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EXPLAINING THE CHANGE FROM REPUBLIC TO PRINCIPATE IN ROME

Jürgen Deininger

The downfall of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Principate are certainly among the most significant political events in the history of ‘classical’ antiquity. The establishment of the Principate by Augustus can hardly be compared with any short term change of power and constitution like those experienced rather frequently, for example, in earlier Greek city states during the establishment of a tyranny. There were at least two distinctive features by which events in Rome differed from many other constitutional changes in antiquity: On the one hand, there is simply the extraordinary length and duration of the slow process of transformation, whose critical phase from the Gracchi to Augustus embraced several generations; and on the other hand, there is what may be called the apparent ‘irreversibility’ of this fundamental change in the Roman political system. No return to the former structure of government seemed possible: the history of the Roman Empire is, indeed, on the whole the history of steadily growing and increasingly articulated monarchical government. There is no need to demonstrate this here in any detail. Therefore, it may be said that the crisis of the Roman republic and its transition to monarchy was a profound and irreversible long-term change of the political system for which there is hardly any real parallel in ancient history. It may be added at once that this transition from Republic to Principate or, to put it in more general terms, to Monarchy, tended to be seen, at least partially in antiquity and still more so in modern times, as a notable turn for the worse, as an obvious sign of the decline of the Roman political community.

There is no question that the main task of the ancient historian studying the late Roman republic is, and will continue to be, to analyze and describe this large proc-
ess of change at Rome by starting from the innumerable actions and motives of individual leaders and groups. But there seemed always to be, in addition, a necessity to search for the more fundamental, underlying causes of this notable disruption in the inner development of the Roman state and its institutions. From Tacitus to Machiavelli, from Montesquieu to the modern historical research of the 20th century, there have been many important attempts to understand and explain the fact that in spite of numerous contradicting interests and in spite of much stubborn resistance, in spite even of the individual intentions of many political leaders, in the end Monarchy replaced once for all the age-old republican system of Rome.

It would be impossible, of course, to give here a complete account of all these attempts, all the more as there has never been made any comprehensive survey of them. Though it would add, I think, to our understanding of Roman history, there exists no history of the problem, no systematic comparison and evaluation of the different explanations given either in antiquity or in modern times. What I want to do here—and my aim must of course be very limited—is to point out some of the principal types of explanation, chiefly in modern historical research, to try to discuss briefly their merits and to add, as a conclusion, a few larger historical perspectives and connections of the problem that tend frequently but, I think, rather unduly to be overlooked. It cannot be the ambition of this essay to present any absolutely new or complete explanation of the vast historical process in question, but a glance at the existing literature of the subject seems to indicate that efforts to clarify some points might be not wholly unwelcome and unnecessary.

One further preliminary remark should be made. It must be admitted that historians in general do not perceive the problem of underlying causes as their most important subject; they concentrate, and, as I said al-

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ready, evidently must do so, on the analysis of single events, on the actions and motives of leaders and groups, on the analysis of institutions, while underlying causes are treated rather by the way. To illustrate what I mean by this, I give just one example. Such a major work on the history of the late Roman republic as Sir Ronald Syme’s *Roman Revolution* avoids nearly completely the question of the underlying causes of the so-called “Revolution.” Essentially, it is stated that the basic problem of the epoch was the dilemma that had arisen between “liberty” or “political stability”: “That was the question confronting the Romans themselves”, Sir Ronald says, “and I have tried to answer it precisely in their fashion.”

I am not sure whether this really was the problem confronting the Romans rather than certain Romans. But even when one identifies, say, Tacitus’ with the Romans’ point of view, the question arises why this dilemma presented itself all at once so urgently to the Romans, and this question remains practically unanswered. I shall not indulge here in a description of the historiographic and methodological origins of this attitude; but, important as ‘the’ Roman point of view doubtless is for our understanding of Roman history, it may yet be questioned whether it can offer us a sufficient explanation of the transition from Republic to Monarchy.

But even when explicit consideration is given by modern writers to the problem of “causes”, one may discover at least two different ways of dealing with it: One possibility is the enumeration of a whole series of single “factors” that have strongly influenced the transition from Republic to Monarchy (or, as it is frequently treated, only the breakdown of the Republic), without any attempt to analyze the relationship between these single factors or between them and the process of change as a whole. The other possibility is the presentation of one, i.e., the writer’s own, explana-
tion without any systematic discussion of differing interpretations. This is to be seen, no doubt, in close correspondence to the fact already mentioned that there has never been an attempt to produce something like a comprehensive survey of the problem.

