

EVOLUTION OF MENTALITIES AND POLITICAL FORMS REFLECTED IN THE WORK OF SALLUST – PLATONIC INFLUENCES

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Abstract This paper aims to examine the concern of Roman society for political philosophy, especially the efforts of the Latin historian Sallust to harmonize Roman political reality, the result of an evolution for centuries, with political theoretical models, of Platonic inspiration. Political ideas expressed here are researched both in monographs on Sallust and the historian's epistles addressed to Caesar. The author's identity problem is a starting point to argue that in the era of the collapsing Roman Republic there existed a general concern about the concept and the development of the state. The question of selecting a leader for the ideal society, as it is treated in Plato's Laws, remains open, and leaves room for further discussions; what is maintained in the corpus of texts studied is the option for a unique leader of monarchical type supported and assisted by a council of legislators. The two types of war, external and internal, also constitute a common topic of Plato's dialogue and the Roman thinker, yet having different weight in the works cited; Plato provides rules for a hypothetical war, while for the Roman state which is about to be reborn rules take into account both the consequences of civil war and political experience of the Roman hegemony.

Keywords forms of government, political theory, autarkeia, laws, Plato, Sallust

The civil wars and social torments that marked the end of the Roman Republic and the establishment of a new kind of a monarchical form of government, namely the principality,

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were accompanied by debates and the refinement on the principles that should underpin the perfect state. On the one hand, the Roman thinkers had their own experience in politics on their side, as it had been in the real, unaccomplished city, and also examples extensively studied in the history of Rome and the universal history. On the other hand, they were all trained directly through study, or indirectly through summaries and translations, in political theories of the Greek philosophers, particularly Plato and the Stoic school. The focus of this article is the influence of Plato's thinking about the state on the work of Sallust.

The first part of this study follows the recurrence of certain Platonic ideas in the two letters addressed to the Caesar at the end of the civil war, allegedly authored by the Latin historian Sallust. This is not the place for a debate about the paternity or the apocryphal character of these writings; since they date back to the 1st century B.C., even if they cannot be attributed with precision to the historian, they indicate the overall concern of the period for the implementation and applicability of political projects in the empire that was to replace the outdated forms of the city states. In the second part of the article I intend to highlight the analysis of the political systems taken from the uncontested Sallustian works, the monographs *De coniuratione Catilinae* and *De bello lugurthino*, and from several preserved excerpts of *Historiae*, and also from apocryphas.

Epistulae spuriae Sallustianae

First of all, the first letter to Caesar¹ ponders on the difficulty of advising a king or an emperor² with the justification of a long preparation of the author for a political career. The recommendations made to the new political leader start with the obligations related to the conduct of the winner: they are highlighted by the contrast with the actions of the defeated opponent, i. e. Pompey.

Before outlining a reform plan, the author deems appropriate to present a brief history of the Roman State, characterized during its old times by *concordia ordinum*.³

Taking this brief history as a starting point, the steps required for the construction of a state on solid foundations are emphasized: extending the citizenship and homogenizing the social classes; fighting against avarice and luxury; diminishing the aristocratic influence on the senate; regaining freedom. The author of the writing also promises to publish a more detailed

¹ In ed. Loeb, which follows codex Vaticanus 3864, Ep. I bears the title *Ad Caesarem senem de republica epistula*, and it is preceded by *Epistula ad Caesarem senem*. Other editions prefer the title *Epistula* for both literary works, and they reverse their order, while taking into account the dating made based upon the chronological criterion of the facts: Epistula I is believed to have been written around 50 BC, and Epistula II, in 46. In this article we shall use the titles from the second variant, and the references will be made to Ep. I and Ep. II.

² *Ep. I ad Caesarem*, 1, 1: *Scio ego quam difficile atque asperum factu sit consilium dare regi aut imperatori*

³ *Concordia ordinum* – the formula belongs to Cicero, who thus describes the balanced state through a mixed constitution; the ruling of such a state is done by the people and the aristocracy, but it also has a royal component; this state is believed to have existed in reality during the time of the Scipions.

plan, which would include the composition of the senate.⁴ The letter ends rhetorically in the Ciceronian style, with a *prosopopoeia* of the homeland, which restates the demand of granting back the freedom abolished during the civil war.

