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The Building of Consensus in Ancient Rome: analysed from the *Commentariolum petitionis* of Quintus Cicero

Omar Di Paola

1. Introduction

The *Commentariolum petitionis* is found in the codex of the letters *Ad familiares* of Cicero, and it is basically an epistle written by Quintus Tullius Cicero, younger brother of the more famous Marcus. It contains plenty of exhortations, good hints and wise pieces of advice, aiming to help the campaign for Consul of his brother, a role that, as we know, he obtained in 63 B.C.

The date of the publication of this work is uncertain, but there are, principally, two hypotheses about that, which both pivot on the question about its authenticity.¹ If the *Commentariolum petitionis* is written by Quintus, then its date has to be placed around 65 and 64 B.C.; on the other hand, if the author is not Quintus, its date may be placed around the first century A.D. Whatever is the solution, the *Commentariolum petitionis* remains a useful work, in order to describe the late republican electoral atmosphere, since even under the rule of Augustus and his heirs, the republican institutions do not die, although they surely lose a bit of their ancient prestige and power.

2. The political system in the Ciceronian age

In the age of Cicero,² those who elected the highest-ranking Roman Magistrates were the Centuriate Assemblies (*comitia centuriata*). These were instituted, according to tradition, by the King Servius Tullius. In

1. Among those who believe in the authenticity of the work can be counted: TYRRELL and PURSER 1904; CONSTANS 1934; CAROTENUTO 1956; NARDO 1970; while among who argue the opposite point of view can be enlisted: EUSSNER 1872; MOMMSEN 1887; HENDERSON 1950; NISBET 1961. For a more recent reconstruction of the dispute see FEDELI 2006.

2. For a description of the political dynamic of this age see also PANI 1999b, 231-232.

brief, they were public assemblies, in which took part who belonged to Centuries. For their part, the Centuries were a military subdivision that divided the population into classes, on the basis of their capacity to buy military equipment. For instance, those who belonged to first class had to have: as defensive equipment, a helmet, greaves, shield, and armor, all made of bronze; and as offensive equipment: a sword and a spear.³ However, gradually it turned into a merely wealth-based division, linked, therefore, to personal incomes.⁴

Overall the Centuries were 193, distributed in this way: eighty of the first class, the classes two through four consisting of twenty each, while the fifth comprised thirty. Furthermore there were two other classes: the cavalry (*equites*) that counted eighteen Centuries, and the *capite censi* (the poor) that enlisted five.⁵

The Centuries voted one at time, and each of them gave only one vote, a vote which represented the most common opinion spreads among its members, and that was the result of a previous assembly. It is easy to understand that to be elected it was sufficient to have the vote of the first two classes (*equites* and first class), which voted first. So it often happened that there was no need for the other classes to vote, such as in the election of Cicero; indeed, he won just with the vote of these two classes.⁶

3. The consensus

At the outset, the first lines of *Commentariolum petitionis* make clear on what the building of consensus has to be based. It essentially relies on four concepts: *simulatio*,⁷ *gloria*,⁸ *amicitia*,⁹ and *adsiduitas*.¹⁰

The *Simulatio* is the ability to fake attitudes and emotions, and it is conceived as opposed to the natural way to be. Indeed, Quintus

3. See Livy, *Ad Urbe condita*, I, 43.

4. See MARCONE 2002, 39-40.

5. TAYLOR 1966, 87.

6. See MARCONE 2002, 29-31.

7. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. I, 1.

8. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. I, 2.

9. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. I, 3.

10. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. XI, 41.

notes that even though it is worth more to be than to appear, in the few months of electoral campaign to appear is more useful than to be.¹¹

The *gloria* is the prestige, the reputation, the fame that the person has collected throughout his entire life. For this reason, the writer suggests to his brother to use the name that he has gained with eloquence, in order to collect votes.¹²

The notion of *amicitia*, instead, underlines the crucial role of the weaving of a thick net of friendships useful to sustain and help the candidate to enlarge his consensus.

Finally, the notion of *adsiduitas* mean the continuous presence of the candidate among his electors, which in this case is obviously his presence at Rome, which is very important to constantly remark on and remember to the latter, both the fact that he is a candidate, and that he is an accessible person.¹³

It is worth noting that, although these four notions in this essay are treated separately, within the *Commentariolum* they are obviously an organic whole, that affect each other, in order to reach the electoral victory.

