

Moral Reasoning 74:
The Theory and Practice
of Republican Government

Lecture 03:
The Roman Republic
and Machiavelli's Vision

Professor Daniel Carpenter
Harvard University

The Roman Republic

Important less as fact, more as myth. For our purposes, Lintott provides facts. Livy, Polybius, Machiavelli provide myth.

Republic is subplot in larger story of Roman Empire (510 BC – 23 BC). Expulsion of Tarquins by Brutus provides mythical founding moment. *Res publica* established, headed by two praetors (consuls) elected annually.

Roman Republic

In Machiavelli's reading, conflict creates new institutions.

1. Expulsion of Tarquins (509 BC) → elections, censors, limited terms, mutual veto
2. Conflict of orders (494) → secession of plebs, creation of tribunes of plebs
3. Fall of Decemviri (451-449 BC) → Second secession, powers of tribunes defined.
4. Conflict of orders (287) → universal voting rights

Polybius on the Mixed Regime

For if one fixed one's eyes on the power of the consuls, the constitution seemed completely monarchical [*monarchikon*] and royal [*basilikon*]; if on that of the senate it seemed again to be aristocratic; and when one looked at the power of the masses, it seemed to be clearly a democracy." [Polybius, *Histories*, Vol III, Book 6, Section 11, sentences 12-13]

CONSULS

[Polybius, *Histories*, Vol III, Book VI, Section 12]

- "Exercise authority in Rome over all public affairs, since all the other magistrates except the tribunes are under them and bound to obey them."
- Introduce embassies to the senate
- Consult the senate on matters of urgency
- Carry out the provisions of the decrees of the senate
- Preside over the execution of popular decrees

Polybius on War Powers

"As for preparation for war and the general conduct of operations in the field, here their power is almost uncontrolled; for they are empowered to make what demands they choose on the allies, to appoint military tribunes, to levy soldiers and select those who are fittest for service." Also can punish any under their command.

SENATE

[Polybius, *Histories*, III, Book VI, Section 13]

- “it has control of the treasury, all revenue and expenditure being regulated by it.”
- outlay every five years for public works (construction or repairs) is under the control of the senate
- Crimes committed in Italy which require a public investigation – treason, poisoning, conspiracy, assassination – are under Senate
- Arbitration for private actors; response to supplication for protection, damages, claims.

TRIBUNES AND POWER OF THE PEOPLE

Polybius, *Histories*, III, Book VI, Section 14:

“But nevertheless there is a part and a very important part left for the people. For it is the people which alone has the right to confer honors and inflict punishment, the only bonds by which kingdoms and states and in a word human society in general are held together....”

“It is by the people, then, in many cases that offenses punishable by a fine are tried when the accused have held the highest office; and they are the only court which may try on capital charges.”

TRIBUNES AND POWER OF THE PEOPLE

Polybius, *Histories*, III, Book VI, Section 14:

- People bestow office on the deserving, “the noblest reward of virtue in a state.”
- “The people have the power of approving or rejecting laws [*nomon*].” At first, laws applying only to plebs [*plebiscita*]; later, universal law.
- “And what is most important of all, they deliberate on the question of war and peace.”

Polybius:
Republic is superior & equilibrated

Polybius *Histories* III, Book VI, Section 18,
sentence 8: “All in fact remains in statu quo, on
the one hand, because any aggressive impulse is
sure to be checked and from the outset each
estate stands in dread of being interfered with by
others....”

Machiavelli’s Lessons

1. Optimality of the mixed regime.
2. The necessity of structured conflict.
3. Importance of emergency powers.
4. Importance of virtue (Livy more than Polybius)