The second letter⁵ firstly tackles the hypotheses concerning the gaining of political power: the old-fashioned and incorrect opinion was that the power should be passed on randomly; the other confirmed hypothesis, stating that the power is gained through the intervention of human actions, indicates that the power is not willingly yielded, but it is kept *per vim*. In order to withstand such difficulty, based on Caesar's acclaimed deeds, which confirmed his good character, the author recommends the ruler to be kind, so as to have kind subjects. The suggested programme for the consolidation of the state and of the peace alternates with the history of the civil war, probably due to the same didactic reasons, that is to provoke the addressee's disgust at and detachment from the bad practices. The fight against luxury and avarice is postulated once again, while the author also brings forward the issue related to the education of the youth.

The two letters, *suasoriae*, addressed to Caesar, focus, as they naturally should, on the personality of the ruler (*rector*),⁶ also called a king (*rex*),⁷ but mostly referred to as an *imperator*, which mainly meant for the author, the addressee and their contemporaries 'the general, the supreme commander of the armed forces, the leader in war' and less 'the civil ruler of the state' or even 'the emperor'. But this very image of the ruler, propelled by the military victories, is what Sallust sets his mind on, presenting on a secondary level, out of didactic purposes, just as Plato did in Book I of *Laws*, in matters of the war, as the first reason of the state, through the dialogue of Clinias and Athenian:

CLINIAS: For (as he would say) "peace," as the term is commonly employed, is nothing more than a name, the truth being that every State is, by a law of nature, engaged perpetually in an informal war with every other State. And if you look at the matter from this point of view you will find it practically true that our Cretan lawgiver ordained all our legal usages, both public and private, with an eye to war(...)

ATHENIAN: But tell me this more clearly still: by the definition you have given of the well-constituted State you appear to me to imply that it ought to be organized in such a way as to be victorious in war over all other States.⁸

ATHENIAN: The highest good, however, is neither war nor civil strife—which things we should pray rather to be saved from—but peace one with another and friendly feeling.

⁴ After the civil war ceased, Caesar intended to complete the senate, based on wider recruitment, with the occasion of the reforms implemented as *dictator perpetuus*. The formulation of a promise of a detailed reform plan for the state constitutes an argument in favour of the attribution of the letter to Sallustius.

⁵ In ed. Loeb, codex Vaticanus 3864 Ep. II bears the title *Ad Caesarem senem de re publica oratio*.

⁶ *Ep. II*, 1, 6, pg. 446: *Nam pessumus quisque asperrume rectorem patitur*

⁷ *Ep. I*, 1, 1 pg. 464 *consilium dare regi aut imperatori*

⁸ Plato, *Laws*, book I, [626a-c]

Moreover, it would seem that the victory we mentioned of a State over itself is not one of the best things but one of those which are necessary. [...] Similarly, with regard to the well-being of a State or an individual, that man will never make genuine statesman who pays attention primarily solely to the needs of foreign warfare, nor will he make a finished lawgiver unless he designs his legislation for peace [628e] rather than his peace legislation for war.⁹

Sallust supports the superiority of the state of peace by firstly indicating how difficult it is to manage a country that is tormented by the previous wars and that is used to take revenge:

I. But for you is harder than all before you to administer your conquests, because your war was more merciful than their peace.

III. Probably some will declare that with this words I am the ruiner of your victory, and that I am too well disposed towards the vanquished.¹⁰

The country that was consolidated during a period of peace and that has its foundations in the principle of justice, is destined to last a long time, whereas a country that is permanently at war due to a ruler who is suspicious of his subjects, and becomes a tyrannical king, is doomed to fall very quickly:

III. Therefore, since you must deal as victor with both war and peace, in order that you may end the one in the spirit of a good citizen, and make the other as just and as lasting as possible. (...). For my own part, I believe that a cruel rule is always more bitter than lasting, and that no one is fearful to the many but fear from the many recoils upon his own head; that such a life is engaged in an eternal and dangerous warfare, in which there is no safety in front, in the rear, or on the flanks, but always peril or fear. On the contrary, those who have tempered their rule with kindness and mercy have found everything happy and prosperous; even their enemies are more friendly than their countrymen to others.