The problem itself has, of course, a long history. But to investigate in any detail the many approaches made to it already in antiquity and again since early modern times would take us too far. A few hints must suffice. The famous 'theory of moral decline' so important for Roman self-understanding in the late Republican period was conceived (or taken over from Greek models) at a stage of the crisis when nobody was aware of its final outcome, which was to be, in fact, Monarchy. Only in the imperial epoch did it become possible to survey the whole historical process, and then it was mainly the Civil Wars (partly seen as a result of 'moral decline') and the necessity for peace that were held to be responsible for the transition from Republic to Monarchy; these are essentially the perspectives given in the work just mentioned by Sir Ronald Syme. There appears, however, also the idea that, in the last analysis, it was merely the size and extent of the Roman Empire that made Monarchy necessary. At least some hints to this can be found in Tacitus and other writers, including some very interesting remarks of the jurist Pomponius in his *Enchiridium* composed in the time of Hadrian. All this should be investigated much more closely than has been done hitherto, and the same holds true for the much more detailed and sophisticated attempts at explanation since early modern times. I can mention here only the recent analysis made by J.G.A. Pocock in his *Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, 1975, where, in a different context, it is demonstrated at length how Machiavelli considered the militia of the citizens (as opposed to mercenary soldiers) as the very keystone of a Republican constitution and that therefore in his view
the decline of the militia and the rise of a professional army in Rome had as its fatal consequence the transition from Republic to Monarchy. The same author has pointed out how first of all in 17th century England James Harrington went still further by emphasizing the economic basis of the republican system, which he thought to be a balanced structure of property. If a considerable part of the citizenry lost its property and fell into—albeit not legal, but economic—dependence, it seemed necessary for the Republic to disappear and for Monarchy to take its place. Then in the 18th century it was Montesquieu in his *Esprit des Lois* who most notably stressed the narrow relationship between the constitution and the size of a given territory. According to him, the classical triad of constitutional patterns: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, had its correspondence in the triad of very extended, medium-sized and small territories. He was by no means the first to take this view. Though his younger Scottish contemporary, David Hume, among others, strongly disputed the impossibility of a Republican constitution in greatly extended territories, this doctrine nevertheless remained very influential, in some parts of Europe, beyond the French Revolution even to the beginnings of our century. Montesquieu himself, who in his famous *Considerations on the causes of the greatness of the Romans and their decline* devoted much space to ‘moral decline’, summed up the causes of the decline of the Republican system at Rome in this formula: “Ce fut uniquement la grandeur de la République qui fit son mal,” (“It was the very greatness of the Republic that provoked its misfortune”), where the context indicates clearly that by “grandeur” is meant the territorial extent of Roman domination.

So much for some of the main ideas of the past about how the change from Republic to Monarchy in Rome is to be explained; we shall have another look at these theories before the end of this essay. What, now, about
the explanation of the breakdown of the Roman republic and the origins of Monarchy in modern and current research, which, by the way, often seems hardly aware of the long history of the basic problem? To get a survey of the most important contemporary types of explanation, I shall not follow a chronological order because, among other difficulties, there has never been a systematic discussion among different writers which would have given a certain pattern to the development of modern ideas. Rather I should prefer to make a first distinction between theories emphasizing too strongly, in my opinion, secondary aspects of the whole process of change and theories trying to explain central aspects. Of course, all that cannot be discussed in full detail here, but I think that there can be made a reasonable distinction between these two types of ‘explanations’. I think as well that the evaluation of certain individual factors as they are emphasized in modern literature, as difficult as it may be, is more than just a case of individual arbitrariness.

First, then, a few remarks about theories that emphasize rather secondary aspects of the process leading from Republic to Monarchy in Rome. As completeness evidently cannot be sought here, I limit myself to four examples of explanations of this kind. To characterize them briefly, number one: The breakdown of the Republic and the rise of Monarchy in Rome is essentially the work of two men, namely the Gracchi. Secondly: the decisive cause of the transformation of the Roman governmental structure is to be found in a phenomenon of social and economic history, i.e., the tremendous expansion of slavery in Rome and Italy during the second and first centuries B.C. Thirdly, in a sense the venerable ‘theory of moral decay’ which dates back to antiquity should probably also be classified among theories concentrating on secondary aspects. And, finally, number four which is also the most recent interpretation: According to this conception, the transition
from Republic to Principate was essentially a matter of chance in conjunction with certain erroneous decisions made by a few leading Roman statesmen.

