

‘A CALL TO ARMS’: SALLUST’S PRESENTATION OF THE CREATION OF THE ‘PEOPLE’ AS A POLITICAL UNIT. Hannah J. Swithinbank

Introduction:

The idea that the identity of a subject (be they an individual or a collective) is shaped by their various contexts is now a commonplace of contemporary critical theory. The process by which this takes place in politics has been considered by the likes of Althusser, Foucault and Laclau (amongst others) and these ideas have begun to make themselves felt in the study of Roman Republican politics – perhaps most notably in the recent work of Robert Morstein-Marx and Joy Connolly on oratory. The *contio*, in particular, has been identified as a key location in the formation of the identity of the Roman people – both in practice and in ideology. In this paper I want to suggest that the Romans themselves were not unaware that this process was taking place or of the impact it had upon politics in the Republic – without suggesting that they thought about it in the same terms that we do. From an examination of Sallust’s representation of the ‘Roman People’ (in inverted commas, for now), in the *Bellum Jugurthinum* it appears that at least one Roman understood that the identity of the people was shaped by the discourse that was centred on them as they came to the forum to participate in civic life. In this paper I want to focus on the speech that Sallust gives the tribune Memmius, which highlights the way in which the People were created as a political body, and to discuss the way that Sallust critiques this process within the narrative of the *Jugurtha*.

The Roman people play an important role in the text, being one half of a conflict that drives the events at Rome which Sallust is narrating, a conflict that has a major impact on the conduct of the Jugurthine War and which, Sallust makes clear upfront will lead, ultimately, to civil war. As he says, he chose to write about this period because the war was long-running and of varying fortune, and because it was - ‘the beginning of a struggle which threw everything... into confusion and... ended in war and the devastation of Italy.’¹ [number 1 on the handout] Sallust provides further details of the way that this occurred in his brief digression on the state of Roman politics at chapters 41-42, commenting that, ‘The nobles began to abuse their position (their *dignitas*) and the people their liberty (*libertas*), and every man for himself robbed, pillaged, and plundered. Thus the community was split into two parties and between these the Republic was torn to pieces.’ (41.5) [and that’s number two]

¹ Sall., *Iug.*, 5.1-2.

But how does this come to pass? Alongside the main storyline of the war with Jugurtha, Sallust shows us. He describes the avarice and ambition of the *nobilitas* and how these qualities led them to abuse their position, and then he shows the way that the people came together to resist this, culminating in the election of Marius and his appointment to the command of the war. In chapter 41 he writes that 'The *nobilitas* had the more powerful organisation, while the strength of the commons (*plebs*) was less effective because it was incompact and divided among many' (41.6). The *BJ* shows this problem being overcome as the people come together to resist the *nobilitas*. The speech of Memmius allows Sallust to depict one of the ways in which the people came together – brought together as a political unit by the skill and power of the tribune's rhetoric. However, while Memmius pulls the people together, he also helps to pull Rome apart, as Sallust makes it clear that this kind of rhetoric and the political action it inspired was partisan and contributed to the ongoing problems of the Republic.

Populus and Plebs

In order to examine the way that Sallust presents and comments upon the People as a political element in the *Bellum Jugurthinum* we need to talk briefly about the different terms Sallust uses in talking about the Roman People: *quirites and cives, plebs and populus*. The first two terms are easily dealt with, both being employed to refer to 'citizens'. *Cives* is not frequently used, but does appear in the narrative to refer to Rome's citizens – the members of the *civitas*. *Quirites* occurs more frequently, being used in speeches as speakers address and identify their audiences – both Memmius and Marius open their speeches with an identification of their audience as *Quirites*.²

Sallust's usage of *plebs* and *populus* is more complex. I don't want to get into a long discussion about the historical distinctions between the two groups, but some comment is necessary in order to understand the way in which Sallust uses the terms. So, briefly, it is generally accepted that the *populus* or *populus Romanus* initially covered the army, with the terms *patrician* and *plebeian* marking out social categories, and that the distinctions between the *plebeians* and the *populus* gradually faded over time, both terms being used to indicate the mass of the Roman people who were not of the elite (or in the Senate, or identified as *nobiles*).³ There is also some consensus that the term *plebs* was initially used to refer to a group that had some kind of political identity and

² *Jug.*, 31.1. Cf. Marius at *Jug.*, 85.1, 5.

³ Momigliano (2005) p.174; Cornell (1995) pp.256-8; Smith (2006) p.200; Mitchell (2005) p.152.

agenda, and that, by the end of the Republic, this had come to be used for the lower classes generally.⁴ In the *Bellum Jugurthinum*, I think, Sallust's employment of *plebs* reflects such a political dimension, while the term *populus* is generally employed of the population of Rome as a whole – and it is this distinction that allows him to comment upon the potential dangers of the politicised 'people' without criticising the idea of the people as the central body of Roman political life, which was so key to Roman Republican ideology.

