“Class Struggle” in the Roman Republic:

Difficulty and Progress in Utilizing a Marxist Framework to Understand Ancient Issues

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Late Republican Rome

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Section I: Introduction

After the industrial revolution, the 19th century saw the advent of Marxist literature coming to the forefront of political and economic thought in the West.[1] With that, new lenses through which historians were able to view both the recent and distant past became available. Therefore, analyzing late republican Rome through a perspective that focuses on class struggle is a relatively new practice that is worthy of further scholarship. The following essay aims to: (a) compare contemporary sources that seek to utilize this modern theoretical viewpoint, (b) analyze how ancient sources viewed the decline of the republic and the plight of the people, and (c) synthesize the two types of sources in order to come to an overarching conclusion of where Marxism fits and does not fit when aiming to comprehend socio-economic and political dynamics of the late Roman Republic. In doing so, it is imperative to keep in mind the difficulty that historians face when trying to apply present-day frameworks to a society of past millennia.

Karl Marx asserted that "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles."[2] However, proper historiography means comparison should come without the need to stretch the truth in order to fit a certain narrative. It would be improper to haphazardly attach a post-mercantilist and capitalist worldview onto a pre-capitalist society. Thus, the following analysis will be conducted with considerable caution when evaluating the valuable illuminations within the literature that examines class struggle, exploitation, and aristocratic

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[1] Robert Service, *Comrades!: A History of World Communism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

[2] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (The Communist League, 1848), 14.

political maneuvering that takes place in late republican Rome. Furthermore, the analysis will aim to be cognizant of the biases of ancient sources and how their (often aristocratic) background shapes their worldview and how they see the rest of the populace.

Through this analysis that takes from both contemporary and primary literature, the following will be asserted: Karl Marx's and Marta Harnecker's concept of "Base and Superstructure," along with other key Marxist framings of society, allows historians to better understand the dynamics between the aristocracy and non-aristocracy.[3] This is despite the fact that Marxism and its various sects (such as Leninism and Maoism) are all modern frameworks to explain exploitation and wealth accumulation.

However, there is a major caveat. Other, notably more important aspects of Marxist rhetoric do not map onto the Roman Republic neatly. For instance, the so-called "classes" of late republican Rome, such as the established rich, slaves, freedmen, farmers, and citizen-soldiers, do not graph onto the Marxist narratives of proletariat and bourgeois. Furthermore, trying to denote Rome as being one developmental stage or another would be futile. Even more so, the patron-client dynamic between the infamous demagogues of the 2nd and 1st century BCE disallows much comparison with the capitalist-worker relationship. These are just some of the many examples of how Marxism falls short in explaining how Roman society and economics functioned during the late republic. At first glance, one could envision Spartacus harboring parallels with various discontented proletariat movements of the 20th century. However, the following analysis will showcase that this agrarian pre-industrial society shouldn't be studied through a Marxist lens; it would be more appropriate for historians and researchers to look for

[3] Marta Harnecker, *The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism* (Sydney: Dept. of General Philosophy, Univ. of Sydney, 1976), 32.

other ways (which will be stated) to comprehend the behemoth of a civilization that is remarkably continued being studied thousands of years after its zenith.

Section II: Historiography

a. Tinges of Applicability

The late classicist David Konstan published the work titled *Marxism and Roman Slavery* in 1975. He writes during a time of significant tension between the West and rising communist influence (current events include the Sino-Soviet split, the Vietnam War, and the Khmer Rouge occupation). As the contentious ideology took the world stage, Konstan explores ideas relating to the slave system being the economic base of Rome's superstructure. He first asserts that "it is open to serious question whether the chief tension in Roman society was that between the classes of slave and slaveholder."[4] He explores the Marxist doctrine of society developing in a chronological set of stages. He does not necessarily refute this claim, but acknowledges the nuances in which ancient Roman society differs. It is important to note that Konstan describes certain aspects of Roman slavery as "quasi-industrial" in that it was the most developed form of the division of labor.[5] This is in contrast to the modern form of slavery that affects the local economies of colonized societies.

He further highlights the distinct capitalist quality of Roman slavery, as "slaves came to be employed on estates which specialized in the production of cash crops for distant markets,

[4] David Konstan, "Marxism and Roman Slavery," *Arethusa* 8, no. 1 (1975), 149.
[5] "Marxism and Roman Slavery," 162.

even for international markets."[6] Konstan highlights the nebulous flow from one developmental stage to another, which mirrors the nonbinary collapse of the republic into principate. Furthermore, he claims that the aggressive expansion of the republic was inherent in Roman society, due to the agrarian basis of its economy.[7] However, he notably acknowledges the fact that there is unclearness in Rome's developmental stages. Thus, it makes mapping the Marxist concept onto the Republic questionable.

