Political Consciousness of Roman People in the Age of Tribune Tiberius Gracchus

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Abstract. The political career of Tiberius Gracchus embodies the mixed characteristics of aristocrat politics and popular politics, which is the incision to understand the connotation of the crisis of the late Roman Republic. After the ouster of M. Octavius and the passing of the decision to allocate Attalus' legacy under the support of the Roman people, the relationship between Tiberius as the leader of the people and the opposers of him in Senatus suddenly became tense, and the Roman politics eventually led to a rupture and chaos. Therefore, the Roman people are the key to inflating the differences among the elites, and public action and its consequences are the keys to understanding the crisis. The consciousness of Roman people varied in different groups and interacted with different tactics of politician elites. The over-mobilized tactics aroused the Roman people's political consciousness of popular sovereignty, which became an essential power source in Roman society. Out-controlled people's politics would finally trigger the crisis in the late republic.

Keywords: Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus; Roman Republic; Plebeian Politics.

1. Introduction

The interaction between the political leadership of nobilities and the political participation of the masses is one of the essential features in the political history of the middle and late Roman Republic. It is a crucial topic how the nobilities and the plebs coordinate and have conflicts with each other, and even cause the crisis. As the initiator of the first violent political conflict and crisis among Roman citizens in the late Republic, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus deserves attention. However, after the introduction of Roman people's consciousness by H. W. Harris and the proposal of the interaction perspective between elites and the ordinary people by Fergus Millar, most studies still focus on the elite side and lack in-depth investigation of public consciousness, which makes it challenging to present a comprehensive interaction perspective [1,2].

In fact, despite the lack of a direct record of the people's self-consciousness, most ancient writers have written about their actions. People's actions can be used as a basis point to understand people's consciousness and complement the interactive perspective. This paper will focus on two critical cases, the ouster of Octavius and the allocation of Attalus' legacy, in Tiberius' last days of his political career, whose sources reflected the active political actions of the Roman people, which will give us a perspective to understand political consciousness of Roman people in the late republic and explore one of the origins of the crisis in the late republic.

2. The Ouster of Octavius and Rise of People's Power

Marcus Octavius's ouster and the Attalus legacy distribution exemplified the rise of people's power. For the former, Tiberius and Octavius had a heated debate. Appian illustrated that Tiberius had unilaterally condemned the latter in the assembly and that his guards tried forcing Octavius to obey [3, 4]. Morstein-Max points out that there is no record of a formal rebuttal delivered by the opposition from the opposers of Tiberius. He argues that Octavius failed to mount an effective counterattack or even deliver a speech [3].

However, after long days of public meetings, whether Octavian launched a counterattack or not, Tiberius must have created a relatively favorable image in the people's minds through various public displays of himself. This public image is suitable for mobilizing people to vote for Tiberius' agenda,

but such propaganda is likely to over-mobilize people's energy and produce uncontrollable results. Tiberius' supporters must have been greatly encouraged by the success of Octavius' removal, an effect described by Livy, who speaks of the mass becoming greedy, and by Orosius, who says people have become arrogant [5, 6].

The descriptions may indicate that in the process of following Tiberius, the Roman populace gradually began consciously striving for their interests. Plutarch's account is more direct. After the dismissal of Octavius, the crowd attacked Octavius and even cut out one of his attendants' eyes. The Roman mass ignored the elites standing in the way to protect Octavius [3]. Considering that it is likely that the majority of the supporters who attended the voting assembly were rural and urban poor rather than the clients of Tiberius' and his friends' [7, 8], this incident seems should not be only understood as a casual conflict, but should be viewed with a deeper perspective: under the premise that the senators are present and participate in the protection of Octavius, citizens who support Tiberius still dare to attack the senator's protection object, and the scene of violent conflict is even "like a rough sea" [9]. Under this condition, the power of the people had been revealed, and even the senators, who enjoyed the traditional respect and honor in Roman society, could not stop them.

The action of the people shows that the "Populus Romanus", whom Moritsen argues that were in most cases a highly formal and even symbolic political image, at this time was no longer a symbolic image but transformed into an acting political existence [10]. In the legislative process, especially in the speech for removing Octavius, Tiberius created a lofty sovereign image for Roman people, which, however, did not have practical significance. Only people's actions could give meaning to it. The action of the people after the control shows that the power of the people is being stimulated by Tiberius' incitement or the long-term accumulated dissatisfaction because of the shortage of lands and decrease in living levels. The noble image and strict procedure used by the senators to restrain the populace in the past are collapsing. As the people break down the order in the meeting place, the sovereign image of the people begins to move from a formal speech to a living reality. The image of the people created by the speech was formal, but the people's actions made this form appear a reality, which may be a fundamental reason for the Senate's anxiety.