My argument here, of course, will not be that all these theories are without any specific merits and that they do not contribute in any way to the explanation of the great change in the Roman world. But they are not aiming, it must be said, at the basic and crucial processes, which led from Republic to Monarchy. To take my first example, which is represented by R.E. Smith's *The Failure of the Roman Republic*, published in 1955: This author has maintained the thesis that it was most prominently the two Gracchi who are to be held responsible for the destruction of the Republic at Rome and its consequences. It was they who questioned the authority and the leading role of the Senate and turned themselves, as Tiberius did, to the 'mob' (the expression is Smith's) or, as Gaius did, more efficiently in his ruthlessly destructive way, to the equites. There can certainly be no doubt as to the responsibility of the Gracchi for the outbreak of crisis in Rome and the initial phases of political change. On the other hand, it should be clear that the whole long-term transformational process cannot satisfactorily be explained in terms of the actions of a few leading individuals, be it the Gracchi at the onset or anyone else later on (even the "revolutionary leader" Augustus). Here, a partial aspect has been overstated, and it is no surprise that this approach to the 'failure of the Roman Republic' has not won scholarly support; besides, it does not explain why the Republic was transformed into Monarchy, meaning in this case the relatively 'mild' Augustan Principate. Of course, the action of individual leaders is something of the utmost importance for the course of events at Rome from the Gracchi to Augustus; but neither the two Gracchi nor any other leading politician can really by themselves be considered responsible for the upheaval and the transformation of the whole Roman political
system; as even masses cannot always be simply "manipulated" at will, mass action and mass attitudes and loyalties and their background must necessarily be part of any sufficient explanation.

To go on, then, to the other explanations just mentioned, there have also been attempts to explain the downfall of the Republic and the rise of the monarchy not by the action of 'great' or leading individuals, but, on the contrary, by profound changes in the social and economic system as a whole, and notably by the enormous expansion of slavery in later Republican times. It is not possible to pursue the many different variants of this basic idea, which is really peculiar to modern times, no ancient writer having given slavery this role, but which has gained considerable influence since the 19th century, no doubt as a result of the abolitionist movement. It may be mentioned that no less a scholar than Theodor Mommsen in his Roman History has attributed in passing to slavery a crucial role in the breakdown of the Roman republic. "There were very old social weaknesses" (uralte soziale Schäden), he states, "in the last analysis (im letzten Kern) the ruin of the Roman middle class by the slave proletariat by which the Roman commonwealth (das römische Gemeinwesen) perished." The explanation based on slavery has had its greatest success in the Soviet Union and other East European countries with Stalin's notorious doctrine of the "revolution of slaves" in antiquity: There it was even held that the end of the Republic and the rise of the Principate must, in principle, be explained by the reaction of slave owners (or rather 'slaveholders') against the imminent danger of a slave "revolution" as it had appeared during the great slave revolts in the late Republican period. The overthrow of the Republic and the establishment of the Principate were seen as the response of Roman society or rather of the propertied classes of Rome to the rebellion of Spartacus. It must at once be added that this extreme, one-
sided and distorted vision of late Republican Roman history, although compulsory for some time, has long and justly been abandoned by the majority of East European ancient historians (it still seems to be maintained by some party philosophers and may be found, here and there, in textbooks of secondary schools). These remarks, of course, should not obscure the actual role played by increasing numbers of slaves in the late Republic as one element in the significant decline of considerable parts of the Roman plebs, especially the free Roman peasantry. But the role of the slaves also appears to be only a secondary one and cannot provide a sufficient explanation of why the political system of Rome turned from republican to monarchical institutions.

Among the types of explanation which I should consider as directed towards minor or secondary aspects of the evolution from Republic to Monarchy, there must be placed also, I think, the classic ‘theory of moral decline’. Much could be said about this and much has been said; but I must limit myself here to a few remarks. As already has been mentioned, this theory originated when the final outcome still could not be known, and it must be regarded for this reason as a theory concerning the breakdown of the Republic rather than a theory explaining the change to Monarchy. Again, there can be no doubt that political change was accompanied, even preceded, by changes of attitudes, values and morals in the upper classes and that these changes have contributed considerably to what is often called the ‘disintegration’ of the leading social groups in Rome during the last century B.C. But—not to insist in this place on other difficulties—the acceptance of moral decline as an explanation of the fundamental change from Republic to Monarchy requires demonstration that ‘morals’ and values were on a lower standard in the imperial period than they were during the Republic. On the whole, the ‘theory of moral decay’ necessarily presup-
poses a favourable prejudice towards the early and "classic" Republican epoch as opposed to imperial times. The existence of such a prejudice is, in fact, clear in some ancient writers as, for example, Tacitus, and in many modern ones too, who are strongly influenced by, as it were, the "return" of republican thinking and republican institutions so characteristic of modern European (and, starting from there, world) history. But the thesis that Roman republican manners, morals and values were basically better and superior to those of the monarchical system cannot be proved at all—pace Tacitus—and cannot therefore be the basis of an explanation of the political events that brought about the change from Republic to Monarchy in Rome.

