

Robert Morstein-Marx:

Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic

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The book under review is primarily concerned with the question: Why did the Roman *plebs* support the political system of the Republic for such a long time although they profited so little, if at all, from it? The author attempts to find the answer in the institution of the *contio* (the non-voting assembly of the Roman citizens that served to announce political news from the Senate, promote legislation, and prepare trials), in particular in its capacity as a meeting-point of senatorial speakers and plebeian listeners. Contional rhetoric assured that lip-service was paid to the *populus Romanus* as the ultimate sovereign, while the *plebs* was prevented from considering any real (e.g. more democratic) alternatives to the present system. The only choice they were given was that between different members of the elite, not between different ideologies. In drawing this picture, Morstein-Marx also offers a plausible, if rather pessimistic, answer to the much-disputed question whether the Roman Republic should be seen as primarily democratic in nature or rather as an oligarchy.

Chapter 1 (“Introduction”) serves to demonstrate Morstein-Marx’s subscription to the recent reevaluation of the public sphere in Roman politics – as opposed to the scholarly attention formerly paid to such semi-private phenomena as friendship and patronage. He then draws attention to the role of the *contio* in the public arena and introduces us to the above-mentioned democracy versus aristocracy debate. Furthermore, he discusses the rhetorical evidence (essentially nine *contiones* by Cicero plus five in Sallust) and, finally, sketches the plan of his book.

Chapter 2 (“Setting the stage”) gives an introduction to the proceedings of the *contio* and a thorough overview of its different meeting places (the Rostra, which is rightly given special attention, the Temple of Castor, the Circus Flaminius, the Campus Martius). The chapter also provides a summary of Cicero’s theoretical treatment of contional rhetoric.

Chapter 3 (“Civic knowledge”) draws attention to yet another prerequisite of contional rhetoric, namely the historical knowledge possessed by the average citizen. By means of three corpora of evidence – historical allusions in contional speeches, coins, and monuments – Morstein-Marx refutes the view shared by many scholars that the *contio*-goers were ignoramuses (*imperiti*).

The fourth chapter (“The voice of the people”) describes the encouraging or, in contrast, intimidating response (e.g. silence, applause, shouting) that a speaker might expect from the audience. Furthermore, Morstein-Marx considers the various ways in which it would have been possible for a speaker to manipulate the audience (e.g. by the use of clagues). The audience’s response would then be interpreted at the speaker’s wish either as representing the will of the Roman people or as the noise of some depraved hirelings. The so-called ‘will of the people’ as manifested in the *contio*, instead of being pre-existent, may thus have resulted in part from the speaker’s maneuverings. In addition, chapter 4 contains a – somewhat belated – discussion of the identity of the actual *contio*-goers (pp. 128-136).

Chapter 5 (“Debate”) examines whether or not the *contio* was a place of open debate inviting citizens to form an independent opinion on a given political question. According to Morstein-Marx this was not the case: Politicians opposing a law proposed by the magistrate who had called the *contio* were indeed regularly brought there to answer his questions. However, the actual function of such questioning was to intimidate the politicians with the hostile attitude of the gathered crowd. The only real discussion took place immediately before the voting – i.e. when the majority of voters had already made up their minds – and therefore in most cases had no influence on the result of the poll.

In chapter 6 (“Contional ideology: the invisible ‘optimate’”) Morstein-Marx demonstrates how the opposition of *populares* and *optimates*, so fundamental to our view of late-Republican politics, was broken down in the *contio*, simply because nobody could openly proclaim himself an *optimas*: one always had to pose as a *popularis*, a “friend of the people”. As a result, the audience would have no alternative ideologies to choose from. The only choice left to them would be that of finding the right man: who was a true, and who a false friend of the people?

Chapter 7 (“Contional ideology: the political drama”) discusses the resulting importance of *ethos* in contional rhetoric as well as the visual and audible means by which the speaker would make himself appear in the most favorable light (dress, delivery, voice, etc.).

The “Conclusion” (chapter 8) concisely sums up the whole argument.