Ultimately, Konstan asserts that the aristocracy was driven by the acquisition of new territory, as it was deemed necessary for the growth and strength of their power. His conclusions show that fragments of the ideology can be used to understand Rome, but not all. The literature serves as a foundational basis or precedent within the exploration of Marxist analyses of late republican Rome. The scholarly work that follows will serve to expand upon Konstan's illuminations.

b. Roman Economics Studied

Less than a decade after Konstan published his work, historical sociologist W. G. Runciman produced "Capitalism Without Classes: The Case of Classical Rome," where he provides an in-depth analysis of the Roman manumission system and slavery within the economy of Rome. When discussing the dynamics of private property owners, he writes, "the choice between slave labour and free was held to depend on their relative cost for the attainable return, but also that manumission by private owners was a matter of economic calculation as

[6] "Marxism and Roman Slavery," 155.
[7] "Marxism and Roman Slavery," 160.

well."[8] He asserts that there existed a constant aristocratic struggle for higher "profit margins" within ancient Rome, but highlights the complexity of labeling classical Roman economic elements as 'capital' or within a 'cash-nexus'.[9] Thus, he bolsters aspects of Konstan's work, as he continues the discussion of the distinctness of Roman society.

He goes on to claim that the constraints on social mobility were to further reinforce the ideological and coercive inhibitions on potential class formation. Had the chances for social mobility been higher, it would have been possible to expect the emergence of a collective consciousness among the proletariat that was excluded from their expected position, "such as perhaps played a part in the recruitment of the Catilinarian conspirators."[10] Thus, Runciman brings valuable insights into the fold, mainly regarding private ownership of property and the economic implications of slavery. He continues the conversation that describes the nuance of Rome's economics. His analyses will inform conclusions made from the literature that follows.

c. Lower Class Agency

A few years after Runciman's publication, ancient historian John Alexander North wrote about the power that voters held, specifically during the late republican period of Rome. He discussed the gradual revolution that occurred, which saw Roman society evolve due to the basis of its agrarian economy. For instance, he asserts that the collapsing republic saw rural poverty and deprivation being widespread, which meant that peasants provided the driving power behind

[8] Runciman, W. G., "Capitalism without Classes: The Case of Classical Rome," The British Journal of Sociology 34, no. 2, (1983): 157–81, https://doi.org/10.2307/590734, 158.
[9] "Capitalism without Classes: The Case of Classical Rome," 163.
[10] "Capitalism without Classes: The Case of Classical Rome," 175.

the repeated revolutionary demands for agrarian reform.[11] It is rather interesting to note the similarities between the economic analysis of North and Konstan. Within North's framework to understand the stumble to principate, he notes the agency of the lower class.[12] This slightly contrasts with the notions of Runciman that focus more on the social and economic limitations that prevented class consciousness. In general, North provides key insights into the discussion surrounding the populace's influence upon the ruling class within the late republic.

d. Imperialism and the Roman Economy

Further analysis of the dynamics between the aristocracy and the lower 'class' can be seen in Albert William Vanderlaan's "American Empire and the Resulting Class Structure: A Roman Model to Explain a Modern Struggle," which was published less than two decades after North's work. Vanderlaan's primary assertion is that the historical analogy of the late Roman Republic is a fitting mold to discuss the relationship between foreign expansion and domestic breakdown, specifically regarding the United States.[13] Although particularly distinct in its topic thus far, it is compelling to contrast the imperial nature of America to—as Konstan states—Rome's "tendency toward aggressive expansion."[14] As previously mentioned, Roman imperialism was contingent on its agrarian economy, which hinged upon its quasi-slave-capitalist society. Thus, America, being its own capitalist entity that continues to run on contemporary

[11] North, J. A. Review of *The Roman Counter-Revolution*, by P. A. Brunt, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989): 151–56, https://doi.org/10.2307/301186, 152.

[12] *The Roman Counter-Revolution,* 156.

[13] Vanderlaan, Albert William, "American Empire and the Resulting Class Structure: A Roman Model to Explain a Modern Struggle," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (2007), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1347784, 2.

[14] "Marxism and Roman Slavery," 160.

slavery, serves as an exceptionally different society that nonetheless warrants a comparison to late republican Rome.[15]

In the case of Vanderlaan, he believes the two share a large number of similarities in how they conduct themselves on the world stage. This includes areas such as land occupation and annexation, control of trade, general foreign policy, and the subsequent internal strife that comes forth from the mixture of these modes of influence. He states that America "has all the characteristics of an empire," as it has "unlimited military capabilities abroad," is "largely dominant [in] the United Nations," and has "vested interests around the world."[16] Vanderlaan makes a compelling argument by comparing Rome's Afro-Eurasian empire with America's Pacific-Atlantic territorial occupation.

He goes on to conduct a comparative analysis of Roman slavery and average American wage workers. His claim is that the Roman system of manumission is closely related to the modern class structure of corporate America, which "keeps the lower class at bay by giving them just enough to keep them from going on strike or revolting."[17] He invokes the 'bread and circuses' euphemism when comparing the two, and notes the two-class structure that can be seen in both societies. Moving forward, the assertions of Vanderlaan and of those with similar notions are not without pushback, as the 21st century continues to see varying degrees of comparison between Rome and the United States.