Finally, the fourth example of the explanation concentrating on secondary aspects. It is rather a kind of "anti-explanation," still it has been sustained with remarkable vigour by E.S. Gruen in his recent, extensive and scholarly work entitled *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic* (1974). Its main conclusions regarding the present problem can be summarized, I think, as follows: The one decisive cause of the downfall of the Roman republic was the Civil War that broke out in 49 B.C. and its effects and consequences until Augustus. The Civil War itself is apparently not conceived of as just another element in a series of long-term tensions in the Roman political system. On the contrary: it arose above all out of a number of erroneous decisions made by leading politicians in the very last months before the outbreak of the war. Up to this point, the Roman republican constitution worked, in a way, perfectly well: there was no real crisis of the Republic in the time between the death of Sulla and the beginnings of the Civil War. There was no 'crisis' according to the author, to put it in the terms of his title, during "the last generation of the Roman republic."

Obviously, chance in history is ubiquitous, and so are the political errors of leading men. One must admit their
importance in the shaping of even major political events; and to remind historians of that obvious truth may be salutary. In the special case of the late Roman republic and the transition from Republic to Principate, however, if one looks at the long and continuous series of increasingly powerful "imperatores" from Marius to Augustus, one gets a very strong impression of an "inner necessity" (the expression is Eduard Meyer's) leading inexorably to the final monarchical solution, and even Sir Ronald Syme has stated that "the conviction that it all had to happen is indeed difficult to discard." But certainly any historical determinism must be rejected. Thus there can be no doubt that warnings expressed by scholars so unlike each other as the German Alfred Heuss and the late Russian Sergei L. Uttchenko against all "mere mechanics of evolution" and against the "teleological" point of view are justified and must always be borne in mind. Nevertheless, an interpretation which goes so far as to reduce the causes of the change from Republic to Monarchy in Rome more or less to chance combined with a few political errors of the leading men in 50 B.C. can hardly be accepted. The statement that there simply were no underlying causes at all in the great shift from the republican to the monarchical way of life, is hardly in accordance with the vast dimensions of the change, with its slowness, its length, its definiteness and its irreversibility. It may be doubted, as well, whether analysis of events between 79 and 49 B.C. can lead to any theory covering the entire period of change from Republic to Principate. There have been, by the way, very different judgments on the date when the fate of the Republic finally was sealed; thus, in sharp contrast to our author's opinion, Mommsen thought that it had already happened long before the Civil War.

But however that may be, certainly no one will doubt that by the time of Augustus, change had definitely taken place; and from then on, evolution visibly worked
in favor of a growing consolidation of Monarchy, culminating, it can be said, in the so-called "Dominate" of Late Antiquity. The whole history of the Roman Empire demonstrated the expediency and the significance of a basic change that cannot be explained, to take a quotation from Gruen's book, chiefly in terms of "accident and irrationality, stubbornness and miscalculation." Again, nobody would deny, I think, that all these elements also played their role, somewhere, in the political events that finally led to the establishment of the Principate. But behind the basic process, the breakdown of the Republic and the appearance of Monarchy, there were much more momentous and even overwhelming, constant pressures and necessities that will have to be discussed presently. Thus we cannot consent to the general views presented in the Last Generation of the Roman Republic, but we may hope that systematic discussion about the causes of the change in the Roman political system will be stimulated by it.

So much for kinds of explanations where too much weight seems to be given to minor or secondary aspects. To stress that point again, I want to make it clear that all these views hitherto considered are in one way or another important and should not be simply rejected; the only thing one has to keep in mind is that they cannot be central to any explanation of the change from Republic to Principate in Rome; that is to say, with the examples given here, that neither the work of the Gracchi, nor the growth of slave labor, nor moral decline nor, finally, accident and irrationality can form a sufficient basis for an explanation why in the course of the first century B.C. the Republican government of Rome gave way to Monarchy.

