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LEADERSHIP IN THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

This section contains three passages: two are from Plutarch's *Lives*, written during the early Roman Empire but looking back to earlier leaders. Plutarch first discusses Cato the Elder, who was elected censor in 184 B.C.E. This was a period when the Republic was expanding its conquests, acquiring new contacts with Greek culture, and developing a more prosperous upper class. Cato, using an office designed to oversee moral behavior, was obviously critical of many of these trends, regarding himself, and regarded by many others, as a bastion of traditional Roman republican values.

The second passage deals with Crassus, one of a triumvirate of leaders (along with the Generals Pompey and Julius Caesar) ruling the Republic in its later days. His leadership qualities are very different from those of Cato.

Finally, from essentially the same period, the great politician and orator Cicero writes in 63 B.C.E. to his brother about winning the election as consul, the highest executive office in the Republic, elected annually by a restricted group of voters. The Cicero family was not aristocratic, rather of business background, but there were opportunities to curry favor with the groups that wielded top power in the Republic. Cicero describes an active political system, but one increasingly divided between popular elements, often accused of demagoguery, and the aristocratic element.

The three passages taken together provide an opportunity to assess the changing nature of leadership in the Republic. Romans frequently discussed the importance of character in sustaining the political system, along with a number of institutions designed to prevent corruption and monitor executive power. Was this a distinctive approach? How do the values and realities of Roman leadership compare to qualities in other political societies, including our own?

1. PLUTARCH ON CATO

Cato grew more and more powerful by his eloquence, so that he was commonly called the Roman Demosthenes, but his manner of life was yet more famous and talked of. For oratorical skill was, as an accomplishment, commonly studied and sought after by all young men; but he was very rare who would cultivate the old habits of bodily labor.

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or prefer a light supper, and a breakfast which never saw the fire; or be in love with poor clothes and a homely lodging, or could set his ambition rather on doing without luxuries than on possessing them. For now the state, unable to keep its purity by reason of its greatness, and having so many affairs, and people from all parts under its government, was fain to admit many mixed customs, and new examples of living.

With reason, therefore, everybody admired Cato, when they saw others sink under labors, and grow effeminate by pleasures; and yet beheld him unconquered by either, and that not only when he was young and desirous of honor, but also when old and grayheaded, after a consulship and triumph; like some famous victor in the games, persevering in his exercise and maintaining his character to the very last. He himself says, that he never wore a suit of clothes which cost more than a hundred drachmas; and that, when he was general and consul, he drank the same wine which his workmen did; and that the meat or fish which was bought in the market for his dinner did not cost above thirty *asses*. All of which was for the sake of the commonwealth, that so his body might be the hardier for the war.

Having a piece of embroidered Babylonian tapestry left him, he sold it; because none of his farmhouses were so much as plastered. Nor did he ever buy a slave for above fifteen hundred drachmas; as he did not seek for effeminate and handsome ones, but able, sturdy workmen, horse keepers and cowherds: and these he thought ought to be sold again, when they grew old, and no useless servants fed in a house. In short, he reckoned nothing a good bargain, which was superfluous; but whatever it was, though sold for a farthing, he would think it a great price, if you had no need of it; and was for the purchase of lands for sowing and feeding, rather than grounds for sweeping and watering.

Some imputed these things to petty avarice, but others approved of him, as if he had only the more strictly denied himself for the rectifying and amending of others. Yet certainly, in my judgment, it marks an overrigid temper, for a man to take the work out of his servants as out of brute beasts, turning them off and selling them in their old age, and thinking there ought to be no further commerce between man and man, than whilst there arises some profit by it. We see that kindness or humanity has a larger field than bare justice to exercise itself in; law and justice we cannot, in the nature of things, employ on others than men; but we may extend our goodness and charity even to irrational creatures; and such acts flow from a gentle nature, as water from an abundant spring. It is doubtless the part of a kind-natured man to keep even worn-out horses and dogs, and not only take care of them when they are foals and whelps, but also when they are grown old.

2. PLUTARCH ON CRASSUS

People were wont to say that the many virtues of Crassus were darkened by the one vice of avarice, and indeed he seemed to have no other but that; for it, being the most predominant, obscured others to which he was inclined. The arguments in proof of his avarice were the vastness of his estate, and the manner of raising it; for whereas at first he was not worth above three hundred talents, yet, though in the course of his political life he dedicated the tenth of all he had to Hercules, and

feasted the people, and gave to every citizen corn enough to serve him three months, upon casting up his accounts, before he went upon his Parthian expedition, he found his possessions to amount to seven thousand one hundred talents; most of which, if we may scandal him with a truth, he got by fire and rapine, making his advantage of the public calamities. For when Sulla seized the city, and exposed to sale the goods of those that he had caused to be slain, accounting them booty and spoils, and, indeed, calling them so too, and was desirous of making as many, and as eminent men as he could, partakers in the crime, Crassus never was the man that refused to accept, or give money for them.

Moreover, observing how extremely subject the city was to fire, and to the falling down of houses, by reason of their height and their standing so near together, he bought slaves that were builders and architects, and when he had collected these to the number of more than five hundred, he made it his practice to buy houses that were on fire, and those in the neighborhood which, in the immediate danger and uncertainty, the proprietors were willing to part with for little or nothing; so that the greatest part of Rome, at one time or other, came into his hands.

