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***Dominari illi volunt, vos liberi esse* – Populist Reason and Rhetoric in Sallust**

Abstract: This chapter explores the ideological and rhetorical frameworks of populism through the lens of Sallust's writings during the late Roman Republic. Challenging prevailing interpretations that emphasize the destabilizing effects of populism, it adopts an emic perspective, analyzing how populism justifies itself ideologically. The study identifies three core elements of populism: the symbolic versus immanent construction of popular sovereignty, the dichotomous opposition of "the People" and "the Elite," and the nostalgic invocation of a moralised historical "heartland." It applies these frameworks to the speeches of Lepidus, Macer, and Memmius, highlighting how Sallust's representation of populist rhetoric totalizes diverse grievances into unified demands grounded in a moral narrative of liberty versus oppression. The analysis extends to Sallust's own historical commentary, revealing a pessimistic yet coherent worldview shaped by the tension between Rome's moral and political decline and an idealized past. This populist perspective uncovers parallels between ancient and modern populisms, particularly the role of symbolic legitimacy and the inherent tensions between democratic ideals and institutional realities.

Introduction

Populism can undoubtedly be bad news for republics. Specifically, populism is bad for the way that republican institutions enact politics without (non-state sanctioned) violence, while maintaining the position of roughly the same hegemonic political class, with a sufficiently accepted aura of legitimacy. As a result, much recent scholarship on populism has focused on its effects: authoritarianism, illiberalism, anti-constitutionality, or anti-pluralism,¹ a perspective that echoes a view of 'demagogues' going back to antiquity.² This chapter takes a different perspective, examining the world-view expressed by one ancient Roman historian through the internal logic of populism as it sees itself, morally and ideologically, rather than the effects of its praxis. Ideological populism takes the bedrock of republican legitimacy – a symbolic and reified popular sovereignty – and enacts it. Doing so reveals a central paradoxical fault-line of republics which promise that *res publica* really is *res populi*, but are in

¹ E.g., Urbinati, N. (2014), Müller (2017a, 2017b), Pappas (2019).

² See the chapter in this volume by Simonton for the rhetoric versus reality of 'demagogues', and, with reference to the populism and Caesarism in antiquity and modern reception, see the chapter by de Dijn.

fact built on complex networks of institutions that actively frustrate direct popular involvement. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Sallust contains evidence of this same ideological pattern in the final years of the Roman republic. Writing history in the late 40s,³ Sallust's antagonistic *popularis* speakers and thesis of political decline can be interpreted through the complex logics of populism. This characterisation reveals an undercurrent of political thought within the Roman ideological landscape recognisable to Sallust's contemporaries as a facet of the highly consequential anti-elite – yet not entirely 'democratic' – moments of political backlash that erupted periodically, destabilising a political system that had failed to deliver the promises of politics and empire equally.

In the first part of this chapter, I sketch the complicated ideology of populism, drawn from a range of modern scholarship and pared down to three key areas. Populism is a complex, multifaceted, and at times chameleonic ideological and rhetorical position, able to take on a wide range of ontic politics.⁴ The response of recognition it evokes – the 'I know it when I see it' of populism – is a complicated interplay of different contextual elements. No single approach can encapsulate the variances in how populism is interpreted: etic or emic, present or historical.⁵ Indeed, this heterogeneity is crucial for analysing ancient Rome as populism changes dramatically depending on the moral and political premises of the observer.⁶ A nascent topic of study is applying issues around populism to Roman sources, but these have often utilised etic or liberal perspectives.⁷ This chapter is concerned with how populism justifies itself within a political system. For brevity, I focus on three key areas: the way popular sovereignty is configured as simultaneously 'immanent' and 'symbolic', the way 'the People' is constructed as an exclusive body in opposition to 'the Elite' through demands, and finally, the rhetorical creation and exploitation of 'a heartland' – a conservative imaginary, located as a historically foundational state when politics happened as it *ought* to be done.⁸

In the second part, I apply these facets of populism within the oft-cited '*popularis*' speeches of Sallust – those of Lepidus, Macer, and Memmius. Ernesto Laclau's structuralist approach is used as a spine, demonstrating the complex way that Sallust's

3 All dates given are BCE unless otherwise specified.

4 Hermet (2017), (2001) 53, Taggart (2000).

5 My current project, 'People, Power, and Politics: Populism and the Late Roman Republic' interrogates the ideological landscape of the republic through different interpretations of populism. Recent work looking at populism in the late Roman republic include Mouritsen (2023) and Lundgreen (2022), as well as the chapters by Rushmer, and by de Dijn in this volume.

6 Paulina Ochoa Espejo (2017) 766 stresses that however 'general' or 'universal' approaches to populism claim to be, they are still grounded in normative claims; ideas themselves – people, elite, popular will – are necessarily constructed through *a priori* normative judgements of how those terms *ought* to be conceived.

7 See, e.g., Urso (2021), Mouritsen (2023).

8 Taggart (2000).

speakers rhetorically totalise a ‘People’ from disparate demands.⁹ In doing so, I identify how different injustices are equivalenced to one another to form a platform, and highlight how an idea of foundational authority or sovereignty is used as the normative justification of both those demands, and the action that might be taken to fulfil them.

Finally, I examine the underlying political analysis Sallust himself expresses in the *excursus* of the monographs and fragmentary *Historiae* through the lens of the ‘heartland’ of Paul Taggart.¹⁰ The end of the Roman republic is tied to the crises of competing legitimacies, and understanding the frameworks of populism in Sallust’s moral landscape enables a view of one such legitimacy.¹¹ The populism underpinning Sallust’s worldview is shown, not as an agent of illiberal anti-constitutionalism, but as a rational, coherent, albeit flawed, ideological position, responding to contemporary politics and materialities. This view colours the foundational sovereignty underpinning the political rhetoric of the speeches as the product of an implicit historical imaginary – a moral relationship between the past and the present that reinterprets Sallust’s seeming political ambivalence as populist rationality.

