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BOOK REVIEW

THE ASSASSINATION OF JULIUS CAESAR: A PEOPLE’S HISTORY OF ANCIENT ROME

Reviewed by Dean Richards* & Edward Toby Terrar*

This book is about ancient Roman history. It will interest anyone who has taken a course in Western Civilization or the New Testament or stumbled through introductory Latin or read the classics in translation. It is anchored around the political life of Julius Caesar (102-44 BC). Its author, Michael Parenti is in the Italian-American, working class intellectual tradition that makes the best use of their ancient heritage.

The book puts into class-conscious context the political, social and economic history of ancient Rome. It takes on the 95% of historiography, ancient and modern, which venerates the established order in the era of the Republic (510-27 BC) and laments its supposed demise during the period of the Empire (27 BC-476 AD).1 This establishment historiography depicts Caesar as a dictator and demagogue, and his assassination as a defense of the Republic. The plebs or Roman workers are viewed as a parasitic mob, a rabble interested only in bread and circuses.

In contrast, Parenti argues that Caesar’s assassination was one incident in a line of political murders of popularly supported reformers. In his view, despite their traditional depiction as a lazy, criminal mob, the plebs largely consisted of hardworking laborers with their own political and economic concerns.

That The Assassination’s type of class analysis has hit its mark is testified to by the protests against it.2 Parenti shows that for the past 500 years the merchant-landlord class has perpetuated the worship of its Roman senatorial counterpart in scholarship and has institutionalised it in academia. Illustrative is the work of the Harvard-based historian of the American Revolution, Gordon Wood. He mistakenly represents the Roman republican ideology of the early American merchant-landlord revolutionaries as the thinking of the colonial working class majority.

In contrast to the Gordon Wood version of Roman republican history, the progressive academic, Gary Nash has shown that the beliefs of the American colonial workers were more aligned with communism than with capitalism. Nash comments:

The political ideas of the majority of Americans who toiled with their hands, as farmers in the countryside, as artisans, mariners, and laborers in the towns, were not, of course, without variety. But the bulk of these laboring people cleaved to what has been called a small-producer ideology.... Stressing the social value—and virtue—of labor, this thought emphasized economic equality and economic justice.... The popular ideology of the Revolutionary period, with its emphasis on the virtuousness and community value of productive labor and on equality and social justice, provided an ideological legacy for those of a later period.3

Illustrative of the anti-republican small producer creed described by Nash was Thomas Cooper (1759-1839). He signed his articles “Back County Farmer” but in time taught at the University of South Carolina. He protested Gordon Wood’s new republican government’s attempts to protect American foreign commerce with a standing military. Such commerce in his view was worth less than the expense of supporting it. He pointed out that American exports consisted of articles “of the first necessity” and that they would be carried away in foreign vessels if American were not available. He stated, “Thus the only part of our commerce really defended by the American ships of war is the carrying trade.”4 In making his argument against the regular army and the Roman ideology that glorified it, Cooper noted that for the benefit, not of the farmer or mechanic but primarily of British agents in commercial towns, heavy taxes were levied upon the entire community and a standing navy was created which led the nation to continuous belligerency and war. As he put it:

I know of no body of men, so ready to postpone the interests of their Country to their own Interests, as Merchants. They are truly a swinish multitude: touch but the bristle of one of them and the whole herd cry out murder. Profess to defend your own territory and that only, and you will have no war; profess to defend your distant Commerce, and you are never safe for a Day.5

Parenti explains that history is biased towards “swinish merchants” described by Cooper because only the wealthy (or those funded by them) had or have the free time to engage in research and writing. He itemizes various ancient writers with a conservative orientation. Since most ancient writings have been lost, few opposing views survive into modern times. The writings that have survived favor the elite.6 Current scholars perpetuate the bias that favors an aristocratic interpretation of history. One only has to look at the neo-conservative movement’s obsession with comparing the United States to Rome in order to see the lasting effects of this academic tendency.

On the negative side, The Assassination is top-down history. Caesar was the instrument of the merchant-landlord class, which during all of Rome’s history waged
aggressive wars for the sake of economic profit against its neighbors and its own working class. Roman imperialism in the period of the late Republic needed a strong central government in order to destroy the independent principalities, the absolute control of the governors and the uncontrolled corruption, all of which were detrimental to commerce. The weak government of the senatorial Republicans was not competent to address this problem.

Caesar’s reforms were guided by this commercial consideration. He sought to convert Ostia to a major port and cut a canal through the Isthmus of Corinth. He ordered the rebuilding of Carthage and Corinth. He extended Latin rights throughout the Roman world. He abolished the tax system and reverted to the earlier version that allowed cities to collect tribute however they wanted, rather than needing Roman intermediaries. Militarily, he sought to conquer the Dacians, Parthians, and avenge the loss at Carrhæ.

Thus, Caesar instituted a massive mobilization. He originated a term limit law applicable to governors. He encouraged a debt restructuring law, which ultimately eliminated about a fourth of all debts owed. He promoted a law that rewarded families for having many children, to speed up the repopulation of Italy. He outlawed professional guilds, except those of ancient foundation, since many of these were subversive political clubs. He ordered a census to be taken, which resulted in a reduction in the grain dole. He established that jurors could only come from the Senate or the equestrian ranks. He passed a sumptuary law that restricted the purchase of certain luxuries. He established a police force and he appointed officials to carry out his land reforms.