A common aspect present in *Letters* and in *Laws* is the perspective on the two types of war – external and internal, more precisely, that the former is preferable:

ATHENIAN: Tell us then: do you clearly recognize, as we do, two distinct kinds of war? [...] the one being that which we all call “civil,” which is of all wars the most bitter, as we said just now, while the other kind, as I suppose we shall all agree, is that which we

⁹ *Laws*, book I, [628 c-e]

¹⁰ Ep. II.

engage in when we quarrel with foreigners and aliens—a kind much milder than the former.¹¹

However, the motivation for this preference is different: for Plato, the internal war, *stasis*, is more dangerous, because it requires the ones involved to possess all the virtues (justice, right judgment, prudence and courage), whereas the external war asks only courage of the ones fighting it;¹² the Sallustian letter draws attention to the political conduct recommended by the Roman tradition, more exactly the equity and the clemency shown towards the defeated enemies must be all the more offered to the citizens of the country:

Doubtless because I believe that the same privileges which we and our forefathers have often granted to foreign nations, our natural enemies, ought to be allowed to our fellow citizens, and that murder should not, after the manner of barbarians, be atoned for by murder, and blood by blood.¹³

It may be argued that the two texts tackle different stages of the internal war; the first one deals with the man's general conduct during the crisis, while the letter deals with the end of the war and the personality of the ruler. Still, both situations require the same virtues, more exactly, the supreme virtue, as Plato puts it.¹⁴

This good conduct towards the former political adversaries, now defeated, helps consolidate the peace, which is one of the conditions for the perennity of the estatal construction. If the external threat is a source of internal cohesion for the state, as the historian indicates in another work, the disappearance of this threat leads to the relaxation of manners and the birth of vices.¹⁵ This is why the state must be provided with the internal means to cultivate virtue in its citizens. Plato's conclusion is that one of the purposes of politics is to make people better persons (literally: to cure their souls),¹⁶ and this can be achieved firstly through the legislator's action, which must regulate the divine goods and the human ones;¹⁷ those who guide themselves in compliance with these principles can be happy.¹⁸

¹¹ *Laws*, book I, [629c-d].

¹² *Laws*, I [630a-b]: *ameinon dikaiosyne kai sophrosyne kai phronesis eis tauton elthousai met'andreas, autes mones andreas*;

¹³ Ep. II, cap. 3.

¹⁴ *Laws*, I, [630c] *ten megisten areten*.

¹⁵ *De bello lugurthino*, 41, 2–3: for before the destruction of Cartagena the Roman people have been treating among themselves the matters of the state peacefully and in a balanced way; *there wasn't any competition for the domination or glory between the citizens; the fear of enemies maintained the citadel in good habits. Only when that fear disappeared from their minds did the ones who enjoy favourable contexts occurred: fornication and arrogance*.

¹⁶ *Laws*, I, 650b *tauta <tas psyhas> therapeuein estin de pou politikes*

¹⁷ *Laws*, I [631d]

¹⁸ *Laws*, I [631b] *tous autois (tois nomois) hromenous eudaimonas apotelountes*

However, in the Roman *suasoria*, the task of making people better persons and of curing the diseases of the society belongs to the new ruler, *imperator*, who needs to take upon himself the role of *rector*, and also of a moral example:

But on the contrary, this should be one's endeavour, to be virtuous and valiant oneself and rule over subjects the best possible.¹⁹

Therefore, I conjure you by the gods, take the commonwealth in hand and surmount all difficulties, as you always do. For either you can cure our ills, or else all must give up the attempt.²⁰

The character that Sallust wishes Caesar to embody corresponds to some extent to the young tyrant endowed with moral and intellectual qualities, from Plato's dialogue, a tyrant whom the people want as a legislator leading the country to the state of perfection.²¹

The author of the letter makes these recommendations not because he intends to overlook the principle of the law,²² but because he has in mind a state which is really tormented because the laws ceased to be observed. Indeed, in the history of the Roman state, the written records indicate a prosperous period in which *the reason why the commons enjoyed freedom was because no man's power was superior to the laws*;²³ it is believed that this state was ruined because the small landholders became poor and preferred to sell even their freedom in the end; Plato's dialogue describes from the very beginning the fact that the law comes from the gods, through men of divine descent.