Populism as Ideology

Populism is a pattern of politics which occurs in certain political systems under certain circumstances – it reveals as much about the populist politician or supporter as it does the political system that engenders it. The precise definition of that pattern is frequently debated,¹² but there is nevertheless an essential core feature that is universally recognisable: populism understands itself as the politics of ‘the People’ in opposition to the ‘Elite’.¹³ This dichotomy is central; a boundary is drawn around – and importantly between – each group, which are defined in normative moral terms: the

⁹ For a further example of how Laclau’s theoretical framework can help isolate a contingent, totalised, and discursively produced *populus*, see Zucchetti (2020) 139–200.

¹⁰ Taggart (2000).

¹¹ For other sources of legitimacy see, e.g. the chapter by Morrell in this volume for discussion of enabling laws.

¹² See Frank (2017) 630–636 for an overview.

¹³ Mudde (2004); Sallust’s *populus* examined in this chapter is a partial *populus*, the people-as-part, but configured in light of the *populus* as the entire polity – straddling two of the polysemic distinctions of *populus*; Hellegouarc’h (1963) – a tension particularly prevalent in Cicero; see, e.g. Moatti (2018), Lundgreen (2021). Hölkeskamp (1995) identifies something similar as universal in speeches *ad populum*, equivalencing the assembled crowd and sovereign *populus*; Zucchetti (2020) 142–151 finds the distinction between symbolic and immanent fails for subjectivising what he better terms ‘multitudes’; this chapter focuses on the contingent rhetorical construction of the *populus* as a component in a populist ideology, rather than seeking to subjectivise the *populus* in a historical role as a political agent.

'People' is pure, morally good, and possesses constitutional legitimacy and authority, while the 'Elite' is corrupt and terminally self-interested.¹⁴

Populism has usually been described as purely a modern phenomenon;¹⁵ I propose that the facets of a political system that appear to be prerequisite for populism to occur are not in themselves uniquely modern. This prerequisite political system has a strong culture of popular representation and participation as a primary source of legitimacy, while having, at the same time, systemic and materially meaningful counters to actual popular or participative power through the form and organisation of its institutions, conventions, and/or laws.¹⁶ In addition to this idea of legitimacy, populism requires a political system in which there is a perceptible (real or imagined) divide between those who are subject to, and those who execute, state power. By extension, some political organisation structures cannot, in principle, be populist. Feudal monarchies have no presumption of popular sovereignty; likewise, theocratic polities have different loci of legitimacy. In ancient democratic Athens, too, there is little space for populism to be discursively produced; those that *symbolically* rule in the rhetoric of legitimacy are, through the function of the *ekklesia*, too numerically identical to those that *actually* rule in practice – the 'sovereignty gap' is too narrow.

This concept of a 'sovereignty gap' is important in understanding populism as a rational ideological position. While populism is at times reduced to the problem of 'illiberalism' or 'anti-pluralism',¹⁷ these are secondary characteristics – knock-on effects of populism for political systems which are predicated on liberalism and/or pluralism. Rather, core to populist ideologies as they are earnestly felt and expressed is the perennial question of legitimacy.¹⁸ Popular sovereignty can be considered as composed of two Hobbesian strands: on the one hand 'legal' sovereignty, as we find in direct-democratic institutions through which a sovereign *demos* executes legislation directly, and, on the other hand, indirect 'constituent' or symbolic sovereignty, which exists as a power 'above' and 'apart' from politics – a final, overarching, yet 'sleeping'

¹⁴ Mudde (2004).

¹⁵ Nevertheless, populist analyses have been made in more distant historical contexts, for instance, the US popular party, Postel (2007), Goodwyn (1976); Boulangism in the French Third Republic, Mudde (2017) 365–367, Hutton (1976); and the *narodniki* of the late Russian empire, Clarke (2002), Mudde (2004); these nineteenth-century populisms are often presented as 'ancestors' to twentieth-century populisms, however Hawkins, Read and Pauwels (2017) 270–274 argue that their roots stem more from the conceptions of popular sovereignty that emerged during the revolutionary movements of France and the United States in the late eighteenth-century.

¹⁶ I use the term 'popular sovereignty' to refer to a loosely-defined conception of legitimacy stemming from the *populus*. For discussions of sovereignty in the *res publica*, see Arena (2016), Hammer (2022). See further the discussion on the validity of comparing Roman and modern political systems in the Introduction to this volume.

¹⁷ Kauth and King (2020).

¹⁸ Mackie (1992) esp. 52–59.

sovereign which is uninvolved with actual law-making.¹⁹ Symbolic sovereignty is the language of legitimacy that binds a system together; a vote may be gerrymandered or iniquitous, but nevertheless it is empowered by an idea of the legitimacy of the People. That 'People' is symbolic – it is not expressed by any group claiming to be every *physical* person that constitutes the citizenry of a polity, but rather extends inclusively to incorporate the whole polity. It is diachronic, non-corporeal, and nonspecific, applying as much to a referendum as to a law of the legislature or edict of the executive. In Rome, this is the *populus Romanus* made up of all citizens, plebeian and patrician, noble and non-noble – the *populus* as the continuous polity extending forward and backwards in time. 'Legal' sovereignty, on the other hand, is enacted by an 'immanent' People. This entity, unlike its symbolic counterpart, is the embodiment of the legitimising act itself, when real massed people enact real interventions.²⁰ It is the language of symbolic popular sovereignty realised as action; 'the People have spoken' is realised in a legal sense as 'a' People that actually speaks. It exists synchronically – appearing during moments in time and in space, as the crowd or multitude.

Roman popular authority exists between these strands. It is highly symbolic (indeed, often, 'ritualised'),²¹ yet possesses an important locus of executive power through *comitia*, elections, and a broad – though heavily constrained – participatory role.²² It is within the tension between the symbolic idea of the *populus* as sovereign, and its constrained role in politics, that populism exists. Populism is the expression of the gap between the foundational normative democratic language ("the People are sovereign", "the will of the People", "the People have spoken", etc.) of a participative system, and the way it actually functions – what the theorist Norberto Bobbio has called the 'broken promises' of democracy.²³

The populist social rationality is the understanding that the symbolic and ubiquitous language of popular sovereignty does not match the lived reality of political

19 Yack (2001) 517–336, Wolkenstein (2019) 338–339; see also Habermas' attempts to reconcile these functions of sovereignty (1996, 1998), cf. Mouffe (2005) 8, 80–120; Rawls (1996) 409–421; conflicting interpretations lead directly to differing normative ideas about the exercise of legitimacy: 'radically', as in e.g. Canovan (2005), Ochoa Espejo (2011) or 'indirectly', e.g. Pettit (2012), Müller (2017a); see Wolkenstein (2019) 339 for a broad overview; the 'sleeping sovereign' was originally coined by Hobbes in *De Cive*, see Tuck (2016) 63–120.