In The Assassination one learns much about Caesar and the decadence of his class, but little about the Roman workers, especially the revolutionaries among them, or about their politics, culture and psychology. Presumably they had ideals and beliefs about labor, the family, class struggle and cosmology. They had forms of resistance and views about money-grubbing imperialism. For those of us who are class conscious, our interest is in the words and deeds of our own class, its politics, folklore, humor, religion and views on the meaning and direction of history. Among the Soviet and East European classicists who do take up these topics but who have yet to be digitized and turned into English are Franz Boime, Roman Kamienik, Sergei I. Koval’ev, Vasili Kuzishchin, Nikol’di Mashkin, Vladimir Sergeevich Sergeev, Elena M. Shterman and Elisabeth Charlotte Welskoph.

Caesar and similar leaders were often popular with working people because of the military victories and land, debt, tax and grain reforms which they offered. But there was a revolutionary tradition in Rome and the provinces that continually surfaced, which saw nothing for itself in such militarism, nationalism and commercial reformism. Even if one believes that history progresses through various stages such as primitive communism, feudalism and capitalism, we believe working people at whatever stage deserve study.

It is of interest that many Soviet and Russian classicists put more emphasis on the revolutionary working class as a cause for the transition from the republic to the empire than one finds in The Assassination. One of these classicists summarized:

Soviet historians do take note of the considerable influence on the socio-political

and ideological life of Rome in the first century B.C. The change in policy toward the slaves and freedmen observable under Caesar and carried out in more planned fashion by Augustus and other rulers of the early Empire was to some degree prepared for by the entire course of class struggle in the late Republican period and the fierce struggle within the slaveholding class for a new form of power, a military dictatorship. Spartacus’s insurrection held in this process if not a decisive, then a highly determining place. Frightened by its scope, the slave owners strengthened their supervision of the slaves and began to prefer home-bred slaves to captives and to create a large slavery administration; part of the functions of watching over the slaves passed into the hands of the state. The slaves gradually changed from being subjects of their own masters alone to being subjects of the entire state.

This same scholar noted further, in discussing the influence of working people in the transition from the republic to the empire, that “Spartacus’s rebellion had a considerably greater influence on changing the political superstructure. It is impossible, of course, to agree with the opinion that Spartacus’s insurrection was the principal reason for the changeover from a republic to an empire, but it undoubtedly promoted an acceleration of that process. Slave insurrections, and primarily that led by Spartacus, dealt a perceptible blow to the Senate as the highest organ of power in the republic, thus speeding the process of transition from the republic to the military dictatorship that preceded the establishment of the empire. The old aristocratic Senate, with its patriarchal traditions of nonintervention in the relations between slave owners and the slaves in their familiae and in disputes among the slave owners, was unable to prevent outbreaks of slave insurrections or to eliminate civil conflicts. The growing and developing class of slave owners needed a fundamentally different, more effective, and more flexible state policy capable of keeping the slaves and other groups of the exploited to subjection.... The need for such a government among the slaveholding class was one of the most important reasons for the establishment of the empire as the organ of state power of that class.”

Similar to the Soviet interest in Rome’s revolutionary working people is that of the liberation theology tradition. Among Rome’s immigrant slave communities were those with egalitarian religious ideologies that taught hatred for the landlord and merchant class. They were, as historian James Walsh, S.J. commented in his study on the working class Jews of the Roman empire, in constant rebellion both ideologically and as a way of life:

A Palestinian Jew living under the Pax Romana, in the reign of Augustus or Tiberius, might imagine the future in a variety of ways. The apocalyptic vision of Daniel 7 might serve: in the beast from the Sea one could recognize the current embodiment of the force arrayed against Yahweh and his people, the Roman Empire. Yahweh would crush the occupying power and restore “authority, splendor, and kingship” to his people. Or Yahweh might raise up an anointed one, from the House of David, in whom the still-outstanding promise of everlasting kingship would be realized. Or Yahweh might raise up a “savior,” like Gideon, who would lead Israel in Holy War against the nations (read Romans) and while he was at it deal with the “wicked,” the unfaithful Jews who collaborated with the Romans in imposing crushing burdens on the poor. Or he might raise up a prophet
to declare such a Holy War and to recall the people to covenant fidelity."11

To sum up, in our view The Assassination tells a valuable story. It corrects most academic accounts, which tell none of the story. But there is still more to be said.

Notes

1 As a scholar of classical Roman literature, the Dean Richards half of this review team confesses to an admiration for the literary beauty and power of ancient writers such as Cicero and has a particular regret at learning about whatever political shortcomings these works may conceal.

2 See R. Clark Carpenter, "Review of the assassination of Julius Caesar" at www.amazon.com/review/ R15UC631W1GWR.


5 Cooper quoted in ibid., p. 101. In speaking the logic of the small producers, Thomas Cooper contended that "if wars are necessarily attendant upon commerce, it is far wiser to dispense with it; to imitate the Chinese and other nations who have flourished without foreign trade: your commodities, the nations who want them will fetch away—if they will go to China for tea cups, they will come to America for bread."

6 Parenti, The Assassination, p. 18, mentions the historian Edward Gibbon as illustrative of the "eighteenth-century English gentleman ... in the upper strata of society." In contrast, the satirist Juvenal "offers a glimpse of the empire as it really was, a system of rapacious expropriation."

7 Like Parenti, the Soviet historian Sergey L. Utchenko focused on the positive nature of Caesar's accomplishments. See Utchenko's Julius Caesar (Moscow: Mytis, 1976), 365 pp. and his Tevera: Teverer (Caesar and Cicero) (Moscow: Mytis, 1998), 619 pp. These are not translated to English, but his Cicero e il suo tempo (Rome: Edizioni Riuniti, 1975), 291 pp. is available in Italian and Spanish.


10 Ibid.