The Roman Democracy of Fergus Millar*

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Abstract

In his *The Roman Republic in Political Thought* (his Jerusalem Lectures in History, delivered in memory of Menahem Stern), Millar refers to the reforms implemented in 1980s by Thatcher's government as the historical context in which he first conceived his work on the Roman Republic. However, the political climate of that era, this paper shows, did not merely serve as the context in which Millar thought about the Republican political system.

Resumen

En su libro *The Roman Republic in Political Thought* (que reúne sus Conferencias Jerusalén en Historia, pronunciadas en memoria de Menahem Stern), Millar se refiere a las reformas implementadas por el gobierno Thatcher en los años 80 como el contexto histórico en el que nacieron sus trabajos sobre la República romana. Sin embargo, este artículo muestra que el clima político de aquellos años no fue únicamente el contexto en el que Mi-

Rather, it functioned, I argue, as a foil within his historical analysis and constituted one of the domains he aimed to intervene in through his historical research. His reading of Roman Republican politics and of its interpretations in later political thought was intrinsically informed by his opposition to (in particular) the university policies of the 1980s and 1990s and to the neo-liberal discourse that informed them.

Keywords

llar reflexionó sobre el sistema político republicano. Funcionó a modo de contraste en sus análisis históricos y constituyó uno de los ámbitos en los que pretendió intervenir a través de su investigación histórica. Su lectura de la política en la Roma republicana y de sus interpretaciones en el pensamiento político posterior se vio intrínsecamente informada por su oposición (en particular) a las políticas universitarias del gobierno durante los años 80 y 90, así como también al discurso neoliberal que las sustentaba.

Palabras clave

Introduction

Much has been written on Fergus Millar and his reading of the Roman political life. The criticisms far outweigh the endorsements, and yet no one, not even the most ferocious detractors, can deny the energising impact of his intervention in the study of the Roman Republic. As Alexander Yakobson puts it, the publication of Millar's studies on the Roman political system, whose powerful democratic component and later outright democratic nature he advocated, was a 'watershed moment' in the study of the Roman Republic[1].

When engaging with Millar's reading of the Republican political system, scholars have often wondered why a historian, who had previously focused predominantly on the eastern perspectives of Roman empire, had decided to turn his attention to the political life of the Republic, at times remarking, with ill-disguised annoyance, on the absence of genuine argumentative originality. Some, not without a rather blinkered irony, pointed to Millar's statement that the first time he had come to appreciate in full the public dimension of Roman political life was when he first spent a month as a Balsdon Fellow at the British School at Rome. However, although in the introductions of the two book length studies of this subject[2], Millar makes explicit references to contemporary political life and thereby establishes a connection between the Republican political system and contemporary political concerns, scholars do not seem to have explored the heuristic value of this relationship. Some have remarked upon these references as a sign of Millar's engagement with public life[3], while others have taken them as a form of contingent prompt that enabled Millar to focus on what interested him the

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1. Yakobson, 2022, p. 93. Millar moved from arguing that the Roman Republican system included a significant democratic element (Millar, 1998, p. 225: «however hesitant we may be to allow the name of democracy to a system whose structural weaknesses and contradictions were so profound, it remains that the central argument put forward in this study is that any valid assessment of the Roman Republic must take into account the power of the crowd») to stating that it was a democracy, however imperfect (Millar, 2002a, p. 7) «manifold anomalies», p. 159 «profound, indeed fatal, defects».

2. Millar, 1998 and Millar, 2002a. These claims are also repeated in the introduction as well as in the epilogue of the collection of his articles Millar, 2002c and Millar, 2006b.

3. Benoist, 2004; Bowman and Goodman, 2021.

most, the reiteration of his thesis about the democratic nature of the Roman Republic[4]. The only exception to this trend is, to a certain extent, John North, who in an introductory essay to an edited volume that marked Millar's sixty-fifth birthday, analyses the revealing parallel between Millar's intellectual commitment to bringing to the fore the democratic nature of the Roman political system, and his commitment to a more democratic running of universities[5]. «The question is», North asks, «whether the two pursuits have a character in common that is significant and interesting, or whether the connection is simply accidental and uninteresting – or, perhaps, an association that is altogether a delusion fostered by a common vocabulary»[6]. After analysing Millar's reading of Roman Republican politics and, by analogy, the running of modern universities (whose management Millar had intervened to democratise), North concludes that «both pursuits derive from the same impulse and whatever the logical connection both are expressions of the same political imperative of the need for justice»[7].

North's instructive analysis points to Millar's inclination towards democratic politics, his determination to put back into the picture the people of Rome, and his deep commitment to fostering (or re-establishing) a more democratic running of universities. This ultimately tells us that the historian and the man were not diffracted but operated with one voice; however, it does not tell us much about the deeper connection between Millar's reading of Roman Republican politics and his commitment to democratic policies. This connection is, indeed, made explicit by Millar himself, who declares that his ultimate intention in investigating the nature of the Roman Republican system is to provide us with a way to think again about contemporary political issues and constitutional arrangements[8]. In his *The Roman Republic in Political Thought*, with a tone of considerable outrage (tempered, however, by his characteristic balance)[9], Millar refers to the reforms implemented in the 1980s by Thatcher's government as the historical context in which he had written his work. Yet, the political climate of that era did not only serve as a backdrop for Millar the scholar as he reflected on the ancient world. It was, I argue, one of the fields in which he intended to intervene through his historical work. His reading of Roman Republican politics and of its democratic interpretations in later political thought was intrinsically shaped by his opposition to the university and constitutional policies of the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s.

In seeking to respond to the Thatcher government's attacks on citizens' rights, the rule of law, and academic freedom, Fergus Millar entered into an indirect and implicit dialogue with the pervasive neo-liberal discourse of the time. The empirical historian, renowned for

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4. Zetzel, 2002 seems to regard the use of Rome in contemporary thought as a contingent prompt, if not a cover, for reiterating Millar's main point.

5. North, 2002.

6. North, 2002, p. 3.

7. North, 2002, p. 12.

8. Millar, 2002a, p. 9. In his previous book on the subject (Millar, 1998, p. 126), he had noted how Cicero had to face political challenges very similar to the ones we face nowadays and implicitly how thinking with Cicero would be beneficial to us.

9. Millar, 2002a, p. 9, «in the scale of human suffering, this is of course a minor step».

his rigorous interrogation of ancient evidence, highlighted in his studies the citizen's right to vote, the functioning of the popular assemblies, and the public character of Roman Republican politics, which he ultimately listed as one of the democracies of the ancient world. In Millar's opinion, this Republican political system should help us reflect on our own political predicament and find a way to react against the status of slavery the affects the British people: as Rousseau had noted long time ago, the English people were free only once a year, when they exercised their right to vote, and then returned to their status of slavery; the situation, Millar warns us, is not that dissimilar nowadays[10].