3.1. *Simulatio*

We start with *simulatio*, since it is, maybe, the most representative concept of political *ars*. Even Plato, actually, in drawing the character of Alcibiades, Athenian politician par excellence, among his best “virtues” emphasizes his seeming handsomeness, although in a negative way, because, as is known, in the dialogues of Plato Alcibiades is a negative character.

But what is it that needs to be simulated? First, fame. It is crucial to have as many followers as possible, to appear already as a winner. Secondly, prestige, because to surround yourself with famous friends

11. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. I, 1. *Quamquam plurimum natura valet, tamen videtur in paucorum mensium negotio posse simulatio naturam vincere.*

12. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. I, 2. *Nominis novitatem dicendi gloria maxime sublevabis.*

13. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. XI, 43.

will add prestige to a candidate.¹⁴ Third political opinion, since a clear political point of view could drive away elements of consensus. For this reason, it is fundamental, according to the author, not to preclude yourself from the friendships of influential personalities by making anti-aristocratic speeches.¹⁵ The last important things to fake are availability and willingness. In fact, to show yourself keen on helping people, resolving their problems, will be useful to create a bonding with electors. But even when the requests are impossible to satisfy or in contrast with personal interests or those of friends, the candidate has to appear willing to help, and the denial of help should never be personal, but tied to the material impossibility of doing the task, so to not disappoint whoever came searching for help.¹⁶ Therefore, as *homines fronte et oratione magis quam ipso beneficio reque capiuntur*,¹⁷ it is crucial to promise to help everybody, in order that none should be disappointed, but arousing, on the contrary, a solid fondness for the candidate.

3.2. Gloria

Another requirement vital for building a strong consensus is *Gloria*, namely, the prestige gained within society. For this reason, according to the author, it is necessary for the candidate to give value to his own moral and professional qualities. So, Quintus reminds his brother to take advantage of both his eloquence and his connections, stemming from his legal activity.¹⁸ In the first case, he shall encourage to support his electoral campaign those who are close to him for his intellectual prestige. While in the second case, he shall put pressure on those whom he has helped in court, reminding them, even insistently, that when they asked for help, he gave it for free, and only now do they have the opportunity to repay their debts.

14. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. V, 18. *Deinde sunt instituendi cuiusque generis amici: ad speciem, homines inlustres honore ac nomine (qui, etiam si suffragandi studia non navant, tamen adferunt petitori aliquid dignitatis)*; see also Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. I, 6.

15. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. I, 5.

16. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. XII, 47-49.

17. Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. XII, 46.

18. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. I, 2.

Anyway, it is striking how this concept of *gloria* does not mean just the notoriety gained by the person throughout his life in an absolute sense, but it indicates also the prestige enjoyed by a candidate in relation to the other candidates.

For this, chapters II and III are very important, because these describe the vices, and so the bad fame, the negative *gloria*, of the two main opponents of Cicero: Gaius Antonius Hybrida and Lucius Sergius Catilina.¹⁹ The first, notorious as a lascivious person, was dismissed from Senate, his properties were confiscated, and he was used to denigrate the Republic;²⁰ while the second was known to be a quite expert thief, a good briber of judges, an excellent embezzler, and, last but not less important, a superb murderer.²¹ In this way, by just reminding the Roman people of the “virtues” of his opponents, he could easily win.²²

3.3. *Amicitia*

Amicitia, namely friendship, is something, differently from what one might think, that does not grow spontaneously; indeed, it needs a lot of attention. True friends are surely always welcome, but usually during an electoral campaign the notion of friendship assumes a wider meaning.²³ Indeed, according Cicero’s words, the friend, during the electoral competition, is *whosoever gives any sign of an inclination to you, or habitually visits at your house*.²⁴ This underlines the fact that the idea of friendship shown is totally utilitarian, because it is not grounded on a true and authentic relationship, but is indeed based on a convenience-related reciprocal relationship. Nonetheless, what it is more striking is that this utilitarian relationship is not one way, since every part of this relation hopes to gain something from this new friendship. The next passage give the meaning of this “convenience”, featuring the concept of *amicitia* in *Commentariolum petitionis*: *There*

19. The first was uncle of the triumvir Mark Antony, while the second was the famous conspirator, stopped by Cicero in 63 b.C.

20. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. II, 8.

21. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. II-III, 9-10.

22. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. III, 12.

23. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. V, 16.

