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Cristina Rosillo-López. *Political Conversations in Late Republican Rome*.

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One of the most prevalent fields of study regarding the Roman Republic has been the study of its political system. The focus of these studies has predominantly been on the political institutions such as the Senate and the political assemblies, leading to an understanding of Roman politics – and thus Roman society – as something driven by the Senate in its private meetings, with the *populus* representing anything from an obstacle, to a passive supporter, to an active agent in the senatorial political process. In *Political Conversations in Late Republican Rome*, Cristina Rosillo-López contributes to the shift in scholarship away from this exclusively institutional focus, building on the work into Roman social relationships begun by Gelzer (1912) and Meier (1980) with new insight drawn from modern communication and information studies. By focusing on the idea of “extra-institutional politics” – the communication and deliberation which exists outside of but is integral to the operation of political institutions such as the Senate or the popular assemblies – R.-L. re-evaluates what constituted political participation in the Roman world, broadening the scope of who could be politically active to include non-senatorial actors such as young men, *equites*, elite women, and freedmen. The result is an insightful analysis which challenges the centrality and dominance of the senatorial class in the Roman political system – a developing area of scholarship since the work of Millar (1998) – and gives more agency in Roman society as a whole to people from outside the senatorial class, all supported with detailed discussions of ancient letters and presented in clear prose.

Political Conversations opens with its primary aim: to highlight the orality of Roman politics, and to demonstrate how this orality in extra-institutional communication formed an essential but overlooked part of the Roman political system.

Chapter One reviews the previous approaches taken to understanding Roman Republican politics. It argues that the three main concepts – *la/le politique*, political culture, and consensus – do not accurately capture the integration of extra-institutional politics. It then reconsiders what might be considered political

participation in light of an extra-institutional model. In this model, non-senatorial groups such as women and foreigners can be realised as political actors.

Chapter Two considers the source material for the analysis. Source availability necessitates an approach favouring Ciceronian material: the letters in particular offer a unique perspective on political conversations, as they constitute an account of the conversational process which is largely unaffected by hindsight. R.-L. also considers the possibility of using later historical accounts of conversations; however, she relegates them to complementary sources with Cicero's letters as the main body of evidence, since later accounts are used more as literary devices rather than representations of actual conversational processes.

Chapter Three justifies the importance of face-to-face political meetings. Romans preferred personal meetings, considering letters a deficient form of political communication to be used only when necessary. The circulatory system of information exchange and political negotiation required a constant physical presence, which R.-L. notes was facilitated by conversations and meetings. In this chapter, R.-L. also examines the famous Luca conference of 56 BC, arguing that while the event as depicted in historical sources was logistically impossible, it provides an interesting touchstone for the issues of senatorial connection and the circulation of information among the elite.

Chapter Four focuses on the settings for informal communication. The elite education privileged networking and socialisation, inculcating the rules for social interaction into the future elite. Meetings could take place in almost any day-to-day situation, but the most common were at dinner parties. Two other often-cited situations, the *senaculum* and the *consilium*, are discounted by R.-L.: the first as a practice which fell into disuse by the Late Republic, and the second as connected to a political institution, based on a strict definition of the term *consilium*.

Chapter Five analyses the dynamics of conversations. R.-L. begins by identifying some of the challenges of interpreting conversations based on Cicero's recollection of them in his letters. Despite this, two main points recur in the recollections: speculation about the future, and the sharing of feelings and impressions. R.-L. also

shows through three examples that conversations were almost always a venue for status conflict between speakers.

Chapter Six analyses the circulation of information through conversation. While there was a term used for “angling for information” – *expiscor* – in practice it was not done often, as it was considered unseemly for a senator to be seen lacking information. R.-L. also examines the control of information flow. In short, it was almost impossible to completely restrict the flow of information; closed meetings could limit who had initial access, but from there participants were bound only by trust and concern for status to hold that information.

Chapter Seven returns to the question of who could be considered a political actor. Senators needed to have a constant presence in many social circles; to achieve this, they worked closely with non-senatorial actors such as women and freedmen. These non-senatorial actors had varying degrees of personal influence and agency, making them more important than simple mouthpieces for senators.

Chapter Eight brings the previous points together by examining how extra-institutional communication contributed to institutional politics. Although ultimately a decision could only be finalised in the Senate, senators needed to lay the groundwork for their policies through extra-institutional communication. R.-L. illustrates this point by demonstrating what happened when extra-institutional communication ceased, using the example of the aftermath of Julius Caesar’s assassination.

An appendix is also included which identifies actors in extra-institutional politics who did not belong to the senatorial group, and who engaged in conversations or delivered oral messages that implied a conversation with the recipient.

The most important contribution *Political Conversations* makes to the study of Roman society and politics is that it gives significantly greater agency to non-senatorial political actors. R.L.’s assessment of their involvement in political conversations sheds light on a subset of society which is only beginning to receive proper scholarly attention, showing that they were not only present, but were

important to the operation of the Roman political system. At the same time, *Political Conversations* provides new insight into the familiar topic of senatorial relationships by giving attention to the conversations occurring between themselves and with other non-senatorial actors.

The only shortcomings of this volume are a consequence of its challenging body of evidence. On a number of occasions, R.-L. states that letters were insufficient for political communication: “a letter could in no way contain the richness and possibilities of an oral communicative moment in politics.”¹ This is certainly true with regard to the presentation of non-verbal features such as gesture, tone, or feeling, as well as the opportunities for information exchange offered by synchronous dialogue. However, in seeking to challenge the notion that written communication was a predominant and overvalued form of political communication, *Political Conversations* may have gone slightly too far in undervaluing written communication. Political circumstances throughout the first century BC – most notably the civil wars – drove many important political actors out of Rome, creating the conditions R.-L. says were the only time when letters were necessary. Recent scholarship on Roman letters has highlighted their function as a conversational surrogate, most notably White (2010). Rather than presenting a dichotomy where either the written or the spoken word must be superior and the other a begrudgingly accepted alternative, it would be interesting to see how closely the dynamics of conversation demonstrated in this study match those in letters. Overall, however, *Political Conversations* is an excellently written study which represents a significant step toward a broader understanding of Roman civil society.

¹ Rosillo-López 2021: 4.

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