3. Tiberius' Political Tactics and His Dependence on Urban Citizens

Most supporters of Tiberius were rural citizens, but they could not stay in the city for long enough to protect Tiberius' life. When the land law was passed, most of them would go home [4], which means Tiberius must turn to gain supporters living in Roman cities. Of course, there may have been some rural citizens as Plutarch and Appian reflected who extended their stay to keep Tiberius safe [3, 4]. However, Tiberius must have sought support from the urban poor to ensure support remained available during the busy farming season.

It should be noted that Tiberius' public speech in the process of confrontation with Octavius and his public solicitation after the dismissal of Octavius is full of solid incitement and self-display, and this kind of tactics over-mobilized his audience's political activeness, which went beyond his control. It is possible to find that Tiberius was constantly defending himself in the process of persuading Octavius publicly that he appealed to Octavius to comply with the demands of the people, defend their rights, and evoke the sympathy of the mass by mentioning their sufferings [3]. These expressions are, in fact, constantly shaping the legitimacy of his actions. At the same time, by constantly referring to the people's legitimate rights, Tiberius is also shaping an image of popular sovereignty.

While these tactics were publicly displayed to everyone in the audience at the counter, they were mainly shown to citizens living in the city to broaden his support base [8]. Tiberius' review of traditional values and defense of rural land may not resonate with the city's masses. However, his stance on defending the people's legitimate rights and his portrayal of popular sovereignty are likely to influence the mentalities of the audience. On the other hand, after the passage of the land law, Tiberius introduced his son as if he was going to die before the public and wore mourning clothes to

win sympathy from the ordinary people. Through these displays, Tiberius hoped to arouse the sympathy of the ordinary people, incite them to support his bill, and protect his own life.

These tactics succeeded, for after the rural citizens began to return to the land, Tiberius was still able to organize enough supporters and, at the risk of further angering the Senate, to pass the allocation of Attalus's estate in the popular assembly and even to gain the support of the voting tribes in his final tribunate election. However, as he organized the people, Tiberius grew more dependent on them, and the distribution of Attalus' legacy was a manifestation of this dependence.

4. The Allocation of Attalus' Legacy and Popular Power Over Tiberius

The people's powerful presence after the ousting of Octavius shocked the Roman elites, and Tiberius, having angered the Senate, had to turn further to the people. This turning event was not because of the desperate situation; it still cannot indicate that Tiberius had any initiative in his relationship with the Roman people. After Octavius' ouster, Gracchus successfully established the Land Council and continued to push through a series of laws. Moreover, when the land became scarce, in order not to provoke the increasingly greedy populace, he announced the distribution of the gift of Attalus III to the people who were due to receive the land according to his law [5].

This is the other practice of popular sovereignty. This is because in the violent action after the ouster of Octavius, the people showed the practical tendency of the form image of "Populus Romanus". This kind of practical people subject is highly active and even revolutionary. However, as a legislator, Tiberius was under pressure after the recall event and even fell into passivity and almost became the people's voice.

The action of removing Octavius reduced Tiberius' power to rely on the Senate. It was also reduced because the consul Mucius Scaevola, who supported him, was not in Rome, also after the election of the land council, Claudius, as the land commissioner, had to go out to measure and settle the land, which significantly weakened the power of the supporters in the Senate. Tiberius was now clearly afraid of the hostility of the Senate. In order to maintain his political position against the Senate, he had to try to please the people and prevent this powerful force from turning against him. He even dressed in black for the occasion, introducing and entrusting his descendants to the people [3, 4, 5]. It is clear that Tiberius was passive and had to rely on the power of the people. However, Flower offers an alternative explanation for this, suggesting that it was not out of desperation but simply a shift in tactics that reflected Tiberius' shift from appealing primarily to farmers to the urban poor [8].

The famous meeting's decision to allocate Attalus' estates infringed on the Senate's traditional monopoly over the handling of public finances 错误!未找到引用源。. Behind the senators' questioning of Tiberius' tyrant's action was, in fact, an expansion tendency of popular sovereignty. This action was a continuation of the removal of Octavian. It was not only a specific action taken by Tiberius because of the hostility of the Senate but also because of the increasing activity of the people. What was new was that it was a resolution driven by the people's will, which was transformed from form to practice. Therefore, contrary to Plutarch, it was not the decision to distribute Attalus's estate that enabled Tiberius to gain the support of the people. However, the people's support drove Tiberius to propose the decision to distribute the estate. Tiberius, of course, initiated the decision himself. However, he proposed a radical resolution to consolidate the support of the increasingly seething public and thus protect his own life and political future. Gaining the support of the people became the cause and purpose of the significant actions Tiberius in his final years, and Tiberius became almost a puppet of the will of the people.

