

Grasping Reality with Both Hands

The weblog of Brad DeLong. Comments (mostly) welcome, or email me at delong@hey.com with "delong-weblog" as the subject.
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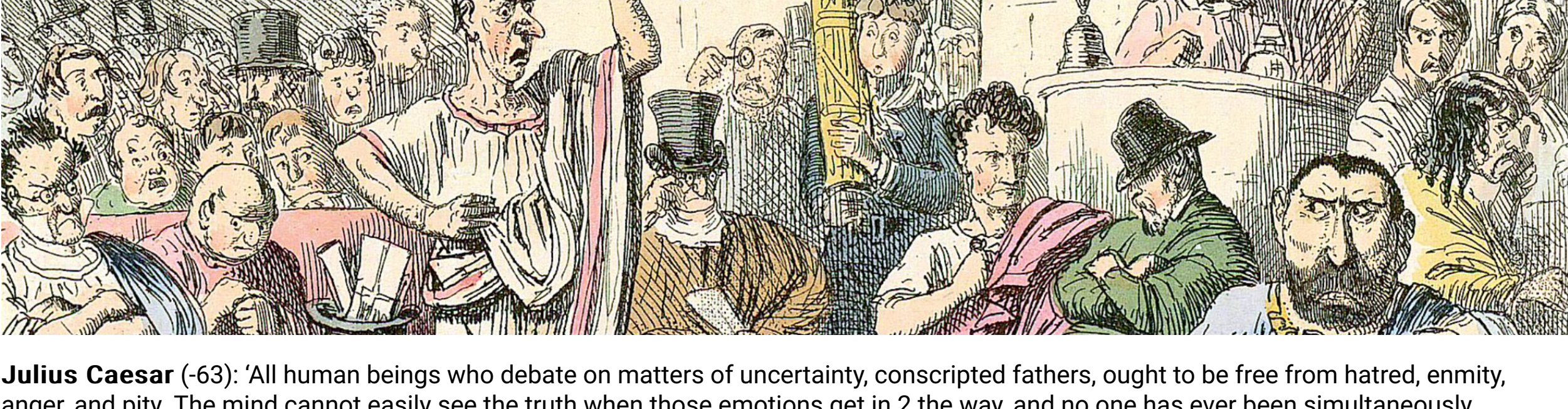
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Julius Caesar (–63): ‘All human beings who debate on matters of uncertainty, conscripted fathers, ought to be free from hatred, enmity, anger, and pity. The mind cannot easily see the truth when those emotions get in the way, and no one has ever been simultaneously governed by the demands of his desire and by practical considerations. Wherever you apply your intelligence, it prevails; but, if passion takes over, it becomes master, and the mind is powerless...

...I can recount many examples, conscripted fathers, of bad decisions made by kings and peoples under the influence of anger or pity. But I prefer to speak of decisions made correctly and orderly by our ancestors when they resisted their hearts’ desires.

In the Macedonian War* which we waged with King Perses, the great and opulent state of Rhodes, which had benefited from Roman wealth, treacherously turned against us. But, after the war was over and we took up the matter of the Rhodians’ actions, our ancestors let them go unpunished, lest anyone say that we had started the war more for money than from injury.

Likewise in all the Punic Wars, though the Carthaginians had often committed many horrible crimes both in peace and under truces, our ancestors never reciprocated when they had the opportunity: they preferred to ask what was worthy of them, not what they could justifiably do.

You, likewise, must use the same prudential wisdom, conscripted fathers. The crime of P. Lentulus and the others should not have more weight with you than your own dignity, and you should not consider your anger more important than your reputation. For, if the penalty can be found that their deeds deserve, I could approve of an unprecedented course. But, if the enormity of their crime exceeds our ingenuity, then I say we must use the penalties already established by law.

Most of those who have given their opinions before me have lamented with great eloquence and grandeur the misfortunes of the Republic. They have listed the savage acts of war, the afflictions of the conquered: the rape of girls and boys; children torn from the arms of their parents; matrons yielding to whatever the conqueror desired; shrines and homes plundered; slaughter, arson; in short, everything filled with weapons, corpses, blood, and grief.

But, by the immortal gods, what is the purpose of those speeches? Is it to make you oppose the conspiracy? Do you suppose that a speech will energize someone who is not moved by the enormity and cruelty of the facts? Not true: no mortal thinks his own injuries are small; for many they seem greater than is fair. But not everyone has the same freedom of action, conscripted fathers. If the humble who have a life in obscurity become enraged and commit an offence, few know; their fame and their wealth are the same. But the actions of those who are endowed with great power and who live exalted lives are known by all mankind. And so, in the greatest good fortune there is the least licence; neither zealous partiality nor hatred is appropriate, but least of all rage. What is called anger in others, is named arrogance and cruelty in the powerful.

