

‘There’s a persistent belief that describing contemporary political figures in classical terms automatically furthers understanding’ (Neville Morley, Sphinx blog).

Do comparisons with past Roman emperors and other ancient leaders help or hinder our understanding of contemporary political events?

Comparisons of individual contemporary political leaders with their ancient Roman counterparts do not automatically further understanding of modern events as they routinely fail to address the disparities between systems of governance and the details of unique leadership circumstances. Any parallels drawn between classical leadership and current political events should be done so extremely tentatively, as to glorify and revere modern leaders in the manner of Roman emperors would be to ignore the damning failures of their leadership.

All too often, current political events are correlated with heavily mythologized and idealised tales of the classical world, but these allusions are rarely illuminating or accurate. Modern interpretations of individual leaders can be easily weaponised for political agendas - as is the case in the common yet misguided comparison of former President Trump with Julius Caesar - and fail to acknowledge the highly specific and historically contingent nature of political events. However, where comparisons of ancient leaders with current events may be more helpful in constructively furthering understanding is in the observation of how individuals interact with socio-political events. These comparisons serve not to demonstrate clichéd assertions that Trump is a modern-day Caesar, ‘crossing the Rubicon’ as a heroic and patriotic restorer of political integrity and traditional values, but instead indicate cyclical patterns of surging populism driven by the irrationality of increasingly alienated and desperate populations.

More general comparisons of Roman political events with the present day reveal that modern societies interact with systems of governance in much the same ways as their classical equivalents. As Mary Beard asserts, “to study ancient Rome from the 21st century is rather like walking on a tightrope”¹ - whilst specific comparisons of individual figures can easily be misconstrued, the examination of how human behaviour and moral values drive politics can be extremely conducive in furthering understanding of modern events when approached cautiously.

According to the emperor of 161-180CE, Marcus Aurelius, when observing history it is important “to bear in mind constantly that all of this has happened before, and will happen again – the same plot from beginning to end, the identical staging”². He was, in part, referring to the Antonine plague of 165 to 180CE – a deadly respiratory virus rumoured to have started in the East that quickly spread across borders, developing into a worldwide pandemic. As observed by Ryan Holiday, the spread of this plague feels “nauseatingly familiar”³ to the present situation – he states that “the only thing that spread faster than the contagion was the fear and the rumours. People panicked. Doctors were baffled. Government officials dawdled and failed. Travel was delayed or rerouted or aborted altogether. Festivals, gatherings, sporting events – all cancelled. The economy plunged. Bodies piled up.”⁴ Roman historian Dio Cassius (155-235CE) estimated 2,000 deaths per day in Rome alone at the height of the outbreak in 189CE⁵ and in total approximately 18 million people are supposed to have died. The impact of the outbreak on Roman society was so severe that In his letter to Athens in

¹ Beard, 2015

² Aurelius

³ Holiday, 2020

⁴ Holiday, 2020

⁵ Dio Cassius 73.14.3–4

174/175CE, Marcus Aurelius loosened the requirements for membership to the Areopagus (the ruling council of Athens), as there were now too few surviving upper-class Athenians who met the requirements previously introduced.⁶ At first glance, this jarring parallel appears to be heavily didactic and may serve to reveal the collective hubris of deep-rooted illusions of Western exceptionalism which have been shattered by government mishandlings of the pandemic. This comparison reveals how, in moments of crisis, figures of authority make the same mistakes, individuals succumb to the same fears, and partake in the same rapacious behaviour.

However, any comparisons drawn between these two pandemics should be done so cautiously as we inhabit a completely different political landscape to that of ancient Rome because of the revolutionary impact of globalisation on the interconnectivity of the modern world. Unlike ordinary Roman citizens, who most likely had little concept of the world outside of their cities, contemporary events occur in a world where both sensationalist media and scientific data spread just as fast as any virus. Additionally, the benefits of modern medicine and scientific advancement provide far more certainty about the direction of the future than ever before.

Where we can make potentially helpful comparisons is when considering the supposedly modern concept of 'fake news' which, as evidenced by the spread of rumour in the Antonine plague and other Roman propaganda battles, is firmly rooted in classical civilisations. In the propaganda war between Antony and Octavian following the Ides of March unnervingly familiar patterns of libellous and defamatory falsifications can be observed – Antony was painted as a libidinous drunk corrupted by Cleopatra, whilst Octavian presented himself as a restorer of traditional Roman virtues. Another relevant comment from Marcus Aurelius – an insightful, selfless and compassionate leader whose humility feels alien to the egocentrism of modern politicians – is that “an infected mind is a far more dangerous pestilence than any plague – one only threatens your life, the other destroys your character”⁷. These patterns of disinformation reveal the extent to which politicians are swayed by the whims of the masses, demonstrating that in both Rome and the 21st century it is not rationality that drives politics.