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[15] Minderoo Foundation, "Modern Slavery in the United States and Key Findings." Minderoo Foundation Pty Ltd, 2023, https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-indhownumberex/country-studies/united-states/, 1.

[16] "American Empire and the Resulting Class Structure: A Roman Model to Explain a Modern Struggle," 4.

[17] "American Empire and the Resulting Class Structure: A Roman Model to Explain a Modern Struggle," 11.

e. Comparisons to a Modern Empire

Four years after Vanderlaan's publication, Paul Burton wrote an analysis, named *Pax Romana/Pax Americana*, that aimed to be in opposition to contemporary American-Roman comparisons that have drawn similarities between the two empires despite the lack of consistent historical research or neglect for a deeper examination of ancient primary sources. For instance, he states, "...it is a rather unsophisticated understanding of 'empire' and 'imperialism' to reserve these terms for territorial control … a Republic can have an empire, whether territorial or hegemonic."[18] Burton asserts that modern historians have inadequately emphasized the territorial control of the United States when highlighting its similarities to Rome. Furthermore, he goes on state that the political discontent in the modern United States over the evergrowing gap between the rich and the poor simply cannot be mapped onto the nuanced Roman social hierarchy or the specific political situation, nor can the checks and balances in the U.S. constitution be comparable to Rome's democratic political institutions, which were specifically designed to entrench the privileges of a small political elite."[19] He argues the social hierarchy of Rome cannot be compared one-to-one with the political system of the United States.

These conclusions contrast greatly with Vanderlaan's assertions that compare its class structure and capitalist system with that of ancient Rome, who calls back to David Konstan when he declares that the situation in the United States has "moved to a point where the laborer is a commodity to the upper class, thus wage labor has come to the point where people are once

[18] Burton, Paul, "Pax Romana/Pax Americana: Perceptions of Rome in American Political Culture, 2000–2010." International Journal of the Classical Tradition 18, (2011), 66–104, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12138-011-0234-7, 75.

[19] "Pax Romana/Pax Americana: Perceptions of Rome in American Political Culture, 2000–2010," 79.

again in cheap demand rather than just the product they are able to produce."[20] Burton, on the other hand, does not believe that the class struggle and the economic basis of these two societies are comparable objects of study that can be used in tandem to reach a higher understanding of each; the problems that pertain to each are too distinct for association.

f. Aristocratic Investments

A continuation of the discussion in regard to the economic basis of Rome that hinged upon agriculture and slavery can be seen a few years later in Jack Morato's work titled "Praecipitia in Ruinam: The Decline of the Small Roman Farmer and the Fall of the Roman Republic." In this, he highlights how Roman aristocrats funneled the wealth they derived from foreign commands and provincial governorships into land ownership and agriculture.[21] This is because, for both social and economic reasons, it was the most attractive investment available to a rich aristocrat during the late Republic. He calls back to John North's claims in regard to the transformation of Roman society through agrarian reforms, but rather than highlighting the agency given to the general populace, he takes on a separate approach that focuses on the exploitation of labor. Morato highlights that, through purchases and extortion, the wealthy gradually expanded their estates by acquiring adjoining farms.[22] These commercial farms employed large numbers of slaves, and unlike tenant labor, slaves were a substantial fixed cost. This meant that slaves worked longer and more intensively than wage laborers.

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[20] "American Empire and the Resulting Class Structure: A Roman Model to Explain a Modern Struggle," 21.

[21] Morato, Jack, "Praecipitia in Ruinam: The Decline of the Small Roman Farmer and the Fall of the Roman Republic," *International Social Science Review,* 92, no. 1 (2016), 7.

[22] "Praecipitia in Ruinam: The Decline of the Small Roman Farmer and the Fall of the Roman Republic," 8.

Ultimately, he asserts that aristocratic landowners had an incentive to capitalize on economies of scale in the presence of such fixed labor costs. They did this by concentrating on the mass production of a few commodities that could be profitably exported to urban and overseas markets. This line of thinking that connects the exploited slave to the international market directly compares to Konstan's discussion on the "quasi-industrial" nature of Roman slavery. Morato's analyses bolster the work of previous scholarly work that pertains to late republican Rome's agricultural economy and hunger for enslavement by the aristocracy.

g. Effects of Armies on the Republic

One of the most recent pieces of literature that continues the conversation established by previous authorship is from the political scientist Vicky Randall in her work "The Romance of the Republic: Class Conflict and the Problem of Progress in Thomas Arnold's History of Rome." In the work, she focuses on the dialectical struggle between conservatism and progress, or in other terms, the rich and the poor.[23] Randall highlights how the poor enlisted in the army as a source of income, and they expected the land gained during victories to be divided among themselves. However, the aristocratic government preferred to sell new territory to the highest bidder to enrich the treasury.[24] She continues Konstan's and Vanderlaan's discussion of territorial expansion being a critical catalyst within the Roman imperial machine. The general notion declared is that the continuous prevalence of slavery and the ongoing struggle for land by the Roman elite defined a society that was in a nebulous stage between a slave state and a capitalist

[23] Randall, Vicky, "The Romance of the Republic: Proletariat–Bourgeois Class Conflict and the Problem of Progress in Thomas Arnold's History of Rome (1838–42)," Journal of the History of Ideas 84, no. 2 (2023): 287-311, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2023.0013, 290.