20 The internal tension of defining the People either 'as-part' or 'as-whole' has a long provenance from the early modern period onwards (cf. Rosanvallon [2020]), but is a polyvalence that clearly emerges in Roman republican distinctions where '*populus*' can mean both *multitudini*, and the community as a whole; cf. Lundgreen (2022) 189–190.

21 Flaig (2003); Hölkeskamp (2011); Mouritsen (2017) 54–104.

22 Whether as an audience at *contiones*, through mass demonstration, or enacting political violence; for a broad overview of the political authority and purview of the massed *populus* see Lintott (1999) *passim*, esp. 38, 49–61, 64, 122, Millar (1998), Morstein-Marx (2004), Mouritsen (2017) 67–72, Brunt (1988) 342–346, Yakobson (2010) 15–34.

23 Bobbio (1987) 27–35; cf. Müller (2017b) 29–30.

power. It is in many ways a straightforward and rational response to crisis, yet contains a central flaw: the legitimating rhetoric of symbolic sovereignty is itself drawn from the language of the institutions state, yet these institutions, by design, do not enable legal, direct, popular sovereignty, but rather frustrate it. By seeking to ‘cash the cheque’ issued by a hegemonic narrative of popular sovereignty, a real, synchronic group needs to be constructed: a unitary People with a voice, will, and agency.²⁴ A finite but disparate People must be imagined into a single univocal entity. This structure has far-reaching implications for the stability of the systems that engender it; a univocal sovereign is incompatible with the polyvalence of a politics of checks, balances, and the ‘mixed constitution’.

Ernesto Laclau provides a useful model of how this univocal People emerges in structural terms. In brief, Bobbio’s ‘broken promises’ can be thought of as unfulfilled demands made by one or more parts of the political community – for example, for food security, political representation, or a share of the spoils of empire in the form of land or elite- or civic-sponsored euergetism. These demands are disparate, yet in the face of recalcitrance from opposition they become equivalenced to one another as each demand becomes linked through a shared, ‘empty signifier’.²⁵ As the term implies, this signifier is not a concrete demand in itself, but a watchword, slogan, or rallying call that comes to encapsulate all demands through what is in some way lacking in each case. Through the adoption of watchwords like ‘peace and bread’, ‘liberty’, and indeed, ‘the People’, the partial group becomes a totality: individual group demands, are rhetorically flattened to represent a *populus* in its own right. Nevertheless, it is a sharply defined and immanent *populus* which is placed in a dichotomous, antagonistic frontier against an equally immanent ‘Elite’. The corollary of this process whereby the ‘People’ becomes tangible is that it is in fact, highly plastic – it is a binary category that must be stretched in specific ways across specific demands to demonstrate a clear boundary delineating who does, and does not, constitute the People.

Understanding this dichotomy in relation to its moral justification through the hegemonic, institutional language of popular sovereignty sheds light on what can seem like a paradoxical conservatism in populist discourse: populism routinely appears to be about restoration rather than revolution – a movement for change that consistently looks backwards. This prominent feature of populism, seen in the political slogans of populist campaigns to ‘take *back* control’ or ‘make America great *again*’, exists deep in the ideological fabric of populist movements. Paul Taggart asserts that the appeal to the People itself stems from something more primal, emotional, and implicit – the ‘heartland’. A historical imaginary, this psychosocial sense of legitimacy is characterised by ‘a romanticised ordinariness that invokes a core constituency for the

²⁴ For a discussion of the *voluntas populi* in populist terms in Cicero, see Lundgreen (2022), cf. Arena (2016).

²⁵ Used here in the sense of Laclau (2005) 69, 104–106.

centre-ground politics of common-sense'.²⁶ It is an emotionally configured worldview that looks backward and inward to an idealised past to turn the crisis of the present into a crisis of legitimacy against which an ideological position can be anchored.

Populist Rhetoric in Lepidus, Macer, and Memmius

The speeches of Lepidus, Macer, and Memmius are examples of a rhetorical 'type'; Sallust is attempting to create – if not historical accuracy – verisimilitude to a kind of speech that would be recognisable to his contemporaries.²⁷ This section interrogates what J. A. Rosenblitt terms the 'hostile politics' embodied in the three speeches, and attempts to go further, exploring how they are grounded in a shared social rationality in which the *populus* is an aggrieved totality, thrown into an existential conflict with a rapacious dominating elite configured by liberty and slavery. The lens of populism, I argue, reveals this social rationality as more than mere imagery, more than mere hostility, but part of a coherent worldview built on a wider understanding of legitimacy and crisis in the Roman republic.

Sallust's speech of Lepidus is a justification of his nascent armed rebellion, launched from Etruria in 78. It covers a broad range of disparate demands contained within the traditional *popularis* platform, and places them in relation to a clearly defined 'enemy other' – Sulla and his regime. There is a clear difference between Lepidus and Macer's speeches and that of Memmius: Memmius focuses almost singly on the individual issue of resolving the threat of elite corruption, while Macer and Lepidus demonstrate directly how disparate demands – from land for soldiers, to grain distribution, to the treatment of allies – are equivalenced. Nevertheless, each of the speeches present their demands as questions of natural right, popular jurisdiction, or foundational authority, demonstrating a picture of subverted sovereignty characterised as an unequal relationship between conqueror and conquered, and free and unfree. This clear dichotomy forms a sharply defined antagonistic frontier between two totalised, and morally configured, groups.²⁸

The social demands set out by Lepidus are both concrete and symbolic. The issue of removal of citizenship from Italian allies, for instance, is demonstrated as both a direct injustice against them, as well as the authority of the Roman *populus* itself. He states that, "a great part of our allies and of the people of Latium to whom you gave

²⁶ Taggart (2000) 97.

