

On Tiberius Gracchus

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The conflict between rich and poor in the late Republic was expressed by means of the struggle over public lands. Public lands—including vast acreages taken over from Italian allies of Hannibal at the end of the third century—had been encroached upon by rich estates; one effect of this was the reduction in number of the smallholding farmer, once the backbone of the Roman army.

(One side effect of this shortfall in farmer-soldiers was an increasing reliance on Italian allied troops levied by tribute; as Rome fought more and bloodier wars this dependence exacerbated tensions with the allies, leading to the Social War.)

Tiberius Gracchus and his brother Gaius pushed relentlessly for land reform, in part to improve Rome's armies, but the elite painted them as ambitious demagogues. Both were killed, marking the beginning of the end of the Republic.

[For 134-133 BCE]: As the Romans conquered the Italian tribes, one after another, in war, they seized part of the lands and founded towns there, or placed colonies of their own in those already established, and used them as garrisons. They allotted the cultivated part of the land obtained through war, to settlers, or rented or sold it. Since they had not time to assign the part which lay waste by the war, and this was usually the greater portion, they issued a proclamation that for the time being any who cared to work it could do so for a share of the annual produce, a tenth part of the grain and a fifth of the fruit. A part of the animals, both of the oxen and sheep was exacted from those keeping herds. They did this to increase the Italian peoples, considered the hardest working of races, in order to have plenty of supporters at home. But the very opposite result followed; for the wealthy, getting hold of most of the unassigned lands, and being encouraged through the length of time elapsed to think that they would never be ousted, and adding, part by purchase and part by violence, the little farms of their poor neighbors to their possessions, came to work great districts instead of one estate, using to this end slaves as laborers and herders, because free laborers might be drafted from agriculture into the army. The mere possession of slaves brought them great profit through the number of their children, which increased because they were absolved from service in the wars. Thus the powerful citizens became immensely wealthy and the slave class all over the country multiplied, while the Italian race decreased in numbers and vigor, held down as they were by poverty, taxes, and military service. If they had any rest from these burdens, they wasted

their time in idleness, because the land was in the hands of the wealthy, who used slaves instead of free laborers.

Because of these facts the people began to fear that they should no longer have enough Italian allies, and that the state itself would be imperiled by such great numbers of slaves. Not seeing any cure for the trouble, as it was not practicable nor entirely fair to dispossess men of their possessions so long occupied, including their own trees, buildings and improvements, a decree was at one time got through by the efforts of the tribunes that no one should hold more than five hundred jugera,¹ or graze more than a hundred cattle or five hundred sheep upon it. To make sure the law was observed, it was provided, also, that there should be a stated number of freemen employed on the lands, whose duty it should be to watch and report what took place. Those holding lands under the law were compelled to make oath to obey it, and penalties were provided against breaking it. It was thought that the surplus land would soon be subdivided amongst the poor in small lots, but there was not the slightest respect shown for the law or the oaths. The few that seemed to give some heed to them fraudulently made over their lands to their relatives, but most paid no attention to the law whatsoever.

At last Ti. Sempronius Gracchus, an eminent man, ambitious for honor, a forceful orator, and for these causes well known to everybody, made an eloquent speech, while tribune, on the subject of the Italian race, deploring that a people so warlike, and related in descent to the Romans, were gradually sinking into pauperism and decreasing in numbers, with no hope of betterment. He denounced the swarm of slaves as useless in war and faithless to their masters, and instanced the recent disaster brought upon the owners in Sicily by their slaves, where the requirements of agriculture had greatly increased their number. He called to mind, also, the war waged by the Romans against the slaves, a war neither trivial nor short, but long drawn but long drawn out and filled with misfortunes and perils. After this address he once more brought forward the law providing that no one should hold more than five hundred jugera of the public land, but he made this addition to the previous law, that the sons of the present occupants might each hold half as large an allotment and that the surplus land should be divided among the poor by triumvirs, that were to be changed yearly.

This greatly vexed the wealthy, because, on account of the triumvirs, they could no longer pass by the law as they had done before; nor could they purchase the lands allotted to others, because Gracchus had provided against this by prohibiting sales. They gathered into groups, complaining and charging the poor with seizing the results of their cultivation,

¹ About three hundred acres.

