

# Review

PAUL BELONICK, *RESTRAINT, CONFLICT, AND THE FALL OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. ix + 228. ISBN 9780197662663. £54.00.

There is an age-old divide among political thinkers, between those who believe a republic flourishes because of good institutions and those who think it flourishes because of civic virtue. In recent decades institutional thinkers have held the field, partly because it has proved difficult to render the idea of civic virtue meaningful to a modern audience. That task is not what Paul Belonick ostensibly sets out to do in this book, but it may turn out to be his main achievement. The book opens a way for us moderns to understand what earlier thinkers meant by republican virtue, and to put that concept to positive use.

B.'s starting point is the ancient sources' emphasis on moral factors in Rome's success and in the Republic's downfall. His focus is on what he calls 'restraint values': internalised self-control and restraint in action (the familiar value-terminology of *verecundia*, *temperantia*, etc.) which comprised a Bourdieu-ian *habitus* for the Roman political class. He argues both that these restraint values stabilised Rome's intensely competition-riddled Republic and that the Romans themselves understood this fact. The Romans went on about restraint values so much *because* they understood their importance in sustaining political culture, not because it was an empty literary trope. Men whose conduct was restrained and within predictable limits could be trusted with power, and B. shows an excellent understanding of this link between predictability and political trust.

In detail, B.'s argument is coherent and persuasive. The function of restraint values was to make the aristocratic honour-and-office distribution system operate smoothly. The people most important for this were those who held the awesome power of the magistracies at any one time; they were the ones who could potentially put the Republic at risk and so it mattered greatly *how* they exercised this power. Restraint norms, transmitted by *exempla*, taught them how to do so. But these values were at best a rough guide to conduct, and disputes inevitably occurred. In the middle Republic which Livy describes for us, the Senate served as the authoritative judge in such disputes, not because of its constitutional position, but because it was the magistrates' peer group. Usually, wilful individuals could be overborne by a united front of their peers in the form of a delegation from the Senate. 'Men who refused to be curbed were shunned and shamed; men who displayed self-control were praised and received notable honors' (190); this is a straightforward incentive structure for status. What B. does well is to render concepts like *auctoritas*, *verecundia* and *existimatio* concrete: they cease to be abstract words and become easily imaginable conversations and feelings.

B. also understands that, while restraint values allowed the Republic to function, this was because of a happy (and temporary) conjunction of circumstances. The Senate-as-judging-peer-group explicitly serves as Simmel's *dritte Instanz*, the accepted and authoritative arbiter (which renews our thanks to Hölkeskamp for bringing Simmel into the scholarly conversation). One problem emerged with the Gracchi: the People became an alternative source of honour and judge of right conduct (although this ignores Polybius 6.14, which suggests they always had been). The division was shown most dramatically with Octavius' deposition in 133: Tiberius Gracchus sided with the People, Octavius with the Senate (as the judge whose collective opinion should be deferred to) and the result was a very unhealthy *exemplum*. After Tiberius, *popularis* rhetoric was extremely damaging to restraint values. It gave cover to any Roman who did not want to accept his senatorial peers' verdict on his *existimatio*: senators could be represented as luxurious and corrupt, and their opinion ignored. More basically (and this is a point B. does not make), the simple fact that there were two judges of behaviour provided the option of playing one against the other and diminished the authority of each. Fewer disputes could be resolved: the result was escalation and violence.

Yet, according to B., restraint values never lost their normative hold on the Romans. The problem was these values could *only* have a stabilising effect as part of a coherent system, and by the post-Sullan generation that coherence was long gone. The result was disordered politics, which B. interprets well. A good example is Caesar's ostentatious moderation over his agrarian law in 59 (Cass. Dio 38.1–3), which caused only confusion and suspicion among his senatorial peers. The best description is of Cato, whom B. calls 'the most lost of all his generation' (159), forcing all

around him into a moral schema which no longer made sense. Such a situation invited zealotry, and Cato obliged.

The book began life as a PhD thesis, and its main fault derives from that origin: a tendency to over-interpret events through the lens of restraint values, despite explicitly warning against this tendency (11). But the argument is well thought out and persuasive. B. presents to us Roman senators who were enmeshed in a social system of peers and values, who were social actors before they were political ones, and who sought status and the good opinion of their fellow citizens more than they sought power. That both helps us see Rome simply as a community and makes these men more understandable as human beings.

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