But then—what must be regarded as crucial elements of the whole process, on which 'explanation' may reasonably be based? In the first place and as a decisive factor in the evolution towards the Principate has to be
mentioned the increasingly independent role, the 'emancipation' in a sense, of generals and armies from Senate and popular assembly, or to use Latin terms, the ever growing division between 'imperator' and 'miles' on the one side, and of 'senatus' and 'populus' on the other. It may conveniently be remarked here that as 'senatus populusque' in Rome (or, for that matter, council and popular assembly anywhere in classical antiquity) formed the base of the Republican system, so military leader and army were the keystone of most of the large monarchies. In Rome, the widening division between 'imperator' and 'senatus' in the higher ranks of society correspond, in a way, to the division between 'miles' and 'populus' in the mass of the Roman citizenry, and it appears that the causes which eventually produced a rift that went through the whole community of Roman citizens, were also the decisive causes of the breakdown of the whole republican system and the victory of Monarchy. In a sense, of course, the shift from Republic to Monarchy is only one element, albeit an especially visible and spectacular one, of much more comprehensive changes in the Roman state and society. But as to the causes of that particular change, I think, there should be widespread agreement among scholars on the primary importance of this growing split in the Roman citizenry, even if it does not by itself provide an 'explanation' of the origins of Monarchy in Rome. It must be added that the change described here rather summarily as a simple 'split' in the Roman political community was something much more complicated, if considered in detail. But in the present context it is not necessary to explain, e.g., the nature of what Anton v. Premerstein called "adherence to military leaders" (Heeresgefolgschaft), the basic process being fairly clear.

From this, however, the third question immediately arises: what were the causes of this internal split? How did this fatal and ever widening rupture in the Roman
state originate? The answer must be, of course, that many different causes contributed to its growth. But there are in fact two main complexes that have received special attention by modern research which can provisionally be characterized by catch phrases like "social issue" and "decline of the free peasantry" on the one hand, and "disintegration of the nobility" on the other. The first complex refers principally to the large masses of Roman citizens, while the second concerns mainly the upper classes. In reality, no doubt, there is much interdependence between the two. It is not possible to analyze in detail the familiar problem of the actual dimensions of the decline of the free peasantry and the role played by the pressures of the long and distant wars, by the competition of slave labor, the growth of large estates, etc. But certainly the social decline of the traditional free peasantry was one of the main prerequisites for the appearance of professional armies strongly tied to their 'imperator'.

As to the second main complex, sometimes called the "disintegration of the Roman nobility," it too, evidently, has to be explained by a large number of single factors, notably the many problems and negative consequences of Roman domination in the provinces and the effects of the extraordinary commands of the first century B.C. One may say that the first complex is more a problem of domestic policy or internal affairs, while the second refers chiefly to problems of "foreign" or "external" affairs. Naturally, however, there is a strong interdependence between the two, and certainly the internal, 'social' problems considerably weakened the political position of the traditional upper class and contributed to its disintegration, while, on the other hand, for example, the expectations and demands of the soldiers were reinforced by the apparent dissolution of the solidarity of the senatorial class.

Of course, all these single elements have been carefully studied and analyzed by modern research and are
familiar topics in late Roman republican history. As to their respective parts in the transition from Republic to Principate, they are frequently—and, after all, justly—placed beside each other, though that may happen in a rather unreflective manner. A problem arises, however, if one tries (as frequently happens) to ascribe any definite priority to one or the other of the two great complexes, in the sense of a “primacy” of foreign or domestic policy to use an expression frequently employed in German historiography. Authors who incline toward a priority of ‘external’ factors tend to emphasize the completely changed needs of the practice and maintenance of Roman domination in the vast Empire: from this, there arose the pressures bringing about the ‘disintegration’ of the governing class. The enormous growth of political and military objectives and of the opportunities and temptations offered by Empire, to which were added certain cultural influences from the Hellenistic world, were, according to this interpretation, the decisive causes of the disintegration of the nobility and the concomitant loss of authority of the Senate. One especially important factor in this view was the granting of the extraordinary imperia, which led to the rise of certain military commanders and, in the end, to Monarchy. This view tends to stress the fundamental lack of political consciousness and independence of the great mass of citizens. Several names could be mentioned to illustrate this. So one book, probably hardly known in this country (and forgotten in Germany, too), the Roman History of Carl Neumann (published posthumously in 1881) has in its first volume a very long chapter entitled “The causes of the decline of the Republic” nearly exclusively built upon this approach. It may deserve a special mention here, because it is one of the surprisingly rare attempts to analyze and describe in detail the causes of the breakdown of the republican system in Rome instead of presenting just a detailed narrative with some general remarks on these causes.
But besides Neumann, there could be mentioned also, for example, Eduard Meyer, Friedrich Münzer and Matthias Gelzer—all outstanding experts in the field. One succinct sentence of Gelzer (in reviewing a book of Münzer) may demonstrate at least one important variant of this interpretation: "He" (so Gelzer says of Münzer) "in explaining the constitutional change places the main stress on the necessities of foreign policy. One need only remember the evolution of the notion of 'imperator' to realize the correctness of this view." Though it is not always presented in this rather strict fashion, this conception seems still to be strongly influential.