Millar's views

Throughout his articles and the two book length contributions on this subject[11], Millar developed his overarching thesis, articulating it over four main arguments: the public dimension of political life; the function of oratory; the working of the assemblies; and the reading of the Roman Republican political system by Polybius. I shall now briefly turn to each of them.

In the 1980s and 1990s, after focusing on the Roman Empire and the Roman Near East, to which he will return later, Millar turned his attention to the study of the Roman Republic.

This unexpected move was the outcome of two main factors: first, his tenure as Professor of Ancient History at University College London (succeeding Arnaldo Momigliano) between 1976 and 1984, second, his Balsdon fellowship at the British School at Rome in 1983. At University College London, Millar found a congenial environment of intellectual excitement; there he had the opportunity to expand his teaching, taking over the lecture course on the period from 404 to 31 BCE, previously taught by Arnaldo Momigliano, and that on Archaic and mid-Republican Rome, and to work alongside John North and Tim Cornell, whose influence he repeatedly and generously acknowledged[12]. The month he spent at the British School at Rome in 1983 provided him with the opportunity to familiarise himself closely with the spatial dimension of Rome as the centre of power: «that, I have to confess, was the first time that I came to appreciate the topography of Rome and to understand something of the significance of its public space»[13].

On this occasion, he had the opportunity to explore the topography of Rome by walking around the city with a copy of Filippo Coarelli's *La guida archeologica di Roma* in hand[14].

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10. Millar, 2002a; Rousseau *Social Contract* 3.15.5.

11. Millar, 1984 (= Millar, 2002b, pp. 109-142); Millar, 1986 (= Millar, 2002b, pp. 143-161); Millar, 1989 (= Millar, 2002b, pp. 85-108); Millar, 1995 (= Millar, 2002b, pp. 162-182); Millar, 1998; Millar, 2002a.

12. Millar, 1984 (= Millar, 2002b, pp. 109-142) in the acknowledgment: «More fundamentally, whatever I have come to understand about the Roman Republic has been learned from John North and Tim Cornell during the last eight years at University College London»; Millar, 1998, p. viii; Millar, 2002a, p. 4. See also Bowman and Goodman, 2021.

13. Millar, 1998, p. vii.

14. Millar, 1998, p. vii; Millar, 2002a, p. 8.

As he will later recognise in the prologue to the collection of his essays, «in terms of style of approach and of interpretation, the tone has been set by Filippo Coarelli, whose work is not essentially archaeological, in the sense of the excavation and analysis of objects, but interpretative, in combining very detailed topographical knowledge, and a profound sense of place, with the use of written evidence. This, above all, has brought the Roman Forum to life as never before»[15]. It is indeed the Forum that took centre stage in Millar's analysis of Roman politics: «It cannot be stressed too much or too frequently that the business of the community was communal, and was almost entirely conducted in the open air, whether we are speaking of *contiones* or of legislative assemblies; of trials before the people or of *quaestiones* conducted under the *conspectus* of the people, all in the Forum; or of *contiones* and meetings of the *comitia centuriata* in the Campus Martius»[16]. With the exception of meetings of the senate, which took place in the Curia or in some temples, Millar emphasised that all acts of the community in the Republic took place in the open air before the gaze of the people. For him, the public dimension of Roman political life with its defining feature of visibility was an important principle of Republican politics and, crucially, a vehicle for the people's power. Advocating the use of archaeological and antiquarian evidence for understanding early Rome, Millar argued that, rather than the curia, the focus should be on «the centre of power in Rome, the Rostra, the Comitium, and the Forum as a whole … It was from the Rostra that speakers would address the sovereign people, who gathered to vote originally in the Comitium, and then, after 145 B.C., in the wider Forum»[17].

The central importance of the Forum, articulated in these terms, inevitably led to the centrality of public oratory. «The necessary persuasion», Millar stated, «was applied, often in open conflict and debate, by means of speeches, which were made not only, or even primarily, in the 'sacred Senate', but in the open space of the Forum, before the ever-available crowd consisting of whoever was already there, or whoever turned up. It was this crowd which, however imperfectly, symbolized and represented the sovereignty of the Roman people»[18]. The copious Ciceronian corpus, in Millar's opinion, has not been used to its full potential; once fully appreciated in its proper context, it would show the importance of public oratory as an instrument of persuasion in the political life of the Republic[19]. Emphasising that the Roman people acted as the sovereign power, which would decide over new legislation, declaration of war and peace-treaties, the election of political and military office holders, and judgments in popular courts, Millar underlined that oratory was indeed the means by which these issues reached the people. In his opinion, the assumptions about Rome's social and political structures, mostly associated to the work of Münzer and Gelzer, «have made us deaf both to the voice of the orator and to the reactions of the crowd gathered in the Comi-

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15. Millar, 2002b, p. 7.
16. Millar, 1998, p. 212.
17. Millar, 1989, p. 141 (= Millar, 2002b, p. 89).
18. Millar, 1984b, p. 19 (= Millar, 2002b, p. 142)
19. Millar, 1998, p. iv.

tium, and Forum, on the Capitol or in the Campus Martius»[20]. As Millar himself effectively puts it, «in essence I want to place in the centre of our conception the picture of an orator addressing a crowd in the Forum; a picture of someone using the arts of rhetoric to persuade an anonymous crowd about something»[21].

This crucial interaction between members of the elite and the people, taking place from the Rostra, gave rise, in Millar's analysis, to the centrality of the *contio*: a non-decision-making assembly where matters of public relevance, from legislative proposals to military events, were presented to the audience gathered there[22]. The speeches delivered before the people, and the reactions they elicited, were, in Millar's view, compelling evidence that the Roman political system was not the closed oligarchy it had often been portrayed to be. In his *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic*, Millar stated that he had two aims: «first, to present a series of images of the Roman people assembled in the Forum, listening to the speeches in this public space, at times reacting to them violently, and of course, also voting; and second to show that the *contio* was a central element in Roman politics and that the fact that those assemblies had been ignored for decades by scholarship led to the masking of the reality of Rome's political system»[23].

The political importance of the *contiones*, which depended on various institutional aspects (such as, for example, who had the right to convene the assembly, to address the people, or to invite speakers onto the platform), was closely linked to the people's role in passing legislation that was binding on the entire community.