Common and cliched comparisons made between Trump and Caesar do an immense disservice to the latter as, despite his brutal and bloody instigation of Civil War in 49BCE, Caesar was undoubtedly a dynamic and revolutionary military mastermind and adept political strategist whose seizure of power and galvanisation of public support was far more nuanced and skilled than the crude and rudimentary authoritarianism of Trump's political regime. Equating divisive and controversial contemporary figures with Roman leaders is incredibly unhelpful and dangerous, as it glosses over the unique circumstances of every politician's specific tenure. Using heavily mythologised language with loaded classical references to describe contemporary political events is not uncommon and arguably puts modern societies on the same trajectory as an antiquated authoritarian system. During the 2016 Conservative Party leadership election, the 'I' newspaper ran the headline 'Et Tu Gove'⁸, equating Michael Gove with Shakespeare's Brutus. Even when considering Boris Johnson, a leader seemingly modelled on the trope of unconventional and eccentric Roman emperors, to compare him with ancient figures – whether it be virtuous Aeneas, quick-witted Cicero, opportunistic Caesar, outlandish Nero, or even, as Helen Thompson bizarrely argues, a “would-be Theseus”⁹ – would be to appease his self-aggrandising yet depressingly inept character.

⁶ Oliver, 1989, pp. 366–388.

⁷ Aurelius

⁸ 'I' Newspaper, 2016

⁹ Thompson, 2019

The burning of the Curia Hostilia in 52BCE eerily foreshadows the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, serving as a stark warning against the current trajectory of US society. Publius Clodius Pulcher, a populist Roman politician and street agitator during the first triumvirate, was killed by the gladiators of political opponent Milo in 52BCE, and what followed was a shocking and demagogic display of violence against the seat of Roman government. Painted as a “womanizing rabble rouser”¹⁰ and “a radical reformer in the tradition of the Gracchi”¹¹, Clodius exploited anti-establishment sentiment by presenting himself as a dynamic and unconventional political figure, generating mob violence to such an intensity that the democratic process was paralysed. At his funeral, Clodius’ eulogisers incited the crowd to take revenge against his enemies, causing a riot which resulted in the torching of the senate house. What followed, of course, was the descent into autocracy, the end of the republic and the brutal censorship of outspoken voices.

When compared with the Capitol riots of 2021, striking similarities can be observed: both events involved incendiary incitements to revolt from populist leaders, both followed the deaths of those leaders – whether it be in a physical or political sense - both mobs blamed governmental institutions, and they both attacked the seat of power. Frustration with an oligarchy is undoubtedly different from anger over unfounded claims of election fraud – but the result is seemingly the same. Like the Roman demagogues, Trump has exploited populist sympathies to gain power and used fascist propaganda to convince his supporters that autocracy is the only answer to their enemies. Just as many who became disillusioned with the Roman republic supported Julius Caesar as he marched on Rome and was appointed dictator in 48 BC, hard-line Trump supporters will continue to feel ignored by their democratic systems and instead turn to increasingly autocratic solutions to air their grievances.

Writing for the Varsity newspaper, Josh Jones asserts that it is indeed “fruitful to compare the two, revealing just how dangerous America’s current situation is for world democracy.”¹² Like the burning of the Curia Hostilia, the events at the Capitol can be construed as a legitimization of populism and classical comparisons help to indicate that America – and current society as a whole – may be destined to head down a similar path to the fall of the Roman republic. Whilst individual comparisons between Clodius and Trump should be made tentatively, these two parallel episodes of anti-establishment mob violence reveal the extent to which individuals will go when they feel their perceived rights and values are under threat. Both riots demonstrate the importance of individuals’ understandings of their freedoms and democracies, and show that when populations lose faith in their institutions, they lose faith in the very foundations of modern – and classical – political systems. In this way, classical comparisons can be extremely helpful in understanding the dangers of current political situations – Americans must tread very carefully in the coming months and years, as “if they do not, they risk the fall of democracy to their own Caesar.”¹³

The actions of fascist dictator Mussolini serve as a grave illustration of the dangers of using classical allusions in modern settings. In a strikingly similar vein to Trump, Mussolini was a “vain and empty”¹⁴ demagogue who succeeded in captivating a shrewd and industrious population through his nationalistic promises of Italian exceptionalism and the rebirth of the Roman empire. Through the use of propaganda permeated with Roman iconography, Mussolini justified his attempted

¹⁰ Pierson, 2021

¹¹ Beard, 2015, p. 281.

