the free peasants. But the slave, whose labour power did not have to be spared and who could be sweated to death without a second thought, produced a greater surplus over the cost of his subsistence than the peasant, who at that time knew

nothing of the blessings of overwork and was used to a high standard of living. There was the further advantage that in such a commonwealth the peasant was constantly being taken from the plough to defend his country, while the slave was exempt from military service. Thus the sphere of economic influence of such large and warlike cities saw the rise of large-scale agricultural production with slaves.” (Kautsky, The Foundations of Christianity, 2:1)

The wars that provided cheap slaves ruined the Roman free peasants who were the backbone of the army. The ruined peasant was forced to resort to banditry or else join the army of unemployed lumpenproletarians in Rome or other cities. This social disintegration led to an unprecedented wave of crime and banditry, which furnished a new source of slaves in the form of convicted criminals. Prisons were unknown, and criminals were either crucified or sentenced to forced labour.

Although we refer to Roman capitalism, it was unlike modern capitalism. It was not based upon industry but on trade, money lending and slave agriculture. As we have seen, it is a peculiar feature of slave labour that it is not very productive. Although slavery enormously raised the productive powers of society, it contained a contradiction. It signified an increase in the productivity of labour in the aggregate, but the labour productivity per unit of an individual slave was far lower than that of a free peasant.

The labour of an individual slave has a low level of productivity because it is forced labour. Slave labour only becomes profitable when it is employed on a vast scale. What is important is the aggregate of production, where individual slaves are literally worked to death and quickly replaced by others. Thus, the conditions of the slaves worsened continually. The big estates or latifundia were worked by gangs of slaves during the day, branded with a hot iron and shackled together in gangs. They were locked up at night in common, frequently subterranean labourers' prisons. Cato used to say: “a slave must either work or sleep”.

And just as the nomenclature of “capitalist” is not really adequate to describe the functions of the Roman slave owners, so the word “proletariat” is misleading when applied to the dispossessed peasants forced to flee to the cities. There is a fundamental difference between the modern proletariat and that of the ancient world. The modern working class is the only really productive class (together with the peasantry, insofar as it still exists), but the Roman proletariat did not work – it had an entirely unproductive and parasitical character. As we have seen in Part Four of this article, the modern proletariat feeds society, whereas the Roman proletariat was fed by society – that is to say, by the slaves, who were the real productive class.

Technology

The basis of modern capitalism is the accumulation of capital for the purpose of re-investment. Such a conception would have been totally incomprehensible to a Roman capitalist. The existence of a mass of cheap slave labour made such an idea unnecessary. Competition of slave labour undermined the development of free crafts. The craftsmen led a precarious existence, always on the verge of sinking into the lumpenproletariat.

Slavery also inhibited the development of industry and technology. The modern capitalist invests a large part of his profit for improving technology in order to get an advantage over his competitors. The case with the Roman slave-owner was very different. Slavery is incompatible with technological advance. For the reasons already stated, only the crudest tools could be put into the hands of the slaves on the large estates.

One of the most striking contradictions of the ancient world is that, having come so close to a capitalist economy, it always drew back from the edge and failed to develop, when it would seem that a potential existed. Take just one example: the Alexandrine Greeks invented a steam engine that worked. But they regarded it as a mere curiosity – a toy. Its productive potential never occurred to them. Why should it?

With cheap slaves, the biggest surpluses came from large landed estates. This was not the result of the application of new technology to large-scale agriculture. With a mass of cheap slave labour, there was no need to develop technology. Moreover, technology is incompatible with slave labour, as slaves working under compulsion will not treat delicate instruments with care – they will break them on purpose. The mule was developed in the slave states of the Southern USA because the slaves could not be trusted with a horse, which was too delicate to survive in their hands. Only the crudest, most resistant implements and tools could be entrusted to the slaves. Marx had pointed this out. He says the following of “production by slave power”:

“To use an expressive phrase of the ancients, the slave is merely a vocal instrument, distinguished only as vocal from the beast as semivocal instrument, and from the inanimate tool as dumb instrument. But he himself is careful to let both beast and tool know that he is of a different order from them, that he is a man. He has the self-satisfaction of convincing himself that he is different, by misusing the beast and damaging the tool. Consequently, it is a universal principle in production by slave labour that none but the rudest and heaviest implements shall be used, such tools as are difficult to damage owing to their sheer clumsiness. In some of the slave states of the American Union, those bordering on the Gulf of Mexico, the only ploughs used were constructed upon an old Chinese model; ploughs which burrowed into the soil like a pig or a mole, but did not cut a furrow and turn the earth over... In *A Journey in the Seaboard States*, Olmsted writes: ‘I am here shown tools that no man in his senses, with us, would allow a labourer, for whom he was paying wages, to be encumbered with; and the excessive weight and clumsiness of which, I would judge, would make work at least ten per cent greater than those ordinarily used with us. And I am assured that, in the careless and clumsy way they must be used by the slaves, anything lighter or less rude could not be furnished them with good economy, and that such tools as we constantly give our labourers and find our profit in giving them, would

not last out a day in a Virginia cornfield – much lighter and more free from stones though it be than ours. So, too, when I am asked why mules are so universally substituted for horses on the farm, the first reason given, and confessedly the most conclusive one, is that horses cannot bear the treatment that they must always get from the Negroes; horses are always soon foundered or crippled by them, while mules will bear cudgelling, or lose a meal or two now and then, and not be materially injured, and they do not take cold or get sick if neglected or overworked. But I do not need to go further than to the window of the room in which I am writing, to see at almost any time treatment of cattle that would ensure the immediate discharge of the driver by almost any farmer owning them in the North.’ ” (Capital, Vol. I., Eden and Cedar Paul translation, London, 1928, p.91.)

Thus, for the whole period of slavery, no great advances were made in technology and productivity remained on a low level. The slave owners, like the feudal lords who succeeded them, were not in the least interested in accumulating for investment. The purpose of accumulation was for their personal enjoyment and consumption on a most lavish scale. This explains the extravagantly luxurious lifestyle of the wealthy Romans, their sumptuous banquets and so on. The description of the extraordinary banquets, parties and orgies that have come down to us, the consumption of such things as stuffed lark's tongues and pearls dissolved in wine, are the end result of the labour of the slaves, along with extravagant games and festivals, silk dresses, colossal public buildings and – last but not least – the free handout of grain to the unemployed mob in Rome.

Since the slave owners had no use for productive investment in labour-saving machinery, he could use his entire surplus (apart from the fixed costs and replacements of tools, cattle and slaves) for his personal consumption. There was some investment in trade and usury, but in the end, this too could not be applied in any other way than in consumption. In some trades the number of free workers might increase in absolute terms, because of the increasing demand for luxuries, like paintings, statues and objects of art, as

well as silk clothes, expensive perfumes and ointments etc. But all this luxury was squeezed from the blood, sweat and tears of an army of slaves.

“The modern capitalist is marked by the drive to heap up capital; the noble Romans of the Empire, the time at which Christianity arose, were marked by love of pleasure. The modern capitalists have accumulated capital to an extent that dwarfs the riches of the richest ancient Romans. The Croesus of all of these was said to be Nero’s freedman Narcissus, with a fortune of some twenty million dollars. What is that compared to the billions of a Rockefeller? But the expenditures of the American billionaires, no matter how reckless they are, are not to be compared with those of their Roman predecessors who served dishes of nightingales’ tongues and dissolved precious pearls in vinegar.”
(Kautsky, op. cit.)

These wealthy parasites lived for pleasure, since there was nothing else they could do with the surplus extracted from the slaves. The extravagances of the ruling class were deplored by conservatives like Cato the Elder (234-149 BC), who also denounced the debilitating effects of Greek culture on the Roman mind. “We know,” says Pliny in the thirty-third book of his Natural History, “that Spartacus (the leader of a slave uprising) did not allow gold or silver in his camp. How our runaway slaves tower above us in largeness of spirit!”

Slavery – the motor-force of Roman expansionism

A new contradiction arose out of the constant demand for more slaves to make up the shortfall, as large numbers of slaves were worked to death. As slavery can only be profitably employed on a massive scale, and since slaves do not reproduce in sufficient numbers, a constant renewal of slave labour can only be achieved through war or other violent means. Therefore, new wars were constantly needed to replenish the supply of cheap slaves.

The owners of large estates were always naturally in favour of war, as the most effective way to get cheap slaves, and of seizing new territories. This

gave a powerful impetus to Roman expansionism. After the Punic Wars, the wars waged by Rome often assumed the character of large-scale slave hunts. A steady flow of cheap slaves played a fundamental role in stimulating the slave economy. War was therefore a necessary element in the Roman slave economy. Within two centuries, Rome had conquered all the lands bordering the Mediterranean and was proceeding from the conquest of Gaul to subjugate Germany, the conquest of which provided a rich harvest of slaves.

All the wars of the period ended in the capture of a vast number of prisoners, which swelled the army of slaves working in the mines and big estates on Roman territory. To cite just one example, in the Romans' third war against Macedonia in 169 B.C. seventy cities in Epirus alone were sacked and 150,000 of their inhabitants sold as slaves. Appian tells us that on one occasion in Pontus prisoners of war were sold at 4 drachmas (less than a dollar) apiece. When Tiberius Gracchus raided Sardinia, he took as many as 80,000 captives, to be dragged to the slave market at Rome, where the expression "as cheap as a Sardinian" became a proverb.

By the end of the Republic, slaves were present at all levels of social life. They were put to work on the construction of public buildings, aqueducts and roads. They also worked as carpenters and blacksmiths who repaired the farm tools and carts. Others looked after the cattle, sheep and pigs. The wool from the sheep was spun and made into items which were used by the Roman army and navy. The Roman farm products such as wine, oil, tools, meat were exported to other countries. They kept accounts, cooked the master's feast and read Greek poetry (which they sometimes composed) after it. Finally, they fought and died in the arena.

Slave revolts

However, slavery in general is not possible without a reign of terror. The conditions of the slaves on the big estates worsened continually in the later Republic. The slave had no rights and had to accept whatever conditions the master offered. They could be forced to work, kept in barracks and fed

as much as was needed to keep them alive. Whereas a free wage-worker (in theory at least) can choose his employer, and withdraw his labour to put pressure to get higher wages, this is impossible for a slave. The only alternative was to escape, but a slave who escaped from his master or refused to work would be put to death.

The only real restraint on ill-treatment or neglect was similar to that involved in looking after a horse or an ox. If a slave dies it was a dead loss to the owner, who would have to pay out money for a replacement. If there was a scarcity of slaves, this might be an argument for treating them well. However, in a period when Roman armies were conquering the world, slaves were cheap and there was no reason to treat the slaves in a humane manner. In an age of unending wars and civil wars, the price of slaves fell continuously, as captives flooded the market.

There was a Roman proverb: “so many slaves – so many enemies”. That is why Plato, Aristotle and the Carthaginian, Mago, warned masters against bringing together slaves of the same nationality, lest they should combine and stage conspiracies against their masters. The slave-owners were always anxious about the possibility of a slave uprising. The free Romans lived permanently like a man sitting on a volcano waiting to erupt. Therefore, any expression of insubordination was punished with extreme cruelty. This explains why even petty offences could be met with arbitrary and sadistic punishments.

Since, in the eyes of the law, slaves were private property, the master's power over the slave (*dominica potestas*) was absolute. He was allowed to torture, degrade, beat without cause, and even kill a slave when he was old or sick. A slave could not legally hold property, make contracts, or marry, and could testify in court only under torture. If a slave tried to run away, he could expect to be whipped, burned with iron, or even killed. Many cases of extreme cruelty have been recorded. When a slave of Vedius Pollio broke a crystal dish, he had him thrown into a pool of lampreys to be eaten alive by the fish.

For neglect of duty or petty misconduct slaves were often punished by flogging. In more serious case, slaves were sold to be gladiators. Since nothing was so much dreaded throughout all Italy as an uprising of the slaves, any attempt on a master's life or taking part in an insurrection, was punishable with death for the criminal and his family in a most agonizing form - crucifixion. Indeed, after the defeat of Spartacus' uprising, Pompey erected six thousand crosses along the Appian Way to Rome, on each of which a survivor of the final battle was nailed. In fact, the word crux (cross) was used among slaves as a curse.

In spite of all these repressive measures – indeed one could say because of them - there were several large-scale slave revolts, of which the uprising led by Spartacus is the best known. (See also: Spartacus - a real representative of the proletariat of ancient times) But there were several other cases. The first recorded Slave Revolt took place in 135-132 B.C. in Sicily. The uprising was provoked by great changes of property ensuing upon the final expulsion of the Carthaginians, about the middle of the Second Punic War, when an army of speculators from Italy rushed into the island and, to the general distress of the Sicilians, bought up large tracts of land at a low price, or became the occupiers of estates which had belonged to Sicilians of the Carthaginian party and had been forfeited to Rome after the execution or flight of their owners.

The Sicilians of the Roman party, by contrast, became rich out of the distress of their countrymen. After the ravages of war Italy was in need of grain and the abundance of cheap slaves could be used to produce grain that had a sure market. Sicily was therefore flooded with slaves, employed to grow grain for the great land owners. The slaves were so ill-fed by their masters that they began to take to robbing the poorer Sicilians; and the masters were glad that their slaves should be maintained at the expense of others. After seventy or eighty years, pressures broke out in the Servile War, which was accompanied by the most horrible atrocities.

Roman sources give us some idea of the kind of bad treatment that provoked this uprising, which was accompanied by the most horrible atrocities. One slave owner, Damophilus, is specifically named (together with his wife) as one of the cruellest:

“36. Purchasing a large number of slaves, he treated them outrageously, marking with branding irons the bodies of men who in their own countries had been free, but who through capture in war had come to know the fate of a slave. Some of these he put in fetters and thrust into slave pens; others he designated to act as his herdsman, but neglected to provide them with suitable clothing or food.

37. Because of his arbitrary and savage humour not a day passed that this same Damophilus did not torment some of his slaves without just cause. His wife Metallis, who delighted no less in these arrogant punishments, treated her maidservants cruelly, as well as any other slaves who fell into her clutches. And because of the despicable punishments received from them both, the slaves were filled with rage against their masters, and conceiving that they could encounter nothing worse than their present misfortunes began to form conspiracies to revolt and to murder their masters.”

Tormented beyond endurance, the slaves took their revenge. Damophilus and Metallis were both murdered. But their daughter, who had treated the slaves kindly, was spared, and this detail was noted by the Roman historian as proof that the slaves were not naturally bloodthirsty, but only desired to revenge themselves for the unspeakable torments inflicted on them. When the slave army captured the town of Enna we are told that they killed “many”, and in general the Roman historians stress the injuries they inflicted on the free citizens. But we must be on our guard here, since it was in the interests of these historians to blacken the name of the slaves as much as possible in order to justify the bloody reprisals they later inflicted on the defeated rebels.

We know almost nothing of the leader of this revolt, except that he was a freeborn slave named Eunus, and seems to have been born in Syria. Styling himself "King Antiochus," Eunus was reputed to be a magician, evidently because the Romans were embarrassed that a mere slave or freedman could defy their power, and therefore attributed magical powers to him (similar nonsense was written about Spartacus). He led the slaves of the eastern part of Sicily. A Roman source informs us:

“In three days Eunus had armed, as best he could, more than six thousand men, besides others in his train who had only axes and hatchets, or slings, or sickles, or fire-hardened stakes, or even kitchen spits; and he went about ravaging the countryside. Then, since he kept recruiting untold numbers of slaves, he ventured even to do battle with Roman generals, and on joining combat repeatedly overcame them with his superior numbers, for he now had more than ten thousand soldiers.” (Diodorus Siculus, Books 34/35. 2. 1-48)

At the same time, in the western part of the island, a slave manager or vilicus named Cleon (also, naturally, accredited with religious and mystical powers) gathered together a slave army. It is interesting that Cleon was a manager or overseer of slaves, that is to say, a man who was recognised by his master as having sufficient intelligence and strength of character to be put in charge of other slaves. History knows many similar examples of this kind of thing. It is known, for example, that most army mutinies were organized and led by sergeants or other Non-Commissioned Officers. Such men tend also to be the natural leaders of the working class.

The same source tells us:

“17. Meanwhile a man named Cleon, a Cilician, began a revolt of still other slaves. And though there were high hopes everywhere that the revolutionary groups would come into conflict one with the other, and that the rebels, by destroying themselves, would free Sicily of strife, contrary to expectations the two groups joined forces, Cleon having

subordinated himself to Eunus at his mere command, and discharging, as it were, the function of a general serving a king; his particular band numbered five thousand men.” (Ibid.)

The Roman sources are reluctantly obliged to pay tribute to the bravery of the rebel slaves:

“18. Soon after, engaging in battle with a general arrived from Rome, Lucius Hypsaeus, who had eight thousand Sicilian troops, the rebels were victorious, since they now numbered twenty thousand. Before long their band reached a total of two hundred thousand [possibly this figure included women and children also], and in numerous battles with the Romans they acquitted themselves well, and failed but seldom.” (ibid.)

Significantly, news of the rebellion in Sicily sparked off uprisings of the slaves elsewhere – even in Rome:

“19. As word of this was bruited about, a revolt of one hundred and fifty slaves, banded together, flared up in Rome, of more than a thousand in Attica, and of yet others in Delos and many other places. But thanks to the speed with which forces were brought up and to the severity of their punitive measures, the magistrates of these communities at once disposed of the rebels and brought to their senses any who were wavering on the verge of revolt. In Sicily, however, the trouble grew.

“20. Cities were captured with all their inhabitants, and many armies were cut to pieces by the rebels, until Rupilius, the Roman commander, recovered Tauromenium for the Romans by placing it under strict siege and confining the rebels under conditions of unspeakable duress and famine: conditions such that, beginning by eating the children, they progressed to the women, and did not altogether abstain even from eating one another. It was on this

occasion that Rupilius captured Comanus, the brother of Cleon, as he was attempting to escape from the beleaguered city.” (ibid.)

The Roman senate was obliged to dispatch the Roman army to end the slave war. The Roman accounts that have come down to us, describe him as more cunning than able; but it should be remembered that these reports were written by his enemies who would not wish to depict him in a favourable light. His lieutenant, Cleon, was given the credit for the many victories he won over the Roman forces; but this may just be spite on the part of the latter. This rebel chief must have been a man of considerable ability to have maintained his position so long, and to have commanded the services of those said to have been his superiors. Cleon fell in battle, and Eunus was made prisoner, but died before he could be brought to punishment.

This was the first of a series of three slave revolts in the Roman Republic. A second Slave Revolt followed, that lasted from 104 BC until 100 BC. The leader of this slave revolt named Salvius led the slaves in the east of Sicily, while Athenion led the western slaves and it took Rome four years to suppress. The Roman consul M. Aquilas quelled the revolt only after great effort. In addition to these slave uprisings, and the great, last and most famous uprising led by Spartacus, the war against Aristonicus and his “Heliopolites” in Asia Minor was also in reality a war of the landowners against insurgent slaves.

In some cases the free labourers made common cause with the slaves. In fact, at one point, the whole island of Sicily fell into the hands of the slaves. According to even the most moderate estimates, the active slave army amounted to at least 70,000 men capable of bearing arms (see Mommsen, vol. 3, pp. 76-7.) The only way of assuring the total submission of the slaves after such revolts was by applying the most ruthless and brutal methods. Thus, in every case, the revolt ended with a massacre of the slaves. In the capital of Sicily, 150 slaves were executed, in Minturnae 450, and in Sinuessa, as many as 4,000. After the suppression of the revolt in Sicily the

consul Publius Rupilius ordered that every rebel slave who was captured be crucified – some 20,000 in all.

Rome continued to be in the hands of an exclusive aristocratic club, although the economic and class relations in society had been completely transformed. The political superstructure no longer corresponded to the economic base. This contradiction had to be resolved, and it was resolved through the most savage class struggle. This was the explosive background to the emergence of the Gracchi. [Part one]

The rise of a money economy

The early Republic was an agricultural economy based upon subsistence farming. Its backbone was the class of free peasants who produced mainly for their own consumption, only exchanging the small surplus left over. In the early days of Rome money played an unimportant role in the economic life of society. But a long period of wars and foreign conquests had radically transformed the Roman economy. With the emergence of Rome as a world power and the consequent expansion of trade on an international scale, money begins to play a more important role, first as silver, later as copper and gold. For the first time, exchange and money-relations begin to dominate economic life.

This led to the disintegration of the old social forms. The rise of money economy put an end to the relative equality of the early days of the Republic, and in its place we see an increasing polarisation between rich and poor that no longer corresponds to the old tribal divisions between plebeians and patricians, noblemen and commoners. As we have seen, the spread of slave labour not only destroyed the class of free peasants. It also degraded the value of free labour in general, reducing the free proletarians to a level of misery that was not very different to that of the slaves.

Together with trade and money economy, the Roman capitalists' power also increases. A new class of Roman capitalists arose on the basis of money, production for exchange and the slave economy. The name equites

("knights", derived from equus, a horse) was originally given to those citizens who could afford a horse and provided the cavalry in the army, but now began to refer to all those with an estate worth more than 4,000,000 sesterces, a kind of Roman bourgeoisie, a new "aristocracy" of speculators, tax farmers, merchants and the like.

With the emergence of these new relations of production, the day of the free peasant was over, and so was the old Republic with its stern morality and simple soldierly virtues. Gone was the famous frugality of the Romans. Very often the new men of money were commoners, and even freedmen (former slaves). These "new men" had no aristocratic pedigree, but they had wealth and showed it off ostentatiously. The nouveaux riches dressed in silk, drank fine foreign wines and employed educated Greek slaves to recite Homer at their lavish banquets, even if neither they nor their guests understood a single word. Conservatives like Cato complained bitterly about this ostentation, but, as we have already seen, by this time old Cato was regarded as a crank when he dressed himself up in a rough peasant's tunic and went to work in the fields alongside his domestic slaves. Such things were now seen as anachronisms.

Although in economic terms the capitalists and aristocrats had similar interests as defenders of private property, in political terms there were still important differences between them. The power of the old aristocracy was based on its control of the senate, but increasingly the equites began to exercise a decisive influence on Roman politics. As these "new men" gradually accumulated vast sums of wealth, so they increasingly felt themselves to be a power in the land. They constantly jostled with old patrician nobility for political power, creating new tensions and antagonisms within the Roman Republic.

Privileged aristocracy

Despite the concessions that the patricians had been forced to give to the "new men" in the previous period, the latter were still poorly represented in the offices of state. The government was still in the hands of a closed circle

of privileged families. About 2,000 men from less than twenty clans controlled the state and took the lion's share of the huge amounts of loot from the wars. A good example of this is the Scipio family, which in less than a hundred years had gained no fewer than twenty three consulships. This was a permanent source of friction between the capitalists and the patricians.

These great aristocratic families kept in their cupboards the wax masks of their ancestors who had held consular office. These masks were paraded in the streets at their funerals, when there were pompous speeches in praise of the dead man and all his ancestors. In this way Rome remained in the hands of an exclusive aristocratic club, although the economic and class relations in society had been completely transformed. The political superstructure no longer corresponded to the economic base. This contradiction had to be resolved, and it was resolved through the most savage class struggle.

Rome was now effectively divided into two or three rival centres of power, reflecting the interests of different classes: the official state power, the senate, controlled by the predominantly patrician oligarchy, the voting-assemblies or comitia, controlled by the middle class citizens, and the popular assemblies, where the poorest sections of the populace gathered, the proletariat, including street-boys, Jews, Egyptians and the city rabble in general. The political life of the Republic now becomes much more complicated. In order to get support for its struggle with the aristocracy, the most radical wing of what we might call the Popular Party tried to lean on the masses, as the French middle class Jacobins did at the time of the French Revolution.

The popular assemblies existed, although they had no legal powers to decide anything – but in practice they controlled the streets. And the power of the street in Rome was growing. The urban poor formed a lumpenproletariat of dispossessed peasants, embittered by their expropriation and always ready to riot. Plutarch describes the popular

agitation in Rome at this time. In the Life of Tiberius Gracchus he writes of the common people expressing their discontent by “setting up writings upon the porches, walls, and monuments,” demanding that the poor citizens be reinstated in their former possessions. This was the explosive background to the emergence of the Gracchi.

The Agrarian question

The period that led to the fall of the Republic was characterized by a ferocious struggle between the classes, along with fierce power struggles between ambitious generals and politicians. There is an official history of this period, but there is also a secret history. In Capital, Marx wrote: "For the rest, it requires but a slight acquaintance with the history of the Roman republic, for example, to be aware that its secret history is the history of its landed property." (Capital, vol. 1 p. 82, The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof).

It was standard practice of the Romans to confiscate part of the land of conquered cities and states, and this was made public land which, was occupied by tenants who paid rent, usually in produce, to the state. From the earliest times the patricians held the lion's share of the public lands. In Italy the holding of public lands tended to become a monopoly of the wealthy. This confirms the old saying that property is nine-tenths of the law. No matter by what dubious means this land had been acquired, once it had been occupied for a certain length of time, it was considered as real property of the occupier. In this way, gradually the people were robbed of the public lands, and this was the focal point of all the great class battles in the later Roman Republic.

There were repeated attempts to pass laws regulating the distribution of public lands— the result of the struggle of the poorer classes to gain some share in the ager publicus. Since these lands were occupied without lease, from a strictly legal point of view, this should not have been difficult. But the law, especially as regards property, has always favoured the rich and powerful. And since most agrarian legislation challenged the wealth and

privileges of the powerful, it remained a dead letter. The wealthy classes were determined to keep the lands they held, and they controlled the state and drew up the laws. Consequently the agrarian laws were often flagrantly disobeyed or simply ignored.

The most famous of early agrarian laws were the Licinian Reforms (367 B.C.), which limited the amount of land any citizen could hold and the number of sheep and cattle he could pasture on public land. Some public lands were distributed to poor citizens, but by about 233 B.C. these laws had already fallen into disuse and the situation of the poor peasants became increasingly difficult.