This emphasis on the *contiones* and the *comitia*, which confers Millar's overarching argument a distinctive constitutional character, was arguably the most crucial element of his thesis[24]. «The exclusive right of the assemblies to pass legislation», Millar argues, «is by far the strongest reason why, in purely formal terms, the Roman *res publica* has to be characterized as a democracy»[25]. Combined with the reiteration of the well-known (but often forgotten or, worse, misunderstood) fact that there is no certainty that the senate did invariably have to

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20. Millar, 1984b, p. 3. Cf. also pp. 12; 17 (= Millar 2002b, p. 112. Cfr also pp. 136; 140). On Münzer's and Gelzer's interpretation of Roman politics see most recently Barber 2022, pp. 207 ff.

21. Millar, 1986, p. 1 (= Millar, 2002b, p. 143). See also Millar, 1995, p. 109 (= Millar, 2002b, p. 178): 'the use of words, oratory, before the people, was central to the political process in Rome.'

22. Nicolet, 1976 first called for an in-depth study of the *contiones*, whose centrality in Roman political life he stated. The call was taken up by Pina Polo in 1989 and in subsequent studies, followed by numerous other works, amongst which Morstein Marx, 2004. For a review of the *status quaestionis* on the *contio* and its role in Millar's work see Pina Polo, 2012. Since then, further important contributions have appeared: Rosillo-López, 2017; Angius, 2018; Rosillo-López, 2019.

23. Millar, 1998, p. 1.

24. Although Millar, 1998, p. 210 nuances his approach ('it is of course essential to separate the emphasis on these formal features from any assessment in sociological terms of actual patterns of participation'), this has not been sufficient to satisfy his critics. On the issue of political legitimacy versus formal political right see Yakobson, 2022, p. 99.

25. Millar, 1998, p. 210.

provide its assent to legislative proposals prior to their submission to the assembly, the citizens' right to vote, in legislative assembly and elections (where candidates had to compete for popular favour) was, in Millar's opinion, the most unequivocal sign that Rome deserves to be listed among the democracies of the ancient world[26]. The significance of the Forum, Millar states when discussing the mid-Republic, «lies above all in the fact that the citizens who gathered there did so in order to exercise their sovereign powers of voting: on legislation, in non-capital jurisdiction and in (some) elections»[27].

Millar's emphasis on the institutional workings of the Republic was aligned with the reading of Polybius, whose interpretation of the Roman political system Millar rehabilitated and placed at the fore of his reading of the Roman Republic. The first article, in which Millar revisited the nature of Roman politics, was indeed dedicated to *Polybius noster*, a double entendre that indicated the centrality of Polybius to his analysis as well as the importance of the work by Frank Walbank, the preeminent British authority on Polybius, to his own understanding of this Hellenistic author[28]. There he explicitly stated that «the main purpose of this paper is to argue that Polybius was right and his modern critics are wrong. We do have to see the power of the people as one significant element in Roman politics. Polybius, it is claimed, failed to see the social structures which ensured the domination of the *nobiles*; that must mean the relationships of patronage and dependence which supposedly dominated Roman political decision making and rendered popular participation passive and nominal. But the existence of these structures is itself a modern hypothesis, which has very little support in our evidence. It is time to turn to a different hypothesis, that Polybius did not see them because they were not there»[29]. By emphasising Polybius' reading of the Roman political system (that is the reading of the Roman world by a Greek), Millar highlighted the presence of a democratic component of the Roman political system, whose importance, he argued adding a more cautionary note, should be taken seriously, even if not necessarily in absolute terms[30].

Even more importantly, by doing so, Millar situated his main thesis within the Greek analytical framework of political investigation, shaped by Aristotelian thought. As a result, his analysis placed primary emphasis on the formal structures of the *res publica* and its constitutional arrangements, whose effective functioning, in his view, had elevated Rome to a position of power on the world scene, and whose breakdown, ultimately, led to the establishment of Augustus' principate[31].

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26. Millar, 1984b, pp. 2; 10; 5-6; 8-9 (=Millar, 2002b, pp. 111; 121; 114-6; 119-20).

27. Millar, 1989, p. 141 (=Millar, 2002b, p. 89)

28. Millar, 1984b (= Millar, 2002b) in the acknowledgment states: 'this article is a tribute to Frank Walbank, to whom we all owe everything when it comes to Polybius'.

29. Millar, 1984b, p. 2 (=Millar, 2002b, p. 110) «Polybius was right» is also the evocative title of Guy Rogers' preface to the first of the three-volume collection of Millar's papers.

30. Millar, 1984b, p. 15 (=Millar, 2002b, p. 132).

31. See also Benoist, 2012.

Methodology

Millar's democratic reading of Roman Republican politics and his formulation of these arguments find their roots in his empirical approach.

If the extensive familiarization with the topography of Rome enabled a first-hand appreciation of the public dimension of Roman political life, this experience did not give rise to an analysis akin to what we are now used to calling the spatial turn, an understanding of space as a sphere where power relations and meanings are consistently and mutually forged. Rather, it fostered a deeper comprehension of the actual topography, whose full absorption was needed, Millar remarks, for it to function as evidence in the historical quest for understanding the nature of the Roman political system. The role of the evidence was one of the most distinctive traits of Millar's scholarship: «This focus on evidence shaped Millar's distinctive working methods. The foundation of his scholarship for Millar was always the discovery and analysis of ancient evidence. His preferred mode of exposition was to present and discuss ancient sources, allowing voices from the past to speak directly to the reader and he took particular pleasure in presenting data which he thought had been ignored by others»[32]. and this, of course, also included archaeological and topographical evidence. In his frequent visits to Israel, as Hannah Cotton recalls, Millar, not satisfied with conducting research in libraries, «wished to feel the very places where the events had taken place. He believed that a historian had to understand the physical/geographic context in which things transpired. He therefore spent time traveling to Jordan, Syria, Turkey, and quite a few times to Israel ("up to the snowbound peak of Mount Hermon" with the late Zvi Yavetz) before embarking on *The Roman Near East 31 BC-AD 337* (1993)»[33].

In the epilogue to the third volume of his collected papers, Millar makes a statement with a distinctly programmatic tone, emphasising the importance of immersing oneself in the physical environments of ancient sites. Reflecting on the means that have enabled a more effective engagement with the ancient world, he highlights the compilation of major corpora of inscriptions, coins, papyri, and archaeological reports, along with technological advances that allow these records and images to be integrated electronically. To these he adds «the capacity to travel relatively easily, and thus, literally, to see any (or almost any) area of the ancient world is also a fundamental transformation in itself. But perhaps even more fundamental is the capacity to 'see' indirectly, without moving from the spot, an infinity of images of documents, artefacts, art-works, buildings and landscapes… Nonetheless, at another level, nothing can substitute for the indefinable lessons of being there, of actually experiencing different environments»[34].