their vineyards, and their houses. Some said they had paid their neighbors the price of the land; were they to lose their money as well as the land? Others declared that the graves of their fathers were in the ground that had been assigned to them in the partition of their family estate. Others stated that their wives' dowries had been spent on the land or that it had been given to their own daughters as such. Loaners of money could show advances made on this security. All sorts of complaints and denunciations were heard at the same time. On the other hand rose the wails of the poor, crying that they had been reduced from plenty to the lowest pauperism and from that to enforced lack of offspring, because they could not support children. They enumerated the services they had rendered in war, by which this very land had been obtained, and were indignant at being despoiled of their part of the public property. They upbraided the wealthy for using slaves, who were always faithless and sulky, and for that cause useless in war, in the place of freemen, citizens and men at arms. While these classes were complaining and reproaching each other, a vast multitude, consisting of colonists or dwellers in the free cities, or others in some way interested in the lands and with similar fears, thronged into town and sided with their respective parties. Angry at each other, they gathered in riotous crowds, made bold by numbers, and, waiting for the new law, tried in every way, some to obstruct its passage and others to carry it. Party spirit in addition to individual interest stimulated both sides in the preparation against each other which they were making for the voting day.

What Gracchus sought in framing the law was the increase, not of wealth, but of serviceable population. He was highly enthused with the usefulness of the proposal and, believing that nothing more beneficial or desirable could happen to Italy, he attached no weight to the difficulties involved. When the time came for voting he brought forward at some length many other arguments, asking whether it was not right to allot among the common people what belonged to them in common, whether a citizen did not always deserve more concern than a slave, whether a man that fought in the army was not more serviceable than one that did not, and whether one that had an interest in the country was not the surer to be faithful to the public weal. He did not tarry long on this contrast between freemen and slaves, which he thought debasing, but plunged at once into an outline of their hopes and fears for the state, saying that the Romans had obtained most of their lands by conquest and that they had the opportunities of acquiring the rest of the inhabitable world, but now the question most doubtful of all was whether, with plenty of warlike men, they should conquer the rest, or whether, through their internal dissensions and weaknesses, their foes should deprive them of what they already had. After enlarging upon the honor and wealth on one side and the peril and need of apprehension on the other, he warned the rich to reflect, and said that for the accomplishment of such hopes they should be willing to give this very land as a gift, if need be, to men that would bring up offspring, and not, by wrangling over trivial matters, lose sight of the more important ones—especially since they were getting full pay for the labor they had expended in the clear title to five hundred jugera of land, in a high state of cultivation, to

each of them without cost, and half as much again for each son to those that had them. After saying much else in the same strain and getting the poor aroused, as well as those that were influenced by reason rather than the hope of profit, he commanded the clerk to read the measure proposed.

Another tribune, M. Octavius, who had been prevailed on by those holding land to interpose his veto (for among the Romans the veto of the tribune always had absolute authority), ordered the clerk to be silent. Upon this Gracchus rebuked him sternly and adjourned the meeting to the next day. This time he placed quite a force around, as if to coerce Octavius against his will, and with threats bade the clerk read the measure proposed to the assemblage. He began reading, but upon Octavius again interposing his veto, stopped. Then the tribunes commenced quarreling with each other, and something of an uproar broke forth from among the people. The influential citizens begged the tribunes to lay their disagreements before the senate for arbitration. Gracchus acted upon this advice, thinking the measure to be agreeable to all patriotic people, and hurried to the senate. As he found only a few supporters there, and was reproached by the wealthy, he rushed back to the forum and announced that he would take a vote in the assembly on the following day upon the law, and also upon the tenor of office of Octavius, to find out whether a tribune of the plebs, acting contrary to the welfare of the plebs, could continue to retain his magistracy.

So he did, and when Octavius, not at all intimidated, again put in his veto, Gracchus had the pebbles distributed to vote on him first. As the first tribe voted to impeach Octavius, Gracchus, turning to him, pleaded with him to withdraw his veto. As he would not do so, the votes of the other tribes were taken. At that time there were thirty-five tribes. The seventeen voting first wrathfully approved the measure. If the eighteenth should do likewise it would constitute a majority. Once more in full view of the people Gracchus passionately begged Octavius, in his great jeopardy, not to obstruct this most devout work, so beneficial to all Italy, and not to dash down the hopes so deeply grounded among the people, whose wishes he ought, as a tribune, the rather to share in, and not to run the risk of losing his office by public impeachment. Upon saying this he called the gods to witness that he did not of his own accord do any injury to his colleague, but, as Octavius was still firm, he continued taking the vote, and Octavius was thereupon reduced to the rank of private citizen and stole away unnoticed.

Q. Mummius was elected tribune in his stead and the agrarian law was passed. The three men first appointed to allot the land were Gracchus himself, the framer of the measure, his brother of the same name, and his father-in-law, Ap. Claudius, for the people were still afraid that the law might not be executed unless Gracchus, with all his family, should be placed at the helm. Gracchus became enormously popular on account of the law and was attended home by the mass of the people, as if he were the founder, not merely of one city or people, but of all the states of Italy. After this the victors returned to the fields whence they had journeyed to conduct the affair, while the defeated ones stayed in the city and went over the subject with one another, feeling incensed and declaring that when

Gracchus became a private citizen he would be made sorry that he had dishonored the sacred and inviolable office of tribune and had opened the way to such a flood of strife in Italy.