Tiberius Gracchus

The next serious attempt to solve the agrarian problem was the Sempronian Law of 133 B.C. This will be forever associated with the name of one of the most remarkable figures in Roman history: Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus. He was not a plebeian but an outstanding member of the Roman aristocracy, whose father had held high office. Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus and his brother Gaius (known to history as “the Gracchi”) came from a prestigious aristocratic family. They were the sons of Sempronius Gracchus and Cornelia, the daughter of Scipio Africanus, the famous general who defeated Hannibal.

With such a pedigree, Tiberius would normally be destined to take his place with the ruling aristocracy and hold high office in the state. But instead he broke with his class and became the most celebrated leader of the plebeians, the Roman poor - the proletariat. Despite his impeccable aristocratic credentials, Tiberius Gracchus was destined to launch himself on a course that would destroy the social and political equilibrium of the Republic.

This is not the only case in history where outstanding members of the ruling class come over to the side of the revolution. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels point out that “in times when the class struggle nears the

decisive hour, the progress of dissolution going on within the ruling class, in fact within the whole range of old society, assumes such a violent, glaring character, that a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands.” (The Communist Manifesto, Bourgeois and Proletarians, Selected Works, Vol. 1. p. 117)

We see the same process in earlier periods also. Marx points out that in the period of the decay of feudalism, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie. So in a period of intense class struggle in the Roman Republic, certain individuals broke away from their class and attempted to represent the interests of the oppressed classes. It may be argued that the Gracchi did not have a consistently revolutionary policy, that they vacillated and attempted to compromise, and that this eventually led to defeat. But when we consider that these men had no reason to do what they did, and that they gave their lives fighting for the cause, surely they deserve to be remembered for their courage and not for their weaknesses.

Tiberius Gracchus was clearly a man of high principles and extraordinary talent, a fact that was grudgingly accepted even by his critics. Seventy five years after Gracchus’ death, Cicero considered Gracchus to be among the best orators Rome had ever produced, but he also saw him as a dangerous demagogue when he wrote: “I only wish that Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus had possessed political intentions as good as his oratorical talents”, and he added, “If so, his renown would have been the most splendid in the world.” (Cicero, Letters, p. 254)

To us today his proposals for reform do not seem excessively radical, but for their time they were genuinely revolutionary. It was almost unheard-of for Roman politicians to deal with social or economic problems and such problems seldom played any part in senatorial debates. The idea that a senator or politician might represent a particular social class was completely alien to the Romans. Tiberius was the first one to address the growing

problems in the city of Rome itself, and tried to solve the economic crisis in the countryside through agrarian reform.

Tiberius clashes with the senate

How did this man become a revolutionary? Probably there were several different reasons. Cicero wrote: “He took office only because he was so infuriated with the nobility.” (ibid.) His clash with the senate seems to have its origins in an incident during the Numantian war in Spain (153 BC), when the name of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus first comes to our attention. He apparently became interested in the land question when he travelled to Spain, and observed the decline of farming in Etruria. Plutarch writes:

“When Tiberius passed through Etruria and found the country almost depopulated and its husband men and shepherds imported barbarian slaves, he first conceived the policy which was to be the source of countless ills to himself and his brother.” (Plutarch, *The Life of Tiberius Gracchus*, in *The Makers of Rome*, Penguin Edition p. 161)

He saw with his own eyes how the Italian smallholders, whom Rome depended on to provide men for her army, were declining in numbers, undermined by competition from the huge farms, worked by armies of slaves. The smallholdings were everywhere in decline, although they had by no means disappeared by this time. Tiberius Gracchus drew the conclusion that the destruction of the class of free peasants would undermine Rome itself.

As a member of an aristocratic family, Tiberius Gracchus could have expected a distinguished senatorial career, following in his father's footsteps to both the consulship and the censorship. But his reputation was undermined by a reckless decision he took in Spain. In the Numantian campaign, Tiberius served with distinction as quaestor, and earned the respect of the Spaniards for his bravery and honesty. Such was his reputation for honesty and fairness that the Numantines insisted on

negotiating with the son of the man who had treated the Iberians better than other Romans, who frequently reneged on their promises.

But his conduct gave rise to an incident that changed his life and the course of Roman history. In order to save the army of Mancinus, which was trapped and facing certain destruction, Tiberius staked his reputation by concluding a treaty with the Spaniards – without first consulting the senate. Plutarch credited Tiberius Gracchus with saving the lives of 20,000 Roman citizens through this agreement. But there was a problem. The senate had not been consulted about this deal and promptly rejected it and sent the commander Mancinus in chains back to Numantia.

The actions of the senate mortified Tiberius. A Roman aristocrat was brought up to prize above all else his *dignitas*, a more complicated idea than dignity in English. It means not just dignity, but status and honour. Tiberius had given his word to the Spaniards, and the senate broke it. He considered this a dishonourable action, which not merely betrayed the Numantines, but also disgraced him. Tiberius' brother-in-law Scipio Aemilianus did his best to shelter him from the dishonour of the Numantian affair, but to no effect. This betrayal had a profound effect on Tiberius Gracchus, who took deep and lasting offence at the senate. This set in motion a chain reaction which exercised a fatal influence on Roman history for more than a century.

Tiberius Gracchus became the mortal enemy of the senate and the Roman aristocracy. He entered the political arena, and in 133 BC he shocked the Roman system by standing not for the office of magistrate, but for the office of tribune of the people. This was a bold and fateful step to take. The tribunate carried with it important powers: the power to veto and to propose law. But the ruling class had always assumed that it could buy off the tribunes and use them to police the masses. They never thought that such an office would be held by a significant political figure such as Tiberius Gracchus, or that it would be used in a serious attempt to change society. But they were wrong.

The moment Gracchus stood for the office it was clear that he was seeking to use his power to rival that of the consuls. In so doing, he was acting according to the letter of the law, but he was doing things that were not in the original script. This was extremely dangerous. It was as if the modern Labour leaders were to make use of the machinery of formal parliamentary democracy to pass laws to expropriate the capitalists. That also is not in the script! This action set Tiberius Gracchus on a collision course with the senate. The hatred felt by the aristocracy towards him was so intense because they saw him as a traitor to his class. He was the first member of the Roman senatorial class to break ranks. His actions offended the strong spirit of solidarity that always exists within the ruling class. They wanted to destroy him utterly. For his part, he was looking for a fight.

The land question

Tiberius Gracchus was no doubt a courageous and sincere man, convinced of the need for a change. He was a social reformer, an idealist who was influenced by the philosophical doctrines of the Stoics of the brotherhood of man. His critics said that he had spent too much time listening to Greeks. In his *Life of Tiberius Gracchus*, Plutarch writes:

“Of the land which the Romans gained by conquest from their neighbours, part they sold publicly, and turned the remainder into common; this common land they assigned to such of the citizens as were poor and indigent, for which they were to pay only a small acknowledgement into the public treasury. But when the wealthy men began to offer larger rents, and drive the poorer people out, it was enacted by law that no person whatever should enjoy more than five hundred acres of ground. This act for some time checked the avarice of the richer, and was of great assistance to the poorer people, who retained under it their respective proportions of ground, as they had been formerly rented by them. Afterwards the rich men of the neighbourhood contrived to get these lands again into their possession, under other people's names, and at last would not stick to claim most of them publicly in their own. The poor, who were thus

deprived of their farms, were no longer either ready, as they had formerly been, to serve in war or careful in the education of their children; insomuch that in a short time there were comparatively few freemen remaining in all Italy, which swarmed with workhouses full of foreign-born slaves. These the rich men employed in cultivating their ground of which they dispossessed the citizens.” (See Plutarch, op. cit/, pp. 159-60)

As we have noted, according to his contemporaries, he was an excellent orator. The following speech recorded by Plutarch is probably not authentic but invented by Plutarch (this was standard procedure with the ancient writers). But it undoubtedly conveys the spirit, if not the letter, of his agitation:

“The wild beasts,” said he, “all over Italy, have their dens, they have their places of repose and refuge; but the men who bear arms, and expose their lives for the safety of their country, enjoy in the meantime nothing more in it but the air and light and, having no houses or settlements of their own, are constrained to wander from place to place with their wives and children.

“He told them that the commanders were guilty of a ridiculous error, when, at the head of their armies, they exhorted the common soldiers to fight for their sepulchres and altars; when not any amongst so many Romans is possessed of either altar or monument, neither have they any houses of their own, or hearths of their ancestors to defend. They fought indeed and were slain, but it was to maintain the luxury and the wealth of other men. They were styled the masters of the world, but in the meantime had not one foot of ground which they could call their own.” (Plutarch, Tiberius Gracchus, p. 162)

Despite the implacable opposition of the aristocracy, Tiberius Gracchus obtained some important backers for his candidature to the tribunate, including a number of key senators and ex-consuls. This may reflect the

power of old family ties and personal friendships, or maybe they did not take his populist propaganda very seriously. In the same way, members of the British Establishment did not take seriously the Communist convictions of Burgess, Maclean and Philby because they were members of the upper class and had been educated at Eton and Cambridge – until they turned out to be Soviet spies.

If they had looked more closely at his programme for taking office, they might have seen that he was very serious indeed.

Tiberius Gracchus was elected tribune in 133BC on a platform of distributing land to the urban poor and limiting the land that each individual could hold. This was hugely popular with the poor but – in spite of significant concessions to the wealthy landowners - it provoked the anger of the patrician reactionaries who blocked his proposed reforms. This sharpened the class conflict, giving it a revolutionary character.

The Sempronian Law

The support that Gracchus got at first from the most powerful of Rome's politicians may indicate that at least a section of the ruling class understood that land reform was both necessary and overdue. His original proposals were not very radical. Many of these latifundia were actually situated on public land, which they rented for ridiculously small leases from the state, if they paid anything at all. Tiberius devised a plan to distribute land to the urban poor.

The Licinian laws were easily circumvented and they had been turned into a dead letter, but they had never been revoked. Tiberius Gracchus therefore could argue that his proposed reforms were based upon law. The Sempronian Law reaffirmed the provisions of the Licinian Laws and added to the maximum allowance an extra amount for each son. The occupants were to be reduced to the legal maximum and the surplus given to the poor. This idea guaranteed popular support for Gracchus, who was duly elected tribune for the year 133 BC. But his movement for reform was continually

blocked by the patrician reactionaries and therefore acquired a revolutionary character.

He proposed to limit the amount of land a man could own to no more than 500 iugera (300 acres). To conciliate the big landowners, he offered to allow the current holders of public land to keep 300 acres as their undisputed property, including another 150 acres for every child. Any wealthy man with four children would therefore be allowed to keep 1000 acres. The remaining public land was to be redistributed in plots of 30 acres to family smallholders. The intention was to create thousands of new landowners, from whom Rome would recruit for her armies. The plots, once granted, were supposed to be inalienable. They could not be sold or transferred to new owners, other than by inheritance from father to son.

In compensation for their losses, the occupants of public land were to receive full title to the land they retained. This was a huge concession to the rich, who would be allowed to keep a large amount of public land, in addition to any other lands they already outright owned, which would have remained untouched. In effect, the old Licinian Law would have been superseded, and the big landowners would have their vast estates legitimized. This was intended to make the reforms palatable to the rich landowners. By this measure Tiberius Gracchus hoped to reduce the opposition of the wealthy landowners to his reform. But this was a vain hope.

Despite the moderate nature of his proposals, the wealthy classes were bitterly opposed to everything Tiberius Gracchus stood for. Plutarch describes their rabid hostility:

“But though this reformation was managed with so much tenderness that, all the former transactions being passed over, the people were only thankful to prevent abuses of the like nature for the future, yet, on the other hand, the moneyed men, and those of great estates, were exasperated, through their covetous feelings against the law itself, and against the lawgiver, through anger and party-spirit. They therefore

endeavoured to seduce the people, declaring that Tiberius was designing a general redivision of lands, to overthrow the government, and throw all things into confusion.” (Plutarch, *ibid*, p. 161)

How familiar these lines sound today! Nowadays, the ruling class would use the mass media to launch a campaign against the “threat to democracy” posed by socialism. We see this now in the hysterical campaign in the media in the USA, which tries to present a very timid attempt to reform the health system more or less as an attempt to push through a socialist revolution and “sovietize American medicine.” This fact shows how little has changed in over 2,000 years of class struggle. The names and circumstances have changed, but the psychology of the ruling class has not.

Aristocratic reaction

For the conservative aristocrats who sat in the senate even minor political differences seemed to be matters of fundamental principle. They saw any attempt to restrict their powers as an attack on the republic. It was particularly intolerable that those who were agitating for reform were men from their own class. Tiberius Gracchus knew he would have to face a stiff fight. Similar land reform had been proposed some ten years earlier by C. Laelius (ca. 145 BC), but these proposals were shipwrecked on the rock of senatorial opposition.

Naturally, the most strenuous opposition came from those who held large quantities of public land. They faced losing the lion’s share of their public lands, and some of them had no great private estates to fall back on. Many senators were themselves large landowners holding vast tracts of public land. They furiously opposed the reform as a radical attack on the principle of private property. They also understood that a land redistribution that would involve settling 70,000 families on public land would create a mass base of clients loyal to Tiberius. For such men Gracchus’ law could represent a serious threat. Among these opponents, the most implacable was Scipio Nasica, ex consul of 138 BC, who held vast tracts of public land.

The new land reform bill was carefully drafted. But Gracchus took a revolutionary step when he presented the bill directly to the people's assembly (concilium plebis). He did not submit the law for review to the senate. This was not strictly required by law but it was the usual practice. Why did Tiberius Gracchus proceed in this way? The reason is unclear. Did he want to take his revenge on the senate, treating them with contempt for having betrayed him over the Numantia affair? It seems more likely that he sought to by-pass the senate where he would meet stiff opposition, and appeal directly to the people.

Whatever his reasons were, the senators were outraged. They did everything in their power to block the bill's progress. When voting day arrived, the party of the rich prevented a vote by the simple expedient of seizing the voting urns. The masses confronted them and were preparing for a fight. Rome now seemed on the brink of revolution. But once again the situation was saved by the cunning of the ruling class and the vacillations of the leaders of the Popular Party. Two distinguished men of consular rank, Manilius and Flavius, threw themselves to their knees before Tiberius and implored him to stop the proceedings and instead take the matter to the senate.

Tiberius agreed "out of respect for their rank". This shows the limitations of his outlook. Despite his undoubted sincerity, he had not yet given up all hope of convincing the senate of the correctness of his proposals. Tiberius appealed to the senate. What was the result? There was no result because the oligarchs dominated the proceedings. The masses were demobilized and the initiative, at least for now, was lost.

Intervention of the masses

We can only explain the conduct of Tiberius Gracchus by the fact that he was not proposing a revolution against the senate, but a reform that was calculated to prevent revolution and save the Republic through an agrarian reform that would save the small peasantry. But for the wealthy and powerful such proposals sounded like a call to subvert all property, undermine the State and provoke a general revolution (“to confound everything”). Feeling themselves threatened, the aristocrats armed a large number of their followers and slaves. They were preparing for a showdown.

A commission was set up to execute the law, but the senate organized a campaign of obstruction to undermine the law and render it ineffective. They circulated the rumour that Tiberius wanted to crown himself king. The senators staged a protest in the streets, dressing themselves in mourning clothes and walking about the Forum as if to announce the imminent death of the Republic. It was part of the preparation for counterrevolutionary violence.

Stirred up by the prospect of land, large numbers of country people flocked to Rome to vote for the bill, which was easily passed in the popular assembly. The senate struck back. They bribed another Tribune, Marcus Octavius, to veto the bill. This was a scandalous move, because this man was using his position to frustrate the will of the people he was supposed to represent. The tribunate had never been intended for this purpose. But the office of tribune was being corrupted and turned into the tool of the senatorial order. The tribune’s veto seemed to spell the end of the reform.

One might have expected Tiberius Gracchus either to retreat or seek to do some kind of deal with the senate. But this time he did no such thing. Instead he passed onto the offensive. First he offered Octavius (who, it seems, was himself the owner of public land) to compensate him out of his own pocket for any losses he incurred, on condition that he would drop his veto on the bill. Octavius refused. Then Gracchus proposed that unless he

withdrew his veto, Octavius should be removed from office. What he was demanding was the right of recall.

In a desperate attempt to avoid a head-on confrontation, Tiberius tried to appeal to Octavius before the popular assembly. Plutarch describes the scene very vividly:

“When the people were met together again, Tiberius placed himself in the rostra, and endeavoured a second time to persuade Octavius. But all being to no purpose, he referred the whole matter to the people, calling on them to vote at once, whether Octavius should be deposed or not; and when seventeen of the thirty-five tribes had already voted against him, and there wanted only the votes of one tribe more for his final deprivation, Tiberius put a short stop to the proceedings, and once more renewed his importunities; he embraced and kissed him before all the assembly, begging with all the earnestness imaginable, that he would neither suffer himself to incur the dishonour, nor him to be reputed the author and promoter of so odious a measure.

“Octavius, we are told, did seem a little softened and moved with these entreaties; his eyes filled with tears, and he continued silent for a considerable time. But presently looking towards the rich men and proprietors of estates, who stood gathered in a body together, partly for shame, and partly for fear of disgracing himself with them, he boldly bade Tiberius use any severity he pleased. The law for his deprivation being thus voted, Tiberius ordered one of his servants, whom he had made a freeman, to remove Octavius from the rostra, employing his own domestic freed servants in the stead of the public officers. And it made the action seem all the sadder, that Octavius was dragged out in such an ignominious manner.

“The people immediately assaulted him, whilst the rich men ran in to his assistance. Octavius, with some difficulty, was snatched away and safely conveyed out of the crowd; though a trusty servant of his, who

had placed himself in front of his master that he might assist his escape, in keeping off the multitude, had his eyes struck out, much to the displeasure of Tiberius, who ran with all haste, when he perceived the disturbance, to appease the rioters.” (Plutarch, op. cit. p. 165)

In these lines we can clearly see the class forces at work. The two opposing forces, the oligarchy and the masses, are pulling in opposite directions. It is a clash of mutually incompatible interests. In the middle we have the social reformer, Tiberius Gracchus, who has set in motion forces beyond his control. He begins to fear that the situation is slipping out of his hands and pleads with the other side to see reason. But the other side is obdurate and will not budge an inch. The masses, enraged, intervene and force the issue. For the time being, the other side is forced to retreat.

After Octavius refused for the second time, and was promptly voted out of office and dragged from the speaker’s podium he was replaced with another candidate. Another Roman historian, Appian, describes the euphoria of the people in this moment: “[Tiberius] Gracchus, immensely popular, was escorted home by the multitude as though he were the founder, not of a single city or people, but of all the nations of Italy [his opponents said that] as soon as Gracchus should become a private citizen he would be sorry that he had done outrage to the sacred and inviolable office of tribune, and had sown in Italy so many seeds of future strife.” (Appian, p. 89)

Sabotage by the senate

When Tiberius persuaded the popular assembly to impeach the tribune, he committed an unconstitutional act that was absolutely without precedent. Cicero later used this disagreement between two tribunes as an example of the wonderful flexibility of the Roman constitution:

“The tribunes have too much power you say. Yes, that is undeniable, but the power of the popular assembly has a much more cruel and violent potential. Yet, in practice, that potential sometimes makes for greater mildness when there is a leader to keep the assembly under

control [....] For no board of [10] tribunes, surely, would ever be so outrageously constituted that not a single one of its members remained sane! Indeed, what caused the downfall of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus was the fact that he had an opponent on his own board, that, indeed, is what brought about his downfall: his removal of one of his own colleagues from office, because he had exercised his right of veto against Tiberius Gracchus.” (Cicero, On Government, P. 205)

The senate had suffered a setback, but was by no means prepared to concede defeat. Tiberius' agrarian law was finally passed without opposition and a new tribune was elected to replace the deposed Octavius. But it still held a strong card in its hand: its control over finances. A commission was set up to supervise the distribution of land to the people. However, the senate sabotaged the measure by withholding the funds that were necessary to help stock the new smallholdings. Without money to provide the basic necessities, the plots distributed under the reform would not be viable farms.

Tiberius Gracchus now took a drastic step, which brought the struggle between the two factions to a head. Attalus, king of Pergamum, who had died childless, bequeathed his treasury to the Roman state. Tiberius Gracchus proposed that this wealth be divided up between the citizens of Rome in order to fund the land commission and help set up farms for new settlers. In effect, he confiscated a large amount of money in order to finance the work of the agrarian commission.

Thanks to this measure, the commission could begin distributing land. But such an action was in complete disregard for tradition, which gave the senate control of all overseas affairs. Although nowhere was this explicitly stated by Roman law, Tiberius' action was a direct challenge to the senate. And that was not all. He also proposed to reduce the length of military service, and to introduce the right of appeal against the verdicts of juries (up to then composed exclusively of senators). In short, he was trying to reduce the powers of the Senate by every means possible.

The reactionaries in the senate were alarmed by the passage of the bill, the deposition of the tribune and the confiscation of Attilus' legacy. They were even more alarmed by the mass following Tiberius was acquiring among the poor. The senate was forced to accept the situation, but only playing for time. The reactionaries had no intention of limiting themselves to peaceful and legal means.

Counterrevolution

The seizure of the Pergamene treasury in defiance of the senate was a turning point. Tiberius Gracchus had made powerful enemies. Many of his former allies now broke away, once they saw he was serious about his intentions. He was now in a dangerous position. There were plenty of people out to destroy him. The fundamental issue at this point was no longer the land reform. The question was: who rules Rome? There was now an open clash between the senate and the popular assembly.

The situation was completely polarized: on one side were Tiberius Gracchus and his supporters, the poor peasants and proletarians, on the other, the senators, the patricians, and the big landowners. There were two rival centres of power in society, a situation resembling what Lenin called Dual Power: on the one hand, the senate, which was in the hands of the slave-holding oligarchy, on the other, the popular assembly. This contradiction could not be settled by laws and constitutions, by speeches and votes. It could only be settled by violence.

The reactionaries now saw their opportunity. Tiberius' term as tribune was nearing its end. Once he no longer had immunity from prosecution as a tribune, he would be a dead man. The only way to prevent this was to stand for a new term of tribune. But for him to run for a second term as tribune was yet another unconstitutional action. He decided upon this desperate recourse. As a matter of fact, his chances of winning the election for the tribunate in 134 BC were very poor. His main base was in the rural areas, where the peasants were busy with the harvest. His powerful political allies

had abandoned him and he had lost the support of his fellow tribunes. But the senators did not want to take any chances.

These tactics used by counterrevolutionaries of every period are well known. The reactionaries accuse their enemies of wishing to install a “tyranny” (“dictatorship”). They agitate around this false accusation in order to incite violence, while at the same time publicly adopting a “defensive” stance: “we will not be the ones who cast the first stone. We are only trying to defend the existing order and institutions of society, and protect the rights of the citizens.” While posing as the injured party that is trying to “defend” themselves, the aristocrats were in fact preparing a violent aggression against the Popular Party.

The Roman ruling elite decided that their only hope was to behead the mass movement: to kill Tiberius Gracchus. But since Tiberius was too powerful to attack directly, his opponents decided to play a waiting game. The reactionary forces began to prepare the ground carefully. They gathered around Cornelius Scipio Nasica, the Pontifex Maximus, who was in charge of religious observances and, by chance, Tiberius' cousin. They began by provoking a riot in the senate:

“They [the aristocrats] created uproar in the Senate, and Nasica demanded that the consul must act now to protect the state and put down the tyrant. The consul answered in conciliatory manner that he would not be the first to use violence, and would put no citizen to death without a regular trial.” (Plutarch, *The Life of Tiberius Gracchus*, in *The Makers of Rome*, p. 171)

There was violence also in the popular assembly, where the reactionaries were attempting to gain support by bribery or other means. The masses attempted to make use of their existing rights, such as the popular assembly, to express their grievances, and this led to open fights in the assembly, with the supporters of Gracchus attempting to physically expel the aristocrats and their supporters.

The murder of Tiberius Gracchus

The Gracchus faction held the Capitol where the popular assembly met. According to Appian, Cornelius Scipio Nasica led a mob of nobles and senators armed with clubs to the Capitol where Tiberius Gracchus was addressing an electoral meeting. As a supreme irony, the unsuspecting supporters of Gracchus gave way as a sign of respect for the senatorial rank. This polite gesture was answered by a show of naked force. The frenzied reactionaries attacked the meeting and battered Tiberius Gracchus' brains out on the steps of the Temple of Fidelity. The scene is described by Plutarch:

“The senators’ followers were armed with clubs and staves, which they had brought from their houses. The senators themselves snatched up the legs and fragments of the benches which the crowd had broken in their hurry to escape, and made straight for Tiberius, lashing out at those who were drawn up in front of him. His protectors were quickly scattered or clubbed down, and as Tiberius turned to run, someone caught hold of his clothing. He threw off his toga and fled in his tunic, but then stumbled over some of the prostrate bodies in front of him. As he struggled to his feet, one of his fellow tribunes, Publius Satyreius, as everybody agrees, dealt the first blow, striking him on the head with the leg of a bench. Lucius Rufus claimed to have given him the second, and prided himself upon this as if it were some noble exploit. More than three hundred men were killed by blows from sticks and stones, but none by the sword.” (Plutarch, *op. cit.*, p. 172)

For the first time in almost four centuries, there was open violence and bloodshed in Rome among members of the ruling elite. “All former quarrels,” wrote Plutarch, “which were neither small nor about trivial matters, were always amicably disposed, by mutual concessions on either side, the senate yielding for fear of the people, and the people out of respect for the senate.” (ibid.)

The terror that followed was similar to all other such episodes in history. The ruling class took its revenge on the defeated party with the utmost cruelty and ruthlessness. In the proscriptions that followed, the supporters of Tiberius were hunted down and killed like animals. The vengeful spite of the aristocratic party was vented even on the dead bodies of its enemies.