Immersing oneself in and absorbing the urban landscape of Rome was indeed one of the manifestations of Millar's methodological approach. As he himself put it in the famous preface to *The Emperor in the Roman World*, «To have come to the subject with an array of

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32. Bowman and Goodman, 2021.
33. Cotton, 2020.
34. Millar, 2006b, p. 490.

concepts derived from the study of other societies would merely have made even more unattainable the proper objective of a historian, to subordinate himself to the evidence and to the conceptual world of a society in the past. Moreover, to have contaminated the presentation of the evidence from the Roman empire with conceptions drawn from wider sociological studies would precisely have destroyed whatever value this book may have for the comparative study of societies and institutions»[35].

This declaration of subordination of the historian to the evidence sparked an interesting and lively debate that still carries on nowadays[36]. In his review of *The Emperor in the Roman World*, Keith Hopkins famously stated that Millar's declared objective of subordinating «himself to the ancient sources (p. xii) is unnecessarily restrictive, impossible to achieve and undesirable»[37]. Millar's response, in an exchange characterised by powerful intellectual vigour and amicable personal interaction, de facto reiterated the fundamental premises of his empirical approach, which gives primacy to a rigorous analysis of the ancient sources. If starting from the sources means being old-fashioned, Millar was content to be described as such. Nowadays, one of the many approaches to historical studies, the empirical method, is so out of fashion that it can even be regarded, as Peter Wiseman laments, as 'an eccentric one, unusual enough to be named after its most illustrious exponent as *la méthode Millar*[38]. This epithet, coined by Stephane Benoist, incapsulates Millar's renown historical approach, «the collection, analysis and organisation of a body of evidence that is never explained a priori by a conceptual framework of interpretation»[39].

The emphasis on the absence of «any preoccupations deriving from any modern intellectual system», as Benoist describes it[40], is often equated to an aversion to all modern theorical approaches tout court, as they may contaminate and distort the reading of primary evidence[41]. Illustrating the aims of *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic*, Millar states that «the first purpose of this book is to present a series of images of the Roman people: assembling in the Forum, listening to orations there, and responding to them; sometimes engaging in violence aimed at physical control of their traditional public space, and dividing into their thirty-five voting groups to vote on laws. The second purpose is to argue strongly that our whole conception of the Roman Republic has been distorted by theories that have allowed us not to see these open-air meetings (*contiones*) of the populus Romanus as central to Roman politics. This book is thus

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35. Millar, 1977, p. xii.

36. See, for example, the article by Mary Beard in the *Times Literary Supplement* (2020) and the response there by Peter Wiseman (2020).

37. Hopkins, 1978, p. 180.

38. Wiseman, 2017, p. 17.

39. Benoist, 2012, p. 12. See also Benoist, 2004 with also discussion of the debate with Keith Hopkins, and Benoist, 2017.

40. Benoist, 2017, p. 51.

41. See Millar, 1977, preface.

the last in a series of studies that have been designed to place the *populus Romanus* – or the crowd that represented it – at the centre of our picture of the Roman system»[42].

In this context, however, the rejection of theories is not tantamount to a refusal to engage with sets of ideas and abstract assumptions that might inform historical practices. As Hannah Cotton observed in her obituary of Millar, «although his technique seems to be very 'Scottish-empirical' and dry, he was not against theory. Over-arching generalizations can be made as answers to questions, so long as those making them ground them in a thorough sifting of the evidence – especially new evidence – and so long as these generalizations are presented tentatively, in the anticipation that the discovery of a new piece of evidence may prove them false»[43]. His firm opposition was against preconceived interpretive schemes, which, in Millar's opinion, did not have any bearing on the sources. As he put it in the preface to *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic*, Millar ventured into the study of Republican history, because he saw «an extraordinary gap between the way the political life of the Republic seemed often to be portrayed and analysed in the modern world and what appeared to present itself in the sources»[44].

It follows that, in the context of Roman Republican politics, the polemical adversary was the analytical scheme associated with the works of Münzer and Gelzer, which, by placing at the centre of Roman political life factions or 'parties' of *nobiles* operating through a system of *clientela*, did not leave much room for meaningful popular participation[45]. As Millar puts it, 'we could with profit abandon Gelzer's view of a homogeneous élite (or 'aristocracy' or 'nobility'?) controlling the mass of the people through a network of patronage relationships, and start all over again by looking at the Roman community and political system from the bottom up, that is starting from the broad mass of the people, settled in Rome and round about it, and progressively also further away'[46].

This rejection of a detailed study of members of the elite distanced Millar from the position held by his former supervisor Ronald Syme, whom he deeply admired. According to Syme, «noble families determined the history of the Republic, giving their names to its epochs»[47]. In his opinion, they governed by virtue of the influence of their *clientela*, the subservience to financial interests, and a widespread consensus amongst the property classes; they were the true political force and the Roman constitution, as Syme famously put it, «was a screen and a sham»[48]. «It is obvious», Millar himself notes, «that my work on Roman history has, broadly speaking, taken not merely a different direction from that of Ronald Syme, but in many respects one which runs directly counter to his. In case it needs saying, this has never been seen by

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42. Millar, 1998, p. 1.
43. Cotton, 2020.
44. Millar, 1998, p. viii.
45. Millar, 1984b, pp. 3ff. (=Millar, 2002b, p. 112ff.) See also Yakobson, 2022, p. 94.
46. Millar, 1989, p. 142 (=Millar, 2002b, p. 92). Cf. Millar, 1995, pp. 167-168.
47. Syme, 1939, p. 11-12.
48. Syme, 1939, p. 15.

me, and was never seen by him during his life, as representing any sort of personal challenge or conflict. So far as he was concerned, as he always made clear, if someone had something to say, that was fine…»[49] Syme's prosopographical approach was not congenial to Millar, not so much because, as he modestly (and implicitly disapprovingly) put it, he did not find easy to remember details of family relations and genealogies, but rather because this approach would inevitably lead to a focus on the elite's inner circle that held the monopoly of offices and power, without leaving any meaningful room to the Roman people[50].