On the other hand, priority might be given to 'inner' or 'social' causes, an interpretation that also has a long tradition. Mommsen's phrase pointing to the ruin of the middle class by slave labor as a 'last' cause of the downfall of the Republic has already been cited, although it must be added that his views are much more complex and, at the same time, may not be entirely consistent. One could name other authors, too, who give a clear preponderance to social factors. I think that this is true, among others, of P. Brunt, or of Kurt von Fritz who has discussed at great length in his work on the mixed constitution in antiquity the causes of the change from Republic to Monarchy in Rome; besides, he emphasizes certain weaknesses of the Roman republican "constitution" as being responsible for the shift from Republic to Monarchy (or rather, as he prefers to call it, to "cesarism").

A recent example of this general approach might be found in a German dissertation published a few years ago (1974). Its author, Helmut Schneider, has since written what might be called another, more popular, version of his views on late Roman republican politics, as well as several articles in defense of his interpretation. According to his view, the crucial causes for the end of the republican system were the erroneous
economic policy of the Senate and its fundamental inability (or unwillingness) to satisfy what the author calls "the social interests of the socially outcast citizens." The "conflict between army and Senate" that brought about the decline and the end of the Republic is essentially, in his view, a conflict between a proletarianized peasantry and the owners of large estates. The author takes express exception to theories which emphasize "external" factors, and he states explicitly in contradiction to the views of Matthias Gelzer and Chr. Meier (while citing in support P. Brunt) that the causes of the decline of the Roman republic are not to be found at all in the growth of the Empire, in the expansion of political objectives or the widening gap between the institutions of the city-state and the worldwide Empire, but basically and exclusively in a social conflict between the landless and the owners of the "latifundia."

It may be acknowledged, after all, as a merit of this author, that he has made explicit some controversies in modern views on the decline of the Republican system in Rome that frequently exist only in a rather implicit or hidden manner in current literature. Nevertheless, it must be clear that neither alternative offers a satisfactory solution or, to use again the German terminology already mentioned, that a "primacy of foreign policy" in an explanation of the constitutional change in Rome would be as questionable as a "primacy of internal affairs." Factors of 'foreign policy' such as the extraordinary commands or the needs of administration, as important as they may have been, are not sufficient to explain the transition from Republic to Monarchy. So it could easily be shown, for example, that the development of a central and provincial 'bureaucracy' began for all practical purposes only after the definite establishment of the Principate and then proceeded only slowly. Against too strong an insistence upon the role of extraordinary commands it has rightly been objected that they remained, during the late Republican
period, limited and restricted to exceptional cases. Moreover the final establishment of the Principate by Augustus (though it profited from existing forms of imperia extraordinaria) can least of all be explained by “necessities of foreign policy” (to repeat Gelzer’s expression). It may be noted, too, that the general passivity of the provincial populations (which has often and rightly been emphasized) also lessened the need of a strong and centralized executive power in the Empire.

On the other hand, the one-sided interpretation of the shift from the Republic to Monarchy in terms of ‘domestic policy’ and ‘social issues’ alone is no less dubious. The characteristic view (as it is presented by the above mentioned German author) of the Principate as a “military dictatorship” with, as compared to the Republican system, “greater efficiency in safeguarding the interests of the propertied classes in Italy and in suppression of social unrest,” to quote him directly, certainly does not do justice to the reality of the Augustan or later Principate. In the Italy of the first century A.D. there was hardly any urgent need to suppress political or social unrest. If the Principate has any claim to the “repression” of social classes, then, it was the suppression of internal strife among the elite itself, which also was the source of the only, rather weak opposition to the Principate during the first century A.D. At the same time, it is a misunderstanding to regard the domestic struggle between “army and Senate” or “expropriated peasantry and big landowners” as being responsible for the breakdown of the Republic. In this interpretation (which in addition omits all the important elements of foreign policy) really significant struggles among the power elite itself are wholly ignored and they, as it should be clear, cannot be explained exclusively in terms of ‘social issue’. This approach too is one-sided, insofar as it tries to explain the crisis of the Republic and the rise of Monarchy only in terms of social conflicts.
The one safe conclusion to be made is that it is not possible to give any specific priority to one of the two main complexes we have briefly discussed here. The ultimate question appears to be, rather, in which way these two chief areas of conflict are related to each other or if they (so to speak) arose independently of each other and combined incidentally to create the rupture in the Roman republic, and thus to bring about the destruction of the Republic and give birth to the Monarchy. The answer certainly will be that these two different spheres of conflict and tension in the Roman Republic did not originate in isolation from each other, but that both, to summarize them briefly, the "social questions" as well as the "disintegration of the nobility", were the results of one comprehensive phenomenon, that is, the continuous, incessant growth of Roman domination, the manifold, decisive consequences of which affected the governing class no less than the mass of citizens. It may be said, and to put it briefly, that as political expansion could be accomplished only by all parts of Roman society, "senate" and "people," so the consequences of it affected both of them, although, as no one will be surprised to see, in wholly different ways. But it should be clearly recognized that the final political outcome, the enduring and permanent establishment of Monarchy in Rome, can in no way be separated from the enormous extension of territory, or, to put it in still other terms, that the 'irreversibility' of the whole process repeatedly emphasized here and so characteristic of this constitutional change in Rome, must be explained primarily by the unparalleled extension of the Roman territory—unparalleled, at least, by any republican state.