[24] "The Romance of the Republic: Class Conflict and the Problem of Progress in Thomas Arnold's History of Rome (1838–42)," 306.

state. The analysis provided generally expands upon previous scholarship that comments on the synthesis of the struggle between the land-hungry ruling class and the worker in Rome.

h. Illuminations and Pitfalls of Contemporary Sources

The aforementioned contemporary sources provide a large amount of insight into how late republican Roman society was viewed by historians from the late twentieth century into the early twenty-first century. They struggled and succeeded to varying degrees to grapple with aspects of Roman society that only half-mapped onto Marxist frameworks. Early works by David Konstan, W. G. Runciman, and John North provided further analysis that focused on a form of "class struggle" and the economic dynamic between slaves and the aristocracy. The authors argued that this dynamic was shown to have some similarities to the proletariat–bourgeois dynamic in capitalism. Later on, scholars like Albert Vanderlaan and Paul Burton sought to expand upon this discussion of labor exploitation through comparative analysis with the modern United States. As they discovered, various aspects of the United States as an imperial entity and its internal class dynamics were and were not seen as parallels to its ancient counterparts.[25] Most recently, literature by Jack Morato and Vicky Randall has called for further analysis on the dynamics behind land and agriculture and how the labor of the Roman worker was harnessed for the betterment of Roman elite life.[26] These more recent illuminations are seemingly more cognizant of the soldier-agriculture-warfare dynamic that entrenched the Republic. That is, how

[25] "Pax Romana/Pax Americana: Perceptions of Rome in American Political Culture, 2000–2010," 79.

[26] "The Romance of the Republic: Proletariat–Bourgeois Class Conflict and the Problem of Progress in Thomas Arnold's History of Rome (1838–42)," 291.

influential generals were able to supersede the republican system by using the spoils of war to purchase land for their own soldiers, thereby investing in their loyalty and military capabilities.[27]

Within all of this, one should see that the Roman situation is very distinct. Its culture (values such as *dignitas* and how it's gained or maintained), the ways in which generals were able to gain power and leverage it for political maneuvering, and the semi-democratic means of attaining the power to chip away at the democratic system were inherent to the society.[28] These aspects are what differentiate Rome from capitalist societies of the modern era. The following section will detail how primary sources, such as Plutarch, Appian, and Cicero, allow modern historians to comprehend how Rome relates and differs from the class dynamics or "class struggles" of today. Their literature will showcase how the Marxist model will fail in various ways, yet have merit in some aspects. Thus, it will show that the substantial undertaking of studying late republican Rome is a difficult one, so much so that it should be advised that one should look to other frameworks before they initiate their studies of the civilization.

Section III: Arguments

a. From Contemporary to Ancient

One cannot expect to fully comprehend the issues and socio-economic dynamics of a civilization of millennia past solely on sources from the present. Thus, an analysis of the ancient

[27] "The Romance of the Republic: Class Conflict and the Problem of Progress in Thomas Arnold's History of Rome (1838–42)," 308.

[28] Plutarch, *Fall of the Roman Republic*, trans. Rex Warner and Robert Seager (Penguin UK, 2006), 128.

sources must be devised in order to have a solid grasp on ancient issues. The primary sources of Plutarch, Appian, and Cicero each showcase their own understandings of the "main characters" such as Pompey, Caesar, and Cicero himself. Their literature highlights how the lives of the elite contextualize the struggles of the populace.[29] More importantly, these sources reveal patterns of economic exploitation and political maneuvering that can be partially understood through Marxist concepts (particularly base and superstructure) while simultaneously demonstrating the limitations of applying Marxist class categories to Rome's agrarian-military society.[30]

b. Obtaining Insight with Base and Superstructure

It should be stated that the Marxist concept of "Base and Superstructure" provides valuable insight into late republican Rome, even if other schemas, such as Marxist class categories, fail to capture the complexity of Rome's society.[31] The economic base of Roman society—slave labor, agricultural production, and military conquest—directly shaped and reinforced the political and cultural superstructure in ways that accelerated the Republic's collapse.[32] This relationship is evident throughout the primary sources; they document how Rome's mode of production was interlinked to the inclination for political manipulation that ultimately destabilized republican institutions.[33] For instance, Appian's account makes the base-superstructure relationship explicit when describing land concentration when he writes:

> The rich gained possession of most of the undistributed land, and after a while, were confident that no one would take it back from them. They used persuasion or force to buy or seize property which adjoined their own, or any other smallholdings belonging to poor men, and came to operate great ranches instead

[29] *Fall of the Roman Republic*, 257.
[30] *Fall of the Roman Republic*, 266.
[31] *The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism*, 34.
[32] *Fall of the Roman Republic*, 278.
[33] *Fall of the Roman Republic,* 228.