At the coming of summer the announcement of the election of tribunes was made, and as the day for voting drew near, it was clear that the wealthy were vigorously aiding the election of those most opposed to Gracchus. Fearing that misfortune would come upon him if he should not be re-elected for the next year, Gracchus sent to his friends in the fields to attend the assembly, but as their time was taken up with the harvest he was forced, when the day fixed for the voting was at hand, to depend upon the plebeians of the city. So he went about canvassing each one to elect him tribune for the next year, on account of the jeopardy he had put himself in on their account. When the voting commenced, the first two tribes went for Gracchus. The wealthy held that it was not constitutional for a man to hold the office twice in succession. The tribune, Rubrius, who had been selected by lot to preside over the comitia, was in doubt upon the question, and Mummius, who had been elected instead of Octavius, besought him to hand the assembly over to his charge. So he did, but the other tribunes objected that the chairmanship should be decided by lot, maintaining that when Rubrius, who had been selected in that way, relinquished it, the casting of lots ought to be done all over again. Since there was a deal of wrangling on this point, Gracchus, who was being bested, postponed the election until the next day. In deep despondency he robed himself in black, though still in office, and led his son about the forum, introducing him to each man and putting him in their care, as if he himself were about to die at the hands of his foes.

The poor were afflicted with great grief, and justly so, both on account of themselves, for they thought that they would no longer dwell in a free state under equitable laws, but were to be reduced to slavery by the rich, and on account of Gracchus personally, who had brought upon himself such peril for their sakes. Therefore, they all escorted him with lamentations to his home at nighttime, and bade him take heart for the next day. Gracchus gathered courage, and calling together his friends before daylight, imparted to them a sign to be made for a resort to violence. Then he placed himself in the temple on the Capitoline hill, where the election was to be held, and put himself in the middle of the comitia. As he was checked by the other tribunes and by the wealthy, who would not permit the votes to be taken on this question, he gave the sign. A sudden uproar arose from those who saw it and the resort to arms followed. Part of the faction of Gracchus took their stand about him like a body-guard. Others that had girded themselves, laid hold of the fasces and staves in the hands of lictors and

shattered them into pieces. The rich were thrown out of the comitia with so much tumult and so many wounds that the tribunes rushed from their seats in consternation, and the priests closed the doors of the temple. Many ran hither and thither and cast wild reports abroad. Some said that Gracchus had impeached all the other tribunes and this was given credence because none of them were in sight. Others said that he had declared himself tribune for the next year without a vote.

Under these conditions the senate came together at the Temple of Fides [Faith]. It is astounding to me that they never thought of electing a dictator in this crisis, though they had often been defended by the rule of an absolute magistrate amid such periods of danger. Though this expedient had been found very serviceable in ancient times, few thought of it either then or afterwards. After coming to the decision they arrived at, they marched to the Capitol, the high priest, Cornelius Scipio Nasica, at their head, crying out in a sonorous voice, "Let those who would save the state follow me." He gathered the border of his toga around his head, either to attract a larger crowd to follow him by his peculiar appearance, or to make for himself, as it were, a helmet as a signal for violence to the spectators, or to hide from the gods what he was about to do. When he came to the temple and stepped forward against the adherents of Gracchus, they yielded to the prestige of so eminent a citizen, for they saw the senate behind him. The senators wrenched clubs from the very hands of the followers of Gracchus, or with pieces of torn-up benches or other things that had been brought for the use of the comitia, began mauling them and in hot pursuit, drove them over the precipice. In the riot many followers of Gracchus were killed and Gracchus himself, being seized near the temple, was slain at the door near the statues of the kings. All the corpses were thrown into the Tiber at night.

Thus died on the Capitol and while still tribune, Ti. Gracchus, the son of the Gracchus who was twice consul and of Cornelia, the daughter of the Scipio that conquered Carthage. He lost his life because he followed up an excellent plan in too lawless a way. This awful occurrence, the first of the kind that took place in the public assembly, was never long without a new parallel thereafter. On the matter of the killing of Gracchus, the city was divided between grief and joy. Some sorrowed for themselves and him and bewailed the existing state of affairs, believing that the republic no longer existed, but had been usurped by coercion and violence. Others congratulated themselves that everything had turned out just as they wanted it to. This event happened at the time that Aristonicus was struggling with the Romans for the mastery of Asia.²

² The Fourth Macedonian War (150–148 BCE).