Yet for all he had so many workmen, he never built anything but his own house, and used to say that those that were addicted to building would undo themselves soon enough without the help of other enemies. And though he had many silver mines, and much valuable land, and laborers to work in it, yet all this was nothing in comparison to his slaves, such a number and variety did he possess of excellent readers, amanuenses, silversmiths, stewards, and table waiters, whose instruction he always attended to himself, superintending in person while they learned, and teaching them himself, as counting it the main duty of a master to look over the servants, that are, indeed, the living tools of housekeeping. But it was surely a mistaken judgment, when he said "no man was to be accounted rich that could not maintain an army at his own cost and charges, for war". . . .

Crassus, however, was very eager to be hospitable to strangers; he kept open house, and to his friends he would lend money without interest, but called it in precisely at the time; so that his kindness was often thought worse than the paying the interest would have been. His entertainments were, for the most part, plain and citizenlike, the company general and popular; good taste and kindness made them pleasanter than sumptuosity would have done.

As for learning, he chiefly cared for rhetoric, and what would be serviceable with large numbers; he became one of the best speakers at Rome, and by his pains and industry outdid the best natural orators. For there was no trial how mean and contemptible soever that he came to unprepared; nay, several times he undertook and concluded a cause, when Pompey and Caesar and Cicero refused to stand up, upon which account particularly he got the love of the people, who looked upon him as a diligent and careful man, ready to help succor his fellow citizens. Besides, the people were pleased with his courteous and unpretending salutations and greetings; for he never met any citizen however humble and low, but he returned him his salute by name. He was also looked upon as a man well read in history, and pretty well versed in Aristotle's philosophy.

3. CICERO'S ADVICE

Almost every day as you go down to the Forum you must say to yourself, "I am a *novus homo*" [i.e. a new man without noble ancestry]. "I am a candidate for the consulship." "This is Rome." For the "newness" of your name you will best compensate by the brilliance of your oratory. This has ever carried with it great political distinction. See that all those aids to natural ability, which I know are your special gifts are ready for use . . . and finally take care that both the number and rank of your friends are unmistakable. For you have, as few new men have had,—all the tax-syndicate promoters, nearly the whole equestrian order, and many municipal towns, especially devoted to you, many people who have been defended by you, many trade guilds, and beside these a large number of the rising generation, who have become attached to you in their enthusiasm for public speaking, and who visit you daily in swarms, and with such constant regularity!

See that you retain these advantages by reminding these persons, by appealing to them, and by using every means to make them understand that this, and this only, is the time for those who are in your debt now, to show their gratitude, and for those who wish for your services in the future, to place you under an obligation. It also seems possible that a "new man" may be much aided by the fact that he has the good wishes of men of high rank, and especially of ex-consuls. It is a point in your favor that you should be thought worthy of this position and rank by the very men to whose position you are wishing to attain.

All these men must be canvassed with care, agents must be sent to them, and they must be convinced that we have always been at one with the Optimates (Aristocratic Party), that we have never been dangerous demagogues in the very least. . . . Also take pains to get on your side the young men of high rank, and keep the friendship of those whom you already have. They will contribute much to your political position. You have many already: make them feel how much you think depends on them; if you rouse to zeal those who are now only lukewarm friends, that will be a vast gain.

"Whosoever gives any sign of inclination to you, or regularly visits your house, you must put down in the category of friends. But yet the most advantageous thing is to be beloved and pleasant in the eyes of those who are friends on the more regular grounds of relationship by blood or marriage, the membership in the same club, or some close tie or other. You must take great pains that [these men] should love you and desire your highest honor—as, for example, your tribesmen, neighbors, clients, and finally your freedmen, yes even your slaves: for nearly all the gossip that forms public opinion emanates from your own servants' quarters. . . .

[As to people who crowd around you]: See that those who do so spontaneously understand that you regard yourself as forever obliged by their extreme kindness; from these on the other hand, who *owe* you the attention [for services rendered] frankly demand that so far as their age and business allow they should be constantly in attendance, and that those who are unable to accompany you in person, should find relatives to substitute in performing this duty. I am very

anxious and think it most important that you should always be surrounded with numbers. Besides, it confers a great reputation, and great distinction to be accompanied by those whom you have defended and saved in the law courts. Put this demand fairly before them—that since by your means, and without any fee,—some have retained property, others their honor, or their civil rights, or their entire fortunes,—and since there will never be any other time when they can show their gratitude, they now should reward you by this service.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What were the main issues Cato faced as Censor? What kinds of values did he seek to uphold?
2. How did the leadership qualities of Crassus compare with those of Cato? Is it fair to see, in the comparison of the two men who lived over a century apart, a deterioration in Roman leadership? Or did the setting simply change, or both?
3. What do the tactics Cicero suggests imply about the nature of Roman institutions and about the Roman political process? Do these tactics resemble the qualities ascribed to Crassus? What kinds of tensions in the political system does Cicero imply, and how does he recommend overcoming them?
4. By implication, what would a traditionalist like Cato have thought of Cicero's advice?
5. Did the Roman republic have an unusual dependence on leadership qualities, compared to other classical societies? Is there a valid comparison with modern societies like the United States?
6. How would a Confucian judge the leadership qualities exemplified by Cato? By Crassus? How would a Confucian evaluate the political process implied by Cicero?