²⁷ Rosenblitt (2019) 116–139; for the commonality of the approaches see, e.g., La Penna (1963), Robb (2010).

²⁸ This analysis lends credence to Rosenblitt's (2019) 65 argument in the debate she sums up as 'Lepidus the Opportunist vs Lepidus the Moderate' (cf. Syme [1964] 186) – she argues that Lepidus does represent a coherent set of well-reasoned demands, and in doing so places much greater emphasis on the importance of Lepidus' 'urban phase' in his insurrection.

[*a vobis data*] citizenship [. . .] are kept from it [*prohibentur*] by one man”.²⁹ Citizenship, argues Lepidus, is the natural prerogative of the Roman people, so the judicial right of the *populus* has been denied. The question of Latin and allied rights – a long-standing and complicated issue – is tied directly to Sulla himself; while Sulla did remove the right of citizenship from some allies following the conclusion of the civil war to settle his own soldiers,³⁰ there is some sleight of hand here as Lepidus frames the issue of injustice toward allies as one of sovereignty. Similarly, the issue of food security is framed as both an injustice in itself, and an assault on the *imperium* of the *populus* as a whole: “the Roman people, until recently the governor of peoples [*gentium moderator*], stripped of its *imperium*, glory, justice, without agency [*agitandi inops*] and despised, does not even retain the rations of slaves [*servilia . . . alimenta*].”³¹ Sallust’s Lepidus is explicit in framing the longstanding issue of grain distribution as directly connected with the recent loss of power caused by Sulla’s *dominatio*.³² Equating the position of the *populus* with that of slaves – lower, even – Lepidus makes a key rhetorical categorisation of the *populus* as an oppressed totality, signified by an absence of justice.

Soldiers who fought on the Sullan side, too, are incorporated into the disenfranchised “at the price of whose blood riches are won for the worst of slaves” (*quorum sanguine . . . pessumis servorum, divitiae partae sunt*).³³ The Roman armies have been, “fastened against themselves, and our arms turned away from the enemy and against ourselves”.³⁴ There is clearly good reason for Sallust’s Lepidus to make an explicit appeal to the army – he is about to lead a rebellion – but the image of civil war between Roman armies was highly relevant for Sallust’s readers by the early 30s.³⁵ While emphasising the primacy and legitimacy of the soldiery, they are at the same time made a victim of their own success, having been robbed like the rest of the *populus*. He poses an ironic, rhetorical question, asking if, “perhaps, they advanced in arms to overthrow tribunician power – established by their ancestors [*conditam a maioribus*

29 Sall. *Hist.* 1.48.12McG – all translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

30 Some communities were also enfranchised – a reward for support upon Sulla’s return to Italy; Santangelo (2007) 134–191, cf. Steel (2013) 110.

31 Sall. *Hist.* 1.48.11McG.

32 Access to grain was a perennial concern of the urban *plebs*, particularly during periods of shortages, and the provision of relief was associated with those looking to enhance their popularity – with an associated implication of aspirations to *regnum*; cf. Livy’s presentation of the middle-republic ‘proto-populares’, particularly Spurius Maelius (4.13–16); Robb (2010), Cornell and Lomas (2005) 50–52.

33 Sall. *Hist.* 1.48.21McG.

34 Sall. *Hist.* 1.48.19McG.

35 The 40s was a decade that saw near-constant civil war between Roman armies – from Caesar’s war with Pompey (49–45), to the brief conflict between Antony, Octavian and Decimus Brutus (43), to the triumvirate’s campaign against the ‘liberators’ (43–42), to the Perusine war (41–40), to the ongoing (as of 40) conflict between Octavian (and Lepidus), Sextus Pompey and Antony.

suis] . . . or wrench away [*extorquerent*] their own rights and courts [*iura et iudica*].”³⁶ The soldiery, then, is part of Lepidus’ *populus*.

Regardless of its historicity, rhetorically, the inclusion of the issue of tribunician power directly alongside disparate social demands ties the issue of economic inequity to that of political representation.³⁷ This equivalence between food security, army conditions, and political representation is seen similarly in Macer’s speech which, while primarily a call to the *populus Romanus* to restore the power of the tribunate, includes as part of its central argument appeals to both the conditions of the soldiers and the grain supply, mirroring Lepidus’ comment above that the people subsist on ‘the rations of slaves’. Macer points to the five-*modii* frumentary law as a poor bribe; an amount “not more than the rations of a prison [*non amplius possunt alimentis carceris*] . . . values all *libertas* at five *modii*”.³⁸ This focus on unfair exchange between *populus* and *nobiles* is all the more striking in that it immediately follows Macer’s call that his audience refuse to serve in the army, framed as a request that “you offer no more blood” [*ne amplius sanguinem vestrum praebeatis*]. The promise of access to the spoils of empire in exchange for service is broken, Macer argues: “let those who take no reward be free from danger and toil” [*absit periculum et labos quibus nulla pars fructus est*];³⁹ war and work are subject to an implicit contract, which has been broken. Taken together, the social demands presented in Sallust’s *popularis* speeches form a ‘platform’. Sallust’s readers can logically tie together issues which are inherently disparate (land, food, Latin rights, plebeian political rights, conditions for soldiers, corruption) and understand them as connected in this rhetorically constructed social rationality. An important aspect of that equivalence is that the demands are all justified by a shared foundational position, predicated on the position of the *populus*.

Sallust’s *popularis* speeches are bound by a rhetoric that repeatedly asserts the *populus Romanus* as the heirs of an ancient sovereign past, and, by extension, a defined moral position. This is not unique to Sallust; there is an almost formulaic necessity for political speeches addressed *ad populum* to express concern for the *commoda*

36 Sall. *Hist.* 1.48.22-3McG; this idea of the heroism of non-elite soldiers as a primary source of legitimacy is echoed by Dionysius’ Lucius Siccius Dentatus (10.36–39), and Plutarch’s Ti. Gracchus’ famous ‘wild beasts of Italy speech’ in Plut. *TG* 9.4–5.