Plutarch comments:

“They refused his brother’s request for permission to take up the body and bury it at night. Instead they threw it into the Tiber together with the rest of the dead. And this was not all. Some of Tiberius’ supporters were banished without a trial, while others were arrested and executed, Diophanes the rhetorician among them. A certain Gaius Villius was shut up in a vessel with vipers and other poisonous snakes and put to death in this way.” (Plutarch, *The Life of Tiberius Gracchus*, in *The Makers of Rome*, p. 172)

The death of Tiberius Gracchus was followed by a White Terror. The senate organized a witch hunt in which many of his supporters were sentenced to death. The bitterness at all levels of society is indicated by the rumour that the war hero Scipio Aemilianus had been murdered by his wife, Sempronia, who was the sister of Tiberius Gracchus, because of Scipio’s refusal to condemn the murder of Tiberius Gracchus.

The rich senators, having killed Tiberius, found that that was not the end of the matter. Powerful class forces had been unleashed from below. Such was the strength of the movement that the senate was forced to accept at least a partial implementation of Tiberius’ reforms. But this was only a means of controlling the masses and eventually overturning those very same reforms. The destruction of the small free peasants and the concentration of land in the hands of the wealthy was an unstoppable process.

Aristocratic reaction

The murder of Tiberius Gracchus changed everything. It introduced violence onto the streets of Rome as a political weapon. All hopes of a political consensus died with Tiberius. There was now no question of compromise. Neither side paid any attention to the laws or the “rules of the game”. It was a fight to the finish between the contending classes. Appian writes:

“Thus Gracchus, son of Gracchus who had been twice consul and of Cornelia, daughter of Scipio who had wrested supremacy from the Carthaginians, lost his life on the Capitol, while holding the office of tribune, as a result of an excellent scheme which he pushed forward by violent means. And this foul crime, the first perpetrated in the public assembly, was not the last, but from time to time something similar would always occur. The city was divided between grief and rejoicing at the murder of Gracchus, one group mourning for themselves and for him and for the present situation, which they saw not as ordered political life, but as violence and the rule of force.” (Appian, pp. 1011)

Although reaction was once more in the saddle in Rome, the murder had solved nothing for the oligarchy. Objectively, the problems of the poor and the dispossessed peasantry continued to worsen, providing a fertile soil for revolutionary agitation. Marx explains that the revolution sometimes needs the whip of the counterrevolution. The masses were enraged by the murder of Tiberius. They insulted the counterrevolutionary senators in the streets. Tiberius’ younger brother Gaius was put on trial, but defended himself energetically and was cleared. By contrast, Cornelius Scipio Nasica, the murderer of Tiberius was disgraced and forced into exile, posted to the new province of Asia, where he died under suspicious circumstances.

The aristocratic party concentrated its attacks on the agrarian reform, determined to remove the last remaining barrier to its seizing all the remaining land. But the senate did not feel strong enough to reverse Gracchus’ land law. The Popular Party was equally determined to keep the laws that defended what was left of the free peasantry. Faced with the sullen anger of the people, the senate retreated and named a land

commission to carry out some of the reforms that Tiberius had demanded. For a time, it even seemed to be succeeding. By 125 BC seventy-five thousand citizens were added to the list of those liable for military service, when compared to the census figures of 131 BC.

The plunder of Italy

The oligarchy was forced to buy peace for a while by squeezing the provinces with high taxes. While keeping the merchants and the urban poor quiet by a combination of concession and repression, the aristocracy continued to concentrate more land into its hands. They plundered Italy shamelessly, ruining the small peasants and driving them out, creating an economic and social disaster. Small farms in Italy, says Mommsen, “disappeared like raindrops in the sea.”

Many dispossessed Italians began to drift into Rome, agitating for greater rights. This added to the political ferment in the city. In 126 BC the tribune Iunius Pennus passed a law expelling non-citizens from Rome. This measure was really targeted at evicting the Italian agitators. To what extent it was ever enforced against the rich foreign merchants and traders is unclear. It is obvious that many of them circumvented this law, which was directed against the poor non-Roman citizens.

Italian discontent became so dangerous that in 125 BC consul Marcus Fulvius Flaccus proposed to grant full citizenship to the Latins and Latin privileges to all Italians in preparation of eventual full citizenship. But this met with opposition on two fronts. The senators saw the mass of Italians as a threat to their political authority, as they held no hold of political patronage over them. And the poor saw any increase of the number of citizens as a threat to their privileges as Roman citizens. The measure stood little chance of success, but just to make sure, the senate sent Flaccus off to Massilia to fight the Saluvii.

Unable to win by force, the senate temporarily resorted to intrigue and bribery. They offered to increase the ration of corn and to give land to the

landless Roman citizenship (at the expense of the Italian peasants). But this was only meant to buy time while they prepared behind the scenes to deal with their enemies in the traditional way. Later the class struggle assumed a violent form again, with new conflicts on the streets and murders. The ruling class, not yet sure of the situation, had to tread with care, combining repression with concession in an attempt to keep the masses under control. They allowed the distribution of public land to proceed and proposed that the people should elect a new commissioner to succeed Tiberius.

The struggle therefore continued, but there was a situation of deadlock between the classes. A class of no more than 2,000 wealthy families decided everything. But the whole nation was now in a palpable state of decline. The upper class showed itself as utterly degenerate and unfit to hold power. At the same time, the masses were not in a position to overthrow them.

Gaius Gracchus

The people had learned to challenge the authority of the senate. Tiberius had turned the Popular Party into a viable political movement. After his murder it was impossible to make the constitution of the Republic work effectively. How could the laws work when the people understood that the legal code was only the formal expression of the class interests of their masters? Tiberius Gracchus had tried to base himself on the people. He failed, but there would be others willing to try it again.

Gaius Gracchus, the brother of the murdered Tiberius, assumed leadership of the Popular Party. Like his brother he advocated a programme that was aimed at breaking the power of the rich. He was a political agitator who started a hundred years of civil war that brought the Roman Republic to the point of exhaustion. He enjoyed immense popularity with the masses, and equally was hated by the rich and powerful:

“All the most distinguished men in Rome without exception joined forces to oppose him, but such an immense multitude poured into the

city from various parts of Italy to support his candidature that many of them could find no lodging; and since the Campus Martius was too small to hold them, they climbed up to the attics and housetops to declare their support for Gaius.” (Plutarch, *The Life of Gaius Gracchus*, in *The Makers of Rome*, p. 177.)

Despite Gaius’ popularity, the aristocrats succeeded in gerrymandering the elections to the post of tribune, so that he came fourth, instead of first, as expected. But no trickery could prevent his meteoric rise.

The agrarian law of Tiberius Gracchus was being applied in a reactionary manner, at the expense of the Italian peasants. This created a profound sense of grievance among the allied regions of Italy. As we have seen, a prominent member of the Gracchan camp, M. Fulvius Flaccus, argued strenuously that the Italians should be granted Roman citizenship as compensation for any disadvantages they should suffer from agrarian reform, and Gaius agreed. The Italian question finally proved to be his undoing.

The senate tried to get rid of Flaccus by sending him off as consul to Gaul to protect the Roman allies of Massilia (Marseilles) who had appealed for help against the Celtic tribes. The manoeuvre backfired. He later returned in triumph, having won victories over the Gauls. In the meantime, Gaius Gracchus had finished his term of office as quaestor in Sardinia, and returned to Rome to take the place of his brother. Nine years after his brother's murder, at the age of about thirty, Gaius was elected as people’s tribune in 123 BC.

Gaius’s main base was the city poor, the proletariat, which looked to him to provide them with their rations and land. He planned to expand his base, forming a broad opposition, based on the city masses, the “knights” and the Italians. In a blatant attempt to bribe the voters, he enacted legislation by which the population of Rome was to be provided with corn at half price.

The programme initiated by the younger Gracchus was even more far-reaching than that of his brother. He demanded that the soldiers should be supplied with clothing at the public expense, with no deduction from their pay, and that nobody under the age of 17 should be conscripted. He also demanded a reduction in the price of grain sold to the public. He got a law passed adding to the 300 members to the senate another 300 drawn from the class of “knights”. He launched an ambitious programme of public works, such as roads and harbours, which mainly benefited the equestrian community – the Roman capitalists. By such means he succeeded in splitting the equites away from the senate.

With this broad coalition, Gaius was able to remain in office for two years, during which he pushed through a lot of legislation. He reaffirmed Tiberius’ land laws and established smallholdings in Roman territory abroad, creating new colonies, including one on the old site of the destroyed city of Carthage. He proposed to divide up the public lands among the poor citizens. But once again he was met with sabotage. The senate allowed the new tenants to sell their new land, which the wealthy bought up. This was a regular feature, by which the senate turned every attempt at reform into a dead letter. Every time newly acquired lands were assigned to the poor, they simply passed into the hands of the wealthy landholders. In the meantime, large-scale slave labour drove all before it, tearing up the laws and mercilessly displacing free peasant labour throughout Italy.

The aristocracy was able to control the assembly (comitia tributa) because, with each tribe controlling a single block vote determined by the majority, the voting power of the urban proletariat was concentrated within four tribes. On the other hand, the rural tribes numbered thirty-one. The landowners could therefore register themselves, together with their freedmen and clients, and this body of interests could usually dominate the assembly, since the small farmers seldom travelled to Rome in great numbers and never stayed there for long. Originally this system had been devised to prevent the interests of the farmers being swamped by those of the urban

masses. But now it was a weapon in the hands of the slave-owning aristocracy.

In order to please the equestrian class, Gaius awarding them the right to contract for the collecting of the enormous taxes due from the newly created province of Asia. It was further agreed that members of the equestrian class should hold judgement in court cases over provincial governors accused of wrong-doings. This was clearly an attempt to cut down the power of the senate, as it restricted its power over the governors, many of whom were Roman capitalists of the equestrian order, filling their pockets at the expense of the provinces.

Gaius wished to expand the franchise to give the vote to the Italians, in order to increase his basis of support. But these measures were controversial and exposed the contradictions within the popular camp. The reactionaries then skilfully utilised anti-Italian feeling to divide the masses and thus the city poor united with the senate to defeat this proposal. The lumpenproletarian rabble did not want to share their privileges as Roman citizens with anybody. Since this “seemed to these people, so to speak, like a partnership which gave them a claim to share in sundry very tangible profits, direct and indirect, they were not at all disposed to enlarge the number of the partners.” (Mommsen, vol. 3, p. 116.)

The struggle between the classes had reached the point of deadlock, as Mommsen points out:

“It was clear that the senate was not powerful enough to wrest either from the merchants or from the proletariat their new privileges; any attempt to assail the corn-laws or the new jury arrangement would have led, under a somewhat grosser or somewhat more civilised form, to a street riot in presence of which the senate was utterly defenceless.” (Mommsen, vol. 3, p. 117)

In 121 BC Gaius Gracchus stood for yet another term as tribune, just as his brother had done. Once again, the senate conspired against him. They put forward their own candidate, M. Livius Drusus with a demagogic programme intended to undermine Gracchus' standing as a champion of the people. They put into circulation malicious rumours about Gaius to undermine his credibility. But the most serious weakness was the loss of popularity resulting from the failed proposal to extend Roman citizenship to the Italians. As a result, Gaius lost the vote for his third term in office.

Gaius Gracchus' angry supporters, some of them apparently carrying weapons, held a mass protest demonstration on the Aventine Hill, with Flaccus at their head. This was used as an excuse for sending the consul Lucius Opimius to the Aventine Hill, backed by militia, legionary infantry and archers, "to restore order". He carried an order from the senate to take action against anyone "endangering the stability of the Roman state". That was all he needed. What followed was a massacre in which the Gracchan movement was drowned in blood. It appears that realizing the hopelessness of the situation Gaius ordered his personal slave to stab him to death. His headless corpse was thrown into the Tiber. In the bloody proscriptions that followed as many as 3,000 of his followers were arrested and strangled in prison.

Why the Gracchi failed

The fatal weakness of the Popular Party was the fact that what we call the Roman proletariat was not a proletariat in the Marxist sense, but to a very great extent a declassed lumpenproletariat. The unemployed mob in Rome hated the rich patricians, but in the last analysis, they formed part of the exploiting classes, living off the labour created by the slaves in the form of the dole, the state handouts of free grain. The Roman proletariat benefited from the exploitation and oppression of the Italians, and therefore were implacably opposed to recognising them as Roman citizens.

They were able to stage riots, and sometimes played a revolutionary role, but in the end they turned out to be fodder for the camp of reaction, which

skilfully played on their prejudices. In a repeat of what happened to his brother, Gaius's plans to extend rights to non-Roman Italians were vetoed by another tribune. But this time, the senate's manoeuvre was accompanied by a sinister development. A large number of plebeians, jealous of their privileges as Roman citizens, turned against Gaius. This fatal split in the popular camp was what emboldened the reactionaries, who again went onto the offensive.

This was not the end of attempts to solve the land problem. It was a particularly serious issue with the soldiers in the Roman army, who demanded land when they retired from military service. On several occasions in the first century BC, public lands were assigned to veterans in Italy as well as on the borders of the empire. The dictator Sulla carried out wholesale confiscation and reassignment of private lands in 82 BC. Later Caesar distributed land to his veterans. Ultimately, however, the attempts at agrarian reform failed, and were bound to fail.

As we have seen, the aim of the Gracchi was to distribute land to the free citizens, revive the peasantry, and populate Italy with free peasants instead of slaves. They demanded that this public land should be redistributed to the poor. Nevertheless, their proposals did not remove the central contradictions. The new class of smallholders could not compete with the big estates of the rich run on the basis of slave labour, especially, if they were to be regularly taken away from their farms to perform military service. In essence, this was an attempt to put back the clock. It flew in the face of economic necessity.

Just as under modern capitalism all the attempts to bolster small businesses and prevent the spread of monopolies by anti-trust laws have proved futile, so in the Roman Republic, the efforts to re-create a class of small farmers proved to be ineffective. The tendency towards the concentration of the ownership of land in the hands of a small number of slave-owners was unstoppable.

The different classes in society, the urban “proletariat”, the propertied classes, divided between capitalists and aristocrats, were not capable of providing any way out of the impasse Roman society faced. The result was a long and inglorious agony of the Republic that led inexorably to Caesarism and the Empire.

The Republic was dying on its feet because its social basis had ceased to exist. This fact expressed itself in continuous political crises and convulsions in the capital, party strife, revolutions and counterrevolutions. Paradoxically, the peasants were not the only ones affected by debt. Behind their outward splendour and overbearing pride, many Roman senators were in debt. The rise of a money economy served to disintegrate the old social relations and the political power that rested upon them.

The old system was dead but there was nothing viable to put in its place. This produced a deadlock between the classes. The masses in Rome were capable of staging periodic riots and upheavals that provided the opportunity for demagogues to seize the reins of political power. But, as we have seen, the Roman proletariat – unlike the modern proletariat – was an unproductive and parasitic class. It lived off the backs of the slaves and the oppressed provinces just as much as the capitalists and aristocracy that they hated. They could never provide a viable alternative to the existing system. On the other hand, the propertied classes, divided between capitalists and aristocrats, were also not capable of providing the necessary stability. The result was a long and inglorious agony of the Republic that led inexorably to Caesarism and the Empire.

The class struggle at Rome in this period assumes a particularly feverish and convulsive character. One party succeeds another without offering a definitive solution. The freedmen were given votes in order to make their patrons masters of the streets. Politicians appeared in the streets and the Forum at the head of private armies of freedmen numbering hundreds or even thousands to intimidate the senate into passing certain laws. The political struggle had reached the point where only armed force could

restore some kind of order and equilibrium. The stage was set for the eruption of the army into politics.

Proletarians and slaves

The crisis of Roman society necessarily affected the slaves. There was ferment among the slave population everywhere, and a whole series of revolts and uprisings, which culminated in the great slave rebellion led by Spartacus. The slave miners in the Attic silver mines in Greece rose up, occupying the promontory of Sunion near Athens and pillaging the surrounding country, before being suppressed. Sicily, as we have seen, was the scene of one uprising after another, even inflicting some defeats on the Roman army.

In the first Sicilian revolt there were cases where the free proletarians joined the insurgent slaves, who came within a hair's breadth of conquering Messana. It is probable that the reason Spartacus tried to lead his army into Sicily was to spark off a new slave revolt there and possibly establish an independent state. But the uprising failed, and after its suppression the slave-owners took their revenge by selling large numbers of proletarians into slavery.

Since the conditions of the free proletarians were not much better than those of the slaves, the logical result should have been the linking up of both classes in a common revolt against the oligarchy. The big question is: why did this not take place? The conditions of the mass of peasants in the countryside were no better than those of the urban poor in Rome. Yet there is no record of rural uprisings, and only in a few cases did the poor Romans join in the uprisings of the slaves.

The reason for this apparent contradiction is that neither the urban plebs nor the free peasants were the productive base of society. Although they were underprivileged and oppressed, in the last analysis they had more in common with the slave owners than with the slaves who were the real exploited class and the producers of social wealth. It was their labour that

provided the dole of the unemployed citizens of Rome, their sweat, blood and tears that paid for the bread and circuses of the masses as well as the luxurious life-style of the slave-owners.

If one wants an historical analogy to the outlook of the free Roman peasants (or the remnant that still survived by the end of the Republic), it can be found in the psychology of the “poor whites” of the southern states of America at the time of the Civil War. This social layer had absolutely nothing in common with the wealthy slave-owning aristocracy which treated it with contempt. For the wealthy slave owners they were merely “white trash”. Although they lived in conditions of poverty which were not that much better than those of the black families that frequently lived alongside them, they nevertheless always combined with the white slave owners against the blacks, and fought obstinately for the cause of the South in the Civil War.

The poor whites, despite their degrading conditions, always felt themselves to be superior to the blacks. It is an established fact that the lowest and most degraded layers of society like to feel that there are people on a lower level than themselves. A similar psychology must have existed among the poor layers of Roman societies in both town and countryside. At every decisive moment, they united with the senate to defeat the slaves.

In his article The North American Civil War Marx made this specific comparison:

“Finally, the number of actual slaveholders in the South of the Union does not amount to more than three hundred thousand, a narrow oligarchy that is confronted with many millions of so-called poor whites, whose numbers have been constantly growing through concentration of landed property and whose condition is only to be compared with that of the Roman plebeians in the period of Rome's extreme decline.” (Marx, The North American Civil War, October 20, 1861).

Marius' army reforms

The defeat of the slave revolts and the crushing of the Gracchan movement meant that there was no longer any possibility of a genuinely revolutionary reconstruction of society. Henceforth, the political struggle in Rome resolved itself into a struggle between rival wings of the propertied classes, a section of which leaned on the city poor for support. But if ever it seemed that the city mob was getting out of control, the propertied classes would always close ranks to put them in their place.

As we have seen in earlier parts of this article, the simmering hostility between the senate and the Roman capitalists (equites) came to a head in 123 BC, when Gaius Gracchus passed the Lex Judicaria, which prescribed that the jurors (judices) should be chosen from the equites, and not the Senate. From this time on the gulf between the senate and the equestrian order widened every year. Hitherto the jurors were chosen from the ranks of the nobles, who therefore had control of the courts, and made unscrupulous use of their power.

This was especially the case in the courts which were established to try governors for extortion in the provinces. The voracious Roman tax-gatherers who plundered the provinces were mainly drawn from the equites. Usually the governors connived with them in this thievery in exchange for bribes. But occasionally, an honest governor would clash with them, and then could be threatened with prosecution, fines or exile. The question of who controlled the courts therefore affected the fundamental interests of the capitalists.

In a situation where the contending classes have fought themselves to a standstill, and where neither side is able to win a decisive victory, the state apparatus, in the form of the army, begins to raise itself above society and acquire a certain degree of independence. In the Roman Republic this process was assisted by the fact that the army had an increasingly mercenary character, reflecting the destruction of the free peasantry that had been the backbone of the old citizens' militia.

After the crushing of the Gracchan movement, the class struggle resolved itself into mere party strife in which ambitious politicians and generals representing one or other clique of the possessing classes struggled to get control of the state. There now appears a whole series of rival generals, each manoeuvring for power. The constant wars against the Cimbri, the Teutones and other tribes, confers increasing power and prestige to these generals, who support now one party, now another.

The first of these generals with political ambitions was Gaius Marius, the son of a poor day-labourer who got rich as the result of lucky speculation and married into the ancient patrician gens of the Julii. His military victories over the Africans, Germans, Cimbri and Teutones further increased his prestige. "Marius stood aloof from parties not much less than from society," Mommsen informs us (Mommsen, vol. 3, p. 186.). This adventurer had one foot in each class and intrigued and manoeuvred between all of them. But his main base was the army, which he reorganised to suit his own purposes. Prior to this, the army was open only to citizens with property.

The different branches of the army (cavalry etc.) were likewise determined by the amount of property one possessed. But the changes in the class composition of Roman society rendered these distinctions irrelevant. In any case, the propertied classes were no longer enthusiastic about military service and avoided it when they could. On the other hand the poor citizens wanted to join the army where at least they would have the prospect of pay and plunder. For the Roman peasant, there was only one way of escaping from poverty: by joining the army. This they frequently did, either voluntarily or under compulsion in the later Roman Republic. Once in the army, the peasant soldier (as later in the armies of Napoleon) felt an overriding loyalty to his commanding general.

The reforms of Marius were a big step towards transforming the army from a citizens' militia into a professional standing army, separate and apart from society, with its own identity and interests and where the soldiers' first loyalty was not to the senate and the people of Rome but to their own

commander – the man who would guarantee them their pay, plunder and glory. It was also a step towards a dilution of the rank of Roman citizen, since the army was open to Latins and other non-Romans, and Marius even gave Roman citizenship away on the battlefield – which he had no constitutional right to do.

From now on, the army was open to the non-propertyied classes and what part of the army one served in was determined not by property but only by duration of service. All distinctions of armour were abolished, all wore the same uniform and all recruits were uniformly trained. The result was a general improvement in the fighting qualities and discipline of the troops, who had a new sense of identity – a new *esprit de corps*. The Roman army became a formidable and disciplined fighting force. But the reforms had another, more sinister import.

“The republican constitution”, observes Mommsen, “was essentially based on the view that the citizen was also a soldier, and that the soldier was above all a citizen; it was at an end, so soon as a soldier-class was formed. To this issue the new system of drill, with its routine borrowed from the professional gladiator, necessarily led; the military service became gradually a profession. Far more rapid was the effect of the admission – though but limited – of the proletariat to participate in military service; especially in connection with the primitive maxims, which conceded to the general an arbitrary right of rewarding his soldiers compatible only with the very solid republican institutions, and gave to the able and successful soldier a sort of title to demand from the general a share in the movable spoil and then from the state a portion of the soil that had been won.” (Mommsen, vol. 3, pp. 190-1.)

The little detail that the training of the soldiers was copied from that of gladiators is significant of a profound change in the nature of the army. Gladiatorial combat, which played such a significant role in the national psychology of Rome in the later Republic and Empire, was probably invented by the Etruscans as a religious ritual involving human sacrifice. But

it is possible that the Romans copied this bloody practice from the Samnites. Indeed, they used the words “gladiator” and “Samnites” synonymously. The gladiator was more often than not a slave, and although some of them acquired the status of pop stars (as long as they stayed alive), the profession in general was looked down upon as unworthy of free men.

The Roman soldier was now a professional killer, just like the gladiator, part of a professional killing machine, held together by military discipline and a common interest in conquest and plunder: “His only home was the camp, his only science war, his only hope the general,” writes Mommsen (*ibid.*, p. 191) The Roman legionary was now completely severed from civil society, and, although it carried on its banners the proud title SPQR (The Senate and the Roman People), in practice ambitious Roman generals could, and did, use it as a weapon against both the Senate and the Roman People.

Thus, the basis for Caesarism had been laid. “They had now the standing army, the soldier-class, the body-guard; as in the civil constitution, so also in the military, all the pillars of the future monarchy were already in existence; the monarch alone was wanting.” (*ibid.*)

The very existence of a standing professional army is a threat to democracy. A standing army that is cut off from society is always a potential instrument for a coup d’etat. This is demonstrated by the experience of the Roman Republic. That is why many centuries later the Paris Commune inscribed in its programme the demand for the abolition of the standing army and its replacement by the armed people – a citizens’ militia. And this demand is at the very heart of the programme of workers’ democracy as explained by Lenin in *State and Revolution* and included in the Bolshevik Party Programme of 1919. The history of the Roman Republic is a salutary warning in this respect.

“Caesarism”

The republic was being torn apart by the class struggle. A series of demagogues arose, always willing to rouse the city poor at Rome to riots and disorders. Such men were the street orator Gaius Servilius Glaucia, known as the Roman Hyperbous, his more able colleague, Lucius Appuleius Saturnius, whom even his enemies recognised as a fiery public speaker. Marius flirted with the People's Party, and its leaders were not averse to a deal with the victorious general with the power of the legions at his back.

Here we have one of the elements of what we now call Bonapartism, and what was known in the ancient world as Caesarism: a tendency to balance between the classes, to lean on the lumpenproletariat to strike blows against the ruling class, while manoeuvring to seize power, using the army. The leaders of the Popular Party struck a deal with Marius to carve up public offices between them. It is said that Marius himself was not above soliciting votes or even buying them. He certainly used the services of discharged soldiers to help his campaign with a little physical force. By a combination of bribery and assassination, Marius succeeded in getting himself elected consul, while Glaucia was made praetor and Saturninus a tribune of the people.

Marius obtained the loyalty of his men by promising them land. This could only be done through conquests. Partly it consisted of confiscated Carthaginian lands. Other land was taken from the Gaulish territory in northern Italy. But soon all the legally available land was divided up. This fact was an important impulse to future Roman expansion, as was the resources to bribe the population of the capital with free grain. Together with the constant need to replenish the stock of cheap slaves, it became a self-enforcing process, propelling Rome to new wars of conquest.

In Rome itself the struggle between the senate and the Popular Party continued. The latter demanded subsidies for the poor that would have bankrupted the treasury. The aristocracy resisted, but the senate was under the pressure of the masses, who regularly rioted in the streets. Saturninus demanded that the Senate act, "or else thunder will be followed by hail". But

behind the scenes the aristocratic party was preparing a counterstroke. Arms were distributed to the sons of the rich, and they began to attack supporters of the Popular Party.

As on previous occasions, the populares were superior in numbers, but they were not properly armed or trained. They were therefore unprepared for such an onslaught. They broke open the doors of the prisons and even appealed to the slaves to fight for their freedom. But it was too late. As we have seen so many times in history, small, well-organized armed groups with good captains can defeat an unarmed and disorganized mass without too much difficulty. And in the moment of truth, they found that they could not rely on “friendly” generals to save them.