And so this is my assessment, conscripted fathers: no torture is equal to the crimes they have committed. But generally men remember the most recent events, and even in the case of execrable men, if the punishment is unusually severe, they forget the crimes and talk about the punishment.

I am quite certain that D. Silanus, a brave and energetic man, said what he said with the state’s interests in mind, and that in a matter of such importance he shows neither favour nor malice: I know his character and his composure. But it seems to me his proposal is not so much cruel—what could be cruel against such men?—as it is alien to our Republic. I am sure that either fear or injustice has forced you, Silanus, a consul designate, to propose an unprecedented punishment.

As for fear, there is not much to say, especially since we have so many guards under arms thanks to the diligence of our consul, a most distinguished man. But concerning the penalty I can speak to the point: in times of grief and affliction death is not a torture but a release from misery. It puts an end to all mortal woes; and beyond that neither anxiety nor joy has any place.

But why, in the name of the immortal gods, didn’t you add to your proposal that they should first be whipped? Is it because the lex Porcia forbids it? But there are other laws that similarly forbid taking the life of a condemned citizen; they allow exile.

Or, is it because flogging is worse than death? But what punishment could be too harsh for men convicted of such a crime?

On the other hand, if flogging is less severe than death, why fear the law that forbids the lesser punishment, when you neglect the law that forbids the harsher punishment?

But, one might say, who will criticize any decree against the assassins of the Republic? I’ll tell you: time, events, fortune, whose pleasure governs the world. Whatever happens to those men, they have earned it; but you, conscripted fathers, think about the example you are setting for others. Every bad precedent arose from a good case. But when power slips into the hands of those who don’t understand it or those less well intentioned, then that new precedent is no longer appropriately applied to those who deserve it but inappropriately to those who don’t.

The Lacedaemonians, after they conquered the Athenians, imposed the rule of thirty men. At first, they began to put to death without trial all the most wicked and those whom everyone hated. The populace was delighted and they said it was the right thing to do. Afterwards, as their licence to act gradually increased, they began to kill at will good and bad men alike; the rest they frightened and terrified. Thus, the citizen body was reduced to slavery and paid a heavy penalty for their foolish delight.

In our own memory, when Sulla ordered the strangulation of Damasippus and others like him who flourished to the detriment of the state, who did not praise his actions? People were saying they deserved it, that he killed criminals and insurgents, men who had threatened the government with seditious revolt. But this action was the beginning of a great slaughter. For whenever someone coveted another man’s home or villa, or eventually even his dishes or clothes, he would try to get the man proscribed. And soon after those who were delighted at the death of Damasippus were themselves being dragged away and there was no end of carnage until Sulla had glutted all his followers with riches.

Now, I don’t fear these consequences from M. Tullius nor do I fear them at this time, but in a great city there are many different temperaments. It is possible that at some other time, when another man is consul and also has an army at his disposal, a lie will be taken for the truth. When this precedent allows the consul by the decree of the Senate to draw his sword, who will stop or restrain him?

Our ancestors, conscripted fathers, were never lacking in intelligence or daring, but neither did their pride prevent them from adopting foreign institutions, provided that they were good institutions. They took our offensive and defensive military weapons from the Samnites;* most of the symbols of civil authority from the Etruscans. They were very eager, in short, to adopt at home whatever seemed to work among our allies or our enemies: they would rather copy what was good than envy it.

But at the same time they imitated the Greek custom* of flogging citizens and executing condemned men.

After the Republic reached maturity and, because of its size, factions prevailed, innocent men were convicted, and other similar abuses began to happen. Then, the lex Porcia and other laws were passed, laws that allowed exile for the condemned. This, I think, is an especially good reason, conscripted fathers, not to adopt a new policy. I am sure that the virtue and wisdom of those men who created such a great empire from small resources was greater than ours, who have difficulty holding on to what was honourably produced.

And so, is it my opinion that these men should be dismissed and Catiline’s army allowed to increase? Not at all. This is my proposal: their money should be confiscated; they should be held in chains in those towns that have the most resources. Thereafter, there should be no consultation about them before the Senate or referendum presented to the people. If anyone tries to change this arrangement, it is the Senate’s judgement that he will be acting against the interests of the state and against the safety of all...

From **Gaius Sallustius Crispus**: *Cataline’s Conspiracy* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sallust>

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