5. Fall of Tiberius and Limitation of Roman People's Political Consciousness

The two events of the ouster of Octavian and the distribution of Attalus' legacy are two examples showing the rise of popular power. In the first case, the people showed strong power in action, while in the second case, the power of the people began to shift to the decision-making field. That is to say,

Roman people are not comfortable being passive listeners in nobilities' dominance meetings. Tiberius's public speeches during his introduction of the land law, confrontation with Octavius, and even his decision to dismiss Octavius provided a source for the Roman populace to turn to positive action. Before the dismissal of Octavius, Tiberius and other nobilities were mainly in the hands of the people control. However, after the case of Octavius, in the process of people removing Octavius from his office for their interests described by Tiberius and to achieve the land bill, the process of people destroying tradition, impacting the senators, the Roman populace showed the effect of popular power and were even possibly conscious of their power as the Populus Romanus.

On the other hand, Tiberius was forced to rely on the power of the people after the deposition of Octavius. It is difficult to make clear whether Roman plebeians ultimately realized that they, as the Roman people had unlimited power because this popular power still needed to express through one or two elites in most cases. However, for Tiberius, the role of plebeians is no longer a passive listener and supporter but an active actor. His presence on the scene conveys a kind of oppressive feeling to Tiberius, for his political career was almost in the hands of the mass. Probably most Roman senator opposers were unaware of the presence of the power of the Roman plebeians and attributed the crisis to Tiberius' fact. However, the anxiety and pressure borne by the senator opposers was the very thing that the Roman people behind Tiberius had taken the initiative to convey. The first recipient of this pressure was Tiberius himself.

Under the pressure of the Populus Romanus, Tiberius' only choice was to continue to carry out more radical actions to retain the people's support. Of course, the initiative of Tiberius cannot be denied. His public performance in the struggle for land law was designed to win the urban masses' long-term support to avoid complete isolation when the peasant supporters returned to rural areas. This action also stirred up the urban masses, who formed a powerful force along with the rural peasants. Therefore, Tiberius was not only actively close to the Roman people but at the same time also passively involved in the quagmire of actions to win the support of the Roman plebeians. With each action he made, he became more dependent on the masses. Therefore, the rising political enthusiasm of the masses finally prompted Tiberius to make his radical actions.

However, due to the limitation of traditional political culture, Tiberius failed to control the people's will and become their representative fully. Instead, he was finally defeated by the counterattack of the senators. The traditional political culture of the Roman Republic not only emphasized the praise of the Roman people and their Libertas but also shaped the people's respect for the noblemen and traditional virtues, as well as the authority of the senators. The people's rights and the authority of the senators became two sides of Roman traditional politics [11]. The convening of various meetings and ceremonies in Roman republican politics was a constant confirmation and reconfirmation of the relative status, rights, and obligations between the plebs and nobilities in the Roman political system [12]. Considering the general passivity of the people in the political process and the monopolistic role of officials, noblemen, and senators in public speaking, presiding over ceremonies, and convening meetings, these eminent persons usually enjoy a high level of public prestige and authority, which is consolidated through numerous repetitions of various ceremonies. The elite, in particular, enjoyed authority in the religious field. The senators, especially the priests, usually monopolized the power of religious interpretation and therefore enjoyed great authority in the public field, as Mouritsen points out, "The Roman res publica was founded on a partnership between the populus Romanus and its gods, and the continued support of the latter was considered vital to the well-being of the community. This "peace with the gods" (pax deorum) was ensured through public ritual and sacrifice, and through the continuous consultation of the gods before any collective action was taken." Such communicator between people and gods played by senators and magistrates enjoyed huge public respect in Roman society [10].

Thus, in ancient Roman society, where religion and politics were highly integrated, even a man as noble and powerful as Tiberius could not dare to organize an effective counterattack under the pressure of the direct force impact of the senators led by the pontifex Maximus Scipio Nasica.

Moreover, the masses behind Tiberius, probably out of awe of the senators and fear of the religious office of pontifex Maximus, were routed, which ultimately led to Tiberius' downfall.

6. Conclusion

The actions of Roman people under the tribune of Tiberius showed active political consciousness as Populus Romanus, which made them essential participators in Roman politics. However, the consciousness of Roman people also varied in different groups based on different interests and tactics used by elites. For rural people, land distribution constituted the primary concern in their political consciousness. However, for the urban poor, it is probably the popular sovereignty illustrated in the speech of Tiberius that constitutes the primary motivation. The context of Roman people's discontent based on an imbalanced economy was also an essential factor. Thus, the active political consciousness resulted from genuine interest, the elite's oratory, and the Roman people's discontent mentalities. Such consciousness of the Roman people resulted in the radical actions that happened during the tribune of Tiberius.

Concerning the context of the late Roman republic, the active political consciousness became one of the essential origins of the crisis in the late republic. Active political consciousness made the Roman people a strong political actor and an essential power source in Roman politics, which probably inspired other politicians a shortcut to power. As a result, incitement became a frequent tactic for tribunes and other Roman politicians, which caused unrest among the Roman people and rushed republican polity.

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