Marius, who had leaned upon the populares to gain power for himself, now abandoned them and sided with the aristocracy to put down the masses. A fierce battle was fought in the great market place. The supporters of the Popular Party were defeated and took refuge in the Capitol, where fighting was seen for the first time in history. But they were forced to capitulate when the water supply was cut off. Probably Marius would have preferred to spare the lives of his former allies, who could be useful to him in future intrigues, but matters were no longer in his hands. Without waiting for orders, the gilded youth of Rome climbed the rooftops of the courtyard where the populares were effectively imprisoned and, tearing the tiles from the roofs, stoned their helpless victims to death.

The victory of the reactionaries was complete and devastating. Overnight, the populares were utterly crushed, their leaders butchered. There followed a reign of terror, in which the ruling class took revenge for its humiliation at the hands of the masses: trials, executions, bans and proscriptions decimated the Popular Party. In the past, the equites had supported the Gracchi, but now, terrified of the threat from the masses, they rallied to the banner of reaction that always unites the propertied classes against the poor and dispossessed.

The state rises above society

In the end the conflict had solved nothing. Roman society was now split into two bitterly antagonistic camps of rich and poor. On the one hand, the slave owners, the Roman capitalists or equites, formed a single reactionary bloc with the aristocracy, on the other side stood the mass of dispossessed Roman citizens, the proletarians. But the peculiarity of the situation was this: that neither side could win a final and decisive victory over the other. Under such circumstances, the state – armed bodies of men - tends to rise above society and acquire a large degree of independence. Engels explained the role of the state thus:

“The state is, therefore, by no means a power forced on society from without; just as little is it 'the reality of the ethical idea', 'the image and reality of reason', as Hegel maintains. Rather, it is a product of society at a certain stage of development; it is the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms, these classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have a power, seemingly standing above society, that would alleviate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order'; and this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state.” (Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, Moscow, 1973, pp. 326-27, my emphasis)

We see this in Roman history in the phenomenon of Caesarism, which is rule by the sword. There followed a long night of reaction in which the rights of the proletariat were abolished or restricted, laws were changed, progressive reforms liquidated. However, the class struggle was not abolished, only driven underground. The discontent of the masses festered. Some of the Popular Party resorted to individual terrorism. They succeeded in assassinating the hated Quintus Metellus by poisoning him. Others took

refuge with foreign enemies of Rome, such as king Mithredates, who was preparing war against Rome.

Reaction was firmly in control but contradictions were breaking out in the camp of the victors. Having utilised the services of the Roman capitalists (the equites) to crush the proletariat, the aristocratic party in the Senate now proceeded to turn on its erstwhile allies. The confidence of the aristocrats had grown, their old overweening pride reasserted itself. Freed of the fear of the masses, they asserted their right to rule the roost without consideration for the Roman capitalists, whom they saw as upstart nouveaux riches.

The class lines did not completely comply with the lines of party affiliation. There were those in the senate who supported the capitalists. Men like Lucius Marcius Philippus defended the rights of the equestrian order. The conflict between the senatorial and capitalist parties boiled down to who would plunder the provinces. Some of the senatorial party were prepared to share the plunder with the equestrian order. Others were greedier or else blinded by the class hatred of the old Roman aristocracy for the new class of moneyed upstarts. The leaders of the intransigent aristocrats were Drusus and Scaurus.

While squabbling among themselves, the ruling class always kept a wary eye on the masses, whom they attempted to keep happy with free handouts of grain (plundered from the unfortunate Italian provinces) and promises of land (likewise taken from the provinces). Slowly the provinces were being crushed by the burdens imposed by the capital. The class of small peasants was already extinct in Umbria and Etruria, although it maintained a precarious foothold in areas like the Abruzzi valley. Italy was being bled by Rome and denied of its rights.

By now, the parasitic nature of Roman society was clearly illustrated in a systematic plundering of the productive provinces by the unproductive centre. This provoked a revolt of the Italians who rose up against Rome, known as the Social War, but they were defeated after several years of

bloody conflict and out of this emerged powerful generals such as Marius and Sulla.

The Italians revolt

The intolerable burdens imposed by a parasitical capital city eventually drove the provinces to revolt. The political upheavals in Rome gave the Italians some hope of redress, but this led nowhere. The provincials first allied themselves to the Popular Party, then to the aristocrats, but to no avail. No matter which party ruled at Rome, the provinces were always the losers. Nowhere is the parasitic nature of Roman society more clearly illustrated than in this systematic plundering of the productive provinces by the unproductive centre.

The cities of Italy were theoretically independent allies of Rome, but in practice Rome dominated them, demanding tribute money and soldiers. By the second century B.C., between one half and two-thirds of the soldiers in Roman armies were from the Italian allies. Rome also controlled the allies' foreign policy and their relations between one another. In compensation, the allies received a slice of the booty and lands taken in the course of Rome's conquest in the Mediterranean. But as time went on, the burden of impositions grew.

As we have seen, the Romans' policy of land distribution was carried out unjustly and at the expense of the Italians. This led to huge and increasing inequality of land ownership and wealth. Appian writes that this led to the "Italian race... declining little by little into pauperism and paucity of numbers without any hope of remedy." (Appian, *The Civil Wars*). For nearly two centuries they had shared dangers and victories with the Romans; they now eagerly demanded all their privileges.

In 91, the tribune Marcus Livius Drusus courageously took up the banner of reform. Like the Gracchi, he was noble, wealthy, and popular, and he hoped to settle the question peacefully and fairly. But his attempt to reform the courts alienated the equites, his agrarian and corn laws earned him the

hostility of the big landowners, and his attempt to admit the Italians to the rights of Roman citizenship aroused the jealousy of the Roman city rabble.

In an exact repeat of what had happened with the Gracchi, his laws were passed, but the senate pronounced them null and void. He was denounced in that body as a traitor, and was struck down by an assassin in the same year. The death of Drusus drove the Italians to despair. Eight nations entered into a defensive alliance. They formed a Federal Republic to which they gave the name Italia, with Corfinium, in the Pelignian Apennines, as its capital. All Italians were to be citizens of Corfinium, and here was to be the place of assembly and the Senate House.

This Italian rebellion is known as the Social War (from *Socii*, meaning allies, which formally the Italians were). The lead was given by the Samnite tribes, followed by other Latin tribes from the Liris and the Abruzzi down to Calabria and Apulia. Soon all of central and southern Italy was in arms against Rome. Only the Etruscans and Umbrians stuck to Rome. Here the landed and moneyed aristocracy ruled, and the class of independent small peasants had totally disappeared.

This war was at first disastrous to Rome. The Italians overran Campania, defeated the Romans several times, and entered into negotiations with the Northern Italians, whose loyalty to Rome began to waver. In the face of this challenge to its power Rome took decisive action. The Consuls, Lucius Julius Caesar and Publius Rutilius Lupus, both took the field. Each had five lieutenants, among whom were Marius and Sulla.

The Social War was the last expression of the vigour of the class of small peasants that had once been the backbone of the Roman republic. The revolt was partly national in character – the Italians were a separate people (or rather, peoples) who spoke languages different to Latin. But there were also elements of class warfare – particularly on the issue of debt. The free Italian peasantry, undermined by slave labour and the rise of the big

latifundia run by the class of Roman capitalists, were being crushed under the weight of debt. They demanded the liquidating of all outstanding debts.

The war dragged on for five bloody years. But in the end the Italians suffered defeat. Their revolt had served to unite all the classes in Rome against them. The radical demands on debt pushed the capitalists into the arms of the aristocratic party. The differences between aristocrats and capitalists were forgotten in the fight against the common enemy. The city rabble was implacably opposed to sharing their privileges with the Italians and enthusiastically supported the war. Under such circumstances, the defeat of the Italians was just a matter of time.

As usual, the Roman ruling class used a combination of cunning and brutality to get what it wanted. It decided to make concessions. Towards the close of the year 90, the Consul Caesar introduced the Julian Law, by which the Roman franchise was extended to all those Italians who had not yet revolted. This law was supplemented in the following year by the Plautian Papirian Law, which allowed every citizen of an Italian town the franchise, if he handed in his name to the Praetor at Rome within sixty days. Yet another law, the Calpurnian Law, permitted Roman magistrates in the field to grant Roman citizenship on all who wished it. These laws had the desired effect. They divided and disorganizing the rebellion. The Samnites and Lucanians held out till the bitter end, but were finally crushed by Marius.

The end of the Social War did not bring peace to Rome. Far from being satisfied with the concessions, the new Italian citizens were embittered and resentful. In Rome, the Senate was torn apart by violent personal rivalries. All classes were affected by the prevailing austerity. The huge expense of the War had drained the treasury, and many capitalists were plunged into bankruptcy. To make matters worse, war with Mithradates, King of Pontus, had been declared. And the two ambitious generals, Marius and Sulla were fighting each other for command of the legions. A new and turbulent chapter was opened.

Sulla and Marius

The Social War had tilted the balance of forces sharply to the right. The senate, whose ranks had been depleted by the long period of wars and revolutions, was filled up by the admission of 300 new senators – all of them naturally loyal to the ruling aristocratic clique. The voting system was reorganised so as to give a crushing preponderance to the propertied classes: those with estates greater than 100,000 sesterces in value possessed almost half the votes. In practice this meant that the poorer classes were excluded from the franchise.

Once more the triumphant reactionaries abolished progressive legislation. The Sulpician Laws were pronounced null and void and their author, Publius Sulpicius, was condemned to death. His head was sent to Sulla as a present. Nothing was done for the debtors, except to enforce the already existing rules for the maximum rate of interest. The people's tribunes were forbidden even to appear before the people unless the senate gave permission.

The Italian wars also led to the rise of powerful generals like Sulla and Marius. The Roman army was now an army of mercenaries. The soldiers were loyal only to their general and indifferent to politics or the interests of the Republic. The reactionary Sulla led two legions into Rome itself, in defiance of all laws and traditions of the Republic. His men murdered two tribunes who annoyed them. Very soon Sulla, the representative of the aristocratic party, was master of Rome. This was a fatal precedent. For the first time the army decided the outcome of the political struggle, as Mommsen remarks:

“The first military intervention in civil feuds had fully demonstrated, not only that the political struggles had reached the point at which nothing save open and direct force proves decisive, but also that the power of the bludgeon was of no avail against the power of the sword. It was the conservative party which first drew the sword, and which accordingly in

due time experienced the truth of the ominous words of the Gospel as to those who first have recourse to it.” (Mommson, vol. 3, p. 250.)

Mithradates

To the social and political crisis was added an economic slump. Rome was now in the grip of a deep commercial and monetary crisis. The Italian revolt and the wars with the Armenian king Mithradates in the East drained the coffers of the Republic and disrupted trade. So unpopular were the Romans with the oppressed provinces that as soon as Mithradates' troops entered Greece, most of the smaller Greek states – the Achaeans, Laconians, Boethians – joined them.

As we have seen, the economic system depended upon a steady supply of slaves, and that depended on successful foreign wars, and entire cities were sold into slavery to guarantee a continuous supply of cheap slaves for the mines of Spain or the latifundia of Italy. But when the Romans met with serious resistance, as in the wars of Mithradates, the flow of slaves dried up, and the disruption of trade immediately provoked a crisis. This was, in fact, the most serious financial crisis that Rome had ever experienced.

The capitalist party at Rome was discontented with the rule of the oligarchy that had not been able to prevent these ruinous wars and the economic crisis that accompanied them. They had, of course, supported the aristocrats when the latter suppressed the masses. But now they began to move into opposition again. There were clashes between the two sides at election time, in which swords were drawn and blood ran in the Forum. On one occasion it is said that 10,000 people were killed. (See Mommson, vol. 3, p. 298.)

Mithradates understood that the best way to strike at Rome was to disrupt its trade. His fleet commanded the eastern Mediterranean, and he controlled most of Greece and Asia Minor. Delos, the centre of Roman trade in the eastern Mediterranean, was occupied and nearly 20,000 men, mainly Italians, put to the sword. Mithradates skilfully combined military methods

with revolutionary measures such as the cancellation of debts and even the liberation of the slaves. This made him a formidable enemy.

After a hard struggle, the Roman armies eventually defeated those of Mithradates. But even here the corrupt spirit of Roman capitalism was manifest. War had ceased to be a patriotic duty for free citizens and had become a simple business affair, an opportunity to plunder and rob. The troops serving in northern Greece under the Roman general Flaccus mutinied against their commander, accusing him of embezzling the soldiers' spoil. The accusation must have had some basis because Flaccus was deposed by the army and executed. Needless to say, after the Roman victory, the slaves were brought back to their previous position and the debts cancelled by Mithradates were reintroduced.

The Marian terror

The struggle between the parties at Rome acquired an increasingly ferocious character. Lucius Cornelius Cinna, who had distinguished himself as an officer in the Social War, was the most visible head of the capitalist party. At one point, he even appealed to the slaves to support the struggle against the oligarchy, in return for freedom. But the appeal fell on deaf ears. After all that had happened, the slaves had no reason to trust the capitalists to give them freedom. Finally, the senate deprived Cinna of his consular office. Others were pronounced outlaws and fled to Africa. But these measures did not calm things down but quite the opposite.

The spirit of the soldiers at this time was inclined to be revolutionary and democratic except when individual generals succeeded in purchasing their loyalties. Therefore, when Cinna appealed to the soldiers stationed in Italy against the unconstitutional proscription against him, he got an immediate response. The army of Campania recognised him as consul and marched on the capital. He invited the exiles back. More importantly, as he marched on Rome Cinna freed the slaves whom he armed and included in his rebel army. He ordered his soldiers to break open the ergastula, the buildings where the landowners shut up their field-labourers for the night.

Cinna issued a proclamation offering freedom to any slave who should desert to him. As a result, many slaves left the city to join the rebels. In desperation, someone suggested that the senate should offer freedom to any slave who joined the army, but this was too much for the senate to swallow. Many others flocked to his standard, and his army soon grew to 6,000 and 40 ships. He was joined by Marius, who was made commander of the rebels in Etruria. Rome was besieged.

The armies of the senate just melted away. Defeat now stared it in the face. The senate was forced to capitulate ignominiously, only asking that there should be no bloodshed. This was a vain hope, given the extremely inflamed and embittered mood of the populace. No sooner did the rebels enter the city than they launched a bloody reign of terror, in which Marius played the leading role.

The noted general, now over 70 years of age, was driven by the thirst for revenge against all those who had engineered his downfall. As Mommsen put it, Marius repaid every sarcasm with a stroke of the dagger. The victors decided not to waste time prosecuting individual senators but to deal with their enemies by a far simpler method: they decided to kill all the members of the ruling party and confiscate their property. The city gates were closed to stop them from escaping.

For five days and nights the slaughter went on uninterrupted. Even after this, the executions continued throughout Italy. A large number of Rome's wealthiest citizens were put to death in what became known as the Marian terror. In theory, the republican laws and constitution remained. But what use are laws and constitutions when all the important questions are settled by armed force? Cinna, the head of the popular party, ruled for four years as Consul but then regularly nominated himself and his colleagues without consulting the people, although he continued to lean on them for support. In effect, he made himself dictator of Rome.

Cinna naturally abolished the reactionary laws introduced by Sulla. He gave the freedmen (freed slaves) the vote in order to turn them into a fixed clientele. He introduced measures to ease the position of debtors. A new law on debt reduced the level of every private claim to one-fourth of its nominal amount and cancelled three quarters in favour of the debtors. To please the Roman proletariat, he removed the restrictions on the free distribution of grain. In this way the Roman people accepted the loss of their political power in exchange for material benefits. The era of “bread and circuses” was born.

The real basis of Cinna’s regime was the army. The capitalist party, which might have backed him, was alienated by his measures on behalf of debtors, which hit them in the most sensitive part of their anatomy – the purse. But the smashing of the aristocratic party produced a situation of relative stability for about three years, until a new wave of agitation upset the status quo. Those members of the oligarchy who had survived the Marian terror, fled to territory controlled by Mithradates. Sulla, the chief of the reactionary party, established something like a government in exile.

In the spring of 83 BC, Sulla landed in Brindisium at the head of his legions. As Sulla advanced northwards, he successfully bought the support of other generals of the Popular Party. His soldiers mixed with theirs, fraternised, joked, got drunk together. Naturally, Sulla’s troops, generously supplied with gold from their master’s coffers, bought the drinks. This was not a struggle for political ideas but simply for loot. The general who promised more loot got the army’s backing. On this occasion, Sulla promised more. The armies of Rome once again melted away like snow in springtime. Bribe by Sulla’s gold, they passed over en masse to his side.

The Marian army was routed and forced to retreat, but not before putting to death all those prisoners who had so far escaped execution. Sulla finally entered Rome, where he made himself dictator and immediately instituted a White terror. A regime of blood and iron was imposed. The Latin tribe of the Samnites, who had obtained a de facto independence under the popular

government, was ruthlessly crushed and their cities given up to pillage. The Samnite nation, said Sulla, should be forever extirpated from the face of the earth.

Sulla's dictatorship

Sulla's government was supposed to represent the Roman aristocracy, but in fact its members were chosen mainly from defectors from the Popular Party and wavering elements – the equivalent of the men who in the French Revolution were called “the Marsh”. He understood that the social base of the aristocracy was too narrow to guarantee stability to his regime, which, like that which it had overthrown, rested mainly on the army.

Among the deserters from the Popular Party were Lucius Flaccus, Lucius Philippus, Quintus Ofella, and last but not least, Gnaeus Pompeus – later known as Pompey the Great. Like his father, Strabo, the young Pompey was not originally a supporter of the oligarchy and had identified himself with the Popular Party, even serving in Cinna's army. But in this age of cynical military adventurers, principles and ideas could change with every change of the wind. Men like Pompey were not the exception but the rule.

The fact that Sulla's dictatorship rested on the army is shown by his nomenclature: he did not call himself Consul but Proconsul – an office of a purely military character. He wrote to the senate, explaining to them that in his modest opinion, they should hand all power to one man, who, again in his modest opinion, should be himself. Since he had a large army at his back, the senators were in no position to argue. Here for the first time, the state – in the form of the army – lifted itself above society and dominated it without any restraint.

The title “dictator” originally signified a magistrate appointed by the senate during an emergency. It had fallen into disuse at the time of the wars with Hannibal. Now Sulla revived it, assuming supreme control of the state. But the original idea was for a short term period – not more than six months – after which the dictator would step down. What happened under Sulla was

quite different. His dictatorship had no limits of any kind. It was rule by the sword, pure and simple.

In order to protect the oligarchy against the proletariat, Sulla established his personal dictatorship over the oligarchy. Although Sulla spoke in the name of the senate, and in fact represented the interests of the senatorial class (the oligarchy), he expropriated them politically, concentrating all power into his own hands. Thus, the ruling class lost power over its own state. As Mommsen correctly comments: “the protector of the oligarchic constitution had himself to come forward as a tyrant, in order to avert the ever-impending tyrannis. There was not a little of defeat in this last victory of the oligarchy.” (Mommsen, vol. 3, p. 330.)

Following the now familiar pattern, Sulla launched a campaign of proscriptions, arrests and executions of his enemies. Every day saw new political murders. The death roll amounted to at least 4,700 names, mostly members of the Marian party. On Sulla’s instructions, their heads were piled up for public display at the Servilian Basin near the Forum. But these bloody reprisals were not confined to those members of the Marian party directly implicated in the previous terror. The victims included Roman capitalists who had sat in judgement on senators or had made money speculating on confiscated lands. There were about 1,600 equites on the proscribed lists.

Sulla’s terror dragged on for months and spread all over Italy. Spies and informers were everywhere. People were denounced out of spite, personal hatred or plain greed. Some were murdered even before their name was placed on the proscribed list to justify murder *ex post facto*. Naturally, Sulla and his family and friends did not neglect the opportunity to enrich themselves by getting their hands on the confiscated property of their enemies. One of his freedmen is said to have purchased property worth six million sesterces for just 2,000, while one of his subalterns is said to have accumulated an estate worth ten million sesterces through speculations.

Sulla's terror was different in kind to anything that went before. The Marian terror was mainly the product of the desire for personal revenge. It was relatively haphazard in comparison to the systematic campaign of Sulla with its cold, calculating cruelty: Sulla's confiscations amounted to the staggering value of 350 million sesterces. Many of the wealthiest men in the republic were ruined by this. Mommsen writes:

“It was altogether a fearful visitation. There was no longer any process or any pardon; mute terror lay like a weight of lead on the land, and free speech was silenced in the market-place alike of the capital and of the country town. The oligarchical reign of terror bore doubtless a different stamp from that of the revolution; while Marius had glutted his personal vengeance in the blood of his enemies, Sulla seemed to account terrorism in the abstract, if we may so speak, a thing necessary to the introduction of the new despotism, and to prosecute and make others prosecute the work of massacre almost with indifference. But the reign of terror presented an appearance all the more horrible, when it proceeded from the conservative side and was in some measure devoid of passion; the commonwealth seemed all the more irretrievably lost, when the frenzy and the crime on both sides were equally balanced.” (Mommsen, vol. 3, p. 334, my emphasis, AW.)

When a ruling class is weakened and exhausted by long years of internecine struggle, we have seen how power can pass into the hands of a “strong man” who rules in the name of the existing social order, but who in fact usurps power and reinforces it by creating a new state in his own image. Such a man was Sulla. His rise, however, also marked the beginning of a process of utter degeneration of Roman society in all spheres of life.

The state as an organ of repression

As we have seen, the state is, in the last analysis, special bodies of armed men in defence of private property. In the good old days of the Republic the army was not allowed to set foot in Rome, and as a consequence there was no army garrison in the capital.

The revolutionary events of the previous period, however, persuaded the ruling clique of the need to take special measures. Sulla therefore took steps to strengthen the state as an organ of repression. For the first time he set up a real standing army, made up of specially selected professionals taken from the ranks of freed slaves and numbering around 10,000.

Nowadays the state is surrounded by a mystique that has been built up over centuries. It is presented as a power standing above society (which it is) and above all class interests (which it is not). It is the Holy of Holies, and not to be questioned. But in Sulla's time the nature and role of the state was plain for all to see. The force set up by Sulla was intended as a kind of bodyguard for the oligarchy, but this was not defence, as in the past, against a foreign enemy, but to defend the ruling class against its own citizens. Here we already have the outline of the future Praetorian Guard. Here is the embryo of the Gestapo, the KGB, and all future special organs of state repression, where an armed force is created to defend the state against the people it is supposed to be defending.

Having concentrated power into his hands, Sulla ruthlessly crushed both the Popular Party and the capitalists. Ever since the time of Gaius Gracchus, the government had provided the proletariat with the distribution of free corn. Sulla abolished this. Gaius Gracchus had encouraged the formation of a class of capitalists (the equites) by developing the system of tax farming, whereby private individuals were able to fleece the wealthy provinces of Asia for their own benefit. Sulla struck a heavy blow against the Roman capitalists by abolishing the system of middlemen and establishing fixed taxes for Asia, to be paid directly to the Treasury at Rome. Gracchus gave the capitalists a privileged place in the legal system. Sulla abolished the equestrian courts and re-established the senatorial courts. In short, the equestrian order established by Gaius Gracchus, was abolished by Sulla.

It is impossible to run society by repression alone and the army is too narrow a base to achieve a stable regime. Therefore, Sulla needed a policy

that would give him a social base. Following a line of action that was in theory acceptable to both conservatives and democrats, he tried unsuccessfully to put the clock back by encouraging the creation of small farms through colonisation of territories in Italy. He ordered the breaking up of some big latifundia, to be settled by soldiers in his own army. Similar utopian schemes were advanced two thousand years later by the Italian fascists – with just as little success. In the time of Sulla the big latifundia dominated agriculture just as the big monopolies dominate our own world. The day of the free small peasant was over, and all attempts to revive it were necessarily doomed to impotence.

Which class now held power? In theory all power now passed to the senate. But in practice, this was only a show. Real power was concentrated in the hands of Sulla and the army. In a move ostensibly designed to strengthen it, Sulla introduced 300 new members into the senate, drawn from the young men of the old aristocratic families and members of Sulla's own circle. These new appointees were grateful to Sulla for their promotion and loyal to him. This measure resembles the way in which Stalin flooded the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet state with his appointees after Lenin's death. The class basis is, of course, entirely different, but the mechanism is similar. In a situation where the ruling class is weakened and exhausted by long years of struggle, power passes to the hands of a "strong man" who rules in the name of the existing social order, but who in fact usurps power and reinforces it by creating a new state in his own image.

While preserving the outward forms of the old republican democracy, Sulla robbed them of any real content. Mommsen explains:

"The burgess-body remained formally sovereign; but so far as its general assemblies were concerned, while it seemed to the regent necessary to preserve their names, he was still more careful to prevent any real activity on their part. Sulla dealt even with the franchise in the most contemptuous manner; he made no difficulty either in conceding

it to the new burgess communities, or in bestowing it on Spaniards and Celts en masse.” (Mommsen, vol. 3, p. 340.)

Sulla did everything to consolidate his grip on power. But he had overlooked one small detail. The Roman army on which he relied had been entirely transformed. The soldiers no longer had any loyalty to the state, but only to their commanders. And this loyalty lasted only as long as the latter guaranteed the soldiers an acceptable amount of loot. In the course of the civil war no fewer than six generals had been murdered by their own troops. The army now had a sense of its own power, and was not prepared to submit to anybody. It is typical of the cynicism of men like Sulla that he abolished the death penalty for political offences, at the very time when his paid assassins were striking down his real or imagined enemies on all sides.

When Sulla attempted to assert his authority over the army, he immediately met with the resistance in his own staff. Naturally, his main opponents were the people in whom he had placed the greatest trust: Gnaeus Pompeus, whom he had entrusted with the conquest of Sicily and Africa and intended to make his son-in-law, and Quintus Ofella. When Sulla, through the senate, ordered Pompey to dismiss his army, the latter refused. The arrogant upstart Pompey told Sulla to his face that more people were concerned with the rising than the setting sun. Nevertheless, Sulla decided to attempt a compromise with Pompey. Ofella was not so lucky. The death penalty had been abolished for political offences, but Sulla had him cut down in the market place anyway.

