**Conspiracy under Suffering: A Desire for Change**

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**Basic Information**

C. Sallustius Crispus (86 BC – c. 36 BC), known as Sallust, is famous for his monograph, particularly *Bellum Catilinae*, which was likely written after the assassination of C. Julius Caesar in 44 BC.[[1]](#footnote-1) His works, surviving through manuscript tradition[[2]](#footnote-2), provide detailed accounts of the political culture during the late Republic.

**Conspiracy under Suffering and Struggle**

In the monograph, Catiline is described as an aristocrat with great strength both of mind and body, but with a depraved genius.[[3]](#footnote-3) Sallust portrays Catiline’s conspiracy in 63 BC to overthrow the *res publica*, following an earlier failed plot[[4]](#footnote-4). During the second conspiracy, Catiline delivered a secret speech to instigate people to revolt.[[5]](#footnote-5) Afterwards, no one betrayed the conspiracy to acquire amnesty from the senate despite two senatorial decrees.[[6]](#footnote-6) Rather than attributing this to Catiline's ﻿charisma, it should be seen as a reflection of the suffering and struggle of his fellows.

**A Desire for Change**

Sallust digresses about ﻿the state of the Roman people during Catiline’s conspiracy in 36.4 – 37.11, ﻿highlighting that it represents Rome’s *nadir*[[7]](#footnote-7). In the given source (37), Sallust analyses the Catiline’s supporters, characterized by the desire for change, and stresses ﻿the complicity of the *plebs*[[8]](#footnote-8). In fact, the supporters are not confined to the *plebs* but extend to all who are dissatisfied with the situation.

Sallust considers *plebs*’complicity normal, as people having no means envy the good, desire an upheaval, and find it easy to sustain themselves in chaos.[[9]](#footnote-9) While this may be true, the underlying issue is why people were left without means, which Sallust ascribes to moral degeneracy, the theme of the monograph. However, his narration reveals more detailed problems.

**1. Indebtedness**

Sallust compares Rome to a cesspool, filled with *plebs* flooding into the city.[[10]](#footnote-10) *Plebs*’ readiness to revolt is ascribed solely to their moral degeneracy, such as squandering patrimony, being tempted by doles, or engaging in crime.[[11]](#footnote-11) It should be clarified that no evidence shows that the *plebs*’ composition had been changed by such an influx and most of the population shift into Rome actually occurred after 58 BC.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Despite inaccuracies, Sallust’s narration reflects a trend that more plebeians were becoming propertyless, which may be closely associated with the prevalent debt issue. According to Cicero, the problem of debt reached crisis proportions in 63 BC and indebtedness was a burden of both upper and lower classes.[[13]](#footnote-13) Sallust also illustrates prevalent indebtedness.[[14]](#footnote-14) Besides, although *nexum* had been prohibited[[15]](#footnote-15), the potential enslavement of debtors is mentioned, showing the inhumanity of moneylenders and the praetor[[16]](#footnote-16). These may explain people’s participation in the revolt, drawn by Catiline’s promise of *tabulae novae*[[17]](#footnote-17).

**2. Post-Sullan Aftereffect**

Sallust also emphasizes the specter of L. Cornelius Sulla and the enemies he left.[[18]](#footnote-18) The former wishes to enjoy the fruits of victory by military service, like the veterans of Sulla, while the latter looks for revenge.

Sulla established a new order and strengthened senatorial power through violence and dictatorship. Although his major political reforms did not last a decade[[19]](#footnote-19), the impacts sustained. The proscription sowed seeds of hatred, and the weakening of the tribune’s power intensified antagonism between the *senatus* and the *plebs*, which drove many to unite against the established order. Sulla's actions, though temporarily consolidating senatorial power, ultimately contributed to the prolonged conflict.

**3. Opposition to the *Pauci Potentes***

A divide within the *senatus* is also reflected in the source. ﻿The distinction is between those who are established in their access to power (*pauci potentes*), and those agitating against this established group.[[20]](#footnote-20)

From 37.10, Sallust turns his attention to the elite, highlighting the factional politics of the senate. His comment cannot include the *plebs*, since ﻿Sallust has another different comment on them before[[21]](#footnote-21). In fact, the digression points to internal conflicts within the *senatus*, with *plebs* only a weapon of political struggle.[[22]](#footnote-22) Thus, “all who stood apart from partisans of the senate’s leadership[[23]](#footnote-23)” can be interpreted as those who belonged to *senatus* but were marginalized by the *pauci potentes*,thusalso sought to break the established order to enhance their political status, even at the cost of the *res publica*, attesting political struggle within the *senatus.*

**Sallust’s Attitude towards *Plebs***

A key feature of chapter 37 is Sallust’s critique of *plebs*. His claim that the entire body of the *plebs* is complicit may have to do with his aristocratic background[[24]](#footnote-24) and vested interests within the system[[25]](#footnote-25), as well as the well-educated readers he writes for[[26]](#footnote-26). Fortunately, this critique does not significantly undermine the objectivity of his analysis of struggles within the *senatus*[[27]](#footnote-27), which is the essence of political conflict in his narration.

**Bibliography**

**Modern Publications**

[1] Ramsay, J.T., *Sallust's Bellum Catilinae* (2nd ed. Oxford 2007).

[2] Shaw, E.H., *Sallust and the Fall of the Republic: Historiography and Intellectual Life at Rome* (Leiden 2022).

[3] Syme, Ronald, *Sallust* (Berkeley [CA] 1964).

[4] Potter, David, *Rome in the Ancient World: From Romulus to Justinian* (3rd ed. Thames & Hudson 2018).

**Translations of Ancient Sources**

[1] Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, trans. Rolfe, J.C., *The War with Catiline* (Harvard 2013).

1. J.T. Ramsay, *Sallust's Bellum Catilinae* (2nd ed. Oxford 2007), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ramsay, *Sallust's Bellum Catilinae*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sallust *Cat.* 5.1, trans*.* J.C. Rolfe*,* *The War with Catiline* (Harvard 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sallust *Cat.* 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sallust *Cat.* 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sallust *Cat.* 36.4-36.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ﻿E.H. Shaw, *Sallust and the Fall of the Republic: Historiography and Intellectual Life at Rome* (Leiden 2022), 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sallust *Cat.* 37.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sallust, *Cat.* 37.1-37.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sallust, *Cat.* 37.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sallust, *Cat.* 37.5, 37.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Shaw, *Sallust and the Fall of the Republic: Historiography and Intellectual Life at Rome*, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ramsay, *Sallust's Bellum Catilinae*, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sallust, *Cat.* 14, 24, 33, 35, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The *lex Poetelia* *et* *Papiria* of 326 BC curtailed imprisonment for debt. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Sallust, *Cat.* 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sallust, *Cat.* 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Sallust, *Cat.* 37.6, 37.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. David Potter, *Rome in the Ancient World: From Romulus to Justinian* (3rd ed. Thames & Hudson 2018), 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Shaw, *Sallust and the Fall of the Republic: Historiography and Intellectual Life at Rome*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Sallust, *Cat.* 37.1-37.3, 37.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Shaw, *Sallust and the Fall of the Republic: Historiography and Intellectual Life at Rome*, 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Sallust, *Cat.* 37.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ronald Syme, *Sallust* (Berkeley [CA] 1964), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ramsay, *Sallust's Bellum Catilinae*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Shaw, *Sallust and the Fall of the Republic: Historiography and Intellectual Life at Rome*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Shaw, *Sallust and the Fall of the Republic: Historiography and Intellectual Life at Rome*, 224-225. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)