Optimates, populares

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Cicero's *Pro Sestio* 96 defines "optimates" and "populares" as two antithetical political types (*see* CICERO, MARCUS TULLIUS; CICERO, MARCUS TULLIUS, SPEECHES OF). The definition has traditionally been taken, with little attention to its specific context in the speech, to indicate that a distinction using these labels was generally made in late republican Rome. Although most modern models of late republican politics make heavy use of the terms, there is considerable divergence over their precise significance.

MOMMSEN saw populares and optimates as parliamentary-style political parties. He suggested that the "Struggle of the Orders" resulted in the formation of aristocratic and democratic parties and that the labels populares and optimates started to be used for these groups in Gracchan times (*see* GRACCHUS, TIBERIUS AND GAIUS SEMPRONIUS). Optimates were those who wanted to give effect to the will of the best, while populares represented the community. Gelzer (1969, first pub. 1912) proposed that the balance of power was not governed by parties, whether based on family ties or ideology, but by the bonds of patronage, obligation, and *amicitia* (*see* *AMICITIA*; PATRON, PATRONAGE, ROMAN). He concluded that personal relationships were more important than particular policies. In his work on JULIUS CAESAR (1968, first pub. 1921), he added concepts of ideological conflict to his model. Populares were creative politicians who sought to implement innovative solutions by attracting support from the people in the face of opposition from a hide-bound Senate (*see* SENATE, ROMAN REPUBLIC AND EMPIRE), which was failing in its responsibilities. Optimates defended the traditional rule of the nobility and the security of property. The divisive issue was whether political decisions should remain in the hands of the Senate or be transferred to the popular assembly.

Taylor (1949) returned to Mommsen's party-based model. In her view, optimates were the members of a clique of powerful nobles who controlled the Senate. They were concerned about preserving the traditional constitution and retaining control over the profits of empire. Defining their opponents, populares, was more complex. After restoring the powers of the tribunes in 70 BCE, POMPEY and CRASSUS both used tribunes to achieve rival purposes. They could therefore be seen as leaders of two rival "popular" parties. Grain distributions, agrarian legislation (*see* AGRARIAN LAWS), and the extension of the citizenship were the chief elements of the program of the "popular" party, which had a serial rather than a continuous existence. Ideological conflict between the two parties occurred in the Senate and in legislative campaigns in the assembly. In elections (*see* ELECTIONS, ROMAN) these differences were put aside and family ties, patronage, and personal obligations became more important.

Meier (1965) took issue with the view that ideologically based divisions between optimates and populares occurred only in certain political situations. He proposed a fluid model of issue-based political division and transitory allegiances. The people themselves had no political initiative, but were "directed" by the aristocratic magistrates they elected. "Popular" politics was therefore the province of politicians, not the people. The common, identifying feature of "popular" action was opposition to the Senate. Because the assembly dealt with many day-to-day matters, which were not undertaken in opposition to the Senate, only the exceptional legislation, which became more frequent in the last years of the republic, could be classified as "popularis." Meier defined a popularis as a politician of the Late Republic who adopted, often temporarily, a particular style, advancing his own affairs by using the assembly, promoting himself as a champion of the people, and using arguments relevant to the masses. The underlying aim of the populares was the

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improvement of the position of those to whom they were obliged or whose support they wanted to win, which might include members of the elite. Populares did not aim at the democratization of the Roman constitution, or political or social revolution. Meier thus provided a behavioral model of the way opposition politics worked in the Late Republic, but the concentration on method exposed its main difficulty: the same tactics could be adopted by "optimate" politicians.

Mackie (1992) questioned whether populares simply adopted a particular political "style." She observed that there were two phenomena, which neither Cicero's definitions nor modern ones explained. First, the Romans themselves could distinguish between "true populares" and "false" ones. Second, although popularis activity appeared most effective at times of particular economic difficulty, it was not limited to offers of material benefits for the populace, but also addressed topics such as popular rights and the transfer of power from Senate to people. Political debate between populares and their opponents was based on a shared ideological ground centered on common values. Since the arguments of both sides were based on the same values, it was difficult to separate the two. She therefore suggested that the defining characteristic of a "true popularis" must have been public commitment to an ideology about transferring power from Senate to people.