Under Sulla's dictatorship, the Popular Party and the capitalists were deprived of all rights. But the ruling oligarchy was itself displaced from state power, which passed to the hands of Sulla and his clique. Sulla was a king in all but name. The whole system rested on the exploitation of the slaves and the plunder of the provinces. The fact that Sulla gave provincials the vote was an empty gesture, because the vote itself was meaningless. He gave the provinces an empty title and in exchange robbed them of very real

wealth. But though Sulla kicked and humiliated them, he could not do without the very capitalists he had displaced from political power.

After decades of revolution and civil war, Rome's Treasury was depleted. Sulla needed the capitalists to raise more cash, but then a large part of the wealth flowed from the state's coffers to the pockets of Roman capitalists. The war tax that Sulla imposed on Asia swelled to six times its original amount as a result of usurious interest rates. The usurers made huge fortunes and the provinces were stripped bare. People in the affected communities had to sell their public buildings, their jewels, their works of art; parents had to sell their children in order to satisfy the greed of these insatiable leeches.

The provinces were being crushed under an intolerable burden of taxation. Sicily and Sardinia had to hand over one tenth of its production of grapes and wheat. There was also a land tax, import duties, and a hundred other impositions. The province of Judea had to pay a Temple tax. Even more onerous was the quartering of troops and other such obligations, such as the free lodging of magistrates, clerks, lectors, heralds, physicians, priests and a host of other official functionaries. To these taxes and obligations must be added periodic forced sales and requisitions. All this provided enterprising Roman magistrates with a huge source of personal enrichment.

These things were the normal state of affairs for most of the provinces. But if the provincials dared to rebel against their tormentors, their plight would be far worse. Sulla compelled the provinces of Asia Minor, which had rebelled against Rome, to pay to every common Roman soldier quartered on them the equivalent of forty times their daily wage (16 denarii), and seventy times of his pay to a centurion. In addition to free food and lodging, they had to provide them with free clothing. To make matters worse, the soldiers were given the right to invite as many guests as they liked.

This does not exhaust the list of impositions. To it must be added the numerous local taxes for the maintenance of public buildings and the

payment of all local services. Last, but not least, the system of tax farming greatly increased the burden of taxation, as greedy Roman middlemen took their slice of the wealth produced by the provinces. Even without the tax farmers, the Roman governors and magistrates plundered the provincials shamelessly. And new laws introducing new taxes were a regular occurrence.

It was necessary to look around for some new source of plunder. Asia was the most tempting target for Roman avarice. With all her wealth, Rome's annual income was only two-thirds of that of the king of Egypt. The Ptolemies exploited the fabulous wealth of the Nile Valley and in addition benefited from Egypt's favoured position as an international commercial centre. Its turn would come soon.

The other source of wealth was slavery. Although the Roman capitalists had been politically expropriated by Sulla, they still retained their stranglehold on the key elements of the economic life of Rome. The Roman capitalists increased their wealth all the time. In Sulla's time, a modest fortune for a Roman senator would be three million sesterces, while two million was considered to be a decent equestrian fortune. The Roman capitalists were naturally the driving force behind the Republic's foreign policy. It was the pressure of the capitalists that led to the destruction of Carthage and Corinth, because they wanted to rid themselves of these trading rivals. Similarly, the slave trade was increased to unheard-of levels to meet the demands of the Roman capitalists: "All lands and all nations were laid under contribution for slaves, but the places where they were chiefly captured were Syria and the interior of Asia Minor." (Mommesen, vol. 3, p. 385.)

This was the hay-day of slavery. Italy was now overrun by a mass of slaves. According to the census of 70 BC, the number of men capable of bearing arms in Italy was 910,000. Mommesen estimates that, after adding dependents, foreigners and others, the total free population of Italy was between six and seven millions. He calculates the number of slaves at an incredible thirteen to fourteen millions – that is, twice the number of free

citizens. This is a very rough estimate, but there can be no doubt whatsoever that the slave population was very high and continuously expanding.

This was what led to a whole series of slave revolts, some on a massive scale. The slaves, the only productive class, were at the bottom of the pile, stripped of all human rights, made to toil in infamous conditions, until they dropped. By contrast, the ancient proletariat was a parasitic class, dependent on the labour of the slaves. This fact explains why the class struggle in Rome could never give rise to a new form of society. Only if the slaves had united with the city poor, the free proletarians, could they have succeeded in overthrowing the old system and arrived at a new synthesis. However, in the end, there was no revolutionary synthesis, and the result was an inexorable decline, accompanied by social, political and cultural collapse.

Is it conceivable that such a synthesis could have existed? This was theoretically possible, and this was shown by the fact that in every revolutionary movement, the most determined elements on the left wing of the Popular Party made appeals to the slaves to rise up. But in the moment of truth the Roman proletariat had more in common with the capitalists than with the slaves. They were on opposite sides of the line that separated exploiters from exploited.

Degeneration

The rule of Sulla was a golden age for the Roman upper classes. This was a period in which the rich became even more fabulously rich. This was shown by the lavish gladiatorial games that now became fashionable. Sulla himself, when he was Praetor, exhibited a hundred lions at the games. Rich men had luxurious houses and gardens, tended by small armies of domestic slaves. The capitalist Crassus had a town house famous for its old trees, which was valued at six million sesterces. By comparison the value of an ordinary dwelling at Rome was about six hundred.

The Roman nobility lounged in idleness in their splendid villas around the Bay of Naples. The inside of their houses was even more impressive than the outside, being hung with expensive curtains and tapestries. Instead of the old woollen dresses, women wore silk that scarcely concealed their figures. Conservatives complained that the latest styles were only an excuse for people to walk around naked. Fortunes were made and lost at the gaming tables. Extravagant prices were paid for qualified domestic slaves – 100,000 sesterces for a good cook, for instance, or 200,000 for an educated Greek slave of the first rank. As in every other form of class society the ignorant rich masters could purchase the services of poets and philosophers.

Morals were looser than ever before. Divorce, previously almost unheard-of in Rome, became commonplace. A Roman orator of the time, speaking in the open Forum, could make fun of a senatorial civil juryman, who instead of going to court, is in some tavern or brothel, drinking and gaming with his cronies:

"They play at hazard, delicately perfumed, surrounded by their mistresses. As the afternoon advances, they summon the servant and bid him make enquiries on the Comitium, what has occurred in the Forum, who has spoken in favour of or against the new project of law, what tribes have voted for and what against it. At length they go themselves to the judgment-seat, just early enough not to bring the process down on their own neck. On the way there is no opportunity in any retired alley which they do not avail themselves of, for they have gorged themselves with wine.

"Reluctantly they come to the tribunal and give audience to the parties. Those who are concerned bring forward their cause. The juryman orders the witnesses to come forward; he himself steps aside. When he returns, he declares that he has heard everything and asks for the documents. He looks into the writings; he can hardly keep his eyes open for wine. When he thereupon withdraws to consider his sentence,

he says to his boon-companions, 'What concern have I with these tiresome people? Why should we not rather go to drink a cup of mulse mixed with Greek wine, and accompany it with a fat fieldfare and a good fish, a veritable pike from the Tiber Island?'" (Mommson, vol. 3, p. 395.)

So scandalous was the ostentation of the rich that the government passed the so-called sumptuary laws, which sought in vain to place some limit on the extravagances of the wealthy. The rulers of Rome were afraid of the reaction that such conduct might provoke among the less favoured population of Rome. But the nobles felt themselves above the law. Their ostentation was a defiant reaction to the period when they had to suffer the indignities and persecutions of the rule of the Popular Party. They were now the masters of the house! They would flaunt their wealth for all to see! No laws would stop them! We see this phenomenon repeated many times in history – in France during the Thermidorean reaction, for example, or in 17th century England after the Restoration of Charles II following the death of Oliver Cromwell.

To this moral decay we must add the decay of religion and the spread of mystical and irrational tendencies. The old Romans were not at all inclined to mysticism. They were farmers with a practical attitude to life. The Roman religion was a religion of farmers with a rather provincial and prosaic outlook on life. We see this healthy and thoroughly un-mystical outlook in all kinds of details. In the struggle against Carthage, the Romans had to learn how to fight on ships for the first time. They were not natural sailors. On one occasion, when they were about to go into battle with the Carthaginian navy, the priest announced that the auguries were unfavourable because the sacred chickens would not eat the grain he had offered them. The Roman captain's answer was: "If they will not eat, then let them drink!" So saying he threw the unfortunate birds into the sea and attacked the enemy – although, sad to say, not very successfully.

It is in the period of Sulla when for the first time we see the spread of mysticism in Roman society. Sulla himself had no ideology and little religion, but he was superstitious and believed in Fate. Of Sulla's beliefs, Mommsen writes:

“[...] it was that faith in the absurd, which necessarily makes its appearance in every man who has thoroughly ceased to believe in a connected order of things – the superstition of the fortunate player, who deems himself privileged by fate to throw on each and every occasion the right number.” (Mommsen, vol. 3, p. 360.)

Both Caesar and Napoleon had a similar cast of mind to that of Sulla, and they constantly harped on about Destiny. There is always an element of the gambler in such military adventurers, and all gamblers are superstitious. It often appears that the outcome of a battle is decided by a lucky accident, like the lucky throw at dice. But this is also a product of a specific period in history, when a given socio-economic system has entered into a terminal decline. This decline sets its stamp on the psychology of all men and women, from the lowest to the highest.

As Hegel pointed out, Necessity expresses itself through accident. The Men of Destiny throughout history have only been men who expressed an idea that had already become necessary by the working out of processes that take place behind the backs of men, and invisible to them. Their “luck” turns out to be no luck at all, but an optical illusion. The circumstances that determine whether they win or lose are prepared in advance. This does not cancel out the role of the individual in history. What it means is that the scope for individual action is severely limited by objective reality, which favours one outcome over all others. When history plays games with the destiny of men and women, it always plays with a loaded dice.

This rise of mysticism and irrationality in the later Roman Republic is also no accident. In a period when the productive forces are developing and society is going forward, people will believe in the existing gods, will accept

unquestioningly the existing morality and obey the existing laws. But when a given social order is breaking down, when the productive forces stagnate and decline, then a different psychology can be observed. There are symptoms of universal malaise, doubt and scepticism. The temples stand empty. Nobody believes in the old gods any more. Instead, we see the spread of mysticism, unbelief and superstition. Mommsen writes:

“Men had become perplexed, not merely as to the old faith, but as to their very selves; the fearful crises of a fifty years’ revolution, the instinctive feeling that a civil war was still far from being at an end, increased the anxious suspense, the gloomy perplexity of the multitude. Restlessly, the wandering imagination climbed every height and fathomed every abyss, where it fancied that it might discover new prospects or new light amidst the fatalities impending, might gain fresh hopes in the desperate struggles against destiny, or perhaps might find merely fresh alarms. A portentous mysticism found in the general distraction – political, economic, moral, religious – the soil which was adapted for it, and grew with alarming rapidity; it was as if gigantic trees had grown by night out of the earth, none knew whence or whither, and this very marvellous rapidity of growth worked new wonders and seized like an epidemic on all minds not thoroughly fortified.” (Mommsen, vol. 3, p. 412.)

This extract shows very clearly the depth of degeneration that had corroded the very spirit of the Roman Republic. What is shocking is not the events here described but the fact that they should be so casually made light of in public. The conclusion is clear. The Republic now existed in name only. Unable to live, it was unwilling to die. It was only a matter of time that an appropriate executioner would be found to put it out of its misery. Exactly the same can be said of the capitalist system in the first decade of the 21st century. Reading Mommsen’s comments on this period, we seem to be reading a description of our own troubled times.

In the epoch of the decline of the republic and the rise of powerful generals appeared the figure of Julius Caesar, who was destined to play a key role. Initially he had many enemies and had to manoeuvre in order not to be destroyed himself. The Catiline conspiracy was one such critical moment.

Julius Caesar (102-44 BC) was a member of the great Julian family – one of the old Patrician gentes of Rome, which traced its ancestry back to Iulius, son of Aeneas. His name was taken over after his death by the first Roman emperor, Augustus (Octavian), and later used by the emperors as a title, from Hadrian onwards. It is the origin of Kaisar in Germany and Tsar in Russia. That is to say, it is synonymous with absolute power.

Despite his impeccable patrician origins, Caesar's start was inauspicious. His father had died when he was 15 years old and he became head of the family. His family was noble, but short of cash. And to make a political career in Rome, one needed a lot of cash. From the start he was an adventurer. This ambitious young man was preparing for better things. He is reported to have said: "I would rather be the first man in a barbarian village than the second man in Rome."

He was prematurely balding and seems to have suffered from epileptic attacks, but his ambition was accompanied with great colossal vanity. We are told he was inordinately preoccupied with his appearance. According to Suetonius he removed body hair with a tweezers. Some cast doubt on his sexuality. The story was circulated that he was "every wife's husband and every husband's wife." But this was probably propaganda inspired by his enemies to discredit him. He went to Rhodes to study oratory with the best Greek teachers. But despite his smooth skin, impeccable appearance and his acquaintance with rhetoric and Greek literature, Caesar was an utterly ruthless man.

The historian Plutarch informs us that on the way to Rhodes he was captured by pirates who demanded a ransom of 20 talents. The smallness of the sum struck Caesar as amusing. He actually got on very well with

these ruffians – probably they reminded him of himself. When he had handed over the money, he promised them he would have them crucified. They may have thought it a joke, but he hunted them down remorselessly, and he kept his word. However, he showed his appreciation of his “friends”: in a gesture of magnanimity, he had their throats cut first.

He married into money – his first smart career move. His choice of partner was not accidental. He married Cornelia, the daughter of Cinna, who had taken over the leadership of the Popular Party after the death of Marius, to whom Caesar was also related. His aunt Julia was Marius’ wife. He therefore had close links with the populares, which he no doubt hoped would help his advance. Then (as we have outlined in an earlier part) came the Civil War between the populares led by Marius and Cinna and the optimes led by Sulla. Caesar, however, was on the wrong side. Sulla defeated the populares and proclaimed himself dictator, not for the traditional six months but for life.

The reign of terror that followed Sulla’s victory was more terrible than anything that had gone before. The first list of victims included forty senators and 1,600 Equites. The total number ran into thousands. Caesar escaped with his life, but along with many others, had all his wealth confiscated. His first political gamble thus proved to be a failure. But when a gambler loses, he just shrugs his shoulders and gives the dice another throw.

Sulla offered to further his career, but on condition he divorced his wife. This he refused to do, either because he was really in love, or, more likely, because he was already looking beyond Sulla. To cross the man who had murdered thousands was a risky thing to do. His family decided it would be best to get him out of Rome and send him as far away from Sulla as possible. He took up a post in the army and was sent to Asia Minor, where he served with distinction. It was there that he learned of the death of Sulla, and he immediately went back to Rome.

The senate proved to be too weak to use the power that Sulla had placed in their hands. The Popular Party was reviving. It was at this time that Italy was convulsed by the great uprising of the slaves led by Spartacus, [see Spartacus - a real representative of the proletariat of ancient times], which failed because it was not supported by the urban masses. In the end Crassus crushed the slaves with ruthless efficiency. The defeat of the slaves condemned the movement of the masses in the cities to impotence. It led to a kind of stalemate between the classes, in which neither side could inflict a decisive defeat on the other.

As we have seen, this explains the rise of ambitious generals like Pompey, who rose to prominence at this time. The rapid rise of Pompey was both unprecedented and highly irregular. During the Civil War, when he was only 23 years of age, he had raised three legions to fight for Sulla. He defeated the Marians in Sicily and Africa, for which he was awarded a triumph. Later he fought against Sertorius in Spain for four years, and was awarded another triumph.

The politics of the slums

There was plenty of combustible material in Rome to take advantage of. The lower classes were filled with seething resentment after the bloody proscriptions, murders and confiscations by which Sulla had destroyed the Popular Party. Caesar saw his chance. His first wife had died, and his second wife, like the first one, was rich (he was always after money). But money alone was insufficient to obtain an admission ticket to the world of Roman high society. Rome's wealthy aristocratic elite regarded him as an upstart. Rejected by the Establishment, he looked for a base among the poor of the slum districts.

The Roman historians report that when the Emperor Vespasian's son, Titus, complained to him about the disgusting nature of the tax on public toilets, his father held up a gold coin and told him, "Non olet!" ("This doesn't stink!"). This celebrated phrase could well serve as an epitaph to the political career

of Julius Caesar. He was quite prepared to wade up to his knees in blood and excrement in order to secure his aims.

The slum districts where Caesar looked for a political base were appalling places where people threw shit from the windows of multi-story tenements that were always falling down. But the declassed lumpenproletarians who inhabited these dangerous and unsanitary districts had the vote, and, while Caesar doubtless held his nose while canvassing their support, he needed them as a battering ram to shatter the political power of his enemies.

When his aunt Julia died, he took a bold initiative. Her husband, Marius, had been the darling of the populares in his lifetime. But ever since Sulla came to power, his name was utterly prohibited. At Julia's funeral, Julius Caesar not only delivered her obituary speech, in which he praised her and her husband, but had portraits and statues of Marius paraded through the streets. Shortly after, his own wife Cornelia died, and he did exactly the same, publicly praising her late father, the revolutionary Cinna. By these means he attached himself firmly to the Popular Party.

In order to obtain this support, he did not mind currying favour with the urban poor and flattering them, as Dio Cassius informs us. In order to get support, he financed big games for the enjoyment of the populace. He brought in vast numbers of wild beasts and 320 pairs of gladiators who fought to the death, dressed in silver, for the crowd's amusement. He even had the arena flooded to create a mock naval battle. "He was lavish in spending", says Plutarch. In other words, he bought votes. However, his extravagance got him into trouble. He was soon in debt again and was forced to go into exile or face death. But then he had a brilliant idea.

At 37 years of age this man, who is not known for his piety, suddenly developed an urgent interest in religion. He stood for the post of Pontifex Maximus – the Supreme Priest of Rome. This post would give him not only prestige but a huge patronage and therefore lots of money. In order to secure his election, he probably prayed to the Gods. More importantly, he

borrowed huge sums of money to bribe his electors. If he won he could repay all his creditors with interest. If he failed, he would be in deep trouble. In the event, he won.

The Catiline conspiracy

Events now took a dramatic and unexpected turn. It seems that about this time a plot was hatched by desperate men from many different classes: bankrupt aristocrats, poor unemployed, capitalists in search of extra profits and political adventurers of all kinds. At the centre of the conspiracy was Lucius Sergius Catilina (108 BC–62 BC), better known as Catiline. He was a man similar to Caesar in many ways. He was yet another of that breed of impoverished upper class adventurers that were common at that time. He is one of the most enigmatic figures of Roman history.

His memory has been obscured by the insults of Roman historians, particularly his arch-enemy, Cicero. It is practically impossible to disentangle the truth from the calumnies. What we do know is that, like Caesar, he came from an aristocratic but impoverished family and had a distinguished military career, serving in the Social Wars under Pompey. We know that he was hated and feared by the Roman aristocracy, and we also know why they feared and hated him. Like the Gracchi, he supported the rights of the urban poor, along other things, advocating the universal cancellation of debts. Whatever else he was, he was certainly not a coward, as he proved in the end.

He was put on trial several times, but was acquitted repeatedly, some said through the influence of Caesar, who was suspected of having connections with him. This is quite possible, since Caesar was always prepared to fish in troubled waters, to see what he could catch. Catiline stood as a candidate in the consular election in 64 BC, when he seems to have had the backing of Crassus. He must therefore have had a lot of money for his campaign, but was not elected. One of the successful candidates was Cicero, a “new man”.

He stood again the following year, but by this time he had probably lost the backing of Crassus, as he was already making vague threats against the Establishment and he had announced a policy of the general cancellation of debts. This would have been popular with Sulla's veterans, but it provoked the hostility of the rich. Predictably, he was defeated once more. Seeing that the road to power by legitimate means was blocked, he decided to adopt other methods.

The ranks of the conspirators included a variety of other patricians and plebeians whose advance had been blocked for different reasons. They were all desperate and displaced people, individuals who had a grudge against the Establishment. But Catiline's main base of support was among the poor, who flocked to his banner as a result of his policy of debt relief. The problem of debt had existed from early times, but had never been greater than in 63 BC.

Decades of war had led to a severe economic depression in the Italian countryside. As we have seen, many poor farmers had lost their farms and were forced to move to the city, where they swelled the numbers of the lumpenproletariat. Prominent among Catiline's supporters were a large number of veterans from Sulla's armies, hungry for land. They were prepared to march to war under the banner of the "new Sulla". One of these, Gaius Manlius, a centurion from Sulla's army, was sent to Etruria where he assembled an army ready for revolt, as Sallust reports

“Meanwhile, in Etruria, Manlius was agitating among a populace whose poverty, added to the resentment which they felt at their wrongs, made them eager for revolution; for during Sulla's tyranny, they had lost their lands and all the rest of their possessions. He also approached some of the many types of brigands who infested that part of the country, as well as some veteran soldiers from Sulla's colonies, whose lavish indulgence of their appetites had exhausted the enormous booty they had brought home.” (Sallust, *The Catiline Conspiracy*, Penguin edition, p.196)

Other men were sent to different locations throughout Italy. The mood of society was explosive. There was even a small slave revolt in Capua, the same place where Spartacus had begun his uprising. Manilus made an appeal that begins with the words:

"We call gods and men to witness, sir, that our object in taking up arms was not to attack our country, or to endanger others, but to protect ourselves from wrong. We are poor needy wretches; the cruel harshness of moneylenders has robbed most of us of our homes, and all of us have lost reputation and fortune. Not one was allowed the benefit of the law, established by our ancestors, which should have enabled us, by sacrificing our possessions, to save our persons from bondage. Such was the inhumanity of the moneylenders and the praetor." (Sallust, *The Catiline Conspiracy*, p. 200)

While civil unrest spread throughout the countryside, Catiline was making the preparations for the conspiracy in Rome, where, as Sallust confirms, he enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the poor:

"Yet there were Roman citizens obstinately determined to destroy both themselves and their country. In spite of two senatorial decrees, not one among the conspirators was induced by the offer of reward to betray their plans, and no-one deserted from Catiline's camp. A deadly moral contagion had infected all their minds. And this madness was not confined to those actually implicated in the plot. The whole of the lower orders, impatient for a new regime, looked with favour on Catiline's enterprise. In this way they did what was expected of them. In every country paupers envy respectable citizens and make heroes of unprincipled characters, hating the established order of things and hankering after innovation; discontented with their own lot, they are bent on general upheaval. Turmoil and rebellion bring them carefree profit, since poverty has nothing to lose.

“The city populace were especially eager to fling themselves into a revolutionary adventure.” (op cit., p. 203)

Here is the authentic voice of the frightened ruling class, faced with the rebellion of the masses in all historical periods. The signal for the commencement would be the assassination of Cicero. It seems his plans included arson and the murder of a large number of senators. They would then link up with Manlius' army in Etruria, and return to Rome and take control of the government. But the conspirators were betrayed when Quintus Curius, a senator they had approached, turned informant, warning Cicero of the plot. Cicero escaped death that morning by placing guards at the entrance of his house.

The next day, Cicero convened the senate and surrounded it with armed guards. To his astonishment, Catiline was present, which shows remarkable coolness of mind. Cicero denounced him before the senate in his celebrated Catiline Orations. But Catiline did not retreat. He took the floor, recalling to the senate the history of his family, reminding it how it had served the Republic, advised them not to believe false rumours and to trust the name of his family. Finally, he played his ace card, rebuking them for taking the word of a “new man” (*homo novus*), Cicero, in preference to a “nobilis” like himself. This might have had some effect, but then he began to threaten the senators, saying that he would “put out his own fire with the general destruction of all”.

Before they could react, he dashed out of the senate, and left Rome under the pretext that he was going into voluntary exile. Instead, however, he joined Manlius' camp in Etruria to continue the fight. But meanwhile, events at Rome took a fatal turn. The conspirators discovered that a delegation from the Allobroges, a Gaulish tribe, were in Rome to complain about debt and the oppressive conduct of their governor. The conspirators established contact with them and to meet them and told them of their plans. It seems that the Allobroges wanted nothing to do with them and informed Cicero.

This was the kiss of death to the conspiracy. The Romans could not bear the thought of foreigners interfering in their political life, and least of all their traditional enemies, the Gauls. Cicero got hold of incriminating letters, which he read before the Senate the following day, and the death sentence was demanded for those implicated. Caesar made an eloquent protest against such a step, which initially got an echo. But a savage speech by Cato, the thirty-two year old great grandson of Cato the Elder cut across this. He was an implacable defender of the aristocratic caste. He hated Caesar and Caesar hated him. The fate of the five named conspirators was sealed. They were condemned to death without even the pretence of a trial and Cicero had them strangled immediately. He even personally escorted some of the condemned men to their execution. Afterwards, he announced to a crowd gathering in the Forum what had occurred. The conspiracy in Rome had collapsed.

When the news reached the rebels in Etruria, many men deserted, reducing the size of the rebel force from about 10,000 to a mere 3,000. In the end, Catiline was forced to fight the legions of Antonius Hybrida's army near Pistoria (Pistoia). Despite overwhelming odds, Catiline fought bravely in the front line of battle. Seeing that there was no hope of victory, he threw himself into the thick of the battle. When it was all over, the victors found that all Catiline's soldiers had frontal wounds, and the lifeless corpse of their leader was found far in front of his own lines.

With a mass of impoverished people in Rome, the wealthy felt constantly under pressure. They started to think in terms of a strong government, stability and order. This meant the rule of a "strong man" – a general. The only question was who would take on this role.

The first Triumvirate

The Catiline conspiracy must have come as a shock to the wealthy classes in Rome. Living in close contact with a mass of impoverished people, must at times have felt like living on the brink of a volcano. There was no police force to keep order in such circumstances, and so the army was the only

resort. Among the army officers the idea was growing that Rome now needed a monarchy, although nobody was bold enough to pronounce that dreaded word. Rather they spoke in terms of a strong government, stability and order. This meant the rule of a “strong man” – a general. The only question was which one.