The opposition to this interpretation of Roman Republican politics brought Millar much closer to the reading by Peter Brunt, his predecessor to the Camden chair, to whom he dedicated *The Crowd in Rome in the late Republic* (according to the original plans, the volume should have come out in 1997, on the occasion of Brunt's 80th birthday)[51]. Contrary to what it may appear *prima facie*, this dedication is more than a conventional act of piety towards his predecessor[52]. Explaining in the preface that, given the nature of *The Crowd in Rome*, in this volume he does not engage directly with the considerable amount of literature on its topic, Millar wishes to put on record his fundamental debt to the work by Claude Nicolet, in particular *Le métier du citoyen dans la Rome républicaine* and *Rome et la conquête du monde méditerranéen*, and Peter Brunt, in particular *Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic* and *The Fall of the Roman Republic and Related Essays*. However, the true innovator of the story he wishes to tell, according to Millar, is indeed Brunt: «but the book that most decisively reasserted that we must read the political history of the Republic as a story of real politics involving social and constitutional issues, not as the sterile interplay of 'factions' or *clientelae*, was of course Peter Brunt' *Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic* (1971). The categorical disproof of the idea that the evidence would support the interpretation of Republican politics in terms of these two concepts was to be reserved for two masterly chapters in his *The Fall of the Roman Republic and Related Essays* (1988). But it was still *Social Conflicts* that opened up the path to a new and better way of understanding Republican history…»[53].

If Brunt is to be credited with having disposed of Gelzer's tenet concerning the crucial importance of personal ties - the «basic axiom of the 'old orthodoxy'»[54] - then, according to Millar, even more important to understanding Roman politics was his abandonment of a political history centred on self-perpetuating aristocratic cliques, in favour of a focus on the discontent and hardship of the masses, particularly the rural plebs, who made up most of the army and whose interactions with the elite played a crucial role in the fall of the Roman Republic.

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49. Millar, 2002c, p. 15.

50. Millar, 2002c, p. 15.

51. Millar, 1998, p. x.

52. I would like to thank Antonio Duplá Ansuategui for making me think about the dedication and Michael Crawford for sharing his opinion.

53. Millar, 1998, pp. ix-x. The reference is to Brunt's chapters on *clientela* (ch. 8) and on *factio* (ch. 9) in Brunt, 1988.

54. Hölkeskamp, 2004, p. 33 (=2010, p. 36). Cf. also Millar, 1984b, p. 3 (=Millar, 2002b, p. 110), with references to Brunt, 1982 and Hopkins and Burton in Hopkins, 1983.

However, reading *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* does not transport one into a Rome à la Brunt, where social conflicts were at the centre of the historical dynamics of the time, but rather in the heart of the major historical events of the last century of the Republic, narrated through an emphasis on the people in the Forum, the persuasion practiced by the orator in *contiones*, and the citizens' exercise of voting rights in the assemblies. Contrary to Brunt's reading of the Roman Republican system - which he ultimately qualified as 'not purely oligarchic' - Millar's interpretation, much more assertive regarding the democratic component, is fundamentally constitutional in nature: «the crowd, which met in the Forum to hear speeches and to vote, was itself, once formed into voting units, the *sovereign* body, and the only one that could legislate»[55]. It was indeed the working of the Republican constitution which Syme had apostrophised as a 'screen and a sham' that, in Millar's interpretation, comes to be rehabilitated.

It follows that it is not surprising that, in the elaboration of Millar's interpretation of the Roman political system, a pivotal role was played by two Greek authors—Polybius and Aristotle—who analysed the political systems of ancient city-states within a constitutional framework[56]. The latter is the focus of two of the most intriguing chapters of *The Roman Republic in Political Thought*, where Millar engages in an exercise of counterfactual history by asking how Aristotle would have classified his contemporary Rome (ch. 2) and Cicero's Rome (ch. 7). He concludes that Aristotle (or his Aristotle) would have settled for a sort of mixed constitution not that dissimilar from that described by Polybius a century before Cicero. Aristotle «would have seen the *res publica* as a complex balance of 'aristocratic' or 'oligarchic' elements on the one hand and 'democratic' on the other»[57].

In line with Millar's preferred approach[58], his analysis includes the description of the Roman political system by other 'Greek observers.' Among them was Dio Cassius, the subject of Fergus Millar's doctoral dissertation and his first book, whose reading of the Republican political system through typically Greek constitutional lenses (exemplified, for instance, by the famous dialogue between Agrippa and Maecenas in Book 52) was congenial to a scholar formed within the Scottish empirical tradition[59].

Millar must first have encountered the works of Aristotle and Polybius during his school years, which he spent in Scotland, first at the Edinburgh Academy, where he stayed until he was 14 years old, and then at the Loretto School. Edinburgh Academy was founded as a Classical School, and Millar, who studied there between 1943 and 1949, left having won

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55. Millar, 2002a, p. 6, emphasis by the author.

56. Millar, 1984b, p. 2 (=Millar, 2002b, p. 110): 'Polybius was right and his modern critics are wrong.' Millar 2002a, p. 5: Millar laments the absence of an empirical description of the Roman political system to match the *Athēnaiōn Politeia* and of an analysis comparable to Polybius.

57. Millar, 2002a, p. 180.

58. Millar, 2006b, p. 489 n. 5, «For all that, I remain a conspicuously "non-Roman" historian of Rome, whose intellectual roots lie in the imperial period and in the Greek East»

59. Dio Cass. 52.2-40; Millar, 1964, p. 107.

the Alastair Hope Kyd Prize for Best in Classics in the Vth Classes[60]. Even if the ethos of Loretto was less academically oriented, and, in retrospect, Millar complained that the change of school had prevented him from receiving that rigorous schooling necessary to render him «what he considered a proper classicist»[61], he was still grateful for the very thorough education he had received, particularly when compared to more recent educational trends[62].

The approaches to these ancient authors, who observed, ordered, and classified the political life of the city-states they investigated through the most objectifiable data, their constitutions, were in line with the Presbyterianism pervasive in the Scottish school system and more widely in the cultural history of Scotland, bearing the fruits of a very distinctive trait of approaching ancient history[63].

Although the connection between empiricism and Protestantism is not unanimously accepted, it has been argued that the Protestant insistence on a literal, rather than allegorical, reading of the Bible supported the transition from a symbolic approach to epistemology to a literal, almost matter-of-fact, understanding of the natural world, thereby establishing the premises for the conceptual space within which empirical science could flourish[64].

It is on these intellectual assumptions, and precisely on their theological dimension, that, as Mansfeld and Ruina have shown, the nineteenth-century *Quellenforschung* came later to be elaborated[65]. This specific technique of philological scholarship, which first came to prominence in Germany, aimed at deconstructing transmitted ancient texts and establishing a relation of dependence between them both by focusing on inconsistencies and errors, and by seeking out non-preserved sources through painstaking comparative work, so as to reconstruct lost texts[66]. Its essential premise was the complete collection of observable data, all the surviving manuscripts, and was animated by the distrust in the text as preserved by ancient authorities.