As well as the proliferation of different explanations, some based on ideological principles, others on the use of a certain political style, there are other problems. Strasburger (1939) challenged the view that optimates and populares represented political parties. He argued that any ideological antithesis between them was lost when the words were applied to the opposing sides in civil war (Marians-Sullans, Caesarians-Pompeians, *see* CIVIL WAR, ROMAN), since it was the armies that played the major parts in such conflicts. Senators and *equites* appeared on both sides. There was no "class war" in these situations. Nor did he accept the view that the word popularis referred to an identifiable group. Individual populares formed a series, linked on an intellectual level by particular goals and tactics. This gave rise to the concept of a "popular" tradition, which had very wide-ranging characteristics because most populares were identified on the basis of one or very few deeds. In addition, the reforms of individual populares tended to stabilize the government, strengthening the authority of the aristocracy. Strasburger concluded that optimates could not be defined as a group in conflict with a group of populares, since this did not exist. Since there was no popularis party, there was no popularis program. Optimates might be identified in terms of class interest, but there was no "optimate" political program.

Ferrary (1997) argued that there was a major inconsistency between the ideological claims of both populares and optimates and the realities of their political actions. Defining populares and optimates on the basis of political conflict is certainly problematic. The fact that reforms of the populares never undermined the aristocratic constitution, but actually tended to stabilize the government, sits at odds with the ideologically based interpretations. Just as importantly, those explanations that concentrate on the methods used by senators to achieve their political ambitions, altruistic or self-serving, have to admit that the same methods are sometimes adopted by their opponents.

Outside Cicero's *Pro Sestio*, there is surprisingly little evidence for the words being used as antithetical political labels by the Romans themselves. We may construe a similar contrast in the *Commentariolum Petitionis*, which advises the electoral candidate to make sure he has always appeared to agree with the optimates and to minimize any popularis activity. Other passages are more difficult to integrate. In Cicero's speeches *Pro Rabirio perduellionis* and *De lege agraria*, each side claims to be a "true popularis" and that their opponent is a "false" one. The debate is about who is truly

acting in the public interest and the meaning of the word is clearly positive.

The word popularis covers a broad spectrum of meaning from popular to populist. In the earliest literature of the republic, it is only found with the meanings "compatriot," "common," and "public." Cicero himself uses it in contradictory ways. Sometimes it designates a rabble-rousing opponent of senatorial consensus (*Clu.* 77), at others it enhances the authority of the Senate (*Cat.* 4.9). It is only the context that makes the sense clear, and Cicero tends to provide an explanation of precisely what he means each time. The wide range of possible meanings and applications makes it difficult to assume a single standard one, especially one that defines a political ideology based on opposition to the senatorial majority. This is not to deny that there were senators who espoused "people-friendly" policies or adopted demagogic tactics to further their political careers, but the word popularis covers all these meanings. The point is that where political debate was structured around judging what was truly popularis, what was truly in the public interest, making such a declaration did not mark a senator out as a certain sort of politician or, indeed, an opponent of the Senate.

Cicero's use of the word "optimas" falls into fairly narrow categories of meaning. He uses it interchangeably with *optimi*, *optimus quisque*, and sometimes with *boni*. The term has a strong moral aspect and is used to designate the aristocracy in general, the Senate and, not infrequently, Cicero's own supporters. While it makes sense to describe the Senate's repeated attempts to obstruct certain kinds of proposal, for example, land distribution, as "senatorial policy," this habit of describing one's own supporters as optimates makes the phrase "optimate policy" a problematic alternative.

The political and social structure of Roman society, represented by the twin institutions of Senate and popular assembly, meant that when a senator opposed his peers over a particular issue, there was only one recourse available from which to seek political support: the people. Meier's study resulted in a functional model of the methods used by the opponents of aristocratic consensus. The primary focus was on "dissenting behavior" rather than the explicit application of the word popularis to particular individuals. He listed seventy-two men who could be considered populares, but noted that several who were actually described as popularis by the ancient sources (P. Valerius Publicola, P. Scipio Aemilianus, P. Licinius Crassus Dives Mucianus, P. Mucius Scaevola, and Q. Pompeius (*cos.* 141)) did not conform to his model. Over half (thirty-eight) of the list are never described by the sources as popularis. These include L. Cornelius Cinna, M. Aemilius Lepidus (*cos.* 78), and L. Sergius Catilina. The ancient sources consistently describe the serious challengers to the Senate's authority, those who adopted the dissident political behavior identified by Meier, as "seditiosi." Unlike the word popularis, "seditiosus" unambiguously defines a particular pattern of behavior that does not depend on complex interpretations about legislative content, motivation, or popular appeal, but simply on opposition to the aristocratic consensus.

SEE ALSO: Catilinarian conspiracy; *Contio*; Roman Republic, constitution.

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