This is why neither of the texts contests the laws, but their interpretation. And because the nature of laws, be it divine or ancestral, is irrefutable, the lawmakers have no choice but to adapt and innovate within the given structure, offering convincing motivations or, better yet, introductions for every law.²⁴ The Sallustian *suasoria* does not ask for an *expressis verbis*, an introductory motivation for the laws, while it mentions the project of a constitution only in passing. However, it highlights certain domains in which a deep reform could be imposed. These have to do with the structure of the society and can prevent crises and even revolutions: the renewal of the social classes, the education of the youth, the limitation of luxury by controlling the individuals' expenses, the democratization of the judicial courts,²⁵ the establishment of colonies for the surplus of population. All these domains are debated and regulated in detail in the text of the *Laws* too.

¹⁹ Ep. II, 1

²⁰ Ep. II, 6

²¹ *Laws*, IV

²² He even promises, as we have noticed, a more detailed plan of the reform of the state (I, 12)

²³ Ep. I, 5

²⁴ *Laws*, IV, [723a-b] *ontos men einai peistikon, prooimiou men tou peri logous dynamin ehein*

²⁵ Plato, VI, 180

Sallust also adds to Plato's theoretical construction two repairing and specific measures which are deemed necessary for the cure of the Roman society, more precisely the diminishment of the aristocratic influence and the strengthening of the senate's authority.

The renewal of the social classes, or more precisely of the people (*plebes*,²⁶ *multitudo*) is necessary because in their current state they are incapable of participating adequately in the leadership of the state, since they no longer have the defining quality of freedom: the solution is to extend citizenship to those who have not lost their freedom, to mix the population; the old should forget all about slavery and the surplus of people should leave and establish new colonies.

Hence this population of ours, at first acquiring evil habits and then divided by different employments and modes of life, since it has no bond of union, seems to me quite unfitted to govern the state. But if new citizens should be added to their number, I have high hopes that all would be aroused to a sense of freedom; for the new citizens will feel a desire to retain their liberty, those who are already citizens will long to throw off the yoke of slavery. I therefore advise you to settle these newcomers, along with the earlier citizens, in colonies; for in this way our military power will be the greater, and the commons, being occupied with useful occupations, will cease to work public mischief.²⁷

In the system proposed by Plato, the surplus of citizens suggested to emigrate in colonies may only come from the fecundity of the families that had settled from the very beginning and only within the citadel, in a fixed number:

ATHENIAN: Moreover, as a final step, – in case we are in absolute desperation about the unequal condition of our 5,040 households, and are faced with a superabundance of citizens, owing to the mutual affection of those who cohabit with one another, which drives us to despair,—there still remains that ancient device which we have often mentioned, namely, the sending forth, in friendly wise from a friendly nation, of colonies consisting of such people as are deemed suitable.²⁸

and as far as the welcoming of the new citizens is concerned, it is to be done only in the event the citadel becomes depopulated out of natural causes, and the philosopher considers this measure rather sceptically:

²⁶ A confusion of the terms may be noticed. This was quite common at the time, between *plebes*, who designated the inhabitants of Rome who lacked the citizenship; and *populus*, made up of Roman citizens. Beyond the stylistic valence of the preference of one term or the other, this confusion is an indicator of the difficulty of operating a binary system of the popular meetings and of the magistrates and plebeian meetings.

²⁷ Ep. I, 5

²⁸ *Laws*, V, 10 [740e]

On the other hand, should the State ever be attacked by a deluging wave of disease or ruinous wars, and the houses fall much below the appointed number through bereavements, we ought not to introduce new citizens trained with a bastard training of our own free will,—but “necessity” (as the proverb runs) “not even God himself can compel.”²⁹

On the contrary, from Sallust’ perspective, the renewal of the population and of the people can be nothing more than a salutary measure, if it benefits from the direct involvement of the ruler:

Since therefore by the introduction of new citizens into the commonwealth the commons will be regenerated, you should devote particular attention to the problem of fostering good morals and establishing harmony between the old and the new burgesses.³⁰

Plato’s solution of colonization is proposed regardless of the social class and the origin of the young citizens, based on *isonomia*; Sallust regards it as applicable only to the average people (*plebes*).