> ot single farms. They employed slave hands and shepherds on these estates to avoid having free men dragged off the land to serve in the army, and they derived great profit from this form of ownership, too, as the slaves had many children and no liability to military service, and their numbers increased freely. For these reasons, the powerful were becoming extremely rich, and the number of slaves in the country was reaching large proportions, while the Italian people were suffering from depopulation and a shortage of men worn down as they were by poverty, taxes, and military service.[34]

This particular passage reveals how the economic base (being large estates worked by slaves) created a self-reinforcing system that transformed Roman political life. The aristocracy's preference for slave labor over free labor was twofold; it was both an economic and a political choice. By concentrating land ownership and employing slaves who couldn't fight in legions, the wealthy kept themselves away from military service. Meanwhile, the remaining freemen bore the burden of Rome's constant internal and external (expansionist) warfare.[35] This economic arrangement produced the superstructure of client armies and soldiers dependent on their generals. This dynamic would continue to chip away at the semi-democratic institution until eventually it became the principate. This transformation that Appian describes, primarily in *Book I* of *The Civil Wars* through the stories of people like the Gracchi brothers and Sulla, represents a shift in Rome's mode of production that had massive political consequences.[36] As Konstan noted in his analysis, this quasi-industrial form of slavery (with its focus on producing crops for distant markets) created economic pressure that demanded continuous territorial expansion.[37] The superstructure of Roman political culture, with its emphasis on military glory (or *dignitas*) and emphasis on general-demagogues, evolved to serve this economic base.[38] Generals needed

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[34] Appian, *The Civil Wars*, trans. John Carter (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 5.
[35] *The Civil Wars*, 94.
[36] *The Civil Wars*, 12.
[37] "Marxism and Roman Slavery," 162.
[38] *The Civil Wars*, 106.

conquests to acquire slaves and land, while slaves and land required military protection and further expansion. Expansion required armies, and armies required land distributions to veterans, ultimately perpetuating this detrimental socio-economic cycle.

If the aforementioned base shaped Roman politics, the cultural and political superstructure also actively maintained and reinforced that base. Roman political culture, mentioned previously, created the ideological wireframe that allowed exploitation by the aristocracy to persist even as it destabilized the Republic.[39] The primary sources reveal how elites manipulated these cultural values to serve their personal economic interests while preventing the formation of the kind of class consciousness. For instance, Plutarch makes an effort to highlight Sulla and how his military success and wealth reinforcement created a self-perpetuating system:

> Undisciplined arrogance soon became the rule, along with a shameful contempt for law and justice. As the evil grew, open revolts took place against the government, and large armies were led with violence against their native land by men who had been exiled, or condemned in the courts, or were feuding among themselves over some office or command. There were now many cases of individuals who would not relinquish power and faction leaders who aspired to sole rule.[40]

Sulla's described strategy reveals how the superstructure of Roman political culture (the competition for dignitas through military command) became interwoven with the economic base. His generous spending on soldiers was both an economic transaction (purchasing military loyalty) and a cultural performance (demonstrating the generosity that was expected of a benevolent Roman).[41] This blending of economic and cultural aspects created a political system

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[39] Cicero, Marcus Tullius, *Selected Letters*, Translated by D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986, 180.

[40] *The Civil Wars*, 2-3.

[41] *The Civil Wars*, 126.

where generals competed to offer better rewards to soldiers, driving both territorial expansion and internal political violence.

The cultural superstructure also prevented the formation of class "consciousness" that might have challenged aristocratic dominance. The patron-client system essentially bound poor citizens to wealthy patrons through personal obligation rather than class solidarity. When Pompey famously addressed the people about Caesar's land reform, Plutarch records the exchange as such:

> [Caesar asked], "If there is any violent resistance made to these laws, will you come to the help of the people?" "Certainly I will," Pompey replied. "And against those who threaten to use swords I shall bring both a sword and a shield." Never in his life had Pompey said or done anything so stupid and vulgar as was generally admitted.[42]

Pompey's blatant populist appeal reveals how Roman elites positioned themselves as protectors of "the people" while actually serving their own interests. This kind of political theater (what Vanderlaan might call "bread and circuses") prevented solidarity among the poor by funneling their focus into patron-client relationships.[43] The "people" who might have formed a conscious class with shared economic interests instead remained fragmented into competing clientele loyal to various aristocratic patrons.[44] Thus, there is some validity in mapping some Marxist concepts to the situation of poor Romans. However, it will be asserted that the overarching conditions of societal, economic, and political life in Rome are distinct enough to warn those who start studying the ancient republic through a Marxist framework.