37 This presents a potential anachronism for Sallust’s portrayal of Lepidus, who seemingly did not support the restoration of the tribunate during his consulship (Gran. *Lic.* 36.33), but this is contradicted by Philippus’ speech later in the *Histories* which explicitly states that Lepidus called for the restoration of the tribunate: (Sall. *Hist.* F1.66.14). This is itself further complicated by Sallust’s Macer’s statement that it was L. Sicinius, ‘the first who dared to speak concerning tribunician power’: *primus de potestate tribunicia loqui ausus*’ (Sall. *Hist.* F3.34.8McG). The *communis opinio* that Lepidus changed his mind – perhaps as Rosenblitt argues, expressed through *mandata* while in Etruria (Gran. *Lic.* 36.43–44, Sall. *Hist.* 1.66.14; Rosenblitt (2019) 67–68 – appears a reasonable interpretation in the face of this evidence, provided that Sallust’s Macer’s *loqui* implies conational rhetoric.

38 Sall. *Hist.* 3.34.19McG.

39 Sall. *Hist.* 3.34.17-8McG.

and *libertas* of the Roman people.⁴⁰ Where Sallust's rhetorical presentation differs is that here this appeal is being configured as essentially antagonistic. Sallust's *populares* must be viewed as integrally related to unmet popular demands understood in terms of the relationship between *populus* and *nobiles*. Underpinning this notion, the normative benchmark that appears throughout the speeches, is a *populus* configured *pars pro toto* with a particular appeal to a specific foundational, legal, and moral sovereignty. An unmet demand becomes a broken promise when the meeting of that demand is understood as a moral imperative, and the partial *populus* in Sallust's speakers is framed as morally configured. It is this moral quality which Lepidus leverages in the opening to his speech: "Your mercy and honesty [*clementia et probitas*], citizens, by which you are supreme and honoured [*maximi et clari*] among other peoples, cause in me the greatest fear in the face of the tyranny of L. Sulla".⁴¹ For Memmius, too, the Roman people are "born into command" [*in imperio nati*],⁴² and "unconquered by enemies, rulers of all peoples" [*invicti ab hostibus, imperatores omnium gentium*].⁴³

Central to this moral position of the *populus* of Sallust is the idea that it springs from an ancient provenance; its provisions and protections are both hard-won and honourable through symbolic moments of struggle. Macer evokes this foundational cultural memory at the beginning of his speech, pitting the normative "law left by your ancestors" [*ius a maioribus relictum vobis*], emerging from plebeian secession, against Sullan slavery [*servitium*].⁴⁴ He reiterates that stripped privileges "were left you by your forefathers" [*maiores reliquere*],⁴⁵ and later, that tribunician power was a "weapon given to you by your ancestors".⁴⁶ These *maiores* are, as María García-Magán shows, a plebeian-coded appeal to tradition;⁴⁷ *maiores vestri* are here the antagonistic unnamed plebeian precursors – and source of a provenance of dissent that confers its own legitimacy through its antiquity. What is appealed to is an alternative founding-moment, configured through historical conflict between plebeians and patricians; an evocation which forms the basis for an empty signifier that comes to stand in for what is lacking in each demand. Prominently, in Sallust's speeches, this is *libertas*, established by the image and rhetoric of a *populus* enslaved by the *pauci*.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ See especially Morstein-Marx (2004) 204–240; Cic. *Agr.* 2.69, 2.84, 3.12; cf. García-Magán (2022) 266–272.

⁴¹ Sall. *Hist.* 1.48.1McG.

⁴² Sall. *Iug.* 31.11.

⁴³ Sall. *Iug.* 31.20.

⁴⁴ Sall. *Hist.* 3.34.1McG.

⁴⁵ Sall. *Hist.* 3.34.6McG.

⁴⁶ Sall. *Hist.* 3.34.12McG, cf. 3.34.15McG.

⁴⁷ García-Magán (2022) 244.

⁴⁸ The question of how to interpret *libertas* in a given context is a longstanding and contested one – in this volume Hillard and Beness address the historiography of the tension between different strands and interpretations of the term; the chapter by Tatum examines the call for *libertas* to be realised

The idea of slavery versus freedom, and indeed, slavery versus mastery, was a rich and multifaceted distinction for contemporary Roman audiences, closely associated with the idea of *'spolia'* [here, spoils; war-booty]. Indeed, in the speeches examined here, Sallust's speakers frequently refer to the *pauci* in terms that suggest an invader.⁴⁹ Repeatedly, the *populares* present a Rome that has essentially been sacked: "the city wasted from flight and murders, the goods of the wretched citizens, as if Cimbric booty, sold or given as a gift" (*vastam urbem fuga et caedibus, bona civium miseriorum quasi Cimbricam praedam venum aut dono datam*).⁵⁰ This configuration of the relationship between *populus* and *pauci* reveals a central theme, like the empty signifier outlined above which, argues Laclau, begins as the articulation of an unfulfilled demand and, as it becomes more conceptualised, comes to symbolise and subsume all other demands: here, the signifier is *libertas*. Valentina Arena's systematic study of how *libertas* is used in the late republic presents two threads of linguistic usage – contrasting *popularis* with optimate – stemming from a state of personal *libertas* – that is, whether one is free or unfree.⁵¹

Slavery forms a crucial component of the rhetorical characterisation of both the state that the *populus* is in, and that which awaits it if action is not taken, configured primarily as an absence of rights.⁵² While protections against lethal violence (without cause) were instituted in the imperial period, in the republic, the power of a master over a slave was, legally speaking, ultimately that of life and death.⁵³ While the categorisation of a slave only in terms of *res* can be an overly legalistic view,⁵⁴ from Aristotle to the *Digesta*, the position of *being* property as opposed to *owning* property was a pervasive component of slavery and liberty in the ancient world.⁵⁵ Arena extends this, demonstrating that the *popularis* concept of *libertas* is bound up with the political,⁵⁶ something visible in the speeches where liberty becomes an empty signifier representing the core issue of the capacity of the '*populus*' to fulfil its own demands – *agitandi*. In this way, the dichotomy between *multi* and *pauci* is represented as fundamentally a dichotomy between states of liberty and slavery by Lepidus, Memmius, and Macer. A clear boundary is established through the idea of who has *libertas*, and

through the 'restoration' of the tribunate in Macer's speech, seeing it an attempt to confect popular controversy where perhaps only lukewarm sentiment existed previously, echoing in some ways the opinion of Gerrish (2023) who views Sallust's Macer as an 'organised' dissimulator – a reflection of Sallust's view of triumviral political tactics.