Luxury and greed are recurrent themes in the entire Sallustian opus; they represent the main cause of social evil. This is why the greater good for the society can be brought about only by the ruler who will suppress or at least limit the desire of wealth. The first means of getting rich is indicated both by Plato, and by the Roman historian as being the sale of agricultural properties, but with Sallust the focus is on the impoverishment of those obliged to sell: *when, however, idleness and poverty gradually drove the commons from the fields (...)*³¹ while Plato had come up with a detailed plan in order to fight this vice: the land and the properties – divided evenly between the 5040 families, the state – joint-owner of every lot,³² the interdiction of selling and buying land ownership,³³ and what results therein: the property is passed as inheritance to a son.³⁴ The radical measures have implications in the demographic control too.³⁵ Of course, the Sallustian *suasoria*, due to the nature of its purpose, deals only to a small extent with the demographical issue.

If for the architects of the ideal citadel the desire to become rich is crushed in the bud by the laws regarding land ownership, crafts, lucrative activities and the internal currency:

²⁹ *Laws*, V, [740e-741a]

³⁰ Ep. I, 7

³¹ Ep. I, 5

³² *Laws*, V, [740a]

³³ *Laws*, V, [741b]

³⁴ *Laws*, V, [740b]

³⁵ *Laws*, V, [740c]

ATHENIAN: ... and it involves the condition that no facility should or can be given to anyone to make money by means of any illiberal trade, –inasmuch as what is called contemptible vulgarity perverts a liberal character, –and also that no one should ever claim to heap up riches from any such source.³⁶

Furthermore, upon all this there follows also a law which forbids any private person to possess any gold or silver, only coin for purposes of such daily exchange as it is almost necessary for craftsmen to make use of (...). For these reasons we say that our people should possess coined money which is legal tender among themselves, but valueless elsewhere. As regards the universal Hellenic coinage, – for the sake of expeditions and foreign visits, as well as of embassies etc.³⁷

For the Roman state, the solutions are remedial: democratizing the election process of jurors and magistrates, disclaiming the criterion of wealth; for this purpose, for the category of jurors the author suggests electing them moderately from the first class of citizens, but in larger numbers; and as far as the election of magistrates is concerned, it should be accessible to all classes of citizens, in compliance with the older legislative project belonging to Caius Gracchus. It should be noted that he offers concrete models in order to support his proposals: the law passed by the tribune of the people, in Rome, the Rhodian judicial system, which is even more democratic than Gracchus' legislative project.³⁸ The courses of action, the means of fighting the desire to get rich are different in the two texts, depending on the era and the citizens' age, but the reaffirmation of the principle of virtue and the mission of the state to cultivate it in its citizens is common to both of them:

But by far the greatest blessing which you can confer upon your country and fellow citizens, upon yourself and your children, in short, upon all mankind, will be either to do away with the pursuit of wealth or to reduce it so far as circumstances permit.³⁹

Yet if you take away the honour paid to money, the power of avarice, great as it is, will readily yield to good morals.⁴⁰

ATHENIAN: The intention of the judicious statesman is, we say, not at all the intention which the majority would ascribe to him; they would say that the good lawgiver should desire that the State, for which he is benevolently legislating, should be as large and as rich as possible, possessed of silver and gold, and bearing rule over as many people as possible both by land and sea; and they would add that he should desire the State to be as good and as happy as possible, if he is a true legislator.⁴¹

³⁶ *Laws*, V, [741e]

³⁷ *Laws*, V, [742a]

³⁸ Ep. I, 7

³⁹ Ep. I, 7

⁴⁰ Ep. I, 8

⁴¹ *Laws*, 5, [742d-e]