To give some quick examples: early in the narrative (at 8.2) Scipio advises his protégé Jugurtha to cultivate the friendship of the *populus Romanus* rather than that of individual citizens, warning him that, 'It is dangerous... to buy from a few what belonged to the many (*multorum*),'⁵ The implication is that the Republic and the decisions taken on its behalf belonged to the whole population – the *populus* – and not just to a few citizens. Elsewhere in the text the *populus* are identified as the audience of a *contio* and as the body who vote on bills and in elections – according to Metellus it is they who could have denied Marius a consulship by voting against him.⁶ The *plebs* act in the same political situations as the *populus*, but – importantly – they do so in a factional manner, being regularly set against the *nobilitas*. It is the *plebs* who support Memmius' bill, and pass Mamilius' proposal for a special *quaestio*. It is they who accept the rumours about Marius and Metellus coming from Numidia, they who are responsible for Marius' election to the consulship, and they who take the direction of the Jugurthine war from the hands of the Senate and the *nobilitas* and grant Marius the command in Numidia.⁷ It is the *plebs* who participate in the civil strife that takes place in Rome.

However, the division between the *populus* and the *plebs* is not actually as tidy as this – and in Memmius' speech Sallust reveals the way in which the two groups blended into one another – and the way that speakers could use the overlapping nature of the groups to their advantage. Here we see the way in which the crowd at a *contio* was taken to stand for the citizen body and the way in

⁴ Momigliano (2005) pp.177-181 argues that the plebeians were those outside the army, who formed their own organisation whose structures mimicked those of the army, and whose group began to grow as dissatisfaction with the patricians increased. Cornell (1995) pp.256-8 doubts that the plebeians were formally excluded from the army, but also holds that they had their own identity and agenda, whilst Smith (2006) argues that the plebeians were shaped by more than one interest group, but that they undoubtedly had a political dynamic.

⁵ Sall., *Iug.*, 8.2. See also Cic., *Rep.*, 1.39 for the *populus'* ownership of the *res publica*.

⁶ Sall., *Iug.*, 30.3; 31.1; 32.1; 40.1; 73.7; 84.1, 5.

⁷ Sall., *Iug.*, 73.3, 6; 78.7; 84.1.

which this group could be associated with both the *populus* and the *plebs* to be shaped as a political actor and the true 'People' of the Republic.⁸

Laclau

Ernesto Laclau has theorized this process in his work *On Populist Reason* to show the way that discourse and rhetoric contribute to the constitution of popular identities as elements of a political culture.⁹ He argues that while the 'People' as a political entity appear to be and claim to be the totality of the people – the *populus* – they are in fact only a part. Something has to be excluded in order for the identity of the people to be established and this something is normally another group that refuses to grant demands that are being made by a large number of the population – be it a demand for liberty, justice, or access to power – or a demand to stop public sector cuts.¹⁰ The rejection of this Other creates an equality and a shared identity amongst the people making the demand, bringing them together as The People (in capital letters). In order to realise their demands this political People claim to be the legitimate *populus* – those who reject them cannot truly be a part of the *populus*, and so the political body of the People claims to be the whole of the *populus*.¹¹ Eventually, of course, it all falls apart as the equivalences holding 'The People' together become strained and fail or become unnecessary if they achieve their demands. It is, for Laclau, an organic political process that is part of the rise and fall of popular movements.¹²

Memmius

Now let's turn to Memmius' speech and the way he talks to and about his audience. [I've put some passages on the handout, but not the whole thing]. He begins by addressing them as *quirites* – the citizen body of Rome. In this, they are, effectively the whole *populus Romanus* – or at least, they are

⁸ See Laclau (2005) especially pp.65-171 on the formation of the people through discourse in this way.

⁹ Laclau (2005), 12, 68

¹⁰ Laclau (2005), 70, 73.

¹¹ Laclau (2005), 81 86.

¹² Think Egypt – the Muslim Brotherhood and the Christian minority will have been side-by-side as The People against Hosni Mubarak, but now he is gone that unity of purpose that made them equals is gone, leaving tensions as the question of 'what next?' is considered.

representing them at this particular *contio* on this particular day.¹³ At the same time, however, he also speaks to his audience as the *plebs*, encouraging them to identify themselves with this group. He evokes the history of the *plebs*, reminding his audience that their ancestors had twice seceded in order to assert their legal rights and sovereignty and seeking to spur them to action and follow this kind of example.¹⁴ He also refers [as can be seen in passage 3] to Tiberius Gracchus and the prosecutions that followed his death - which, he says, were instituted against the Roman *plebs* (*in plebem Romanum*). He goes straight on to refer to Gaius Gracchus saying that many men, 'of your order' (*vostri ordinis*) suffered at the time of his death.¹⁵ The identities and *populus* and the *plebs* are thus merged, with the aims and ambitions of the *plebs* being taken on by the *populus*, and they become a unified political body, represented by the crowd in the forum. This group possess the *imperium* and *maiestas* of the Republic – making them the legitimate *populus Romanus*.¹⁶