49 A common language of the spoils of war in the speeches has been dealt with extensively in Rosenblitt (2016), (2019) 116–139.

50 Sall. *Hist.* 1.48.17McG; cf. 1.48.7McG, 1.48.16McG; 3.34.27McG; *Iug* 31.10, 31.23.

51 Arena (2012) 1–44.

52 *Dig.* 1.5.9; cf. Wiedemann (1981) 1–2.

53 A state of 'permanent, violent domination', as Patterson relates (1982) 13.

54 Knapp (2011) 15–16; Joshel and Peterson (2014).

55 Cf. Buckland (2010 [1970]) 10–11.

56 Arena (2012) 116–168.

who does not – but it is a *libertas* that has come to represent a whole range of equivocated, unmet, popular demands. More broadly, *libertas* and slavery amplify the exclusionary effect of the themes of predation and conquest; *libertas* can be taken away, and the *populus*, in a defensive (conservative, even) stance is vulnerable. The question of what *libertas* means to Sallust's three speakers is a flexible mixture of positive and negative freedoms that range from material security to political agency, but also a quality which, by its absence, comes to signify membership of the exclusive body of the *populus* – in direct opposition to its counterpoint, the *nobilitas*. This binary social rationality underpins, not only the immanent nature of the two groups – exclusive, clearly delineated, and bound to the time and space of the moment – but also creates a moral impetus for political action. Each speaker exhorts the *populus* to act as a matter of, not only moral, but existential, necessity. For Lepidus, the binary is between “dangerous freedom [and] quiet slavery”,⁵⁷ and likewise, for Memmius, the dichotomy is fundamentally exclusive, and ultimately untenable:

Nam fidei quidem aut concordiae quae spes est? Dominari illi volunt, vos liberi esse; facere illi iniurias, vos prohibere; postremo sociis nostris veluti hostibus, hostibus pro sociis utuntur. Potestne in tam divorsis mentibus pax aut amicitia esse?

Because what hope is there of mutual trust or concord? They wish to dominate, you to be free; they to inflict injuries, you to stop them; finally, they use our allies as if enemies, enemies as allies. How, with minds so opposite, can there be peace or friendship?⁵⁸

Taken together, these calls tap into a populist narrative which is able to harness the ontological conception of a bifurcated, asymmetric society constructed from an oppressed *populus* and an oppressor elite, in order to make a reasoned case for a specific, directed, ontic expression.

This section has demonstrated the rhetorical construction of a totalised *populus*, defined through the concrete distinctions of individual demands and equivocated to one another through the idea of *libertas*. Both political and material freedoms, positive and negative, create a strong rebuttal to an inclusive conception of the *populus*: membership, at this synchronic point, is defined by one's relation to the crisis of *libertas*, and by which side of the promise one is on. Indeed, this is a profoundly synchronic configuration of crisis because it can only be expressed as a deviation from the normative. A past foundational state of sovereignty, equilibrium, and morality forms a ubiquitous reference point to these speeches, summed up by Macer at the end of his speech as a time “before, [when] each of you found protection in the many, not in one man”.⁵⁹ It is precisely this tension between the past and the present – between the promise and the reality – that the next section examines, moving the per-

⁵⁷ Sall. *Hist.* 1.48.26McG.

⁵⁸ Sall. *Iug.* 31.23–24; cf. Macer's call to action in Sall. *Hist.* 3.34.27McG.

⁵⁹ Sall. *Hist.* 3.34.24McG.

spective from Sallust's speakers to Sallust himself. This section examines how Sallust configures his contemporary *populus* and contrasts it with his 'heartland'; an imagined *res publica* that exists periodically prior to the destruction of Carthage in 146.

Sallust's Heartland

While rhetoric and composition permeate ancient historiography,⁶⁰ the political analysis put forward in Sallust's own voice allows a contextualisation of the ideas found in the speeches with a somewhat clearer picture of his own views. The remainder of this chapter examines the complicated worldview of Sallust himself, morally configured by a populist conception of a Roman political 'heartland'. Looking at Sallust's view of history, and his understanding of morality, decline, and conflict within the *res publica*, populism provides a loose structure for understanding the ambiguities that Sallust has traditionally represented. This worldview is pessimistic, lacking the belief in the possibility of positive change that often characterises populism – but nevertheless, some profoundly populist beliefs remain: a stalwart belief in a symbolic popular sovereignty, the ability to understand that *populus* as immanent and analogous to the *populus* of the *contio* or *comitia*, a narrative of society as a dichotomy between a (mostly) 'pure people' and a 'corrupt elite', and of that corruption as a hypocrisy that breaks some of the fundamental civic promises about values, honour, and liberty.

Sallust's purported motivations for writing history are centred on the central theme of post-Carthage class conflict, *discordia*, and a decline characterised by an increasingly predatory elite whose actions give rise to an increasingly desperate *populus*. Both *Catiline's War* and *The Jugurthine War* begin with discussion of an established trope: the merits of achievements of the mind as opposed to the body.⁶¹ Having set out the broad theme of a dichotomous relationship between two components which must "function together through a productive tension if they are to function well",⁶² he expounds on his central preoccupation – *concordia*, *discordia*, and social decline. Sallust's Rome has a temporal 'heartland' which extends – in the *Jugurthine War* and *Catiline's War* – from Aeneas to the fall of Carthage,⁶³ although he places the pinnacle of Roman moral virtue between the Second and Third Punic wars,⁶⁴ when men compete for honour rather than wealth, exemplifying martial strength and moral uprightness.⁶⁵ A number of foundational moments are identified, beginning

⁶⁰ Laird (2009).