We say that in the State there must be neither gold nor silver, nor must there be much money-making by means of vulgar trading (...), and of this only so much as will not drive a man by his money-making to neglect the objects for which money exists: these objects are the soul and the body, which without gymnastic and the other branches of education would never become things of value.⁴²

Plato's dialogue is significantly dedicated in almost every book to the education of children and young people; every age and every subject are dealt with thoroughly; this is not the case and there are no resources in the Letters addressed to Caesar: the youth that is already corrupted by the habits that have crept into the citadel have to be brought back to honesty and diligence, which should be easier and more effective than the application of some cruel punishment as a consequence of a harsh judgment.⁴³

The theory of the forms of government in Sallust's work

The quality that should ensure perennity to any constitution is *autarkeia*: this is the conclusion reached by Sallust, both through the research of theoretical work about the state of other historians and also through the research applied to the firsthand historical sources, also including the material provided by his own era. But this *autarkeia* is far from being the political system closed within the imaginary boundaries of the ideal citadel, in which a wise legislator has removed not only the malicious individuals, but also any possibility of challenging the functioning order: the Roman *autarkeia*, which the historian mentions in several places, must provide models of good practice, protection and friendship to other states, in other words, it must achieve its imperial and civilizing vocation. The Roman state must primarily ensure the freedom of its members, and the development of the community, and to assume the role of mediator between the neighbouring peoples.

Sallust establishes that, chronologically, the first form of government of all the peoples was the monarchy, characterized by *autarkeia*:

Accordingly in the beginning kings (for that was the first title of sovereignty among men) took different courses, some training their minds and others their bodies. Even at that time men's lives were still free from covetousness; each was quite content with his own possessions.⁴⁴

They had a constitution founded upon law, which was in name a monarchy.⁴⁵

The primitive royalty is associated to the city-state (*urbs, polis*), whose structure allows the rulers to be in charge of its wellbeing and control (*reges, Patres*) and the people to participate democratically in the political decision. This kingship, at least in Rome, is not a

⁴² *Laws*, 5, [743d-e]

⁴³ Ep. II, 6

⁴⁴ *De coniuratione Catilinae*, 2, 1.

⁴⁵ *De coniuratione Catilinae*, 6, 6

tyrannical one, in an excessive manner, for the king's authority is accompanied by the advice of the elderly:

A chosen few, whose bodies were enfeebled by age but whose minds were fortified with wisdom, took counsel for the welfare of the state.⁴⁶

For the downfall of royalty, a process that starts in the East, through Cyrus' conquests, and spreads to Greece, Sallust suggests external causes: the envy provoked by the wealth of other countries, the desire to reign – which lead to wars, to the impoverishment and the negligence of farmers, and then to their reorientation towards a military career⁴⁷ –, and internal causes: the moral degradation of kings and the failure to fulfil the tasks for which they were appointed:

Later, when the rule of the kings, which at first had tended to preserve freedom and advance the state, had degenerated into a lawless tyranny (...) ⁴⁸

The solution to the defect of the monarchic Roman state the annual renewal of the power and the imposition of collegiality; the historian calls these heads of state (*consules imperatores*, meaning the rulers of an *imperium*). The chosen term presents the advantage of contiguity with *imperium*, which means 'complex state organization' but it primarily means 'military command'. Sallust conceives the State after Plato's model of the unity between the body and the soul, where the civic body is represented by the *plebes*, whose attribute is 'the greatest force' (*vis maxuma*) and the soul (*animus*) is represented by the rulers,⁴⁹ whether they are aristocrats (*nobilitas*), patricians (*patres*) or monarchs (*reges aut imperatores*). *Patres*, thanks to the experience and wisdom accumulated over the years, are the ones who should give advice and make decisions in the public interest, while *reges*, or after the reform mentioned by the historian, *imperatores* have the role of ensuring their implementation.

So *regnum*, the monarchical form of government, does no longer seem viable for Rome, from the historian's point of view; but it represents a convenient way of organizing the neighbouring states, while applied to or maintained in the states that are in *amicitia populi Romani*, whether they are integrated in the empire, or they request and receive the protection of the Roman people. This type of *regnum* remains a good choice if it is reconfirmed by the Roman authority.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ep. I, 5

⁴⁸ *De coniuratione Catilinae*, 6,7.