In the eighteen century this form of source criticism was first applied to the study of the New Testament, which had come to be conceived as a text whose exact literal meaning had to be reconstructed. This, in turn, added an imperative sense of theological urgency to the philological practice of source criticism, and in the following century the sporadic insights into this methodology came to be worked out systematically and applied to ancient classical texts, most prominently, Homer[67].

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60. I would like to thank Andrew McMillan, the Honorary Archivist at The Edinburgh Academy for this and other information on the school curriculum in the years 1943-1949.

61. Bowman and Goodman, 2021, p. 27.

62. Morrisey, 2019.

63. See also Cotton-Palteil, 2019 who attribute Millar's wish to familiarise himself firsthand with the geographical reality and spatial dimension of those places discussed in the written sources to the «pragmatic Scottish training». See above, p. 187.

64. Harrison, 1998; Webster, 1975.

65. Mansfeld and Ruina, 1997, esp. 1 pp. 87-106, 111-120, and Mansfeld and Ruina, 2010, pp. 3-31.

66. Arena, 2018.

67. Most, 2016.

As the aim was to reconstruct ancient texts with a greater degree of reliability, questioning how they have come into being, *Quellenforschung* placed emphasis on questions of origins rather than of identity, which, in turn, generated a preoccupation with the issue of the historical reliability of the information provided by these texts[68]. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, as Most has observed, this form of source criticism came to be applied also to the reconstruction of both Greek religious texts and the history of early Rome, whose mythical stories Niebuhr was able to deconstruct by virtue of this methodology[69].

The empirical premises of this new method of 'scientific' scholarship became a feature of a wider intellectual tradition, where an empirical philosophical approach came to be embedded into wider cultural habits, becoming almost one of the distinctive traits of the intellectual and the cultural fabric of Scotland. And as anyone who met him remarks, although Millar spent most of his life in England, he considered himself a proud Scot, as he would occasionally remind his friends and colleagues at Burns Night in Wolfson College[70].

Thatcher and Neo-Liberalism

If the empirical approach ingrained in the Scottish cultural tradition may, in part, help explain the constitutional emphasis of Millar's analysis[71], it does not, in itself, clarify why certain features of Roman Republican politics are emphasised over others in his interpretation: above all, the political rights of Roman citizens; the importance of being persuaded - and thus informed - about matters relevant to the community; the question of sovereignty; the nature of law; and the power relationship between Rome, the political centre, and the city-states throughout the Italian peninsula and beyond.

This selection of arguments, as well as Millar's overarching thesis, has attracted a wide range of scholarly criticism[72]. The most pointed target the acute formalism of Millar's in-

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68. Arena, 2018, p. 644.

69. Niebuhr, 1811-12. On the connection between *Quellenforschung* and a positivistic conception of history see Iggers 1983. On the transformative function of philology that turned the study of the classics into an historical science, see Wellmon 2015, 234-261. For the innovative nature of the Enlightenment contribution to the study of ancient history and the revival of studies in classical history in the Eighteenth-century J. Moore, I. Macgregor Morris and A. J. Bayliss, 2008 with also the review by Kostas Vlassopoulos, 2009.

70. Goodman, 2019 and Sorabji, 2019.

71. Millar 2002a, p. 1: «the nature of Rome's constitutional and political order deserves both detailed political examination and (as Polybius gave it) interpretation by comparison with other known examples of political systems. The word *empirical* [emphasis by the author] needs to be stressed, for much of what the Romans themselves wrote about their own political order was polemical, ideologically loaded».

72. Amongst the most sustained critiques are Hölkeskamp, 2004; Jehne, 2006; Mouritsen, 2001 and Mouritsen, 2017, just to mention a few. For the most recent and comprehensive review of the debate, see Yakobson, 2022. In addition, the public nature of Roman politics has been strongly criticised: as anyone who lives in a country subject to a monarch knows, the visibility of the royals is one of the fundamental enablers of their existence As Queen Elizabeth II is reported to have said, «we have to be seen to be believed».

terpretation; others focus on the lack of sufficient consideration for the deeply hierarchical nature of Roman political culture; still others criticise the insufficient engagement with prior scholarship, which, in their view, obscures the lack of originality in Millar's overarching thesis – it is often noted, for instance, that even Jean Bodin claimed the people were the sovereign power in the Roman Republic.

Most interestingly, alongside the dichotomy between the notion of the sovereign *populus Romanus Quirites* and the actual crowd who met in the Forum, witnessed trials, and gathered in assemblies, scholars have observed that in his analysis of the Roman Republic in political thought, Millar focused on aspects that aligned with his own interests or agenda, while neglecting the broader interpretations and uses that later thinkers made of the Republican model[73]. The driving force of his investigation was an appreciation for what these authors had to say about the democratic features of the Roman Republic - features that, in his earlier studies, Millar had identified as being of paramount importance. As a result, the overall picture, and, more importantly, its investigative method, may appear idiosyncratic. As Millar himself recognised in the prologue to the first volume of his collected essays, «this sequence of studies of Republican politics, culminating in my book on *The Crowd in Rome*, have a very different character from most of the rest of my work»[74]. And this is certainly also attested by his last intervention on this subject, the Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures, published as *The Roman Republic in Political Thought*.

The reason behind this peculiarity, I argue, lies in the political reforms of Mrs Thatcher's government in the 1980s and in Millar's personal commitment to political justice and democratic values within and beyond university.

As he states in the introduction to *The Roman Republic in Political Thought*, in many respects an 'angry book'[75], the 1980s and the 1990s have «posed profound political and conceptual problems for anyone living in Britain»[76]. The discussion about the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh National Assembly, and the Northern Ireland Assembly, which changed the political structures of the United Kingdom, along with the complex relationship between Britain and the European Union, provoked fundamental questions about sovereignty, citizenship, and national identity[77]. «Closer to home» Millar continues, «the citizen of Britain and not least any such citizen who teaches in a university, has had ample cause to acknowledge the truth of Rousseau's conception of English government as a system of slavery punctuated by occasional moments of liberty, namely,

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73. Zetzel, 2002. Cornell, 2003, p. 353 takes the central theme of Millar 2022a to be the investigation of why the last century of the Roman Republic has been largely ignored in the western canon of political thought.