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[42] *Fall of the Roman Republic*, 211.

[43] "American Empire and the Resulting Class Strucure: A Roman Model to Explain a Modern Struggle," 11.

[44] *The Civil Wars*, 19.

d. Farmers, Soldiers, and Slaves: Where Marxism Falls Short

While some frameworks (like base and superstructure) certainly help explain the Republic's decline, the traditional class categories used by Marx and Engels ultimately fail to capture Roman social reality. The distinction between proletariat and bourgeoisie cannot be legitimately mapped onto Rome's agrarian-military centric society. The primary dynamic was between the land-owning aristocrats and soldiers who were simultaneously citizens, farmers, voters, and standing military personnel.[45] Appian explicitly describes this non-capitalist class structure when he writes about the plight of the less fortunate:

> ...the poor made equal complaint, that they had been reduced from prosperity to abject poverty, and from that to childlessness, since they could not rear children. They listed the campaigns on which they had served to win this land and were indignant at being deprived of access to common property, and at the same time, they berated the rich for choosing slaves who were always treacherous and malevolent and, on that account, exempt from military service, instead of free men and citizens and soldiers.[46]

When he writes "poor," these are not exactly "wage laborers" who are alienated from the means of production in an industrial sense. They are dispossessed farmers who see themselves as soldiers and citizens with a lawful claim to the land they helped conquer.[47] According to Appian, their main gripe was about access to property and status as contributors to Rome's territorial expansion, not about wages or working conditions. This reveals a social structure where economic class, political rights, and military service are intertwined in ways that Marxist categories cannot explain. This is but one of many ways the framework cannot explain certain societal relationships commonly found in the late republic.

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[45] *Fall of the Roman Republic*, 57.
[46] *The Civil Wars*, 5.
[47] *The Civil Wars*, 7.

Cicero's writings reveal how Roman elites understood (or failed to understand) the societal dynamics documented by Appian and Plutarch. His correspondence, letters, and speeches show an aristocratic worldview that recognized individual failings and moral decline.[48] However, it seems likely that he (and others like him) remained blind to the systemic issues festering within Rome's economic and political structure. For example, in his letter to Caesar about Apollonius, a former slave, Cicero writes:

> I know him to be a scholar, devoted to liberal studies from boyhood. For he was much in my house from an early age with Diodotus the Stoic, a most erudite person in my opinion. Now his imagination has been captured by your career, and he wants to write an account of it in Greek.[49]

Seemingly innocuous letter at first, this letter reveals a fair bit about Roman social structure that Marxist categories struggle to capture. Apollonius was a former slave who gained his freedom and became an educated scholar, moving in elite circles. He essentially crossed from the most exploited class to the cultural apparatus of the ruling class. Perplexingly to the modern reader, Cicero presents this as unremarkable. Manumission and social mobility (for a select few) were features of Roman society that complicate any analysis emphasizing a rigid class structure.

The unexceptional existence of freed slaves like Apollonius in positions of cultural influence demonstrates why Roman "classes" cannot map onto proletariat and bourgeoisie. The Roman system included multiple status categories: slave, freedman, citizen, equestrian, and senator.[50] Each of these "classes" cut across economic positions in complex ways that do not mirror modern relationships. A wealthy freedman might have more economic resources than a

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[48] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Selected Political Speeches*, trans. Michael Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 68.

[49] *Selected Letters*, 180-181.

[50] *Selected Political Speeches*, 91.

poor citizen, but lack the political rights and social standing of impoverished freeborn Romans.[51] This multi-dimensional system resists any capitalist-esque mold that establishes economic classes based on relationship to means of production.

Another example of Roman dynamics being considerably distinct from the "profit and exploitation" model can be seen in how Appian describes Marius:

> Contrary to law and custom, he enrolled in his army many poor men of low standing, a class of people who used not to be accepted by commanders in the past, who gave arms, like other honours, only to those qualified by their property – the idea being that each man's property served as a pledge of loyalty[52]

The translator, Robert Seager, for *Fall of the Roman Republic*, notably comments on how Plutarch glaringly misguides the reader by not being fully transparent about the consequences that Marius' innovation in the citizen-general-soldier dynamic:

> ...perhaps the gravest criticism that can be made of Plutarch is that he failed to highlight the consequences of Marius' enrollment of the capite censi. This measure created the armies of the last century of the republic, dependent on their generals for rewards when their service was done and ready to follow them if need be against Rome itself. Marius never used the weapon he had forged against the state, but it was he who made possible the last precipitous stage in the fall of the republic that began with Sulla's march on Rome in 88.