So we have to return, finally, to the general thesis hinted at occasionally already in antiquity and stated very formally, for example, by Montesquieu, according to which it was ultimately the prodigious territorial expansion of Roman domination which through many
intermediate effects ‘enforced’, as it were, the transition from Republic to Monarchy, or, if you prefer a more reserved description, which was its decisive prerequisite. This also, to be sure, has been contested, the main argument against it apparently being that Roman political expansion had already by the third and second centuries B.C. reached dimensions far beyond the size of the classical, ‘republican’ city-states, without any visible imminent danger for the existing republican system of government. The supporters of the thesis linking final constitutional change and the dimensions of Roman expansion and domination must, according to E.S. Gruen (and others), indicate one fixed point, one particular stage in Roman domination, a quantum, as it were, at which the republican system necessarily changed beyond hope of reversal.

There will be little doubt, that, put in these terms, this argument serves mainly to suggest the absurdity of the ‘expansion thesis’; for it is, of course, clear that political history (and history in general) is not obedient to simple ‘quantum mechanics’ of this kind. The connection between territorial expansion and the shift from Republic to Monarchy cannot however be cast aside in this way. It would be easy, indeed, to show that if the crisis finally became open only with the struggle about the agrarian reforms proposed by the elder Gracchus, there had already been clear signs of increasing difficulties in the system of Republican government, paralleling the growth of Roman domination; the growth of domination was indeed accompanied by the slowly increasing effect of the factors already mentioned, which worked with such fatal effects upon the masses as well as upon these prominent in Roman society.

Finally, our understanding of the change that took place in Rome might be enhanced by placing it in a wider perspective of ancient history, a perspective which frequently seems to be ignored by historians of Rome but which may further clarify what may be called
the non-incidental nature of the whole process and its characteristic 'irreversibility.' So I hope you will permit me to make still some more general considerations about the relationship between the size and the governmental structure of a given territory as we see it in antiquity.

It seems, first of all, that in the whole of antiquity republican forms of government were chiefly restricted to quite small territorial units of government, or, as they are aptly called, "city-states." This must, of course, be stated here simply as a matter of fact; any attempt to explain it would lead us too far away from our present subject. One important additional feature of these ancient 'republican' city-states was the fundamental role played by primary, 'popular' assemblies as opposed to potential representative institutions. We must leave aside the vast problem of representative government in antiquity, which has been discussed notably by J.A.O. Larsen. But, in a sense, one cannot escape the conclusion that the very notion of political representation remained foreign to the citizen of classical times or, for that matter, to the ancient city-state; and one main reason for the importance of primary (as opposed to representative) assemblies in antiquity was, again, the characteristic smallness of the city-states. On the other hand, evolution did not stop at the city-state, and there did indeed arise republics or republican political units much larger than mere city-states: one may mention, for example, the 'Greek federal states' or sympolities; and there no doubt developed quite comprehensive political units at least led or dominated by republican, that is, non-monarchical governments—as, for example, the Delian League, the Carthaginian Empire, or, of course, the Roman Empire of the Republican epoch, by far the greatest of them all in territory and population. But even here there evolved no recognizable system of representative government, and one principal cause for this must be sought—to state it briefly—in the fact that
the governmental structure of these larger political associations always remained closely tied to their basic models, which were the institutions of the city-state. One could point for a further illustration of these remarks to the special case of Italy in the comparatively short period from the end of the Social War to the establishment of the Augustan Principate: the Appenine peninsula was doubtless the largest territory in all antiquity to possess, if only briefly, a consistent ‘republican’ organization. But obviously one must admit that with this unique example we are already in the midst of ‘crisis’; and indeed one could demonstrate very well with this example, the problems arising from the absence of any system of representation.