74. Millar, 2002c, p. 20.

75. Zetzel, 2002; Cornell, 2003, p. 353.

76. Millar, 2002a, p. 9. The whole book is punctuated by attacks against the government presented as undemocratic, pp. 8-10; 124, 145.

77. Millar, 2002a, p. 9.

at elections»[78]. The tyrannical behaviour of Parliamentary majority, which abolished London local authority (the Greater London Council) and retroactively abolished tenure in British universities (however small steps in the scale of human suffering, as Millar puts it) were an affront to freedom, both in its wider instantiation of the citizens' political freedom and in its more circumscribed form of the intellectual freedom of academics. Nor did his passion and political commitment waver after retirement in 2002: in a letter to the editor of *The Times* in 2013, attacking the government's university policies, he famously wrote that «a physics lecturer called Einstein, who just thought about the Universe, would risk being sacked because he brought in no grants»[79]. Alongside the removal of the tenure, which may force academics to toe whatever the current line of the establishment to avoid losing their jobs, Millar's main target was the shift from direct funding to funding granted for specific research projects. Since the financial benefits of the overheads brought in by research grants were (and still are) of immense value for departments and universities, British universities, Millar laments, now formulate their research agenda to gain the funding and not the other way around. However, «worse still», Millar continues to the Editor of *The Times*, «the Research Assessment Exercise, or now 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF) works on very short cycles. The result is to render serious, long-term research, whose results are by definition uncertain, impossible. If you can confidently predict your results in five years' time (and, as now required, also predict the 'impact'), then it is not research».

The battles against the now REF, on the one hand, and in support of academic freedom, on the other, had been two longstanding causes to which Millar directed his energy. When the RAE (now REF) was first introduced in 1986, Millar thought that it could have been successfully sabotaged and ultimately defeated if Oxford and Cambridge had simply refused to participate – something that was never attempted.

On the other hand, while at University College London, Millar, together with John North and others, became actively involved in the Council for Academic Autonomy, of which he also became chair. This too did not bear any fruit, «we organised and publicised meeting after meeting»; North recalls, «it was a great effort, but too few supporters ever rallied to the cause. Political interference won the day then and still does today»[80].

As Millar became increasingly dissatisfied with the proliferation of bureaucratic obstacles to the effective running of universities, and with the gradual encroachment on academic autonomy, he frequently expressed his frustration in letters to political and university authorities. «One Oxford vice-chancellor remarked», Alan Bowman recalls, «that he felt his day had not started properly unless his mailbag contained at least one grumpy letter from him»[81].

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78. Millar, 2002a, p. 9. Rousseau *Social Contract*, 3.15.5.

79. Millar, 2013.

80. North, 2019, p. 9, a tribute delivered at a Memorial Event in honour of Fergus Millar in the Sheldonian Theatre on 1st December 2019.

81. Bowman, 2019.

The conservative reforms, against which Millar mounted a firm, but ultimately unsuccessful, opposition, were in line with, if not the direct product of, the neo-liberal approach advocated by thinkers like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Although Thatcherite political choices were profoundly influenced, albeit not directly dictated, by neo-liberal discourses of the 1970s and 1980s[82], it is exceptionally revealing that Mrs Thatcher and many of her close supporters made a conscious choice to connect their own policies with neo-liberal thinking and, in particular, with the ideas of Hayek. Famous is the story of Thatcher trying to end a debate on Conservative Party policy by slamming a copy of Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty*, and declaring «this is what we believe»[83]. In her Keith Joseph Memorial Lecture, Thatcher stated that Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* had had a great effect on her, and even more so when, following Keith Joseph's suggestion, she delved into his work more in depth[84]. Alongside open declarations of direct intellectual dependency during a BBC interview[85], many of Thatcher's more programmatic statements, as Green has observed, are not only cast in Hayekian language, but also informed by many of Hayek's conceptualisations concerning markets, liberty, and the rule of law[86].

When discussing university tenure, Robin Nicholson, Thatcher's chief scientific adviser in the mid-1980s, who shared the same ideological convictions as Thatcher, wrote to Keith Joseph that «one of the problems for universities … has been their inflexibility in retraining/hiring/losing the appropriate staff». He added: «the tenure system means that universities can simply not respond in the way a business can to changes in demand for teaching and research»[87]. In essence, in his view, the problem with university tenure was that it acted as a hindrance to the functioning of the university according to market logic. Similarly, two years later, in 1984, during a discussion on Defence Research and Development, Nicholson argued that the system of government-funded research and industrial development – which came, in his words, «at no risk to the company» – should be replaced by «a more normal commercial arrangement, where Government buys defence goods at a price which allows the manufacturer to carry out and pay for his own»[88].

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82. The relationship between Thatcher's policies and neo-liberalism has been the subject of extended debate, whose positions range from a direct correlation to complete independence. For a review of these positions see Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2012.

83. Feser, 2007, p. 1.

84. Thatcher, 1996; see also Ead. 1978.

85. Interview with *BBC Radio 3*, 17 Dec. 1985: «I find that the conservatism which I follow does have some things in common with what Professor Hayek was preaching and also has some things in common with what you called old-fashioned Liberals. Let me just quote one, to whom I am devoted, John Stuart Mill …. on liberty. "A nation that dwarfs its citizens will find that with small men it can accomplish no great thing" ».

86. Green, 2002, pp. 255-256.

87. T 471/45. Nicholson to Joseph, 17 December 1982, cited by Agar, 2019, pp. 44-45.

88. PREM 19/1339. Nicholson to Barclay, 4 September 1984, cited by Agar, 2019, p. 45.

The principle behind these university policies – which Millar deplored and opposed – was that they aimed to transform universities into business-like corporations. The introduction of the RAE/REF, as Collini noted, distorted the balance between research and teaching, leading to a flood of standardised publications that were not always necessary, and aimed at measuring and rewarding the social and economic impact of academic research. It follows that, «in the process, the universities have progressively come to resemble business corporations, whose internal governance they have sought to emulate, with the consequent escalation in administration and decline in morale»[89].

Business-based model of universities was meant to foster an entrepreneurial free spirit and a sense of individual responsibility, values that Thatcher firmly believed should form the foundation of society's renewal[90]. According to the neo-liberal way of conceiving liberty as the absence of interference to compete in the market place, the universities would no longer have «been subordinated to the new funding councils but have been freed to pursue their own enterprising destinies».