⁴⁹ Ep. I, 10

The Roman people gave Masinissa as a free gift all the cities and territories that he had taken in war. Consequently, Masinissa was ever our true and loyal friend.⁵⁰

Since in the interior of the Roman state the Senate holds the supreme authority (*summa auctoritas*) and the *plebes* represents *vis maxuma*, *populus Romanus* show *summa auctoritas* towards the satellite states who fulfil their obligations deriving from the central authority:

Those who diligently cultivated your friendship undertook an arduous duty, indeed, but were safe beyond all others.⁵¹

These kingdoms have the status of *procurationes* (administration, services) of the empire, as Adherbal describes his own reign inherited from the old allies of the Roman people.

Fathers of the Senate, my sire Micipsa admonished me on his death-bed to consider that I was only a steward of the kingdom of Numidia, but that the right and authority were in your hands.⁵²

The fact that the power belongs to the people – *populus Romanus*, the formula used in official contexts and in matters of external politics, *plebes*, when it is mentioned in relation to the other categories of the participants in leadership –, would correspond to the democratic form of government (*commune imperium*). The name under which the democratic constitution may be recognized in certain Sallustian writings is 'liberty' (*libertas*),⁵³ and at times it may be understood as *libertas populi*:

Still the free state, once liberty was won, waxed incredibly strong and great in a remarkably short time.⁵⁴

Moreover, those to whom Sulla's victory had meant the proscription of their parents, loss of property, and curtailment of their rights, looked forward in a similar spirit to the issue of a war (...) ⁵⁵

⁵⁰ *De bello lugurthino*, 5, 5.

⁵¹ *Iug.* 14,12

⁵² *Iug.* 14, 1

⁵³ *Libertas* is also the term used by Titus Livius for the democratic governing, as opposed to the monarchy: *Although < in other respects > they had opposite wishes, they all still wanted to <elect> a king, being unfamiliar with the sweet feeling of being free. (Ab Urbe condita, I, 17)*

⁵⁴ *Cat.* 7, 3 - after renouncing the monarchy.

⁵⁵ *De coniuratione Catilinae*, 37, 9: L. Cornelius Sylla's victory and the instauration of the perpetual dictatorship created the premises for the arrival of the optimates, exponents of the aristocracy and of the oligarchy, but the dictator was actually about to act as a cruel tyrant, striking a heavy blow at all the social classes.

But we ask neither for power nor for riches, the usual causes of wars and strife among mortals, but only for freedom, which no true man gives up except with his life.”⁵⁶

“We are battling for country, for freedom, for life; theirs is a futile contest, to uphold the power of a few men.”⁵⁷

But if your love of freedom were as great as the thirst for tyranny which spurs them on, surely our country would not be torn asunder as it now is (...)”⁵⁸

The freedom of the people, perverted, is transformed into greed (*lubido*), just as the dignity which should characterize the aristocracy (*nobilitas*): in between the contradictory kinds of greed, the state is torn apart, and the power is taken over, as the historian points out, by the faction of the nobility, because the plebeians (*plebes*) are divided and disunited. The decision and the material means fall in the hands of the few (*pauci*); a new form of leadership is born in Rome, which could be called oligarchy. The formula chosen by Sallust in order to elect the oligarchic government, as well as the oligarchic faction, is *potentia paucorum* (the strength or the influence of the few):

Unless haply one is possessed by a dishonourable and pernicious passion for sacrificing one’s personal honour and liberty to the power of a few men.”⁵⁹

The power of the commons was lessened, while that of the few increased.”⁶⁰

Potentia nobilitatis is to Sallust synonymous with *potentia paucorum*,⁶¹ since this influence always seems to be used against plebeians or freedom:

The nobles then abused their victory to gratify their passions; they put many men out of the way by the sword or by banishment, and thus rendered themselves for the future rather dreaded than powerful.”⁶²

In fact, the term *potentia*, with a negative content in relation to *potestas* (authority of the magistrate), is generally used for the illicit, even unjust power, to which such individual aspire or have. *Avidus potentiae* is the characterization the historian makes for describing

⁵⁶ *De coniuratione Catilinae*, 33, 4: This fragment and the next are extracted from the discourse of some representatives of the Popular Party; regardless of their true intentions, through the invocation of freedom, they proclaim themselves defenders of the interests of the people.