Pompey, who had made his name crushing the revolt in Spain and massacring the last remnants of Spartacus’s forces, was in a strong position as the supreme arbiter of Rome’s destiny. He had recently returned from a victorious campaign in the East with an army of 40,000 veterans at his back. Cicero’s rash conduct in the Catiline affair was probably due more to his fear of Pompey than his fear of Catiline, whose conspiracy seems to have been badly planned and executed. He wanted to avoid giving Pompey any excuse to intervene. Cicero needed to act quickly to suffocate the conspiracy before he arrived at the gates of Rome with his soldiers, ready to make himself master of the city.

For the senate Cicero was, at least for a time, the hero of the hour, considered as “the saviour of the Fatherland.” This was not going to last. Later on Cicero was made to pay a heavy price for his part in the execution of the rebel senators. On the other hand, the Catiline affair damaged Caesar’s position. His enemies had triumphed, and he now found himself compromised by his past links with Catiline and his opposition to the executions. He needed to consolidate alliances with powerful men who could protect him. This determined his line of action.

Pompey had returned from the wars not only with a greatly enhanced prestige but also with a considerable fortune. Some said he was now even richer than Crassus, who was considered the richest man in Rome. His campaign in the East was successful, and finally crushed Rome’s most dangerous enemy, Mithridates. Before he left for Rome, Pompey made the whole of the Near East secure, with a number of new client kingdoms. Fifty cities were founded or restored. And Rome’s revenues from Asia were increased by seventy percent.

Caesar drew the conclusion that the quickest way to make money was by fighting wars. In addition, the suspicions that he was somehow involved in the Catiline affair made it sensible to absent himself from the Capital for a while. He therefore got appointed governor of Spain, where he once more distinguished himself by his abilities as a military commander. Like almost every other Roman governor, he plundered the natives (this was regarded as quite acceptable). But as governors went, he was by no means the worst. Like everybody else, the Spaniards were subject to the ruthless laws on debt, by which creditors were allowed to take all the possessions from a debtor. Caesar amended the law to restrict the amount that a creditor could seize to two-thirds. This may seem quite a lot to us, but in those days it was a very generous concession indeed.

Caesar returned to Rome, where he resumed his intrigues, an art at which he was extremely skilful. In the streets of Rome rival gangs loyal to one politician or other fought it out, while their masters manoeuvred to strengthen their positions. Bribery and intimidation were the normal tools of the trade. Chief of the city lumpenproletariat was another aristocrat turned tribune, Publius Clodius. This demagogue, now in his mid-thirties, made a profitable political career out of his influence with the city mob and the gangsters whose headquarters were the slum districts. Caesar had already established his popularity with the plebs at the same time as he made use of the existing machinery to get possession of one office after another. He had close connections with Clodius and the populares. But in his present delicate situation, Caesar needed more: he needed to reach agreement with elements from the Establishment.

While posing as the people's champion, Caesar also attempted to get contacts with the rich and build an alliance with the "respectable classes". Therefore, after the death of Cornelia he married Pompeia, who was the granddaughter of Sulla, the former dictator and leader of the aristocratic party. During Pompey's absence, Crassus was trying to increase his own

political power and influence in Rome. He was aided in this by Caesar, who in return borrowed large amounts of money to advance his own career.

Crassus was a firm defender of the rights of the equites, the Roman capitalists, of which he was one. He proposed the annexation of Egypt, probably with the idea of sending Caesar there to organise the plunder of that wealthy province on his behalf. But this was defeated by Cicero, with Pompey and the aristocracy behind him. One of the main sources of wealth for the Roman capitalists was the plunder of the provinces by the practice of tax-farming. Most governors did not interfere with the activities of the publicani (tax-farmers) as they usually got a share of the loot. However, Pompey, in search of popularity, annoyed the equites by relieving the debts of people in Asia. All this did nothing to improve Crassus' opinion of Pompey.

But Pompey had his own differences with the senate, which had refused his request for a grant of land for his veterans. Although Pompey was supposed to be on their side, the senators obviously were afraid that he might be tempted to use his military muscle to take power. Now Crassus had another clash with the senate on the issue of tax farming. Sometimes the tax-farmers would overestimate their profits and lose money. He had asked the senate to grant a rebate to the publicani who had done this. This was clearly unreasonable and the senate refused. Crassus was furious at what he saw as this new insult from the senate.

This was Caesar's chance. Both Pompey and Crassus now had grievances against the senate. This gave him the possibility of acting as a mediator between them. Cicero understood the danger and, although he knew Crassus' demand to be outrageous, he was bitterly critical of the senate's decision. He now began to see in Caesar an even more dangerous enemy than Pompey, saying "[I fear him] as one might fear the smiling face of the sea."

Cicero's fears were well grounded. Caesar now entered into contact with Pompey. He arranged a marriage between Pompey and his only daughter Julia, which was one of the usual ways of establishing a political alliance. Caesar also wanted to include Crassus in the alliance. But there was a problem. The relations between Pompey and Crassus were chilly. Crassus had not forgotten that Pompey had stolen the credit for defeating Spartacus, which was really his work. Nor had he forgotten the fact that the senate had awarded his rival a triumph, but refused one to him. In addition, Pompey had stepped on the toes of the tax-farmers, Crassus' friends.

In order to win Pompey's support, it appears that Caesar used his agents to spread rumours that prominent members of the ruling party were planning to assassinate Pompey. Cicero for one was in no doubt that Caesar was behind this intrigue, the purpose of which was to frighten Pompey and push him into the arms of Caesar (59 BC). These were preliminary steps towards a definite goal. Although Caesar did not have the money or influence of his two colleagues, he was able to play a pivotal role in bringing Pompey and Crassus together in an alliance, which is known as the first Triumvirate - Caesar, Pompey and Crassus – as a rival power centre to the senate. The formation of this formidable alliance was a warning sign that the end of the Republic was in sight.

The consulship of Julius and Caesar

Caesar planned his rise to power with typical single-mindedness and ruthlessness. The candidates for consulship had to be at least 40 years old. Caesar was only 30, but that did not stop him. In 59 BC he became consul, along with the conservative Bibulus. There always had to be two consuls at Rome. This was an irritation for Caesar, but he soon hit on an effective solution. With the help of Clodius, he paid ruffians from the slum districts to insult and assault the unfortunate Bibulus every time he appeared in public. A clash with the conservatives was inevitable, and it soon came.

One of the first acts of Caesar as consul was to introduce legislation to distribute to Pompey's veterans whatever public lands remained in Italy.

This was obviously part of a deal that Caesar had struck with Pompey as a condition for his support for his election. But Caesar was also following his own interests when he added a clause giving part of the land to the poor people of Rome. This action provoked the hostility of the conservatives, for whom it recalled unpleasant memories of the Gracchi.

Cato, Caesar's bitter enemy, opposed the measure violently, and Caesar had him arrested. He was later released, but the two sides were now on a collision course. The conservatives prepared to block the law in the senate, whereupon Caesar decided to bypass the senate and take the law directly to the popular assembly. This again brought back frightening memories of the times of the Gracchi. The Assembly met in chaotic conditions. To the general surprise both Pompey and Crassus spoke in favour of the reform, thus revealing the existence of their alliance with Caesar.

Bibulus, the conservative, opposed the law, but when he spoke against it, he got a very rough reception, during which a bucket of excrement was poured over his head. After this, Bibulus decided to withdraw from public life, alleging that he had read unfavourable omens in the sky (although it seems nobody else saw them). As a result he spent most of his time indoors, avoiding both the unfavourable omens and the buckets of foul-smelling organic matter. The local comedians joked that this was the "consulship of Julius and Caesar".

All the time the heightened tension between the classes was becoming ever more violent. In January 52 BC Clodius was murdered in the Via Appia by the supporters of his conservative rival Milo. Clodius was a popular figure, who had passed a law authorising the distribution of grain to the people of Rome free of charge. The body of the murdered tribune was put on public display – a sight that, together with the lamentations of his widow, excited the passions of the populace. This led to a riot that turned into a virtual insurrection. The Curia was set ablaze and mobs of enraged citizens rampaged through the streets smashing property and assaulting anyone who looked wealthy. This reaction was not surprising when one considers

the abyss that separated the conditions of the masses from those of the rich.

The Gallic campaign

Caesar approached politics (and everything else) as a kind of shady business deal. As we know, in order to continue his upwards progress he needed to secure a constant flow of cash. He had spent colossal amounts on buying votes and bribing high officials - and the money was constantly running out. Now Caesar had a problem. In order to succeed in his political intrigues, he needed more money. The only way he could get this was by borrowing and incurring in huge debts.

The problem with debts is that they have to be repaid, and the only way to pay these debts off was by securing an appointment to a profitable position in the provinces or by a military command that would enable him to obtain a large amount of booty. Caesar's enemies in the Senate were well aware of his predicament and therefore offered him a minor position in rural Italy – a position that held out no prospects of enrichment whatsoever.

By means of intrigues and bribery he succeeded in getting this decision overturned and instead was given control of the northern part of Italy, then known as Cisalpine Gaul, and Illyria, now Albania. This was a much better proposition for enrichment. But Caesar had an even greater stroke of luck when the man who had been assigned control of Transalpine Gaul (modern southern France, Switzerland and Belgium) died unexpectedly. The rebellious state of that province caused panic in the Senate and therefore compelled them, against their wishes, to grant control of this province to Caesar.

This was just what he required. What he really needed, he decided, was a nice little war. As we have seen, Pompey made his fortune through conquests in Asia. In order to defeat his rivals, Caesar had to win even more spectacular victories. If he could kill a few thousand foreigners he would qualify for a triumph at Rome, and the money would start flowing

again. Then, in 55 BC, he had another sudden stroke of luck. A Gallic tribe called the Helvetii invaded Italy. This was just the opportunity he had been waiting for.

In reality, the Helvetian incident posed no great threat to Rome. The tribe was apparently migrating to the Atlantic coast of Gaul where they intended to settle. But the Romans were undoubtedly very sensitive on the issue of invading Gauls. They still shuddered at the memory of the time when, in 387 BC, a Gaulish army sacked Rome. This dreadful event was deeply rooted in the collective consciousness, and any suggestion that history might be repeated was certain to provoke a powerful response. Caesar therefore got what he so ardently desired: the command of a Roman army.

Caesar's famous account of his Gallic campaign (*De Bello Gallico*) has acquired the status of a literary classic and an important historical document. In reality, however, it is not a work of history at all but a brilliant example of self-promotion. The celebrated War Commentaries, written in the third person singular, are documents of immense value to historians, but they are not strictly historical. Written in a clear, concise Latin style, they are not devoid of literary merits, but they are not strictly literature. Above all they are masterpieces of political propaganda, which one might say, Caesar invented. They are designed to glorify Caesar's achievements and magnify his victories. In *De Bello Gallico* the word "Caesar" is repeated no fewer than 775 times.

There are many exaggerations and some downright lies in Caesar's accounts of the war. In the campaign against the Helvetii, Caesar claims to have confronted an army of 368,000. But modern historians like Furgur-Gunti consider the actual numbers to have been around 40,000 warriors out of a total of 160,000 emigrants. Delbrück suggests an even lower number of 100,000 people, out of which only 16,000 were fighters, which would make the Celtic force about half the size of the Roman body of about 30,000 men. Many of them were old people, women and children.

The battle itself seems far less glorious a victory than Caesar presented it to be. The main body of the Helvetii withdrew from the battle at nightfall, abandoning, as it seemed, most of their wagons; they retreated northwards in a forced night march and reached the territory of the Lingones four days after the battle. Thus, what Caesar presents as a desperate flight without stopping could actually have been an orderly retreat at moderate speed, covering less than 40 km a day. Caesar himself does not appear as a triumphant victor in turn, being unable to pursue the Helvetii for three days, “both on account of the wounds of the soldiers and the burial of the slain”.

There is no way of verifying these figures, of course. But there can be no doubt that these wars were accompanied by slaughter on a massive scale. According to Plutarch's *Lives*, out of three million Gallic soldiers engaged in the wars, one million were killed and another million captured. It is possible that these figures are exaggerated (the Romans did not react to war casualties in the same way people do today. Their slogan was: the more deaths, the better!). But it is clear that vast numbers were killed and enslaved. This was seen in Rome as a strong point in Caesar's favour. This was an age when imperialist aggression saw no need to disguise its true nature under the hypocritical cloak of “humanitarian missions”.

There is no doubt at all that Caesar was a very able general, but he was also an extremely ruthless man prepared to use the utmost cruelty and deception in order to obtain his ends. His campaigns in Gaul were characterised by extreme brutality. Caesar himself confirms Plutarch's estimate of over a million enemy soldiers killed on the battlefields of Gaul – without including the civilian victims. Here was the real ugly face of Roman imperialist expansionism. If a tribe in Gaul rebelled against Roman rule, every man, woman and child would be slaughtered without mercy. The intention was to terrorise the rest into submission.

The final aim was to obtain a huge number of slaves to feed the insatiable appetite of the Roman economy for slave labour. Like in previous wars, in essence these were gigantic slave hunts. Despite the sheer savagery of

these campaigns, it cannot be denied that Caesar was a brilliant commander and diplomat. He had flair and ability. He was also a talented writer, as his Commentaries show, though, as we have seen, this literary skill had a practical purpose – to boost his own image and further his political aims. Like most adventurers, Caesar was not short of personal bravery. He had a gambler's instincts and was prepared to risk everything on a desperate throw. We see this tendency continually throughout his life.

Pompey versus Caesar

From Caesar's point of view, the campaign in Gaul was a spectacular success. He crushed the resistance of the Gauls, which culminated in the famous (or notorious) siege of Alesia, in which Vercingetorix led a last desperate struggle against the Roman legions. Between the years 58 and 50 BC, Caesar had conquered a vast expanse of territory in what is now called France. Not satisfied with this, in the year 55 BC he crossed the Channel and led the first invasion of Britain, an island shrouded in mystery, and situated "beyond the furthest bounds of ocean". Although the conquest of Britain did not succeed, his reputation as a successful general was now made. It was time to return to Rome and capitalise on his success.

The upper classes once again saw Pompey as their deliverer. They fawned upon the man who Cicero now called "the divine consul". But while the "divine" Pompey, the darling of the upper classes, rested on his laurels in Rome, Caesar was always on the offensive, followed by a troop of loyal soldiers in search of loot and officers in search of glory, promotion and a promising political career in the future. And there were plenty of ambitious young men prepared to follow Caesar abroad to win fame and wealth in the wars. These provided the shock troops of the Caesarean party.

In the end Caesar proved to be the more skilful politician, balancing between the classes to build up a power base inside Rome while earning a reputation as a successful general abroad. The final battle between two generals would settle the fate of the Republic.

The formation of the Triumvirate (Caesar, Pompey and Crassus) was already a step in the direction of undermining and overthrowing the Republic and replacing it with the rule of one man. But relations within the Triumvirate were now beginning to crack. The question was really very simple. Who would be the future ruler of Rome?

Crossing the Rubicon

The conquest of Gaul enabled Caesar to amass an even more fabulous fortune than that of Pompey. He succeeded in strengthening his political base in Rome, and at the same time he directed the attentions of the people towards new horizons. Hitherto the conquest of the world had reached only to the circle of the Alps. Although his two expeditions to Britain did not leave any tangible results, they enormously enhanced his prestige. In going beyond the established bounds, Caesar opened a new scene of achievement, extending even to the foggy shores of Britain – at the very boundary of the known world.

He returned to Rome to celebrate his triumph with an astonishing display of gold, silver, slaves and other loot. With this plunder he was able to pay off his debts and then bribe the mob and create a mass of political clients. Always the astute politician, Caesar played upon the seething discontent of the lumpenproletariat in order to build up the Caesarist party in Rome. Together with a powerful army of soldiers hardened by years of war in Gaul, he had a strong base from which to launch his bid for power. Caesar's main base was always the army.

The formation of the Triumvirate (Caesar, Pompey and Crassus) was already a step in the direction of undermining and overthrowing the Republic and replacing it with the rule of one man. But relations within the Triumvirate were now beginning to crack. The question was really very simple. Who would be the future ruler of Rome? Pompey was now once more the favoured candidate of the senate and the aristocracy, who saw in him a counterweight to Caesar. The latter was away in Gaul, where his victories

were so many stepping stones on the road to power. For the senatorial party, this was now the main danger.

At this point the Triumvirate suffered a mortal blow. Crassus, the man who defeated Spartacus, was desperate to win military glory that could compare with that of Pompey and Caesar (a victory over an army of slaves was somehow not sufficient). He therefore set out for the East, where he participated in a campaign against the Parthians. But things did not turn out as he anticipated. In 53 BC his legions were defeated at Carrhae (now Harran in Turkey) by a smaller Parthian force made up of armoured heavy cavalry and horse archers. Later the Parthians lured him into their camp, where he was seized and murdered. It was said that the Parthians poured molten gold into his mouth as a symbol of his thirst for riches. If it is true, it was a fitting end for the man who killed Spartacus and had thousands of slaves crucified.

With this blow, the Triumvirate was dead. Now a struggle opened up between Caesar and Pompey for control of the Republic. In the persons of Pompey and Caesar the two rival focal points in the state came into hostile opposition. Pompey had at one time been a supporter of Sulla and the aristocracy, but subsequently flirted with the populares and became a close ally of Caesar. Now he joined the senate, and appeared as the defender of the Republic and the aristocratic party. On the other side stood Caesar with his legions. This contest between the two most powerful individualities could not be decided by peaceful debates in the senate.

Caesar was the supreme political opportunist, a man who knew how to subordinate means to ends, always acting with great resolve and the most unerring perspicuity, and executing his plans calmly, with the greatest vigor and practical skill. For Hegel, Caesar was right because “he furnished a mediating element, and that kind of political bond which men’s condition required.” In other words, Caesar balanced between the two opposing forces. But in the process, he concentrated all power into his hands. This is the real meaning of Caesarism.



Joseph-Marie Vien, Caesar before the statue (1767)

The class basis of Caesarism

Caesar the adventurer attracted to his banner all kinds of discontented elements, as Syme explains:

“When Caesar went to war with the government, avid and desperate men in his party terrified the holders of property. But not for long – they were a minority and could be held in check. The cause of Caesar’s heir was purely revolutionary in origin, attracting all the enemies of society – old soldiers who had dissipated gratuities and farms, fraudulent financiers, unscrupulous freedmen, ambitious sons of ruined families from the local gentry of the towns of Italy. The hazards were palpable, and so were the rewards – land, money and power, the estates and prerogatives of the nobility for their enjoyment, and the daughters of patricians for their brides.” (Ronald Syme, *The Roman revolution*, p.130, my emphasis, AW.)

These were the shock troops that he used as a battering ram to shatter the senate’s hold over state power. But the real class basis of Caesarism was not the lumpenproletarian rabble in Rome, but a section of the oligarchy: not the old established aristocratic families that dominated the senate and opposed him at every step, but that class of Roman capitalists, the “new men”, the bankers and financiers, especially in the provinces, who felt excluded from power and recognition and were greedy to lay their hands on the fruits of state power. These rich men imagined that they were using Caesar and the mob to advance their own interests, whereas in reality Caesar was using them (and their money) to grab power for himself. This relation has been repeated many times in later history, and has a close parallel with the relationship between the French bourgeoisie and Louis Bonaparte, and that between the German capitalist class and Hitler.

In spite of everything, Caesar was in difficulties. The murder of Clodius had weakened the leadership of the Popular Party. Cicero was using his very considerable oratorical and literary skills to attack Caesar. They had now succeeded in detaching Pompey from Caesar and were using his considerable authority to oppose him. His enemies still controlled the senate and Pompey’s army was still intact. Moreover Caesar’s conquests in Gaul were not as sure as they seemed. At any time, one or other of the tribes might rise up in revolt against the Roman oppressors.

Under these circumstances, it was essential for Caesar to keep hold of his office – and his army. If he lost his position even for a short time, he would be open to prosecution by his enemies at Rome:

“If he gave way now, it was the end. Returning to Rome a private citizen, Caesar would at once be prosecuted by his enemies for extortion or treason. They would secure lawyers reputed for eloquence, high principle and patriotism. Cato was waiting for him, rancorous and incorruptible. A jury carefully selected, with moral support from soldiers of Pompeius stationed around the court, would bring in the inevitable verdict. After that, nothing for Caesar but to join the exiled Milo at Massilia and enjoy the red mullet and Hellenic culture of that university city. Caesar was constrained to appeal to his army for protection.” (Ronald Syme, *The Roman revolution*, p.48.)

Syme's analysis is obviously correct. But it is open to serious doubt whether Caesar would be allowed to go into a comfortable exile where he could enjoy the fish cuisine for the rest of his days. It was far more likely that his enemies in Rome would hand him over to the public executioner. The question therefore arose as to what would happen when the period of his office was over. Would he voluntarily give up control of his legions? Here the question of state power as armed bodies of men emerges with full force.

In June 51 BC the question of Caesar's military leadership in Gaul was raised in the Senate. In the meantime, Pompey let it be known that he also had his differences with Caesar. It was now clear that the destiny of Rome would be settled in an open struggle between the two generals. Although the senate was theoretically in command, in reality it was already a spent force. It could issue decrees and make eloquent speeches, but ultimately everything boiled down to a show of naked force. Not speeches and resolutions, but swords and lances would decide matters.

Despite this evident fact, the senators continued to play out the constitutional farce. The strange and incurable disease, which Marx described as parliamentary cretinism, is by no means a modern invention. In November 50 BC the senators solemnly voted (by 370 votes to 22) that both Pompey and Caesar should dissolve their armies. Since neither man had the slightest intention of doing such a thing, this was a pointless exercise. In any case, it was clear that the senate needed Pompey's legions to use against Caesar. This is shown by the fact that the Consul elected that year took the step of leaving Rome and placing a sword in Pompey's hands.

For his part, Caesar showed that he understood how to play the game of constitutionalism as well as the senate. He sent letters to Rome laying out all the legal arguments that would justify his retaining control of his legions. The consul Lentulus, who belonged to the aristocratic party, proposed a motion in the senate that Caesar must lay down his military command by a specific date. This proposal was vetoed subsequently by the Tribunes, one of them a young supporter of Caesar called Marc Anthony. The time for constitutional ballet dancing was now clearly over. On 7th January Lentulus proposed the application of the so-called ultimate decree against those tribunes who had vetoed his proposal. Marc Anthony and his comrades understood the meaning of this and fled from Rome to join Caesar.

As a commander Caesar made use of the same psychological skills he had used in getting a mass base in Rome. He won popularity with his troops who thus became loyal to his person. He cemented this by promising them land. The Senate in Rome guessed his intentions and moved to prosecute him for his conduct as consul. A test of wills followed. The senate ordered him to return to Rome. He refused. This was tantamount to a declaration of war. Cicero, who hated Caesar, raged against "this insane, miserable fellow". Finally, the senate sent Pompey to oppose the rebel, arms in hand.

Caesar responded by a characteristically daring gesture. He was now in Cisalpine Gaul, with a relative small number of troops. It would seem that he stood no chance against Pompey's legions. Yet he did not hesitate for a

second. On 10th January he reached the little river Rubicon which traditionally constituted the northern frontier of Italy. To cross it at the head of an army would be an act of open rebellion. With a theatrical gesture and the famous words “the die is cast” he crossed the river. Typically, even the words he used come from the gambler’s vocabulary. That immortal phrase meant simply: there is no turning back. The civil war had started.

Caesar balances between the classes

Cicero, who stood for the Republic – that is to say, the interests of the old aristocratic senatorial party - was playing a double game. He had sided with Pompey because he hoped to use his old enemy to crush Caesar, after which the senate could dispose of Pompey and return to business as usual. The spectacle of civil war between the two erstwhile allies filled him with ill-concealed glee:

“The point at issue is this, and it is over this that the men in power are going to fight: Pompey has made up his mind not to let Caesar be elected consul without his first surrendering army and provinces, while Caesar is convinced that his personal security depends on his keeping his army ... So their old love-affair and their detestable alliance have not decayed into furtive bickering but have erupted into open war.”
(Cicero, Letters to Friends, VIII, 14.)

Cicero and the senate thought that Cesar could be easily defeated. They thought they could count on the cities of northern Italy to resist Caesar’s advance. They were mistaken. Despite their numerical disadvantage, Caesar’s forces advanced rapidly, meeting with little resistance. Part of the reason for this was that Italy had been plundered and exploited for too long, and the provincials were now utterly indifferent to the fate of Rome and its Senate. The other reason was that Caesar’s agents had already bribed the Latin cities to stay out of the conflict.

Cicero complained bitterly that many wealthy Latin families were only too pleased to accept this offer to remain neutral in the civil war. As often

happens in history, the men of wealth were not anxious to place their lands and fortunes at stake even in a conflict in which their class interests were involved. Even in Rome many wealthy families that had supported the senate tried to remain neutral once the fighting began in earnest. They tried to remain on good terms with both sides, until it became clear which side was more likely to win.

Always a smart politician, Caesar encouraged these wavering enemies in the belief that he was not so bad after all. He spread the idea that he was a defender of Liberty and that the name of Caesar was synonymous with “clemency”. To back up this impression, he sent letters to Pompey offering peace on the most generous terms. Even his most implacable enemy Cicero was fooled by this and agreed to act as mediator between the two generals. But this was all a farce designed to win time for Caesar and disarm the enemy.

Unlike Cicero, Pompey was not fooled. Alarmed at Caesar’s rapid advance (he had expected more help from the Latins), Pompey hastily left the City and went South to the port of Brindisium, where he set sail for Greece. He sent messages to the senate that this was just a tactical move to gather the necessary forces in the provinces with which to defend Rome. As a matter of fact, this was probably true. Thinking in purely military terms, Pompey realised that it was pointless to try to make a stand against Caesar in Italy. His idea was to regroup his armies in Greece, from which he could command the riches of the East and slowly strangle Rome by cutting off its supplies of corn from Egypt. This was not a bad idea. After all, how long could Caesar retain his support of the Roman populace once they had no bread to eat?