However, there was no doubt in Millar's view that the 1988 Education Reform Act, which abolished the system of tenure, removed both academic freedom and academic autonomy. The tenure system comprised the right to some form of job security, which required the successful completion of a probationary period of employment and a peer-reviewed assessment of academic accomplishments. Tenure could be removed from those members of staff who did not comply with professional standards. However, while obtaining tenure depended on the probationer demonstrating their ability and competence, the removal of tenure required the university to be able to show due cause[91]. With the abolition of this system, Millar and the other members of the Council for Academic Autonomy argued that academic freedom - the freedom to question received wisdom or to put forward controversial opinions - was effectively removed. They also contended that universities lost their right to self-governance, which included the ability to speak freely about the running of the institution, to participate in decision-making processes, and to appoint or dismiss individuals from positions of authority within the university. As Bogdanor notes, it is not a coincidence that at the beginning of the 1980s issues concerning civil liberties had come to play a much more prominent role in the constitutional debates of the time[92]. Equally, the introduction of a research assessment system in higher education, used to determine the allocation of funding to UK universities, hindered, in Millar's view, the autonomy of university researchers. They are now expected to produce research outcomes within timeframes set by the government, rather than according to the inherent demands of their work. At the same time, they must

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89. Collini, 2012, p. 183.
90. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2012. See also Bogdanor, 1989, p. 91; Scott, 1989, pp. 210-211.
91. Jasper, 1990; De George, 2003; Lerch, Frank and Schofer, 2024.
92. Bogdanor, 1989, p. 136.

devote a disproportionate amount of time and energy to aligning their research agendas with those of funding bodies, which often limit support to so-called 'national priorities'[93].

In response to the relentless encroachment on universities by the government, under the guise of market reform and inspired by neo-liberal thinking, Millar, through his analysis of Roman Republican politics, a dialectical dialogue with the governments of the 1980s and 1990s, and with the neo-liberal ideology that, albeit indirectly, informed their policies. Opposing the interference in the running of the university and the direct attacks on academic freedom by the government of his time, in his investigation of Roman politics, Millar emphasised the ability of the Roman people to voice their opinion in the *contiones*, the people's power implicit in the elite's need to persuade them, their right to cast their vote to elect their magistrates and, most importantly, to pass decisions binding on all. Lamenting the contemporary state of affairs, Millar claims that «at all levels, from the future of the national state to the nature of law, to the possibility of a written constitution, to the positive and negative freedom of the individual citizen, a reconsideration of the principles and structures is urgently needed. In that context, there may be benefits in looking again at a variety of historical examples, even distant, alien, and much misunderstood ones like the Roman Republic»[94].

Thinking about Rome and its political system, according to Millar, can help us think about our political predicament. In this view, studying Roman Republican politics is not an intellectual exercise end in itself, but could function as a direct intervention in the way we think and, ultimately, operate in the world we inhabit. In an interesting turn, one that brings Fergus Millar, the Oxford Camden Professor of Ancient History, closer to Quentin Skinner, the Cambridge Regius Professor of History[95], the study of ancient Republican politics comes to serve as a foil, revealing the historical alternatives that could have been taken (but were not) and casting into sharper relief the consequences of those that have been chosen. This move, in Millar's view, is justified by two important features that should, more often, be taken into account: first, that contrary to appearances, ancient Rome is far less chronologically remote than usually assumed; second, considering its primary role in the formation of so-called 'Western civilisation', its proximity to us is much more cogently meaningful and our relationship much closer than usually appreciated[96].

Lamenting that, nowadays, «academic citizenship and academic democracy are completely dead», as every academic goes about their own business without considering

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93. Collini, 2012, p. 196.

94. Millar, 2002a, p. 10. Previously, in *The Crowd in Rome* (Millar, 1998, p. 226) he had concluded the book by stating: «In stressing the power of oratory, in acknowledging the force of the crowd, in asking how far the institutions visible in the Forum could serve to restrain popular feelings, and in raising the question of what in reality distinguished Rome from a Greek democracy, Cicero was touching on fundamental problems about the nature of Roman politics. These are questions which still demand an answer from us».

95. Millar, 2002a, pp. 2-3 acknowledges his debt to Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit, the most authoritative proposers of the renewal of Republican political thought in our time.

96. See Millar, 2002c, pp. 1-2. See also Benoist, 2004, p. 374, n.11 who contrasts Millar's position with Veyne's perspective on the ancients as exotic.

common causes of wider importance, and reflecting on the poor state of democracy in the contemporary nation-state, Millar resolutely affirms that «a Republic in which elected office-holders had to function in public, had to persuade those gathered in the Forum (who themselves represented, however imperfectly, the vastly greater total of citizens), and could not pass legislation without the votes of the people, would still deserve a place among the objects of political thought»[97].

Conclusion

His tenure of the Balsdon fellowship at the British School at Rome provided Millar with the opportunity to appreciate in full the topography of Rome, and, in particular, the nature of the Forum, the public space centre of Roman political life. In line with his empirical approach, this experience provided him with the occasion to think about the Roman political system and made him appreciate the dichotomy between the picture provided by the sources of the Republican political system and the description elaborated by modern scholarly accounts. The aim of his study of Republican politics was, therefore, twofold: on the one hand, to dismantle the picture of a political life dominated by a closed nobility who operated through their *clientelae*; and on the other, to re-establish the centrality of the Roman people, who assembled in the Forum, expressed their opinions, at times violently, and voted in electoral and legislative assemblies.

However, through his historical analysis, Millar, far from being an ivory tower scholar[98], also intervened in the political debate of his time by opposing (in particular) the university policies of the time as well as showing that Rome could offer us an alternative way to think about how we could organise ourselves as a community.

It follows that the policies to which Millar explicitly refers in *The Roman Republic in Political Thought* – a work in which a convergence of research and political experiences that began in the early 1980s culminated – do not merely serve as the generic historical context of his writing, nor as a contingent pretext for undertaking these studies. Rather, alongside scholarly approaches he regarded as misconceived, they operated as a foil within his historical analysis.

The empirical historian who approached the ancient sources free from external preconceptions, «allowing voices from the past to speak directly to the reader»[99], found his analysis deeply shaped by his opposition to government policies and the neo-liberal discourse that underpinned them.

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97. Millar, 2002a, p. 182.

98. As Benoist (2012, p. 2) puts it « Le savant n'est pas, en ce qui le concerne, l'érudit enfermé dans les bâtiments médiévaux de Brasenose College, mais bien celui qui prit des positions politiques courageuses aux moments opportuns, face aux tentatives de déstabilisation du monde universitaire sous le gouvernement de Margaret Thatcher, mais également face aux comportements néo-libéraux du New Labour ».

99. Bowman and Goodman, 2020, p. 43. See also Benoist, 2004.

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