

# Before the Fall of the Roman Republic, Income Inequality and Xenophobia Threatened Its Foundations

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Long before Julius Caesar declared himself dictator for life in 44 B.C., essentially spelling the beginning of the end to the Roman Republic, trouble was brewing in the halls of power.

The warning signs were there. Politicians such as Tiberius Gracchus and Gaius Gracchus (together known as the Gracchi brothers) were thwarted from instituting a series of populist reforms in the 100s B.C., then murdered by their fellow senators. Old and unwritten codes of conduct, known as the *mos maiorum*, gave way as senators struggled for power. A general known as Sulla marched his army on Rome in 87 B.C., starting a civil war to prevent his political opponent from remaining in power. Yet none of these events have become as indelibly seared into Western memory as Caesar's rise to power or sudden downfall, his murder in 44 B.C.

“For whatever reason, nobody ever stops and says, if it was this bad by the 40s BC, what was it that started to go wrong for the Republic?” says Mike Duncan, writer and podcast host of *The History of Rome and Revolutions*. “Most people have been jumping into the story of the Late Republic in the third act, without any real comprehension of what started to go wrong for the Romans in the 130s and 120s BC.”

This was the question Duncan wanted to examine in his new book, *The Storm Before the Storm: The Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic*. To learn more about the events that preceded the fall of the Republic, and what lessons the modern world can learn from it, Smithsonian.com spoke with Duncan.

## *The Storm Before the Storm: The Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic*

Chronicling the years 146-78 BC, Duncan dives into the lives of Roman politicians like Marius, Sulla, and the Gracchi brothers, who set dangerous new precedents that would start the Republic on the road to destruction and provide a stark warning about what can happen to a civilization that has lost its way.

*What inspired you to look into this story?*

When I was doing the History of Rome [podcast], so many people asked me, ‘Is the United States Rome? Are we following a similar trajectory?’ If you start to do some comparisons between the rise and development of the U.S. and rise and development of Rome, you do wind up in this same place. The United States emerging from the Cold War has some analogous parts to where Rome was after they defeated Carthage [in 146 B.C.]. This period was a wide-open field to fill a gap in our knowledge.

*One topic you describe at length is economic inequality between citizens of Rome. How did that come about?*

After Rome conquers Carthage, and after they decide to annex Greece, and after they conquer Spain and acquire all the silver mines, you have wealth on an unprecedented scale coming into Rome. The flood of wealth was making the richest of the rich Romans wealthier than would've been imaginable even a couple

generations earlier. You're talking literally 300,000 gold pieces coming back with the Legions. All of this is being concentrated in the hands of the senatorial elite, they're the consuls and the generals, so they think it's natural that it all accumulates in their hands.

At the same time, these wars of conquest were making the poor quite a bit poorer. Roman citizens were being hauled off to Spain or Greece, leaving for tours that would go on for three to five years a stretch. While they were gone, their farms in Italy would fall into disrepair. The rich started buying up big plots of land. In the 130s and 140s you have this process of dispossession, where the poorer Romans are being bought out and are no longer small citizen owners. They're going to be tenant owners or sharecroppers and it has a really corrosive effect on the traditional ways of economic life and political life. As a result, you see this skyrocketing economic inequality.

*Do you see parallels between land ownership in Rome and in the modern United States?*

In the Roman experience, this is the beginning of a 100-year-long process of Italy going from being a patchwork of smaller farms with some large estates to nothing but sprawling, commercially-oriented estates. And yes, the United States is continuing to go through a very similar process. At the founding of our republic, everybody's a farmer, and now everything is owned by what, Monsanto?

Moving beyond just strictly agricultural companies, large American corporations are now employing more and more people. There seems to be this move away from people owning and operating their own establishments, and they're instead being consumed by large entities. You're talking about the Amazons of the world swallowing up so much of the market share, it just doesn't pay to be a clerk in a bookstore or own a bookstore, you end up being a guy working in a warehouse, and it's not as good of a job.

*Could the Roman senators have done anything to prevent land being consolidated in the hands of the few?*

It doesn't really feel like they could've arrested the process. Fifteen years after some land bill, you'd ask, "Who has the land? The poor?" No, they all just got bought up again. There never was a good political solution to it. The problem of these small citizen farmers was not solved until 100 years later when they simply ceased to exist.

*If the Senate couldn't solve that one problem, could they have prevented the end of the Republic?*

There were things that could have been done to arrest the political collapse. People felt like the state was no longer working for them, that the Assemblies and Senate weren't passing laws for the benefit of anyone but a small group of elites. This resentment was threatening the legitimacy of the Republic in the eyes of many citizens.

Even if they couldn't necessarily stop the acquisition of these huge properties or estates, there were other reforms they could've made to transition people from one version of economic reality to another: providing free grain for the cities, providing jobs building roads, trying to find places for these people to do economically meaningful work that's going to allow them to make enough to support their families.