⁵⁷ *De coniuratione Catilinae*, 58, 8

⁵⁸ *Iug.* 31, 16

⁵⁹ *Iug.* 3, 3

⁶⁰ *Cat.* 39, 1

⁶¹ Even though it is known that a part of the Roman aristocracy, in the late period of the republic, was reduced to a modest material situation and that the oligarchic aspirations actually belonged to the wealthy Knights.

⁶² *Iug.* 42, 4

Pompeius Magnus, adding that if the ruler was not willing to associate himself with anyone else for the reign, and that if he had won the civil war, there wouldn't have been anyone else in the world against whom to wage a war: we recognize here the description of a candidate to tyranny, with an imperial vocation.⁶³ *Avidus potentiae* also describes Scaurus, who proves himself willing to secretly sell the *amicitia* of the Roman people, thus contributing to the erosion of the external politics of the empire.⁶⁴

Next, the aristocratic faction is described and presented as a deterrent in the reform of the society because it would not like its inherited privileges to be restricted. Thus, the aristocracy tends to impose an oligarchic regime.

The rivalry between the aristocracy and the plebeians is entirely assumed by the tribunes of the people too:

C. Memmius, tribune of the commons elect, a man of spirit who was hostile to the domination of the nobles (...) of whose independence and hatred of the power of the nobles I have already spoken (...)⁶⁵

Tiberius and C. Gracchus, (...) began to assert the freedom of the commons and expose the crimes of the oligarchs.⁶⁶

Even if their actions attract the accusation that their purpose is to become tyrants (*solus rerum potiretur*), thus jeopardizing their honour and life. The accusation that they aim towards tyranny, directed to the opponents, whether they are leaders of the plebeians or individuals striving to be acknowledged, thus represents a political weapon skilfully used by the aristocracy. As a victim of this manoeuvre, Sallust warns Caesar that he too may fall in this trap, due to his moral restoration programme, which is aimed at reacquiring the freedom regulated by the law:

The nobles (...) will cry out that the very foundations of society are being undermined, that this is the same thing as enslaving the original citizens; in short, that a free state will be transformed into a monarchy, if citizenship is conferred upon a great multitude through the bounty of one man.⁶⁷

The historian evokes the precedent of the tribune Livius Drusus, whose draft laws were blocked in the Senate because they benefitted everyone, *fearing therefore that by conferring such a favour he might acquire supreme power.*⁶⁸

⁶³ Ep. II, 2

⁶⁴ *Iug.* 15, 4

⁶⁵ *Iug.* 27, 2; 30, 3

⁶⁶ *Iug.* 42, 1

⁶⁷ Ep. I, 6

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Beyond the suspicions of the aristocracy and the bad intentions projected against the rivals, there is a grain of truth in the association of the people with a unique ruler, embodied by the providential character, to whom its freedom could be delegated in full trust:

Of a truth, few men desire freedom, the greater part are content with just masters.⁶⁹

Under these circumstances, *libertas*, the essential quality of a human being, and a form of participation of the citizen in the political life in all its forms (*res publica*), risks to be on sale once again (*venalis*).

To Sallust, the state is an organism composed of a soul and a body; the soul cultivated with virtues, the ruling class, will ensure the wellbeing of the citizens who make up the body, so as they participate in full freedom to the harmonious development of the entire citadel: that ruling class is especially called for to cultivate good manners (*bonae artes, boni mores*), firstly within itself, and then to set examples. However, if the aristocracy fails to become a moral elite and manifests oligarchic tendencies, and even manages to take over the leadership of the state, the historian indicates that it is recommended that a virtuous and well-intentioned ruler temporarily assumes the leadership of the state (*capessere rem publicam*) or of the mass (as tribune of the plebeians), in order to apply the right remedies and to restore the balance.

⁶⁹ *Historiae, Epistula Mithridatis*, 18.