24. Idem. *Quisquis est enim qui ostendat aliquid in te voluntatis, qui colat, qui domum ventitet*.

are, again, others who either have no influence or are positively disliked by their tribesmen, and have neither the spirit nor the ability to exert themselves on the spur of the moment: be sure you distinguish between such men, that you may not be disappointed in your expectation of support by placing over-much hope on some particular person.²⁵ So there are two types of persons to be avoided: those who “*nihil possunt*” (have no influence) and those who “*odio sunt tribulibus suis*” (are positively disliked by their tribesmen), since the first would be useless, while the others would be damaging.

For this reasons to weigh accurately one’s friendships is essential. These should be of every kind and class: nobles, *equites* (cavalry), influential people, judges, old and young people, since everyone is able to give something. For instance, judges would protect the candidate from the laws,²⁶ noblemen give him prestige,²⁷ and young people, for their ambition and energy, would be the most zealous in the canvass.²⁸ Further, what is crucial is the role of the most important people of Centuries, since these people are able to influence their vote, thus granting victory.²⁹

To achieve all these goals, first Quintus reminds his brother to collect from his clients the debts of gratitude that they have with him - it is to be noted that lawyers in ancient Rome defended their clients without any fees -, and he should insist with them even urgently and harassingly;³⁰ and then he continues by noting that there are so many people that want as debtor someone powerful like him, and so if he will just ask, showing gratitude for the help received, there will be a queue to sustain him.³¹ Moreover, his supporters will increase in number if he makes the effort to remember their names, so as to make each of

25. Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. VI, 24. *Sunt autem alii qui aut nihil possunt aut etiam odio sunt tribulibus suis nec habent tantum animi ac facultatis ut enitantur ex tempore; hos ut internoscas videto, ne spe in aliquo maiore posita praesidi parum comparetur.*

26. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. V, 18.

27. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. I, 6.

28. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. VIII, 33.

29. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. V, 18.

30. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. V, 19-20.

31. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. VIII, 31.

them feel special,³² as, in the end, consensus finds its roots, mostly, in the strength of appearances.

As we have said, to make many friendships is crucial, and, on this particular aspect, Quintus writes a whole paragraph, the sixth. Here, he maintains that people are usually led *ad benevolentiam* by three reasons: *beneficio*, *spe*, and *adiunctione animi ac voluntate*.

The first reason, the *beneficium*, is literally the aid received. The latter, even very little, can bring a lot of votes, both from the natural affinity that the aid generates between helper and helped, and also for a sort of moral duty, that in some way forces the person who has received the benefit, if he does not want to spoil his reputation, to give something in return. Nevertheless, this threat for someone could not be enough, so in this case, Quintus suggests to his brother that he should be even insistent in demanding that the debts are paid.³³

The second reason, the *spes*, is the hope to receive some day, not necessarily now, a benefit or an aid for your support. As is clear, it is something subtler, it is something that needs to be nurtured, because it could easily disappear. To feed it, the semblance of the candidate shall be marked by gratitude and availability. The former will make clear that he recognizes the efforts to help him, and the benefits that he is gaining; while the latter will show that the candidate will be happy to return the favours. It is to be noted that this hope could remain only a potential benefit - as indeed happens most of the time - which never becomes real.³⁴

The last reason, the *adiunctio animi ac voluntas*, could be defined as the natural affinity that bonds two persons who have something in common. This one, even though it seems the most true and genuine kind of friendship, is not, since, in the same way as the others, it needs to be constantly fed, modifying one's own speeches with the reasons for which they seem to support the candidate.³⁵ Following these hints, he will weave a strong net of friendships, that will help him a lot in his electoral campaign.

32. See *id.*

33. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. VI, 21.

34. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. VI, 22.

35. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. VI, 23.

3.4. *Adsiduitas*

Adsiduitas is a concept in some way alike to that of “advertisement”, since it represents the visibility of the candidate: in other words, it is his capacity to be always in front of his public.³⁶

For this reason, he should go regularly to the Forum, because there he will find the most influential citizens³⁷; and he must go at fixed hours, so as to be always available and traceable.³⁸

Furthermore, he should wander among all tribes, to be known and, at the same time, to canvass for himself.³⁹

Nonetheless, the *adsiduitas* is not just the mere physical presence, although to be in Rome is very important, but it has to be meant in a wider sense, which includes to be present in the “mind” of voters too. For this reason, Quintus recalls to his brother that the best publicity comes from one’s own house, from respect of one’s own friends, from blessings of relatives, and even from the good words of one’s own freedmen and slaves. So, he should show kindness and availability towards anyone,⁴⁰ and when he cannot reach someone physically, he should make postal advertisement, sending messengers so as to be always present.⁴¹