⁶¹ Sall. *Cat.* 1.1–2.7; *Jug.* 1.3–2.4.

⁶² Kapust (2011) 48.

⁶³ Sall. *Cat.* 10.1–6; *Jug.* 41.1–10.

⁶⁴ Sall. *Hist.* 1.9McG.

⁶⁵ See esp. Sall. *Cat.* 7.4.

with the merging of Trojans and Latins – an event configuring a central Sallustian ideal, the establishment of *concordia*, which “quickly made a wandering and scattered multitude [*multitudo dispersa atque vaga*] into a community [*civitas*]”.⁶⁶ Later, as the institution of kingship degraded into a “wanton domination” [*superbiam dominationem*], was the re-establishment of liberty concomitant with the abolition of the kingship.⁶⁷ Maintaining *concordia* and preventing civic competition from spilling out into civil discord was the *metus hostilis*; a restraining threat from outside forces that threatened the entire community.⁶⁸

The fragmentary *Histories* is more nuanced. Still holding the sack of Carthage in 146 as an important sea-change in the social, economic, and political life of the *res publica*,⁶⁹ in the *Histories*, the ‘purest and most moral’ period in Roman civic culture only begins at the end of the Second Punic War.⁷⁰ Prior, Sallust asserts, there had been alternating periods of strife and concord. *Concordia* is hard-won and fleeting; unlike the monographs, “equal justice and restraint lasted only until the fear of Tarquin . . . came to an end”, from which point, “the patricians treated the *populus* as slaves”.⁷¹ Once the rights of plebeians and the tribunate are won, however, the agonistic tensions produce a moral and balanced timocratic society – the moral high-water mark of the *res publica*, evidenced by the extraordinary imperial position Rome finds itself in by the first century.⁷²

To Sallust, this ‘heartland’ created its own nobility. This nobility emerged from a general competition to excel in war; “to be the first to strike down the enemy, to scale a wall, to be seen by all while doing such a deed”.⁷³ There is no direct mention in the monographs of the so-called ‘Conflict of the Orders’; rather, “quarrels, discord, and strife were reserved for their enemies, citizen vied with citizen only for the prize of merit”.⁷⁴ The competition that occurs in this period is for *honor*, whereby what is deemed good for the individual is good for the community,⁷⁵ in a productive tension between people and their paternalistic leaders.⁷⁶ The senate that emerges in that time were, notes Sallust, “named Fathers [*patres*], either because of their age, or the similarity of their duties”.⁷⁷ This heartland is a state of asymmetrical but symbiotic con-

66 Sall. *Cat.* 6.2; cf. *Iug.* 41.2.

67 Sall. *Cat.* 6.7.

68 Cf. McGushin (1992) 74, 77.

69 Sall. *Hist.* 1.1.10, 12McG.

70 Sall. *Hist.* 1.1.9McG; cf. Syme (1962) 182.

71 Sall. *Hist.* 1.1.10.

72 Sall. *Hist.* 1.1.9 – although note that Sallust gives the consulship of S. Sulpicius and M. Marcellus (51 BCE) as the height of Rome’s extent; cf. Connolly (2007) 73–75 for a Ciceronian take on antagonism.

73 Sall. *Cat.* 7.6; cf. *Iug.* 41.2.

74 Sall. *Cat.* 9.2.

75 Cf. Kapust (2011) 29–30, 43.

76 Kapust (2011) 47.

77 Sall. *Cat.* 6.6.

cord in which the *populus* rose to become world hegemon, on the one hand under the care and example of a benign leadership, but on the other as a result of healthy agonisms – between the *nobilitas* and the *populus*, and the *nobiles* with each other – totalised by fear and austerity. Reversals come firstly with the destruction of Carthage in 146 and subsequent removal of the Punic fear, and secondly, with Sulla. Indeed, Sallust is scathing about Sulla and the Sullan regime, to the extent that it represents a corrupt nadir from which Rome never recovers.⁷⁸

Both the *populus* and *nobilitas* are configured in light of this moral heartland. As with the speeches, in his historical analysis, Sallust regularly deploys the populist elision of the *populus* as both symbolic sovereign and immanent actor. Highly polyvalent, this conception is often deployed as the general political totality; *populus Romanus* often standing in for an idea of *res publica*, albeit in circumstances that emphasise the ‘state’ as agentive – either describing military action, or moral character.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the *populus* is also a group that is concretely defined in relation to its counterpoint, the *nobiles* or the *pauci*. Frequently configured through the same institutional language that configures the functions of the tribunate, the vulnerable *populus* is under threat from elite domination, primarily through attacks on the tribunate and assembly, and consequently, popular *libertas*.

Equally striking is Sallust’s multifaceted conception of *nobilis* and *nobilitas*. Making a supporting case for Moatti’s thesis of *altéronomie*, Sallust plays with the idea of nobility, both as a noun and as an adjective.⁸⁰ *Nobilis*, like *populus*, encompasses different spheres; as a technical social distinction which differentiates those with office-holding ancestors from those without,⁸¹ the plebeian-patrician combined senatorial elite that emerges between intermarriage rights and the *lex Hortensia* to replace the dominant role formerly played by the patricians,⁸² or it can denote a quality of authority justified by superiority and moral rightness (*nobilitas*). In Sallust, *nobilis* moves fluidly between these ideas, to present an idea of what the nobility is, and what the nobility ought to be (and once was). While references are made to the technical definition,⁸³ Sallust primarily talks about his contemporary ‘nobility’ as a broad term for those promoting their own self-interest at the expense of the *res publica*, who are defined by their acquisitiveness, special interest, and corruption.⁸⁴ Here, cor-

⁷⁸ Sall. *Cat.* 5.9.

⁷⁹ Sall. *Cat.* 6.5, 7.7, 11.6, 53.2; *Iug.* 5.4.

⁸⁰ Moatti (2011).

⁸¹ Lintott (1999) 167.

⁸² Mitchell (1990) 22–25.

⁸³ Sall. *Iug.* 85; cf. Yakobson (2010) 293–297.