*So why didn't they take action and make those reforms?*

The Gracchi wanted to reform the Republican system, but they also wanted to use those issues—economic inequality, grain for the plebs—to acquire political power for themselves. [Rival senators] believed this was going to be terrible. If the Gracchi had been able to pass all of these popular pieces of legislation, they

would have had more influence, and that was something their political rivals could not abide by. It created a desire to defeat the Gracchi above all. Old rules of conduct didn't matter, unspoken norms weren't as important as simply stopping the Gracchi from getting a win.

When Tiberius Gracchus introduced the Lex Agraria [to redistribute land back to poorer citizens], the Senate hired a tribune to veto it. This had never happened before. A tribune was supposed to be a defender of the people, and this was a popular bill. If it came to a vote, it was going to pass. It was not illegal what he was doing, but it was completely unprecedented, and this led Tiberius Gracchus to respond with his own measures, saying, "I'm going to put my seal on the state treasury so no business can be transacted." [Tiberius was later murdered by the senators.] The issues themselves almost ceased to be as important as making sure your political rival didn't get a victory.

This is really what crippled the Senate. It's 100 years of focusing on internal power dynamics instead of enlightened reform that caused the whole Republic to collapse.

*When did this in-fighting start to threaten the republic?*

It starts to fail after the imperial triumphs [over rival nations]. With Rome being the most powerful nation in the Mediterranean world, and senatorial families controlling unimaginable wealth, there wasn't any kind of foreign check on their behavior. There was no threat making the Senate collectively say, "We need to stay together and can't let our internal fights get out of hand because that will leave us weak in the face of our enemies." They didn't have that existential fear anymore.

The other big thing is, with a new style of popular politics, you start having way more confrontations. Roman politics until about 146 B.C. was built upon consensus. By the period of my book, it becomes a politics of conflict. People start ignoring the old unspoken ways of doing business and the whole thing rolled down hill till it was warlords crashing into each other.

*Another big issue was citizenship. How did the Romans decide who could be Romans?*

When Rome conquered Italy in the 300s B.C., they would not annex that city into the Roman state and make the citizens Roman citizens or even subjects. A peace treaty would be signed, and that city would become an ally of Rome. Italy was a confederation, a protectorate under Roman auspices. You couldn't even call them second-class citizens because they were not citizens at all, they were merely allies. For a couple hundred years this was a pretty good deal, they didn't have to pay much in taxes and were allowed to govern themselves. After Rome hits this imperial triumph phase, they started looking at Roman citizenship as something they fervently desired. The Italians are facing the same stresses of economic inequality but they don't even have a vote, they can't run for office, they have no political voice at all, so they start to agitate for citizenship.

For almost 50 years the Romans steadfastly refuse to let this happen. The Senate and the lower-class plebs, it was one of the few things that united them. They might be pissed at each other, but they would join together against Italians.

Finally, in the late 90s B.C., there was one last push [for Italians to be citizens] and the guy who put it forward wound up getting murdered. The Italians erupted in insurrection. Most insurrections are people trying to break away from some power—the Confederacy tries to break away from the United States, the American colonies try to break away from the British—and the weird thing about the Social War is the Italians are trying to fight their way into the Roman system.

The ultimate consequences of allowing the Italians to become full Roman citizens was nothing. There were no consequences. Rome just became Italy and everybody thrived, and they only did it after this hugely destructive civil war that almost destroyed the Republic right then and there.

*Are there any lessons the United States can take from Rome?*

Rome winds up existing for 1000 years as a civilization. When the Republic falls you're at about the halfway point. One of the reasons the Romans were so successful and why their empire did continue to grow was because of how well they managed to integrate new groups. The Romans were always successful when they integrated a new group, and always facing destruction and ruin when they tried to resist bringing new people in. The Social War [against the Italians] is a great early example. If you have a group of people that are going to be part of your civilization and act as soldiers in your army, you need to invite them into full participation in the system. If you try to resist, all that you're going to do is make them mad at you.

The other biggie is if people's way of life is being disrupted, and things are becoming worse for them at the same time that this tiny clique of elites are making out like bandits, that creates a lot of resentful energy. If you ignore genuine reformers, you leave the field open for cynical demagogues. They're going to use that resentful energy not to answer people's problems, but for their own personal advantage. They make themselves powerful by exploiting people's fears, their grief, their anger. They say, "I know who to blame for all your problems, it's my personal enemies!"

*What do you hope readers come away from the book with?*

I jokingly said when I started writing, that I wanted people to come out of it with a general feeling of unease about what's going on in the United States and in the West generally. To emerge from reading the book, go back to flipping on the news, and think, "This is not good." Whatever your political persuasion, I think we can all agree that politics in the United States is becoming fairly toxic and if we're not careful we can wind up going the way of the Roman Republic. In history, we often go from shouting at each other to shooting each other—or in the olden days stabbing each other with swords.

I hope they read it as an example of a time in history when people didn't pay attention to a lot of warning signs. If you ignore it, you risk the whole thing collapsing into civil war and a military dictatorship. I would like to avoid this. If people say, "Maybe this is starting to look like the beginning of the end," then maybe we can do some things to avoid the fate of the Roman Republic.