This is an impressive book. Its results, as far-reaching as they are convincing, solve some serious problems concerning our image of the late Republic and deepen our understanding of its fabric. In developing his argument, Morstein-Marx combines meticulous analysis of archaeological and numismatic evidence, as well as a close reading of his literary sources (including discussion of lexical and syntactical subtleties and of problems of textual criticism), with a broad theoretical outlook, especially on modern political theory. His reading is extensive and covers not only the Anglo-Saxon, but also the continental (German, French, Italian) literature. The argumentation is well-structured and easy to follow; the language clear and accurate.

As we have seen, the study’s overall aim is to contribute to a better political understanding of some central questions posed by the late Republic. To this end, the discussion of the way contional rhetoric worked is ‘only’ instrumental. Nonetheless, the book deals with a number of problems of a purely rhetorical nature. These I will discuss now, leaving aside the larger political problems, which are beyond my competence.

As concerns rhetoric, chapters 2-4 are of special interest. In chapter 2, the section about “the physical setting” of the *contio* (pp. 42-60) commands particular attention. With the help of two maps and three figures, Morstein-Marx scrutinizes the archaeological, numismatic, and literary evidence in order to visualize the Rostra and similar other meeting-places associated with the *contio*. This is a way for Morstein-Marx to determine the extent to which the physical setting of a *contio* may have influenced the oratory practiced there and how it was perceived. For example, Morstein-Marx believes that “the elevation of speakers [sc. on the Rostra] relative to the audience reflects, and indeed helps to construct, a political hierarchy” (p. 51), and suggests (with appropriate caution) that “the very setting of the *contio* was an ideologically contested space, on which were inscribed highly charged polemics which are likely to have shaped Roman citizens’ lived experience of the *contio* in ways which cannot be precisely defined” (p. 57). (Later on, pp. 271-272, Morstein-Marx adds the important point that the sheer size of the central Forum, which the speaker had to cover with his voice and gestures, must have had decisive influence on the style of his delivery.) All in all, this is an exemplary attempt to locate a certain kind of oratory in its particular surroundings and to demonstrate the latter’s (possible) influence on the former.

Chapters 3 and 4 are also ground breaking in that they focus not on the speaker and his speech – both of which are almost invariably at the very center of attention in other studies of ancient oratory – but on the audience of the *contio*. While this audience must have been, as Morstein-Marx prudently reminds us (pp. 130-131), “highly variable” depending on the occasion, and while one should refrain from generalizations about its social composition, we may gain some valuable information about the intellectual background and behavior of the people that made up the audience.

As to the intellectual background, Morstein-Marx argues that the *plebs* had quite a detailed knowledge of Rome’s political history in general and a very good one of its recent history. This thesis is, on the whole, convincing. However, two reservations may be made:

First, the rather sophisticated images on the *denarii* issued by the *tresviri monetales*, which Morstein-Marx adduces to bolster up his claim (pp. 82-91), may not have been addressed exclusively to the *plebs*. The observation that many of the images are “manifestly ‘popular’” and the conclusion “that the coinage was an instrument of political self-advertisement with the electorate” (pp. 84-86), no doubt carry some weight. However, the inscriptions, which in most cases were crucial to the understanding of the images, meant nothing to the large illiterate part of the *plebs*. It therefore cannot be ruled out that the aristocratic messages and recherché allusions on some of the coins (e.g. those discussed on pp. 83-84, and on p. 90, n. 104) were exclusively aimed at the *nobiles*.

Second, historical knowledge should not be confused with ‘civic knowledge’ and above all not with what is of greatest concern in the context of the present study, namely political understanding. Here Morstein-Marx could have been a little clearer. True, on pp. 114-117 he offers some examples of the *plebs*’ legal knowledge and of their understanding of questions of procedure, but then (pp. 118, 189, 194-203) he also reveals their general dependency on the expertise of the Senate for religious and legislative technicalities, a fact which tilted the balance of power in favor of the *nobiles*.