⁸⁴ E.g. Sall. *Cat.* 5.9; Sall. *Hist.* 1.12McG.

ruption has become universal; virtue itself is “blunted [*hebescere*], poverty held a disgrace, innocence thought wickedness”.⁸⁵

Understanding Sallust’s view of the *res publica* through a populist lens begins to resolve some of the ambiguities found in his work. Sallust can be deemed ‘conservative’ – the narrative of moral decline, his austerity, an ambivalent approach to *popularis* politicians, but also his vision of a well-ordered state in which some kind of nobility rule as *patres* over a free *populus*.⁸⁶ These issues raise problems for the clear politics of dichotomous class-conflict illustrated throughout his historical works. To the modern imagination, this does not look like what we often imagine a *popularis* sentiment to represent – it rather appears as another kind of elite superiority. A populist reading, however, reveals an internal coherence and consistency. Extending the recent convincing work of García-Magán (2022), who demonstrated that appeals to tradition and evocation of *maiores* was just as compatible with a *popularis* approach as those that maximised the role and prestige of the senatorial *nobilitas*,⁸⁷ a populist reading views Sallust’s political position as fundamentally dependent on a particular understanding of history and decline. A core component to the discursive production of populist moments is taking that group, the *populus* configured as all citizens, past, present and future, and applying its legitimacy and totality to a partial and immanent group. Sallust’s heartland produces the same effect; in the heartland, the politics is agonistic and the *populus* is one organism. The *multi* and *pauci* exist in a productive tension that produces and augments the whole – they comprise the *populus* together. In the fall away from the heartland, however, the divide becomes antagonistic – and these groups are no longer part of the same entity; the majority retains the signifier of *populus*, but the *pauci* is a designated out-group.

Conclusion

From its ‘heartland’-based nostalgia, to its opposition to a monolithic elite, to the subordination of convention to the popular moment, the *populus* of populism shapes itself to fit a felt moment of asynchronicity between a timeless promise and its immediate hypocrisy. Comparing the republican *populus* with the Athenian *demos* highlights this disparity. In the *ekklesia*, the symbolic and immanent people overlap, as the execution of power is equivalent to the execution of popular sovereignty. Conversely, the Roman *populus* is found in multitudes of overlapping synecdoches, deploying degrees

⁸⁵ Sall. *Cat.* 12.1; cf. Cato’s speech in Sall. *Cat.* 5.9; cf. Kapust (2011) 50–51; Levene (2000) 176–177, 184–185; Sallust’s conception of *virtus* has been examined in detail in Balmaceda (2017) 48–82.

⁸⁶ Indeed, Sallust has been an important source for the modern characterisation of the Roman republic’s inability – or unwillingness – to reform; see Vervaeke, Dart and Rafferty in this volume.

⁸⁷ García-Magán (2022) 233–272.

of power, and speaking with degrees of voice. The vernacular *populus* 'is' the flexible and contradictory shape that it is because any definition with less capacity for its conflicting properties would have to emerge as an intellectual calcification.

It is important to note that this chapter is hermeneutic. Populism is a narrative that makes sense of components of ideology and praxis that have often sparked the same response of recognition from observers. This study is, moreover, only one synchronic perspective. It follows, therefore, that caution is needed before extrapolating these facets in Sallust to a static *popularis*-plebeian-populist political position or worldview. What is shown instead is evidence of a particular way of thinking about politics, legitimacy, and power. Drawn from the complex, heterogeneous intellectual apparatus embedded in the language and mores of the *res publica*, this interpretation poses questions to any idea of 'ideological monotony' in the late republic – and begins to make sense of the genealogy of the 'institutionalisation' of the *populus* and the *res publica* that starts to take shape in the nascent political philosophy of Cicero and Livy.⁸⁸ The politics of Lepidus, Macer, and Memmius are a politics of antagonism – hostility, even – and yet they are underpinned by a worldview that is grounded in a particular idea of legitimacy. Even so, this view is more than a conception of what the world ought to be, but also an idea of what the world is: a moment of crisis and decline. The draw of the past for the problems of the present is at the heart of the ambiguity of Sallust's politics; through a populist lens, an appeal to conservatism can be wholly radical when fashioned from a political vocabulary predicated on a sovereign *populus*.

The implications for modern populisms are complicated. Firstly, this recognisable narrative of populist ideology is not inherently modern – its predicate conditions appear more fundamental. A sovereign 'People' is clearly important, but so too is a way of separating that idea from those who exercise power – a deficit of democracy, where the exercise of power is dominated by one persistent group. An interpretive view of this Roman populism insists that we look at populists on their own terms; it is much easier to see the inequalities and imbalances of political power in the ancient world than it is our own, and yet these inequalities provide an alternative vocabulary to examine problems within modern political systems. Understanding the demands made in the plebeian-coded populist rhetoric of Sallust's speakers at a time of rapid social and economic upheaval is clearer when these are understood as legitimated by a strong normative idea of what ought to be, and what has gone wrong.

In this way, ancient populism reveals one of the core 'dangers' of modern populism – the legitimacy that drives its politics is drawn from a constant tensional re-description. The linguistic apparatus of the sovereign *populus* – *maiestas*, *dignitas*, *libertas* – is institutionally symbolic, but its evocation in populism as immanent brings with it a unitary voice and will – and so arises a susceptibility for anti-pluralism and

88 Moatti (2018) 187–196.

authoritarianism. Populism's *populus* needs a single voice, and so often must channel its legitimacy into one individual. However, as can be seen through this attempt to look at populism on its own terms, this is an ideology that emerges from a political system that rests on the perception of broken promises. Sallust shows a deeply felt perception that his *res publica* was failing to live up to its foundational normative claims. Hovering between vanguard and victim, his immanent *populus*, the moral majority, is antagonistically configured against a hostile nobility as a movement for restoration, not revolution. As with populism today, Sallust's speakers are bound to an idea of an imagined past and a paradoxical role for the 'popular' in the exercise of power, which can neither accept the status quo, nor claim to seek real constitutional change. Much can be justified in the name of restoration or purification, as historical and modern populisms show us, but populism is not usually well-placed to answer the questions posed by the systems which engender it.

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