Pompey’s military reasoning may have been sound, but politically his decision to abandon Rome was a disaster, and in a civil war, factors relating to politics and morale play an even more decisive role than in other wars. To the senate and the people of Rome it looked like panic and an act of cowardly betrayal. Caesar’s veteran army, hardened by years of warfare in

Gaul, sliced through the opposition like a hot knife through butter. The senate's resistance collapsed. Towns and villages opened their gates along the way and Caesar stood before the gates of Rome, his enemies having fled. The city was now at the mercy of Caesar. The Senate awaited its fate like a condemned man waiting for the morning of his execution, while the populace awaited its Liberator with suppressed elation. Both were in for a surprise.

Caesar's tactic from the beginning was to manoeuvre between the classes to concentrate the state power into his hands. When in April 49 BC he finally appeared before Rome, he did not order his army to enter and sack the city but, observing the laws and customs, halted respectfully at the gates. The aristocratic party must have been astonished. All of a sudden, the noose that had been tightening around their plump necks, slackened. Yes, Caesar seemed to say to them, I respect the rule of law and the sacred constitutional rights of the Roman Senate. But like so much of the politics of the period this was just play-acting. Caesar was prepared to let the senate retain the shadow of power, and encouraged them in the belief that they were still in charge, as long as he held the real power firmly in his hands.

The real state of affairs was quickly revealed. Caesar was now in complete command of the situation. He entered Rome in triumph at the head of his army. As the crowds roared their adulation, a slave stood behind him on the chariot whispering in his ear: "Remember, you are only a man". All this was done in the name of the senate and the Roman people. But the senate was powerless in the face of his military might. It meekly named him dictator, which was supposed to be a temporary position for a six-month period.

As always, Caesar's actions were determined by two fundamental considerations: money and force, and the two were closely linked. His real power base was the legions, but soldiers have to be paid. Ever since he had left Gaul he had been promising to reward his troops handsomely for their services. Unfortunately, although he had huge quantities of loot in Gaul, he lacked ready cash to make good his promises. This had already led to one

mutiny and he could not afford discontent among the troops to spread any further. They now held Rome and its treasure within their grasp and there was no time to be lost. Caesar demanded the keys to the Treasury as a matter of urgency. But one of the tribunes, acting in the name of the laws and the constitution, refused, whereupon Caesar showed the precise limits of laws and constitutions by threatening to kill him. Needless to say, the gates of the Treasury were opened rather quickly.

Pharsalia

Having established his base in Rome, Caesar now took the initiative on the military front. He first went to Spain where, with some difficulties, he smashed Pompey's most important base of support. The truth is that at this stage in the conflict, the result was still in the balance and at one point it looked as if Caesar would be defeated. But in the end his adventurer's luck did not desert him. The stage was now set for the decisive battle against Pompey in Greece, where the latter was attempting to assemble a powerful army.

Caesar had the support of the plebeian masses in Rome and the Popular Party, although he himself was an aristocrat, a member of the tribe of the Julii, one of Rome's oldest families. He was supposed to be fighting for the rights and freedom of the People, whereas Pompey was supposed to be fighting for the rights and freedom of the senate and to defend the Republic. The problem was that these rights and freedoms were mutually exclusive. The Republic and its institutions had been long monopolised by a privileged aristocracy of slave-holders, and behind the banner of the Republic it was the rights and freedoms of these wealthy exploiters that were what was really being defended.

Caesar made himself master in succession, of Italy, Spain, and Greece, and finally routed his enemy at Pharsalia in Greece. This battle finally decided the destiny of the Roman Republic, although in reality it was settled long before. In reality, Caesar and Pompey represented different factions of the same oligarchy. In the words of Ronald Syme:

“The ambition of generals like Pompeius and Caesar provoked civil war without intending or achieving a revolution. Caesar, being in close contact with powerful financial interests and representatives of the landed gentry, was averse from any radical redistribution of property in Italy. He maintained the grants of Sulla. Further, many of his colonies were established on provincial soil, sparing Italy. A party prevailed when Caesar defeated Pompeius – yet the following of Caesar was by no means homogeneous, and the Dictator stood above parties. He did not champion one class against another. If he had begun a revolution, his next act was to stem its advance, to consolidate the existing order.” (Ronald Syme, *The Roman revolution*, p.194.)

If Pompey had succeeded in defeating Caesar, the outcome would have not been substantially different. Instead of one gang of marauding Mafiosi, there would have been a different gang in charge. That is all. Almost certainly the dictatorship of Pompey would have been more open and bloody, like that of Sulla, whereas the dictatorship of Caesar was more discrete and hypocritical, and one-man rule was disguised by the fig-leaf of “respect” for the Republic and its laws and constitution. But whoever won, in reality the old Republic was dead. All that was left was a name and an empty husk that was ready to be blown away by the slightest breeze.

“This important change must not be regarded as a thing of chance; it was necessary – postulated by the circumstances. The democratic constitution could no longer be really maintained in Rome, but only kept up in appearance.” (Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 311)

Cicero and the other leaders of the republican faction attributed the corrupt state of the republic to individuals and their passions. Cato said of Caesar: “His virtues be damned, for they have ruined my country!” They therefore considered that to preserve the Roman Republic was to eliminate its chief adversary. This showed a complete failure to understand the nature of the state and of the Roman State in particular. As Hegel points out:

“But it was not the mere accident of Caesar’s existence that destroyed the Republic – it was Necessity. All the tendencies of the Roman principle were to sovereignty and military force: it contained in it no spiritual centre which it could make the object, occupation, and enjoyment of its Spirit. The aim of patriotism – that of preserving the State – ceases when the lust of personal dominion becomes the impelling passion. The citizens were alienated from the state, for they found in it no objective satisfaction;” (ibid.)

The Republic died because it could no longer exist. In Cicero’s writings we see how all public affairs were decided by the private authority of the more eminent citizens – by their power, their wealth. All political transactions were accompanied by riots, murders and tumult. There was no longer any security for the rich, or satisfaction for the poor. Such conditions, if they are prolonged without any perspective of a lasting solution, inevitably give rise to a yearning for stability, and consequently the emergence of the Party of Order, which must be expressed by subordination of all to a single will: the rule of a Strong Man.

In this civil war many interests were at stake. In most cases on both sides it was a case of naked self-interest, a desire either to defend existing fortunes (frequently the result of the looting and confiscations carried out by previous regimes, notably that of the dictator Sulla) or, on the contrary, to seize the estates and offices of those who held them. But there were some idealists, like Cicero and Brutus, who seemed to be genuinely attached to the cause of Republicanism and were convinced that they were fighting for “freedom”, whereas in the opposing camp there must have been others who believed exactly the same thing.

Among those who had joined Pompey’s force was Cicero, the most outspoken opponent of Caesar, who, however, was shocked by what he saw and heard in Pompey’s camp. Here he soon grasped the reality of the situation as he listened, horrified, to the bragging speeches of Pompey and

his officers. "His words were so bloodthirsty that I trembled to think of his victory," he wrote.

These gangsters were already sharing out the plunder and offices that they would obtain, even before they had won the war. But one little detail had escaped them: the war was not won. Pompey also made a serious political blunder: he had called upon the kings of eastern lands to come to his aid. This was a propaganda gift to Caesar, who, as we have already noted, was a very skilled propagandist. When it became known in Rome that Pompey was enlisting the aid of barbarian kings to conquer Rome, Pompey's support, already weakened by his desertion of Rome, plummeted, while that of Caesar's party increased in the same measure.

Revolutions and counterrevolutions are always a struggle of living forces. Pompey was taken by surprise by the rapid reaction of Caesar's forces, which, against all accepted practice, crossed the sea in the dangerous winter season and entered Greece with a relatively small force, which was later reinforced by Mark Anthony. On at least two occasions after he landed in Greece it looked as if Caesar had lost. The second of these occasions was the famous battle on the plains of Pharsalia in Thessaly, where, on the ninth of August 48 BC, the two armies met.

Pompey's forces enjoyed a considerable advantage in numbers. Despite this, the ever-cautious Pompey did not want to engage in combat with Caesar's veteran army. The fact was that Caesar was in serious difficulties at this point. His supplies were running out, whereas Pompey, who controlled all the main cities, had plenty of food. Therefore, despite the unfavourable balance of forces, Caesar was desperate to provoke a battle there and then, or else withdraw his army. His initial efforts failed to provoke Pompey, who only agreed to go into battle reluctantly under the pressure of the other leaders. These men were arrogant and over-confident, and, unlike Pompey, they underestimated Caesar's army. They paid a heavy price for this excessive confidence.

The result of this battle was by no means preordained. Pompey commanded 45,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalry, against Caesar's total force of 22,000. His troops were well fed and rested, whereas those of Caesar were undernourished, tired after many exertions, and had already suffered one serious defeat at the hands of the Pompeians. On the other hand, Caesar's troops were seasoned veterans of the Gallic wars, whereas many of the opposite side were inexperienced. Above all, the result of the battle was determined by superior leadership – the over-cautious and defensive Pompey versus the bold and energetic adventurer, Caesar. Here, once again, we see the correctness of Danton's famous advice to revolutionaries: "Audacity, audacity, and yet more audacity!"

Before the battle, as was usual, Caesar delivered a speech to his troops to boost their morale. The man who rebelled against the legal authority of the senate now attempted to justify his rebellion to his soldiers. According to Lucan, who wrote the most famous account of the battle, he used a most striking phrase: "What, after all, is an illegal act? The answer depends upon who judges it after the battle is over." (Lucan, *Pharsalia*, Penguin edition, p. 157) He reassured them that, in spite of the disparity in numbers, the quality of Pompey's forces was infinitely inferior to their own, appealing to Roman national pride and contempt for foreigners, Greeks and barbarians: "Do not think that you have a serious task ahead of you. Pompey's army consists largely of levies from the Greek gymnasia, trained in wrestling and athletics but hardly able to carry a full weight of arms and equipment, let alone use them; and of undisciplined barbarians, shouting gibberish to each other, who hate fighting and even marching." (ibid. p.158)

He also warned them of the consequences of a defeat: "Today will decide whether we are to be or punished for going to war. Picture to yourselves what will happen if Pompey beats us: Caesar dragged off in chains, Caesar crucified, Caesar's head cut off and displayed on the Rostrum, Caesar's body left unburied! And do not forget how Sulla behaved, the Sulla against whose pupil Pompey we are fighting the second civil war. He promised to spare 6,000 Marian prisoners, yet butchered them in the voting pens of the

Campus Martius.” So defeat would mean certain death, whereas victory would mean an end to all their suffering: “You need not pause to think where you will sleep tonight; Pompey’s troops have comfortable quarters, which you will take over from them.” (ibid. p. 159)

In this battle, Mark Anthony distinguished himself as the leader of Caesar’s army on the left wing. To the astonishment of Pompey, his army gave way and was routed. He never recovered from the blow. After the battle, Pompey complained bitterly that he had been betrayed by the cavalry, who outnumbered Caesar’s mounted troops almost two to one. The bulk of this elite corps was composed of pampered young aristocrats, who entered the battle with the same mentality with which they would go on a fox-hunt. Caesar understood only too well the psychology of these spoilt brats of the rich. He carefully prepared an ambush, concealing a band of infantrymen, who emerged suddenly to confront the enemy cavalry, taking them by surprise.

Caesar advised his soldiers to strike at the faces of the young patricians, because they would be more afraid of good looks spoiled than of being wounded in any other part of their anatomy. This proved to be very sound advice: the Pompeian cavalry panicked and fled, which was a key factor that decided Caesar’s victory. Realising that the battle was lost, Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was immediately murdered on the orders of the rulers of that country, anxious to win the favours of the victors – and keep the Roman army out of Egypt, which was formally an independent state.

The dictatorship of Caesar

News of Caesar’s victory reached Rome in October, but he did not return for a period of nine months. This period was spent in the East, mainly in Egypt where, as is well known, Caesar entered into an amorous relationship with Cleopatra. In addition to fathering a son with the Egyptian princess and putting down a dangerous rebellion, Caesar also led a short and successful military expedition against Parthia (it was at this time that he was supposed

to have uttered the celebrated words: “I came, I saw, I conquered” (“Veni, vidi, vici”).

Naturally, in all this time he did not neglect business. His conquests in the East provided him with a new supply of booty, with which to replenish his depleted coffers in Rome. The cash was much needed, since unpaid soldiers are likely to mutiny, which is what they did, forcing him to return to Italy in haste. Marc Anthony did not show his master’s skill in dealing with this situation, probably because his attentions appear to have been fully occupied by a beautiful mistress.

Having secured the East, Caesar returned to Rome with a spectacular triumph, which further strengthened his position and weakened that of his enemies. In the course of four days in August 46 BC huge processions wound their way through the streets of Rome including a statue of Cleopatra together with Venus (who was supposed to be Caesar’s ancestor). After the processions came the games, a lavish spectacle including wild beast hunts, in which for the first time giraffes were seen in Rome. The whole extravaganza ended with a feast. In Caesar’s absence there had been a shortage of grain, and now the populace looked to their saviour to provide all their needs. This extravagant show must have cost him a fortune.

He continued to use his wealth to bribe his opponents and his legions were never far away in the background to intimidate them if that became necessary. Having installed himself as master of Rome, Caesar took care not to push the aristocratic party too far. His measures were surprisingly moderate – and therefore disappointing to the Popular Party.

Unlike his aristocratic forerunner Sulla, and against all expectations, Caesar did not launch a reign of terror, with proscriptions and executions of his enemies and the confiscation of their property. In those cases where estates were taken from his rivals and ended up in the hands of his supporters, they were auctioned or sold. All this was intended to win over the rich and powerful to Caesar’s cause and to neutralise the extreme Republicans. This

explains why he so quickly “forgave” many of his enemies and tried to attach them to his cause.

Although he posed as “the People’s Friend”, and had leaned on the masses to strike blows against the Senate and the aristocratic party, Caesar had absolutely no intention of handing power to the lumpenproletariat. That is why, once he was installed at Rome, he made strenuous attempts to conciliate the aristocratic party. This must have come as a disagreeable surprise to his partisans on the streets, who expected to be allowed to loot and burn the houses of the rich as soon as Caesar returned. Instead, he kept strict order on the streets.

In fact, as soon as he was in power Caesar took measures to clip the wings of the Popular Party by banning all clubs and associations unless they had a license (very few did). The dictator was not willing to share power either with the aristocratic or with the Popular Party. Why should he? The new ruler of Rome must appear as a force above all classes, representing “the State”. This is a common feature in all Caesarist or Bonapartist regimes.

He severely restricted the number of people eligible to receive dole in the form of free grain. But the army was another matter. The bill for the army was by now colossal, since every soldier was due to receive the equivalent of a lifetime’s wages, as well as a plot of land. The discontent in the army had already led to more than one mutiny. Caesar could not afford another one. When some of his soldiers protested about the lavish spectacle put on by Caesar on his return from Egypt he had them immediately executed and their heads displayed in the Forum “to encourage the others”. But had to take care to preserve and strengthen his real power base – the army. He therefore used the money looted from the East to pay the soldiers and created new colonies to give to his soldiers land on retirement (a very important objective for a Roman soldier).

To some extent this measure was used to resettle part of the poor population in Rome. This was doubtless a popular measure, which was

intended to remind the masses that “Caesar was on the people’s side” and to arouse echoes of the tradition of the Gracchi and the populares in the past. However, these schemes had nothing in common with the revolutionary agrarian policies of the Gracchi. In the first place there must have also have been disappointment that these new lands were not in Italy but in the provinces. By this means Caesar could go some way to satisfying the masses’ hunger for land but without expropriating the big latifundia of the slave-owners in Italy.

The convulsions, revolutions and civil wars of the previous half century meant that many Romans and Italians had fallen seriously into debt, and the harsh laws governing such situations threw these men completely at the mercy of voracious money lenders, casting many of them into utter destitution. Caesar was aware of this, and the dangers that it posed to social stability. But what was to be done? He faced a dilemma that was well expressed by the historian Michael Grant:

“On the one hand, something must obviously be done to rescue the ruined debtors. On the other hand, however, the rehabilitation of these unfortunate men must not be allowed to turn into a general cancellation of debts, which would destroy private property, the basis of the entire social system, and thus plunge Rome into a state of revolution: and that was what even moderate conservatives greatly feared.

“During the months that had elapsed since the beginning of the civil war, the debt crisis had become much greater. This was partly because of a shortage of currency. Money had been withdrawn from circulation to be hoarded until times became better, and such cash as could still be found had gone to pay the rival armies. This meant that whereas debtors were now receiving pressing claims for repayment, they were unable to respond to them and had to forfeit their land and other possessions instead, at wretched prices. So Caesar now began a long, patient series of attempts to deal with this harrowing situation. First, the hoarding of coin was forbidden – though such a veto,

unsupported by other measures, was not very likely to prove effective. Secondly, creditors, if offered land and other property in repayment of their loans, were compelled to accept them. But in order that they should not be allowed to pay too cheap a price, Caesar also laid it down that the prices should be assessed at the sums the property in question had been worth before the civil war began – these assessments to be made by commissioners specially appointed for the purpose.

“Creditors, of course, complained bitterly. But some of them were prepared to admit that they had expected even worse. At least Caesar had not proved the totally revolutionary destroyer of private property that he had been widely feared to be. Indeed, it was reassuring for property owners to note that, even if the senior senators were against him on political grounds, the able financiers were mostly on his side. So confidence began to come back, and men started to lend money once again.” (Michael Grant, Caesar, pp. 121-2.)

To placate the poor he introduced some restrictions on the laws relating to debt and bankruptcy and suspending rents for twelve months. However, he failed to cancel all debts – one of the most pressing demands of his supporters. One of the reasons for this was that Caesar himself was owed huge sums of money by many people who he had “helped” (and turned into clients) by lending them money in the past. It was now time to call in these debts – or at least to remind the debtors of where their loyalties lay. To Caesar, cancelling debts would be like cutting off an arm – or probably some other, even more painful, extremity. None of his measures came close to touching the property of the slave owners.

This fact explains many things. History knows many revolutions and it is customary to refer to the changes made by Caesar and his followers as “the Roman Revolution”. But in fact it was a revolution that affected only the political superstructure. It did not alter in any way the existing property relations in society. In the end the same slave-owning aristocracy remained

the ruling class and continued to hold economic power just as before. But it lost control of the state apparatus, and was compelled reluctantly to hand power to a military strong man.

The aristocracy was forced to share its loot with a gang of adventurers, Mafiosi and banditi, which protected them against the masses and kept order but extracted a heavy price for its services. Trotsky once compared Bonapartist and Fascist regimes to the legend of the Old man of the Sea, who sits on the shoulders of the ruling class and guides it to safety, but at the same time digs his heels into its side and spits on its bald patch.

All attempts to revive a corpse that is already beginning to smell bad are doomed to failure. The Roman Republic was by now dead because the old economic and class relations that created it had disappeared long since. Caesar only gave it a shove and it collapsed. All that was left was an empty husk, which was blown away by the first puff of wind.

Caesar balanced between the classes, now appealing to the poor against the rich, now leaning on the rich to suppress the poor. He used the Popular Party to defeat the aristocracy, and then lined up with the Party of Order to suppress his erstwhile supporters. But all the time he was concentrating power into his own hands. Caesar kept up the appearance of maintaining the Republic, and the senate thanked him for it by licking his boots.

When he had first entered Rome after crossing the Rubicon the senate granted him dictatorial powers but only for eleven days (just enough time to rig the consular elections). Later it made him dictator for four months, one year, ten years and finally for life. His triumphant return from Egypt gave this august body an excellent opportunity to display its utter servility before the military jackboot. It heaped honours upon him. It even voted to erect in the heart of Rome a statue of Caesar on a chariot with a globe in his hand and an inscription designating him a semi-god.

A rebellion in Spain led by Pompey's sons was quickly put down and when the news of Caesar's victory reached Rome the senate once again lost no time in grovelling before their new Master, upon whom they bestowed the title (replete with unconscious irony) "the Liberator", and even consecrating a temple to Liberty in his honour. Later he was granted unprecedented honours: sacrifices on his birthday (something reserved for kings in Greek mythology), annual prayers for his health and well-being and so the list goes on and on. And while the Senate heaped honours and praises on Caesar, with every passing day he was strengthening his power and forging new chains for the Republic.

Caesar's Party was now the Party of Order, with its boots placed firmly on the neck of the Senate and the Roman People. It was also the war party. Partly, this was to add to Caesar's greatness. But it had a more immediate and practical aim: it was the only way to fill the state's coffers. The economic crisis at Rome was unprecedented. After years of revolutions, upheavals and civil war, the treasury was bankrupt. Yet Caesar distributed land to his veterans and ordered the construction of lavish public works – libraries, canals, even a harbour. To pay for all this, there had to be new wars every year, like the war against Parthia.

Pursuing his internal revolution, Caesar increased the number of senators to reward his own Party and undermine the old aristocracy. In order to reward his supporters, Caesar doubled the number of senators. But far from increasing the Senate's weight and power, this was merely another way of expressing its irrelevance. All the real decisions were now taken by Caesar and his entourage. From his point of view it made sense to pack this talking-shop with loyal supporters and thus weaken still further the specific gravity of the old aristocratic Party. What was the composition of Caesar's party and the character of those adherents with whom he stuffed the Senate? Syme writes:

"Many of Caesar's partisans were frank adventurers, avid for gain and advancement, some for revolution. (...) Caesar's following was

heterogeneous in composition – at its kernel a small group of men paramount in social distinction, not merely nobiles but patrician; on the outer fringe, many excellent Roman knights, ‘the flower of Italy’.”
(Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, p.51.)

These “excellent knights” (equites) were Roman capitalists, as Michael Grant points out:

“Bankers, industrialists and farmers [...] represented Caesar’s personal backing: and this broadening of the senate proved one of his most permanent achievements.

“And if he arranged, as he did, that the senators should be the men he wanted he also found ways to mould the leading offices of state to his own pattern. Under his direction as dictator, the annual elections to the consulships and other offices still continued. But he secured the passage of a law allowing him to ‘recommend’ quite openly to a large proportion of the more important posts – and indeed to fix who their holders should be, for a number of years ahead. In the old days the consuls had been rulers of the state. Now, they were convenient henchmen for Caesar: and their posts were appropriate ones to hand to loyal supporters as a recompense for their services.” (Michael Grant, *Caesar*, p. 185.)

The huge increase in the numbers of senators was therefore not just a means of diluting the senatorial power and increasing that of Caesar: it was also very good for business. Naturally, those promoted to senatorial rank (many of whom were provincials from Gaul and Spain with no connection with the old senatorial aristocracy) would not only be grateful to their benefactor but would also be anxious to express their gratitude by paying important sums of money into his coffers

The assassination of Caesar

Caesar announced a reform of the calendar with 365 days – the basis of our modern calendar. Behind this was a definite idea. The old calendar was in a mess, and he wished to introduce order out of chaos at all levels. The Party of Order decided even what day of the week it was! Naturally, one of the months was named after him (July). He appeared in a purple toga – this being the colour traditionally associated with royalty. He had himself declared dictator for life – although it was supposed to be a temporary office. Finally, he consorted with the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, though still married to Calpurnia, his third wife. In other words, he was behaving like an Oriental despot.

Inevitably, the question was raised of making Caesar king. It is likely that these rumours were spread by his enemies as a provocation. The title of king was hated in Rome ever since the distant days when the Tarquins were expelled from the city. Caesar, who in practice enjoyed almost all of the attributes of a monarch, understood very well the risks entailed in accepting such a title. On one occasion, his faithful supporter and friend Marc Anthony publicly offered him a golden crown, which he made a great show of rejecting, hurling it away from his person with great force.

It is obvious that the whole thing was a prearranged show designed to prove to the people that he had no ambitions to wear a crown. And why should he? A man who holds real power in his hands is not interested in possessing the outward signs and insignia of power. On the contrary, Caesar was quite content that an impotent senate should carry such meaningless insignia, as long as it was he, and not they, who actually ruled. Caesar did not overthrow the Republic, but only its empty shadow of a thing that already lacked all real substance. Hegel understood the situation every well:

“His position was indeed hostile to the republic, but, properly speaking, only to its shadow; for all that remained of that republic was entirely powerless. Pompey, and all those who were on the side of the senate, exalted their *dignitas auctoritas* – their individual rule – as the power of

the republic; and the mediocrity which needed protection took refuge under this title. Caesar put an end to the empty formalism of this title, made himself master, and held together the Roman world by force, in opposition to isolated factions.” (Hegel, op. cit., p. 313)

The diehard republicans could only curse under their breath as they witnessed the inexorable decline of the senatorial power. Conservative republicans like Cicero had to be content with whispering in corners or writing sarcastic letters like the following:

“At one o’clock Caesar announced the election of a consul to serve until 1 January – which was the next morning. So I can inform you that in Caninius’ consulship no one had lunch. Still, nothing untoward occurred while he was consul: such was his vigilance that throughout his consulship he did not sleep a wink.

“Yes, you may laugh, but you aren’t here. If you were, you could not help weeping. What if I told you everything? There are countless similar instances.” (Cicero, Letters to Friends, VII, 30.)

In this way, Rome, and all its world-wide sovereignty became the property of a single man. The extreme republican wing of the aristocratic party was implacable in its opposition to Caesar, whose connections with Cleopatra and the kings and despots of the East made his intentions even more suspect. The aristocrats stifled their indignation when Caesar sent a Gaul into the Senate but could do nothing about it except complain furtively for fear of Caesar’s spies, who were everywhere. The enemies of Caesar, however, were now on the defensive.

While the majority of the senate acted in a cowardly fashion in surrendering power to a man they hated and despised as much as they feared, the extreme republican faction, feeling the last vestiges of power slipping inexorably from their hands, resorted to desperate measures; they decided to get rid of Caesar. A decisive step was taken in the summer of the year 44

BC, when the senate finally voted to make Caesar dictator for life. This was the final act of self-abasement of this miserable and spineless group of men. But for some this was the last straw.