The relevance of this notion is marked by the role assumed by “*deductores*” and “*adsectatores*” within an electoral campaign. The former are those who even sustaining the candidate follow him into the forum just sometimes; while the second are those who constantly follow him, like the modern “groupies”. It is striking that Quintus deems this task so important, that if someone cannot attend at it, even for health reasons, he should delegate this duty to a friend or a relative.⁴² This is amazing, because it shows a peculiar way of understanding the role of a candidate: he is not just like a single person who aims to obtain an office, but he is a leader of a faction, who every day with *adsiduitas*

36. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. XI, 41.

37. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. VIII, 29.

38. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. IX, 36.

39. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. VIII, 30.

40. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. V, 17.

41. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. VIII, 29.

42. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. IX, 37.

(which literally translated means “continuity”) shows his strength and brings pressure to bear both on voters and on the whole city.

4. Appendix: the dangers behind an electoral campaign

An electoral campaign can be very dangerous, and threats can come from both inside and outside. What saves the candidate from those dangers is his judging capacity, that has to lead him in the choice of his friends, and in the understanding of his enemies. About inside threats, according to the author, one has to recognize the real friends from those who only pretend to be.⁴³ Furthermore, it is crucial to know also how much everyone can be helpful, so as not to be subsequently disappointed for the weak aid received.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, Quintus says no more.

Regarding the other kind of threats, the author distinguishes three sorts of people who can bring dangers to the candidate: those who have been injured by the candidate (*quos laesisti*), who dislike him without reason (*qui sine causa non amant*), and those who are friends with his competitors (*qui competitorum valde amici sunt*).⁴⁵ The first type of persons can be blandished with open excuses, and explaining if they support him, he will be as zealous to save their interests as he was when he was against them.

The second genre of people, on the other hand, have to be flattered by gifts, favours, and especially with the hope of having more of these. Finally, the last kind of people should be appeased by both using all previous strategies, and persuading them that he will be good to enemies too.⁴⁶

5. Conclusion

We can conclude this essay by saying that the process of creation of consensus, in the late Roman Republic, at least from what it is possible to assume from the *Commentariolum petitionis*, is something essentially

43. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. X, 39.

44. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. VI, 24.

45. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. X, 40.

46. See Q. CICERO *Commentariolum petitionis*. X, 40.

based on the connections which the candidate, or the person who is looking for consensus, is able to build. Anyway, it is important to reaffirm the irrelevance for this essay of the dating problem of the *Commentariolum petitionis*, because this idea - of consensus grounded on connections - does not change in the first century A.D.. Indeed, the same concept appears in the Senecan *De Clementia*, in a presumed speech of Augustus to Cinna, that has as its background the revealing of a conspiracy made by the latter against the former. Here, Augustus openly declares that if it were just him between Cinna and power, he will be glad promptly to leave the rule to him, but he reminds him that several influential man and families - such as Paulus and Fabius Maximus, and the family of Cossi and Servilii - would never let him be in charge.⁴⁷ This passage shows that the Augustan consensus, at least according to Seneca, is founded on the support which those families give to him. The *De Clementia* was written, according Senecan scholars, around 54 and 56 A.D., hence it is reasonable to assume that even in the first century this notion remains the same, so the issue of dating as regards this is irrelevant.

But maybe what is mostly striking about the *Commentariolum* is the notion of *adsiduitas*, which represents the roots of consensus itself. This idea is crucial, because designates the capacity of the candidate to deploy his political power, bringing a constant threat, although subtly covered, to competitors and voters. All of this shows an essentially negative, almost Mafioso, view of power, since he who is in charge rules not because he is the best or the most virtuous, but only for the reason, that if he does not, he could bring a serious threat to the stability of the Republic. The relevance of “followers” in an electoral campaign is the clearest mark of this state.

Nowadays we have something similar with the “acquiring of followers”, in which daily every VIP is involved. But what is astonishing is that today we have lost the sense of ‘presence’, so the question whether these “followers” are real or not for us is unimportant, generating the paradox that the only things that are relevant are the numbers, imaginary things created by us, to make us feel safe behind their artificial order.

47. See Seneca, *De Clementia*, III, 7, 10.

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