In many aspects, however, all these political units transcending the city-state, but with a certain kind, at least, of republican ‘head’, important as they may have been for the political history of the Mediterranean world, must be viewed rather as exceptions. Monarchic, not republican government is the rule (one is tempted to say the ‘law’) in all large and what may be called territorial states of antiquity, in all ancient Empires. This holds true for all antiquity—and not only for classical antiquity, but starting from the ancient Oriental empires of the third and second millenium B.C., from the Assyrian and Persian empires to the monarchies of the Diadochs; it holds true no less, if I may add, for India and China, and I think one can even say that it holds true, roughly speaking, for ‘pre-modern’ times as a whole. In a sense, it can be maintained (as often has been done) that only since the late 18th century, that is, with the American and French revolutions, have Republican structures begun to appear in large territorial states. Thus this is a phenomenon characteristic only of modern times. Far away as all that is from the Roman republic, I think nevertheless that it may seem worthwhile to put the Roman republic for a moment in this wider perspective, because only then its uniqueness,
not only in antiquity, but in the whole of pre-modern history, becomes clear. It may be added that the limitation of republican government to small units (and especially to city-states) before modern times may be seen not only in the existing states of these epochs, but may also be seen as an influential part of political doctrine. This doctrine was until modern times in perfect accord with political and historical experience, including as the most striking example Rome’s transformation into Monarchy. The origins of the doctrine can be traced, I think, at least as far back as the 14th century, to the great Italian jurist Bartolus de Saxoferrato, in his *Tractatus de regimine civitatis*; and notwithstanding the objections made by David Hume and others mentioned in the beginning of this lecture it remained very influential until the 18th century. There are many interesting examples of its importance even after the American and French revolutions (notably in those European countries that upheld Monarchy through the early 20th century); but to list them will not be necessary here.

It seems illuminating to me to place the Roman republic of the last century B.C. within these wider, if frequently ignored, historical perspectives, because only then does the extraordinary and quite exceptional position of the Roman republic of the first century B.C. begin to emerge, not only in classical antiquity or the ancient world but in pre-modern history as a whole. The Republic that finally and irreversibly turned to Monarchy was an exceptional phenomenon because, as by far the greatest in size and population of all pre-modern republics, it was the most anomalous; thus, it may appear less strange that it ‘failed’ and was transformed into Monarchy, there being no tradition whatsoever of representative government.

As to the links between the size of a unit of government, the problems of apparently limitless growth, and change in political structure, it may be argued that Rome, after all, is the only case where a transition from
Republic to Monarchy can be observed in this manner. This is essentially true, although it would be possible to discover trends to monarchical government in other large ‘republics’ of antiquity. But there exists nevertheless one kind of historical ‘check’ which should not be overlooked and which can confirm to some extent the correspondence that existed between size and constitution. For example, some centuries earlier, in the world of Greek poleis, there had been very strong tendencies toward monarchical government, in the form of ‘tyranny’. But all the almost countless attempts to establish and to consolidate a kind of monarchical power within the city-state failed utterly, as is well known, in the long run. It seems certainly to be characteristic both of the extraordinary force and of the limited range of the republican system in the ancient Mediterranean, that tyranny, essentially a monarchical form of government, never grew into a lasting monarchical system within the narrow area of the city-state, while on the other hand Monarchy was not only established, albeit after a long critical period, in the vast Roman Empire, but gained continuously more strength as well as lasting and undisputed predominance. Thus it may be said that within the vast Roman Empire there occurred exactly the opposite of what had been the case in the innumerable small city-states of earlier classical antiquity. Viewed in this perspective, the Roman “revolution” leading from the Republic to Monarchy appears, as it may be emphasized here, not as something really new (which the contemporary notion of “revolution”, after all, tends to suggest) but rather as the disappearance of something new and unusual—the large Republic state—and its replacement by a quite venerable principle of government, that is, by Monarchy; and it could be asked whether a change of this kind should, from a wider perspective, properly be called a “revolution” at all. But if the shift to Monarchy appears from a modern point of view to be a movement ‘backwards’, leading, in
a sense, to a more 'archaic' structure of government, it meant, for antiquity, a political structure much more efficient and stable, at least in very great territories.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the republican structure of government has never before modern times had a development comparable in size to that of Rome in the last century B.C. So what remains remarkable and astonishing and demands explanation is, in a sense, less the eventual transition from Republic to Monarchy or Principate, a step, as we may say, which merely 'normalized' the political pattern of so vast an empire, but, on the contrary, the extraordinary vigour and tenacity of the traditional republican order in Rome. There was ultimately no power that could prevent its breakdown or rather its transformation into Monarchy, as a lasting consequence of excessive political expansion. To a certain, if diminishing, extent even the Principate and the later Empire, as is well known, were still imbued with republican remnants; and so it may seem in a sense appropriate that, from the Roman 'libera' res publica there came to the large modern republics their very name, tied no longer, as during the classical epoch, basically to the city-state.

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