This *plebs*-who-are-The-People are conceived of as a group that is politically active – and, particularly, reactive against the *nobilitas* as the Other – a dominant faction who they argue are suppressing the *libertas* of the people.¹⁷ Memmius claims [passage 4] that this group has stolen from the people, their crimes including the appropriation of the tributes of kings and free peoples, the possession of power, glory and wealth, including consulships, priesthoods and triumphs, and the betrayal of Rome's laws and the sovereignty of his audience.¹⁸ These rights are associated with the *libertas* of the *plebs*, as the tribune tells his audience that, 'if your love of *libertas* were as great as the thirst for tyranny (*dominatio*) which spurs them [the few] on, surely our country would not be torn asunder as it now is, and your favours would be bestowed on the most virtuous (*optimos*), not on the most reckless.'¹⁹ He echoes this later in the speech, stating that, 'They wish to be tyrants (*dominari*), you to be free,' – making this the demand that unifies his audience as the *plebs* and as the legitimate *populus* in the face of those who are withholding *libertas*.²⁰

By associating his audience with the *plebs*, declaring their sovereignty in the Republic, and reminding them of their past Memmius calls his audience together as the *plebs* – as a political group - and

¹³ See Ober on the synecdochical existence of the *populus* or *demos* in public assemblies where space was, of necessity, limited.

¹⁴ Sall., *Iug.*, 31.16-17, 23

¹⁵ Sall., *Iug.*, 31.7.

¹⁶ Sall., *Iug.*, 31.11. Lintott (1999) p.96. Hellegouarc'h (1963) pp.314-320 discusses *maiestas*, and notes (p.317) that the *maiestas populi Romani* may be opposed to the *auctoritas senatus*, with reference to Cic., *Phil.* 3.13.

¹⁷ Sall., *Iug.*, 31.2, 4, 7-9.

¹⁸ Sall., *Iug.*, 31.9-10.

¹⁹ Sall., *Iug.*, 31.16.

²⁰ Sall., *Iug.*, 31.23.

urges them to action [passage 5]. This action, he says, does not have to be violent— he says that does not urge them to take up arms against their oppressors as their fathers did for, ‘There is no need of violence, none of secession’ (*nihil vi, nihil secessione opus est*) – the *nobilitas* will ruin themselves on their own.²¹ But Sallust undermines this claim, showing how this kind of rhetoric and the actions it led to were divisive and led to violence at Rome and suggesting that Memmius was, whatever he might have said or thought about his own position, something of a rabble rouser.

Sallust and the Plebs

While Sallust reveals the role of rhetoric in constructing the *plebs* in his version of Memmius’ speech he also accepts the force that construction had within Roman politics, and uses it in telling the story of Rome’s recent past. Once the *plebs* are identified or self-identify they exist and they participate – they are a part of Rome’s history, and so Sallust includes them. Like Memmius, Sallust presents the *plebs* as political, suggesting that the tribune’s construction of the *plebs* was a common understanding of the term in late Republic. The opposition of the *plebs* to the *nobilitas* is particularly prominent in Sallust’s narrative: for example, he identifies the figure of Opimius with reference to his cruel use of the victory of the *nobilitas* over the *plebs* after C. Gracchus’ death, and describes the passing of Mamilius’ bill thus: ‘The *plebs* passed the bill with incredible eagerness and enthusiasm, rather from hatred of the *nobilitas*, for whom it boded trouble, than from love of the Republic.’²² Later Marius and other, ‘Seditious magistrates,’ who support him are shown exploiting this opposition against Metellus. The *nobilitas* are defeated, and the *plebs* ensure that Marius is elected consul.²³ However, there is a difference between Sallust’s *plebs* and Memmius’, and it lies in their opinions about the role of the *plebs* in Roman politics and, because of this, their views of this kind of rhetorical shaping of the identity of a political body. For Sallust, the two groups – the *plebs* and the *populus* - overlap, but are different: the *plebs* are the ‘partisan wing’ as it were. Memmius (at least as Sallust writes him) suggests that the *plebs* and *populus* are the same. And for Sallust, this raises problems. Although he accepts this kind of rhetoric as the ‘norm’ (and it appears in Marius’ speech, as well as in other speeches in Sallust’s historical texts – such as those of Lepidus and Macer in the *Historiae*) – he shows the danger that it can pose to the stability of the Republic.

²¹ Jug., 31.6.

²² Sall., Jug., 16.2; 40.3.

²³ Sall., Jug., 73.5-7; 84.1.