A conspiracy was organized by a small group of senators headed by Brutus and Cassius, who hit on a plan childish in its simplicity: the problem was Caesar, and therefore his removal was the solution. Once Caesar was assassinated the Republic would be restored and everything would be as it was before. Cicero, Brutus and Cassius imagined that Caesar's rule to be a mere accident, and that the entire position of affairs to be dependent on his individuality.

The chief organizer of the conspiracy was Gaius Cassius Longinus, a man with great practical energy who had come over to Caesar's side after the battle of Pharsalus, but who evidently thought he had not been sufficiently rewarded for his services. He won over his brother-in-law, Marcus Brutus, who had a special place in Caesar's affections (some thought he was Caesar's natural son). Brutus is generally held to be a man of noble character ("This was the noblest Roman of them all", wrote Shakespeare). But he defended the same class interests as the others: the interests of the old aristocratic senatorial class.

The conspirators believed that if this one individual were out of the way, the Republic would be ipso facto restored. Possessed by this delusion, they plotted the assassination of the individual who, in their mind, was responsible for all their ills. The outcome of all this is well known. On the 15th March, only days before he was due to leave for a military campaign in the East, Caesar was murdered on his way to the senate. One of the great mysteries is why he had no real protection. He had even dismissed his personal bodyguard of Spaniards. Was this an excess of confidence? Or was it the result of his fatalistic Stoic philosophy, as Shakespeare implies:

"Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.

Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.” (Julius Caesar, 2.2.34)

Whatever the reason, the conspirators had it easy. They surrounded Caesar, who, having been stabbed 23 times, finally covered his face in his cloak and collapsed. According to Suetonius, when Brutus struck his blow, Caesar said: “You too, my son.” The conspiracy succeeded in its immediate objective. But his murder could not save the Republic. It immediately became clear that the Roman State had been transformed, and it was impossible to put the clock back.

The conspirators imagined that by eliminating one man they could save the system. But the results of their actions were diametrically opposed to their intentions. Instead of restoring the Republic, they only succeeded in ushering in the Empire. The problem of this analysis is that its basic assumption was false. All attempts to revive a corpse that is already beginning to smell bad are doomed to failure. The Republic was dead because the old economic and class relations that created it had disappeared long since. Caesar only gave it a shove and it collapsed. All that was left was an empty husk, which was blown away by the first puff of wind.

Even the tactics adopted by the conspirators revealed a fatal weakness. Individual terrorism is always an expression of weakness. The assassins believed that one bold stroke for “liberty” would galvanise the old aristocratic party to fight in its own defence. But that Party was already in ruins, split and demoralised. It was not even prepared to fight in its own defence. As Michael Grant says:

“Curiously blinkered by their own traditions, the Roman nobility just did not realize that they could not simply pick up the threads where it had dropped them at the beginning of the Civil War. For the power was no

longer theirs to recapture: it had passed forever into the hands of the general who could marshal the most formidable armed forces.” (M. Grant, Caesar, p. 198)

The Second Triumvirate

In the moment of truth Brutus and the other conspirators found themselves isolated and rapidly crushed. By their actions, far from saving the Republic, they accelerated its destruction. The leader of the Caesarist Party was at first Marc Anthony, who took advantage of the outrage of the mob at Caesar’s murder to consolidate his position. In the confused and turbulent situation that followed, he was forced to manoeuvre and arrive at an uneasy compromise with Brutus and Cassius, who were allowed to leave Rome and establish a base in the East.

Anthony was greedy for power and lost no opportunity to fill his pockets, as Syme points out: “Invective asserts, and history repeats, that the consul Antonius embezzled the sum of seven hundred million sesterces deposited in Rome at the Temple of Ops.” (Ronald Syme, The Roman revolution, p.131.)

But Anthony’s position was still insecure, and he had an important rival for the leadership of the Caesarist Party: a clever, cold and calculating young man called Gaius Octavius, who was Caesar’s great-nephew. Since Caesar had no children by Calpurnia, and they had adopted Octavian, he was also Caesar’s legal heir. At first, they were on a direct collision course. But in November 43 BC they patched up their differences and formed the Second Triumvirate together with Lepidus.

In 42 BC, they went onto the offensive, defeating Brutus and Cassius at Philippi. In September 40 BC, the Triumvirs agreed to divide the Republic into spheres of influence. Octavian took control of the West, while Antony took over the East, and Lepidus was left with Spain and Africa. This pact was known as the Brundisium Agreement. It could not last. Octavian, who had boundless ambition, started calling himself "Divi filius" ("son of the

God"). This was a direct imitation of Caesar, who had been deified as Divus Iulius ("the Divine Julius"). Later he simply styled himself "Imperator Caesar". Imperator, a military term for a victorious general, is the origin of our word Emperor.

The methods of the Caesarists are described by Ronald Syme:

“Nor would Antonius and his associates have behaved as they did, could security and power be won in any other way. The consequences of compelling a general to appeal to his army in defence of life or honour were now apparent – the generals themselves were helpless in the hands of the legions. The proletariat of Italy, long exploited and thwarted, seized what they regarded as their just portion. A social revolution was now carried out, in two stages, the first to provide money for the war, the second to reward the Caesarian legions after victory.

“War and the threat of taxation or confiscation drives money underground. It must be lured out again. Capital could only be tempted by a good investment. The Caesarian leaders therefore seized houses and estates and put them on the market. Their own partisans, astute neutrals and freedmen of the commercial class got value for their money in the solid form of landed property. Freedmen, as usual, batted upon the blood of citizens.

“The proscriptions may not unfairly be regarded as in purpose and essence a peculiar levy upon capital. As in Sulla’s proscription, nobles and political adversaries might head the list: the bulk is made up by the names of obscure senators or Roman knights. The nobles were not necessarily the wealthiest of the citizens: men of property, whatever their station, were the real enemies of the Triumvirs. In concord, senators and business men upheld the existing order and prevented a reconstitution of the old Roman People through a more equitable division of landed property in Italy; now they were companions in

adversity. The beneficiaries of Sulla suffered at last. The Triumvirs declared a regular vendetta against the rich, whether dim, inactive senators or pacific knights, anxiously abstaining from Roman politics. That was no defence.” (Ronald Syme, *The Roman revolution*, pp.194-5.)

The real class basis of Octavian was the same as that of Caesar: the big bankers and capitalists of Rome. Octavian not only had the opportunity of robbing the State Treasury. He also had behind him the richest men in Rome:

“The diversion of public funds was not enough. Octavianus also won the support of private investors, among them some of the wealthiest bankers of Rome. Atticus, who refused to finance the war-chest of the Liberators, would not have looked at this venture. No matter: Caesar’s heir secured almost at once the financial secretaries and political agents of the Dictator. Among the first Caesarians to be approached in April was the millionaire Balbus. Balbus could keep his counsel, and time has respected his secrets. No record survives of his services to Caesar’s heir. After November he slips out of history for four years: the manner of his return shows that he had not been inactive. The Caesarian Rabirius Postumus also shows up, as would be expected, benevolent and alert in any shady transactions. Along with Matius and Saserna he advanced money for the celebration of the games in July.” (Ronald Syme, *The Roman revolution*, p.131.)

Sooner or later Octavian was bound to come into a head-on collision with Marc Anthony for possession of the immense wealth of Egypt and the East. First Octavian got rid of Lepidus, the weakest link in the Triumvirate, who leaned towards Marc Anthony. Then he manoeuvred to turn public opinion in Rome against Marc Anthony, using his relations with Queen Cleopatra to discredit him. He illegally obtained Anthony’s will in July 32 BC, and exposed it to the Roman public: it promised substantial legacies to

Anthony's children by Cleopatra, and instructed that his body should be shipped to Alexandria for burial.

These shocking revelations caused outrage in Rome, and the ground was psychologically prepared for war. At the Battle of Actium in Greece (September, 31 BC), Octavian's forces decisively defeated those of Antony and Cleopatra, although by all accounts the battle itself was a bit of a farce, ending in Octavian's fleet chasing the enemy back to Egypt, where Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide. All power was now concentrated in the hands of one man – Octavian, who is known to history as Augustus, the first Emperor of Rome.

The natural result of Caesarism was the Empire, where all traces of the old Republic vanished without trace. The hypocritical Augustus kept up the pretence of respect for the Senate and the Republican forms, but everybody knew that it was just pretence. His followers did not even pretend. Caesar scandalised people by sending a Gaul into the Senate. When the emperor Caligula made his favourite horse a senator, everybody knew that this action expressed very well the real situation.

Today we conclude the series on the class struggles in the Roman Republic. The death of the Roman Republic meant the rise of Caesarism, a phenomenon with many similarities to modern Bonapartism. In his final contribution, Alan Woods explains the reason for this, and compares the period of the collapse of the Roman Republic to the situation today. The epoch of the senile decay of capitalism provides many striking parallels.

“Two mighty camps are locked in irreconcilable conflict. Neither side can win by parliamentary means. Neither would willingly accept a decision unfavourable to it. Such a split in society foreshadows a civil war. The threat of civil war creates a need in the ruling class for an arbiter and commander, for a Caesar. That precisely is the function of Bonapartism.” (Leon Trotsky, *The German Puzzle*, August 1932.)

In the last analysis, the movement of history is determined by the development of the productive forces and the changes in class relations that result from them. These constitute the solid ground upon which rises the complex superstructure of legal forms, constitutions, governments and the state, morality and religion, philosophical schools and so on. However, the relation between all these elements is complex and contradictory, and not at all easy to determine.

Marxism explains that economics is the dominant factor in social development. However, the superstructure that arises on this economic base tends to raise itself above this base and enters into contradiction to it. Gradually, changes in production within the old society gives rise to a contradiction, which can only be resolved by bringing the super-structure into line with the new conditions, bringing about a complete reorganization of society on the base of the new mode of production.

This is the essence of a genuine social revolution. But there are other kinds of revolution, which do not bring about a fundamental change in economic relations, but affect only the superstructure and the political relations between different layers of the ruling class. Such revolutions we call political revolutions. The so-called Roman Revolution that finished off the Republic and ushered in the Empire was precisely of this kind.

In circumstances where the class struggle reaches deadlock, the inherent tendency of the state (“armed bodies of men”) to rise above society and acquire a certain independence becomes accentuated. The ruling class can lose control of its own state. This is a dialectical contradiction that formalistic minds find it impossible to grasp. But history furnishes us with many examples of this phenomenon.

The state

Let us take the question of the state. Engels explains that the state arose to prevent the class struggle from destroying society. The state “regulates” the struggle between the classes, and, once having arisen, and within limits, it

develops a certain independence and a logic of its own. Under certain conditions, this independent movement of the state can assume an extreme form. In *The Origins of the Family*, he wrote:

"But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, shall not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, a power, apparently standing above society, has become necessary to moderate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order', and this power, arisen out of society, but placing itself above it and increasingly alienating itself from it, is the state."

Marxism explains that the state is instrument for the oppression of one class by another. In the last analysis, it consists of armed bodies of men: the army, police and the bureaucracy that sustains them. That is the essence of the Marxist view of the state. However, this general definition by no means exhausts the question. What was the ruling class under Louis Napoleon? The answer is: the bourgeoisie. Yet in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx described how the drunken soldiery of Louis Napoleon shot down the bourgeoisie. This would appear to be a contradiction, and so it is: not an absurd contradiction but a dialectical contradiction. The state of Napoleon III, like that of Caesar, was composed of gangsters and adventurers who were defending their own interests, plundering the state and also the very bourgeoisie they represented.

Elsewhere Engels writes:

"As the state arose from the need to keep class antagonisms in check, but also arose in the thick of the fight between the classes, it is normally the state of the most powerful, economically ruling class, which by its means becomes also the political ruling class, and so acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class... Exceptional periods, however, occur when the warring classes are so nearly equal in forces that the state power, as apparent

mediator, acquires for the moment a certain independence in relation to both."

And again:

"The central link in civilized society is the state, which in all typical periods is without exception the state of the ruling class, and in all cases continues to be essentially a machine for holding down the oppressed, exploited class..."

Engels uses very careful and precise language. In typical periods, the state is normally the state of the ruling class. But there can be periods that are abnormal and atypical, in which this does not apply. This question was dealt with in a masterly fashion by Ted Grant in his Reply to Tony Cliff:

"Let us take a case extremely rich in examples, the history of France. The bourgeois revolution took place in 1789. In 1793 the Jacobins seized complete power. As Marx and Engels pointed out, they went beyond the framework of bourgeois relations and performed a salutary historical task because of that, accomplishing in a few months what would have taken the bourgeoisie decades or generations to accomplish; the complete cleansing from France of all traces of feudalism. Yet this regime remained rooted in the basis of bourgeois forms of property. It was followed by the French Thermidor and the rule of the Directory, to be followed by the classic dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon re-introduced many feudal forms, had himself crowned Emperor and concentrated the supreme power in his hands. But we still call this regime bourgeois. With the restoration of Louis XVIII the regime still remained capitalist...and then we had not one but two revolutions - 1830 and 1848. These revolutions had important social consequences. They resulted in significant changes even in the personnel of the state itself. Yet we characterise them both as bourgeois revolutions in which there was no change in the class which held power.

“Let us proceed further. After the Paris Commune of 1871 and the shake-up of the relations which this involved, we had the organization of the Third Republic with bourgeois democracy which lasted for decades. This was followed by Petain, then the De Gaulle-Stalinist regime, and now the Quielle Government. Examine for a moment the amazing diversity of these regimes. To a non-Marxist it would seem absurd to define in the same category, shall we say, the regime of Robespierre and that of Petain. Yet Marxists do define them as fundamentally the same - bourgeois regimes. What is the criterion? Only the one thing: the form of property, the private ownership of the means of production.

“Take, similarly, the diversity of regimes in more modern times to see the extreme differences in super-structures which are on the same economic base. For instance, compare the regime of nazi Germany with that of British social democracy. They are so fundamentally different in super-structure that many theorists of the non-Marxist or ex-Marxist school have found new class structure and a new system of society entirely. Why do we say that they represent the same class and the same regime? Despite the difference in super-structure, the economic base of the given societies remained the same.”

Deadlock between the classes

The period that we have been describing here, the last period of the Roman Republic, was a period in which the struggle between the classes exceeded all bounds. Wars, civil wars, slave uprisings, constant factional strife between different layers of the ruling class for possession of the state, led to a state of utter prostration and exhaustion of the contending classes. This fact was already understood by the idealist Hegel when he wrote:

“We see the internal contradiction of Rome now beginning to manifest itself in another form; and the epoch which concludes the second period is also the second mediation of that contradiction. We observed

that contradiction previously in the struggle of the patricians against the plebeians: now it assumes the form of private interest, contravening patriotic sentiment; and respect for the state no longer holds these opposites in the necessary equipoise. Rather, we observe now side by side with wars for conquest, plunder and glory, the fearful spectacle of civil discords in Rome, and intestine wars.” (Hegel, Lectures on the History of Philosophy, p. 307)

In the last analysis, Caesarism (and its modern equivalent Bonapartism) is rule by the sword. It emerges in certain periods, when the class struggle reaches a point of deadlock, and the state power (basically, the army) raises itself above society and requires a certain independence. At the head of this power there arises the “strong man”, or dictator. In the period of the decline of the Republic the intense class struggles had already reduced a series of such men including Marius and Sulla, and later Pompey and Caesar.

This was the soil upon which the phenomenon of Caesarism took root and flourished, as Trotsky explains:

"Caesarism, or its bourgeois form, Bonapartism, enters the scene in those moments of history when the sharp struggle of two camps raises the state power, so to speak, above the nation, and guarantees it, in appearance, a complete independence of classes - in reality, only the freedom necessary for a defense of the privileged." (L. Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed, p. 277.)

The class struggle at Rome had reached complete deadlock. The contending classes were locked in a deadly struggle for control of the state. The rival parties alternated in power, and took advantage of the opportunity to slaughter their opponents. The internal cohesion of the state was fatally undermined, as nobody recognized the authority of the other side, or the validity of its laws and statutes, as Hegel affirms:

“The sovereignty was made dependent on the people – that people which was now a mere mob, and was obliged to be supported by corn from the Roman provinces. We should refer to Cicero to see how all affairs of state were decided in riotous fashion, and with arms in hand, by the wealth and power of the grandees on the one side, and by a troop of rabble on the other. The Roman citizens attached themselves to individuals who flattered them, and who then became prominent in factions, in order to make themselves masters of Rome.” (Hegel, op. cit., p. 311)

The real cause of this situation was the inability of the plebs to unite with the slaves in their struggle against the ruling oligarchy. In the last analysis, the Roman lumpenproletariat shared in the fruits of the exploitation of the slaves and the plunder of the provinces. This doomed the Roman Revolution to failure. The contending classes fought each other to a standstill, but neither could prevail. Under such circumstances, the state itself must become the master of society, imposing its absolute rule to prevent society from devouring itself in internecine conflicts.

Caesarism, Absolutism, Bonapartism

In the Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels pointed out that the class struggle eventually ends either in the total victory of one of the classes, or else in the common ruin of the contending classes. The fate of Roman society is the clearest example of the latter case. The rise of slavery destroyed the free Roman peasantry that was the backbone of the Republic. In the absence of a free peasantry, the state was obliged to rely on a mercenary army to fight its wars. This produced what we call Caesarism.

There are many other cases in history in which one section of the ruling class has attacked other sections and the state has risen above society. In the wars of the Roses in Britain, the two factions of the ruling barons (the Houses of Lancaster and York) virtually exterminated one another. At one time or another big sections of the ruling class were either in jails or were executed, and the throne occupied by adventurers of one gang or another.

Finally, a new dynasty emerged, the Tudors, which balanced between the bourgeoisie (London) and different factions of the barons to establish an absolutist regime. Similar processes occurred in other countries.

What was the class nature of absolutism? These absolute monarchs, in an attempt to consolidate themselves as a power standing above society, and increasingly alienating themselves from it, leaned on the nascent bourgeoisie to strike blows against the feudal nobility. Yet the class nature of the regime remained feudal. It was determined by existing property relations, not by the political configuration of the government.

The Roman emperors rose above society and viciously oppressed the ruling class, the slave owners, who found themselves looted by taxation, arrested, tortured and murdered by the emperors, who were “elected” by the Praetorian Guard. Yet this fact did not change one iota the class nature of the Roman state as a slave state. And the slave owners remained the ruling class even under the iron heel of Caesarism.

As we have already shown, Caesar and his supporters plundered the slave-owning oligarchs and stole their estates. But in the last analysis, they stood for the defense of the slave system and allied themselves with the wealthy oligarchs and bankers to save private property from “anarchy” and the mob. There are many variants of this phenomenon, which constantly appears in different disguises. Engels wrote the following on the Bismarck regime in Germany, which he regarded as a variant of Bonapartism:

“Bonapartism is the necessary form of state in a country where the working class, at a high level of its development in the towns but numerically inferior to the small peasants in rural areas, has been defeated in a great revolutionary struggle by the capitalist class, the petty bourgeoisie and the army. When the Parisian workers were defeated in the titanic struggle of June 1848 in France, the bourgeoisie had at the same time totally exhausted itself in this victory. It was aware it could not afford a second such victory. It continued to rule in

name, but it was too weak to govern. Control was assumed by the army, the real victor, basing itself on the class from which it preferred to draw its recruits, the small peasants, who wanted peace from the rioters in the towns. The form this rule took was of course military despotism, its natural leader the hereditary heir to the latter, Louis Bonaparte.

“As far as both workers and capitalists are concerned, Bonapartism is characterized by the fact that it prevents them coming to blows with each other. In other words, it protects the bourgeoisie from any violent attacks by the workers, encourages a little gentle skirmishing between the two classes and furthermore deprives both alike of the faintest trace of political power. No freedom of association, no freedom of assembly, no freedom of the press; universal suffrage under such bureaucratic pressure that election of the opposition is almost impossible; police-control of a kind that had previously been unknown even in police-ridden France. Besides which, sections of the bourgeoisie and of the workers are simply bought; the former by colossal credit-swindles, by which the money of the small capitalists is attracted into the pockets of the big ones; the latter by colossal state construction-schemes which concentrate an artificial, imperial proletariat dependent on the government in the big towns alongside the natural, independent proletariat. Finally, national pride is flattered by apparently heroic wars, which are however always conducted with the approval of the high authorities of Europe against the general scapegoat of the day and only on such conditions as ensure victory from the outset.” (Marx and Engels, Collected works, Vol. 20, Engels, The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers' Party.)

Trotsky also wrote extensively on Bonapartism, which he describes as a situation in which the state rises above society: “A government which raises itself above the nation is not, however, suspended in air. The true axis of the present government passes through the police, the bureaucracy, the military clique. It is a military-police dictatorship with which we are confronted,

barely concealed with the decorations of parliamentarism. But a government of the saber as the judge arbiter of the nation – that's just what Bonapartism is.

“The saber by itself has no independent program. It is the instrument of “order.” It is summoned to safeguard what exists. Raising itself politically above the classes, Bonapartism, like its predecessor Caesarism, for that matter, represents in the social sense, always and at all epochs, the government of the strongest and firmest part of the exploiters; consequently, present-day Bonapartism can be nothing else than the government of finance capital which directs, inspires, and corrupts the summits of the bureaucracy, the police, the officers' caste, and the press.” (Trotsky, Bonapartism and Fascism, July 1934.)

The term Bonapartism is very elastic and covers many different variants. In 1934, when dealing with the rise of Hitler in Germany, Trotsky explains:

“Such terms as liberalism, Bonapartism, fascism have the character of generalizations. Historical phenomena never repeat themselves completely. It would not have been difficult to prove that even the government of Napoleon III, compared with the regime of Napoleon I, was not “Bonapartist” – not only because Napoleon himself was a doubtful Bonaparte by blood, but also because his relations to the classes, especially to the peasantry and to the lumpenproletariat were not at all the same as those of Napoleon I. Moreover, classical Bonapartism grew out of the epoch of gigantic war victories, which the Second Empire did not know at all. But if we should look for the repetition of all the traits of Bonapartism, we will find that Bonapartism is a one-time, unique occurrence, i.e., that Bonapartism in general does not exist but that there once was a general named Bonaparte born in Corsica. The case is no different with liberalism and with all other generalized terms of history. When one speaks by analogy of Bonapartism, it is necessary to state precisely which of its traits found

their fullest expression under present historical conditions.” (Trotsky, German Bonapartism, October 1934.)

Conclusion

History knows a descending line as well as an ascending one. Under the Empire Rome entered into a prolonged period of decline that lasted for over four centuries and eventually led to a complete collapse and a regression to barbarism. Human civilization was thrown back at least a thousand years. The ultimate causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire must be found in the contradictory character of the slave economy – but this question falls outside the scope of the present work.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the impasse of capitalism threatens to drag society back to barbarism. All the grotesque symptoms that we associate with a socio-economic system in a state of advanced senile decay. The strategists of capital have already begun to compare the present situation with the decline of the Roman Empire: economic crisis is expressed in a general crisis of culture, morality, politics and religion.

Many people who do not understand the deeper causes of this crisis nevertheless feel that society has reached an impasse, that something is badly wrong, that the whole world has somehow gone crazy, and that a final denouement is approaching. Similar feelings haunted the collective psyche in Rome during the period of its decline, which was accompanied with all sorts of irrational and mystical tendencies. Nobody believed in the old Gods and the temples stood empty, while there was a flood of religious cults from the East, of which Christianity was only one. In fact, it was just like today.

In the workings of our “democratic” political system we can detect many interesting parallels with the period of the terminal sickness of the Roman Republic. In the later Roman Republic those generals who aspired to power required access to enormous sums of money, just as in our modern Empire, the United States of America, the Presidency, a formally democratic office, is in practice only available to billionaires, or at least those with access to

such sums. True, they no longer pour buckets of excrement over the heads of their rivals. Instead, they make use of the “free press”, over which they have a monopoly, to pour filth over their opponents, to blacken their name and destroy their character. This is far more effective than a bucket of wet manure!

In the industrialised countries of Europe, North America and Japan people like to imagine that democracy is well established. It is assumed to be something normal. But in reality, it is an historical exception that was made possible only by a long period of economic upswing in capitalism that enabled the ruling class of the developed world (though not the rest of the world) to make concessions that kept the class struggle within acceptable limits. But that period has now ended. The present crisis is the deepest since the 1930s – and in some respects the most serious in the history of capitalism. The period that opens up is one of years or decades of austerity, of painful reductions in living standards and the curtailment of democratic rights. It is a finished recipe for class struggle on an unparalleled scale. Ultimately, the alternative will be socialism or barbarism.

The Roman state developed into a real monster – a power standing above society and alienating itself from it. But that state was only a child’s toy compared to the modern state that has been perfected by imperialism – a far greater monster consisting of vast armies of bureaucrats, soldiers, police, secret police, prison wardens and judges who lord it over society and absorb unheard-of quantities of the wealth created by the working class. The wars of Julius Caesar were bloody and destructive affairs, yet Caesar could have never imagined the destructive power of our modern armies, which killed at least 65 million men, women and children in the Second World War alone.

Have we advanced no further, then? Have the last two thousand years of history served no purpose but to repeat the crimes of the past, but on a vastly greater scale? That is one possible interpretation of history, which was well expressed by the author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman*

Empire. Marxists do not share this pessimistic view. Despite all the crimes, violence, wars and cruelties inflicted on humanity, history nevertheless expresses itself as progress, in the deepest and most scientific sense of the word. The development of the productive forces, first under slavery, then under feudalism and finally under capitalism, has laid the material foundation for a new and qualitatively higher stage of human society – socialism.

The Romans referred to the slaves as “tools with a voice.” Today, the marvellous achievements of science and technology, if they were used rationally in a socialist planned economy, could abolish slavery forever and create the conditions for what Engels called “humanity’s leap from the realm of Necessity to the realm of Freedom.” The modern proletarian who has been educated in the Marxist method looks back on history and sees, not just a catalogue of crimes and errors, but an actual development that has prepared the way for socialism. He or she finds inspiration in the heroic struggle of the Gracchi – and above all by that greatest of all the fighters of antiquity – Spartacus. And from a scientific understanding of the class struggles of the past, we draw the necessary lessons to prepare the ground for future victory.

London, 22nd December 2009.