I would also like to call attention to the section in chapter 4 on “Contional ventriloquism” (pp. 136-143). It is a brilliant demonstration of the way in which audience and speaker worked together in the *contio* to create a specific rhetorical event. Drawing on research on modern political rhetoric, Morstein-Marx suggests that Roman speakers used rhetorical devices such as tricolon, antithesis, and rhythmic *clausulae* to elicit ‘spontaneous’ applause from the audience. Morstein-Marx verifies this by a close reading of passages from contional oratory that are known to have been particularly successful. In Morstein-Marx’s analysis, what is usually perceived as mere rhetorical ornament emerges instead as a powerful weapon in the speaker’s fight for the assent of his audience.

In chapter 7, pp. 258-276, Morstein-Marx stresses the utmost importance of *ethos* in contional oratory, corresponding to that of *auctoritas* in Roman political life in general. It was paramount that the speaker present himself as a weighty and trustworthy person, either by embodying the ideal of cooperation and mutual trust between *populus* and *senatus*, or by posing as champion of the people against an oligarchic Senate. Morstein-Marx’s explanation of this profoundly ‘ethical’ character of contional oratory is as convincing as it is simple: The lack of hard facts, more specifically the average *contio*-goer’s inability to obtain trustworthy information about proceedings in the Senate, made the character of the speaker as constructed by himself the most convincing ‘proof’ available.

Finally, the book also presents us with a new image of Cicero, the contional speaker. The way Morstein-Marx understands the functioning of the *contio* allows him to see with unusual clarity how disingenuously Cicero the optimiate achieved his political goals by means of ‘popular’ rhetoric. Moreover, Morstein-Marx manages to make sense of the astonishing fact that throughout his career Cicero succeeded at being accepted by the *plebs* as a true *popularis* (cf.

especially pp. 193, 207-230). The analysis (pp. 194-201) of Cicero's *De lege agraria* serves as an excellent illustration of these considerations. On the other hand, the very brilliance of Cicero's hypocrisy casts a shadow of doubt on some aspects of the book's overall picture. It reminds us that a very large and certainly the most authentic part of its evidence is provided by a *homo novus* with incomparable rhetorical gifts. To what extent can the achievements of such an exceptional person be used to illustrate the everyday proceedings of the *contio*?

Although I do not agree with every detail of Morstein-Marx's conclusions, I would rather leave my small objections aside and emphasize the broader perspectives of his work. First of all, the book inspires further comparative studies of the other two most important forms of oratory in the Roman Republic, namely those of the Senate and the courts. Whereas we may in some ways consider senatorial oratory as the 'other side' of contional speech, a study of oratory in the law-courts, staffed mostly by *equites*, could help us to draw a clearer picture of the political role of this class during the late Republic. The understanding of Athenian rhetoric and politics would also very much benefit from a study such as this one.

Moreover, it might prove fruitful if we broaden the temporal horizon (even if the meager evidence poses some problems): Morstein-Marx repeatedly (e.g. pp. 229, 271-272) alludes to the middle Republic as a period when rhetorical conventions were different from those of the late Republic; the reasons for and the modalities of this change deserve further study. By the same token, the 'decline of rhetoric' that set in at the end of the Republic may also be viewed differently from the vantage point of this book.

Finally, we are used to classifying ancient speeches according to the classic Aristotelian tripartition as either juridical, deliberative, or epideictic. This study, by elaborating on the characteristics of contional rhetoric, suggests that we may also be justified in classifying Roman oratory, at least, according to its major institutional occasions (contional, senatorial, forensic, *funeris* etc.). Such an alternative classification partly cuts across the conventional one and is not done full justice by its categories (cf. especially p. 61 on how inadequately contional rhetoric is treated in the ancient handbooks). This observation points towards the limits of ancient rhetorical theory in general and, more specifically, towards the limits of Greek theory as applied to Roman oratory, and invites us to detect and to explore its 'blind spots'.

By now it should have become clear that Robert Morstein-Marx's *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic* is an excellent study on late Republican politics as well as a work that offers plenty of new and stimulating insights into Roman rhetoric. Not only should specialists of ancient history and classicists in general refer to this book, but it will surely also appeal to anyone interested in the history of rhetoric.

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