Sallust uses the idea of *libertas* and the relationship of the Roman people (in all their formulations) to *libertas* to reveal the danger of Memmius' rhetorical construction of the *plebs* as the true People of Rome. He, like Memmius, associates the *plebs* with a demand for *libertas*, however, he then undermines the tribune's support of this demand by suggesting that they are demanding the wrong kind of *libertas*. I mentioned before that within the *Bellum Jugurthinum* the *populus* are associated with the right to participate in political activity such as elections and the passing of legislation. We have also seen that Memmius' speech associates the rights of the *plebs* and their *libertas* with the possession of glory and wealth, including the tribute of kings and allies: attributes they are denied by the *dominatio* of the *nobilitas*. But for Sallust this ambition and desire for glory and wealth are a mark of the corruption of the *nobilitas* – and they are not good for the *plebs* either. They are not the natural possessions of those who have *libertas* – they are the benefits that come from living in a successful community like the Roman Republic. That the result of the *plebs*' activities, encouraged by this rallying cry of *libertas* is the growth of factional strife at Rome only serves to emphasise the flawed understanding of *libertas* associated with the *plebs*.

This brings us to chapters 41-42 and Sallust's overview of Rome's decline after the destruction of Carthage. At the centre of this picture is the struggle between the *nobilitas*, who are said to have abused their *dignitas*, and the *populus*, who have abused their *libertas*.²⁴ The antithesis does not recur during the *Bellum Jugurthinum* - throughout the rest of the text it is the *plebs*, not the *populus*, who are the factional element of the Roman citizenry, involved in civil strife – but suddenly at this point the *populus* are guilty of abusing their *libertas*. What is going on here, then? Has Sallust just got mixed up, have I read too much into Sallust's presentation of the people, or did the historian have some kind of malicious streak that wanted to leave people like me grasping at straws till the end of time? I have a suggestion. Sallust suggests that the *nobilitas* 'go wrong' first in the opening of the *BJ* in his comment that their *superbia* was being resisted. The Gracchan assertion of the *libertas* of the *plebs*, which Sallust endorses as something that leads to *vera gloria* (rather than the false, self-interested *gloria* of the *nobilitas*) is set in opposition to the crimes of the few who hold the reins of power. *Libertas* is a desirable quality and a right of Roman citizens – as we know from its prominent place in Republican ideology and political discourse. However, somewhere between the Gracchi, who sought true glory and exposed the crimes of the few, and Memmius, the nature of *libertas* that is aimed for has been distorted by an emphasis on personal gain. As Sallust comments, 'The commons (*plebs*), as so often the nobles, had been made insolent by success' – and this creates

²⁴ Sall., *Jug.*, 42.1.

problems within the *populus* as a whole.²⁵ We have seen that in the *Bellum Jugurthinum* the *populus* are clearly associated with political activity in the Republic, in their ability to vote on legislation and in elections, and it may be that it is this ability, this freedom to participate in political affairs, that Sallust understands the *populus* as having abused after the fall of Carthage as they ‘succumbed’ to tribunes like Memmius who called out the *plebs* as the true *populus* and led them in demands for the wrong kind *libertas* and inspired factional behaviour. So the *nobilitas* are represented as abusing their *dignitas* to justify their desire to control public affairs and hold *potentia*, whilst the *populus* abuse their *libertas* in resisting this attempt and in following their own desire to possess the wealth and power of Rome.

The narrative of the *Bellum Jugurthinum* recognises the force of Memmius’ understanding of the people and their role in Roman politics: as Sallust sees it, this is what happened. But he also criticises this understanding, showing that Memmius’ calling-out of the *plebs* as the true *populus* created division and discord in Rome. Sallust makes it clear that kind of action that Memmius’ approach urges leads to factional strife and, eventually, to violence – no matter what he says in his speech. Jugurtha’s presence in Rome creates division between the tribunes, as the *nobilitas* bribe Baebius to protect Jugurtha (and so themselves).²⁶ Next, Mamilius proposes a special *quaestio* to indict those who had advised Jugurtha to ignore the Senate, or those who had taken money from him.²⁷ This struggle between the *nobilitas* and the *plebs* intensifies, culminating, in the text, in the election of Marius and his appointment to the command of the war, beyond the text it will culminate in civil war – as Sallust makes clear at the beginning. The ending of the *Bellum Jugurthinum* also points that way – foreshadowing the war between Marius and Sulla. The attempt of the *plebs* to become the *populus* and to dominate is, in Sallust’s understanding, as damaging to the stability of the Republic as the *nobilitas*’ desire to monopolise power. Memmius’ rhetoric is effective in creating The People as a political body – but in Sallust’s opinion, it’s effectiveness was damaging.

²⁵ Sall., *Jug.*, 40.5

²⁶ Sall., *Jug.*, 34.

²⁷ Sall., *Jug.*, 40.1-3