It is clear that Marius's innovation of recruitment created a fundamentally different social dynamic than the one Marx described in industrial capitalism. The enlisted "poor" were not proletarians in the Marxist sense; they were not wage laborers selling their bodies to capitalists who extracted surplus value. Instead, they were citizen-soldiers who entered into patron-client relationships with their commanding generals.[53] Their economic interests were tied to the promise of land distributions after military service instead of wages. Furthermore, unlike the

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[51] *Selected Letters*, 174-175.

[52] *Fall of the Roman Republic*, 11.

[53] "The Romance of the Republic: Class Conflict and the Problem of Progress in Thomas Arnold's History of Rome (1838–42)," 306.

modern Marxist proletariat, they did not want to abolish or collectivize property relations. They wanted to become property owners through conquest and warfare.[54] This aspiration to join the landowning class, funnily enough, contradicts Marxist theories of proletarian consciousness and revolution.

The soldier-patron dynamic that Marius created showcases how Roman social structure goes against Marxist class categories. A Roman soldier's loyalty was to his general, instead of to others in his economic position (his comrades, one could say). Sulla's veterans received land confiscated from communities, and they didn't see themselves as fellow exploited workers alongside the dispossessed.[55] They saw themselves as the demagogue's clients who had earned their reward through military service. Similarly, when Caesar distributed land to his veterans, those soldiers became personally invested in the eternal dictator's political success.[56] This personal relationship between general and soldier does not have a direct equivalent in the capitalist employer-employee relationship of a Marxist worldview.

A major aspect of Roman life that also does not have a direct equivalent is the manumission system, which, for those seeking to apply a Marxist framework, becomes difficult to grapple with. In Marxist theory, the exploited worker cannot individually escape their class position through personal advancement; the system as a whole must be overthrown collectively. In late republican Rome, manumission offered an achievable escape route from the most exploited position (slavery) to a position capable of social and economic advancement. A slave like Apollonius, who could realistically aspire to freedom and education, had different incentives

[54] *Fall of the Roman Republic*, 32.
[55] *Fall of the Roman Republic*, 13.
[56] *Fall of the Roman Republic*, 275.

than a factory worker in industrial capitalism.[57] Thus, the manumission system was a distinct characteristic of Rome that does not have a direct comparison in modern capitalist societies.

Continuing this notion, the Roman civil wars and how they were orchestrated do not have much parallel if one were to use a Marxist lens. What Appian and Plutarch document are power struggles between the elites, where various factions of the poor were mobilized as soldiers for competing aristocratic benefactors. The followers of Marius fought the followers of Sulla, the veterans of Caesar fought the veterans of Pompey (and the Senate), and soldiers loyal to Octavian eventually defeated those loyal to Antony. These were factional conflicts within the elite that drew in the poor as participants. Even when "popular" leaders like the Gracchi or Caesar championed land reform, they did so as aristocrats pursuing personal political advancement through populist means, not as representatives of a self-conscious lower class pursuing collective liberation.[58]

Overall, Marxism predicts that as exploitation intensifies and class issues become recognized, the exploited class will develop consciousness of their shared interests and revolutionary potential. In Rome, however, intensifying exploitation and obvious systemic dysfunction did not lead to consciousness emerging among the "poor." Instead, the workers remained fragmented and bound to elite benefactors through personal loyalty.[59] They invested in military imperialism instead of possibly overthrowing the system. The conflicts that ultimately transformed the Republic into the Principate were not class struggles. It was a series of competitions within the elite over control of the existing system. The eventual "triumph" of

[57] *Selected Letters*, 125.
[58] *The Civil Wars*, 94.
[59] *Fall of the Roman Republic,* 159.

Augustus wasn't the result of a new class seizing power in some coup d'état; it represented one aristocratic faction establishing monarchical control over a traditionally oligarchic system.

e. Synthesis: Some Concepts Align, Others Do Not

When read alongside contemporary scholarship, the primary sources reveal a nuanced picture of Marxism's applicability to late republican Rome. The concept of "Base and Superstructure" provides analytical value; Appian's accounts of land concentration, Plutarch's descriptions of military patronage, and Cicero's elitist perspective all reveal how Rome's slave-based, conquest-dependent economy created a political dynamic that accelerated the collapse of the republican semi-democratic system. The self-reinforcing aspect is apparent: (a) slave labor displaced free farmers, (b) displaced farmers became soldiers dependent on generals, (c) generals needed conquests to reward soldiers, (d) conquests brought more slaves and land, (e) land concentrated in fewer hands, and finally (f) more farmers were displaced once again.[60] The political superstructure, with its emphasis on the command of provinces, grandiose triumphs, and competition for dignitas, evolved to serve this economic base, ultimately creating the conditions for civil war and monarchy.

However, Marxist class categories radically misrepresent Roman social structure. The Roman poor were not proletariats selling their labor power to capitalists. Rather, they were a complex mix of small farmers, veterans, urban plebeians, and slaves.[61] These are groups with different relationships to property, different political rights, and very often, conflicting interests.

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[60] *The Civil War*, 134.
[61] *Fall of the Roman Republic,* 51-52.