¹² Jones, 2021

¹³ Jones, 2021

¹⁴ Joll, 1976

imperialism, which ended only after the deaths of 153,200 civilians in WWII¹⁵, and a further 661,500 in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia¹⁶. It is in this way that comparisons between ancient leaders and contemporary political figures are not just unhelpful, but extremely perilous as they risk the legitimization of attempts at Roman-style imperialism and military expansionism. A depiction of the dangers of the weaponization of classical references was issued by Mussolini himself in his alarmingly pertinent assertion that “democracy is talking itself to death... [it] is beautiful in theory; in practice it is a fallacy. You in America will see that some day.”¹⁷

In discussion of both ancient and contemporary leadership, women are notably absent, and the parallels between past and present female marginalisation are too striking to ignore. Even in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the epic supposedly detailing the actions and attitudes of the archetypal Roman leader and citizen, female characters are rendered passive by Aeneas. Dido, Penthesilea, and Camila represent women who, while possessing certain Roman qualities, are doomed to fail in a world that is, according to societal standards of the time, rightly dominated by males. Dido and Amata are presented as victims of their own transgressive passion and impulsiveness, and even Camilla, a supposed paragon of purity, succumbs to the inevitable weakness of her femininity when she is momentarily distracted by desire on the battlefield. This presentation of women as inferior and subservient was part of Virgil’s effort to redefine Rome’s national identity in the age of Augustus, whose reign was characterised by a return to traditional Roman values.¹⁸ These conservative attitudes bled into Roman culture, as evidenced by the fact that women in the ancient world had a single function that defined their existence – to reproduce – and were appointed guardians “on account of the weakness of their sex as well as their ignorance of legal matters.”¹⁹

The view that women had weak judgement (*infirmitas consilii*) was expounded by influential political figure Cicero, and Roman women could not attend, speak in, or vote at political assemblies, nor could they hold any position of political responsibility²⁰. Similarly, Livy’s retelling of the rape of the Sabine women corroborates early Roman attitudes towards women by demonstrating that Romulus too viewed them as expendable and exploitable ‘collateral damage’ in the creation of Rome. These patterns of female relegation can be traced throughout history, and even today only 21 women sit as the head of state or government in 193 countries around the world²¹. Additionally, contemporary female leaders – from Theresa May to Jacinda Ardern, Hillary Clinton to Angela Merkel – are consistently judged not for the integrity of their political convictions, but their appearance and the supposed inherent weakness of their femininity. The paralleled minimalization of female voices in leadership in ancient and contemporary societies indicates that reflections on ancient leaders in modern contexts do not help our understanding of current political events, but instead highlight areas where we have failed to progress as a civilisation and shame us as a society that has done little to move on from the brutality and inequality of the Roman empire.

To conclude, although comparisons between classical and contemporary political figures and events can undoubtedly be fruitfully observed, to blindly declare that they automatically further understanding of current politics and that the world is therefore destined to follow the same

¹⁵ Roma: Istituto Centrale Statistica, 1957

¹⁶ Sullivan, 1999

¹⁷ Mussolini, 1928

¹⁸ Reilly, 2015

¹⁹ Ulpian, p.101

²⁰ Cartwright, 2014

²¹ Gregory, 2020

trajectory of the demise of the Rome is to ignore the very nature of history. Specific comparisons drawn between Roman emperors and contemporary political figures do little to further understanding of current events because individuals can only ever be facilitators of momentous political change, whilst their supporters and compliant populations act as the driving force. It is not the undemocratic actions of Caesar, nor the irrationality and eccentricity of the emperors which led to the collapse of the Roman empire, but the “paradoxes of social development and the inherent unpredictability of nature.”²²

Ultimately every political situation is the culmination of a unique set of circumstances and blurring and generalising invariably distinct historical events does little to further understanding of contemporary politics - it is not political leaders who drive change, but the force of human behaviour, which is entirely random and refuses to be characterised. As Mary Beard states, we do not have “much to learn directly *from* the Romans... there is no simple Roman model to follow”²³, but in drawing tentative parallels between classical and modern political events, it becomes apparent that the Roman empire as a whole “continues to underpin Western culture and politics, what we write and how we see the world, and our place in it”²⁴. However, heedlessly asserting the cliched notion that “history repeats itself” ignores the complexities of the subject, the nuances of the past, and the volatility of the future.

²² Harper, 2017

²³ Beard, 2015, p. 535.

²⁴ Beard, 2015, p. 15.

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