The Roman elite were not cut-and-dry bourgeoisie extracting surplus value from wage labor. Instead, they were aristocrats whose wealth came from land, slaves, warfare, and political office. To reiterate, the patron-client system and the centrality of military service created social dynamics that have virtually no parallel in industrial capitalism.[62] Most importantly, the primary sources reveal that Roman political conflict was not exactly about "class consciousness" or economic exploitation in the Marxist sense. Instead, it was about aristocrats competing for power using various desperate methods, with the Roman people being manipulated as supporters of competing patrons (who continuously aimed to buy clientele), instead of recognizable classes with shared interests.[63] As Appian notes, the civil wars began as elite rivalries that escalated, not as a proletarian revolution against bourgeois exploitation.

At this point, the message should be clear to historians: use Marxist concepts or ideas selectively, and with caution. Marx, Engels, and Harnecker's idea of "Base and Superstructure" can highlight how economic foundations shape political institutions. However, one should not assume that ancient social categories are parallel to modern classes, such as the bourgeois and the proletariat. Ultimately, conflicts in the Roman Republic were undoubtedly not driven by the same dynamics as modern class struggle. Its distinctness, such as its agrarian-military foundation, its slave system, its patron-client networks, and its unique cultural values, must be understood on its own terms, even as we use modern frameworks to ask questions about economic and political relationships.

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[62] Caesar, Julius, *The Conquest of Gaul.* Translated by S. A. Handford, New York: Penguin Books, 1982, 129.

[63] *The Civil Wars*, 141-142.

Section IV: Conclusion

Although Marxist theory was born in the modern era, there are indeed some concepts and frameworks that have been utilized by various scholars to explain the exploitation of workers in late republican Rome. This dynamic between the wealthy and poor would culminate in flashes like the Servile Wars. Alongside these flashes, the larger takeaway to obtain from this relationship can be seen in how the aristocracy had to maneuver when faced with the will of the populace. As seen in Cicero's personal letters and the nuances in narrative in which both Plutarch and Appian wrote, there is a level of manipulation that the general public was subjected to by the "ruling class." This manipulative culture was a mere aspect of the political maneuvering of the most dominant leaders in the late Roman Republic. That is, a manipulative culture that defines the superstructure of Roman society.

The economic foundation, or base, nurtured this superstructure, which was built upon slave labor, continuous expansionism, and the client kingdom model. Values such as *dignitas* and *clementia* were leveraged by demagogues like Sulla, Pompeius, and Caesar, which allowed them to obtain a sphere of influence that quelled any public unrest while simultaneously chipping away at the quasi-democratic structure that Roman elites and historians prided themselves on. In summary, this was the superstructure that Rome was entrenched in, one that inherently made the base more and more dependent on military conquest and the relationship between client states,

foreign kingdoms, or semi-autonomous provinces of Rome. It is within this cycle that the Roman Republic became a mortal entity, one that would have historians for millennia question the reasons behind its collapse.

While the selective use of Marxist concepts can reveal certain dynamics of late republican Rome, the framework as a whole is apparently inadequate for understanding Roman society and economics. The fundamental issue is not simply that Rome was "pre-capitalist." The organization of society was based on fundamentally different principles compared to ones that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels analyzed. There were patron-client relationships, rather than class solidarity. The status hierarchy was based on citizenship and dignitas rather than economic position. And instead of wage labor, the system of "military clientage" was the main base. Among the various other nuances of Roman society, these key diversions from the organization of industrial society highlight how Rome was truly distinct, and shouldn't be viewed through such lenses.

Historians of the Roman Republic during its collapse would be better off using methods or frameworks that emphasized the unique Roman institutions and values. For example, focusing studies on the patron-client and general-soldier dynamic would better accentuate the variable of loyalty that structured rather than class divisions. Furthermore, delving into the cultural aspects that affected the economics of Rome (the base) would greater reveal how values like *dignitas*, *clementia*, and *pietas* affected political behavior. It would also better explain competition among the elite more easily than class conflict models. Lastly, as seen in key contemporary sources, comparative studies of other imperial systems could illuminate (some, but usually not all of) Rome's expansion and internal tension and how it affected the populace.

Considering everything, the question should not be whether Marxism (or any other contemporary theory) fully "works" for understanding Rome. Historians would find more success by finding concepts from a variety of frameworks to aid in comprehending particular aspects of Roman life. It is often tempting to make ancient evidence fit modern categories, but as many historians know, this usually ends up leading to erroneous conclusions or an obscuration of the facts. Rome's hegemonic presence in the ancient world and its eventual collapse should be understood on Roman terms and through Roman categories. This does not mean it's impossible to bring modern ideas, tools, and concepts to help understand ancient sources. This civilization, like many others, is a complex conglomerate of cultural nuances and economic systems that make it difficult to understand. In a similar vein, proper historical research includes knowing when to pick up and drop certain apparatus to comprehend such complicated entities.

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