THE BRIDLE OF FEAR

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Much has been written about the Greek contribution to political theory, very little about the Roman. What follows is an attempt to reclaim for Roman thinkers (and doers!) a distinctive and original theory of politics.

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Around 150 B.C. there was a fierce debate in the Roman Senate on the issue of Carthage. Cato the Censor urged that it should be destroyed because it was a threat to Rome’s power. Scipio Nasica, on the contrary, counselled forbearance; Carthage was useful precisely because it was a threat. ‘He urged that fear of Carthage be kept as a bridle to restrain the demands of the masses.’ 1 Diodorus Siculus makes explicit the premises behind this analysis:

... so long as Carthage survived, the fear she generated compelled the Romans to live together in harmony and to rule their subjects equitably and with credit to themselves — much the best means to maintain and extend an empire; but once the rival city was destroyed it was only too evident that there would be civil war at home, and that hatred for the governing power would spring up among all the allies because of the rapacity and lawlessness to which the Roman magistrates would subject them.2

That was written around 40 B.C.; and just about the same time very similar ideas were being developed by a Latin writer. Sallust, in his monograph on the Jugurthine War, noted that the decline of Rome began when Carthage was destroyed. So long as it remained it caused fear, and this ‘fear of the foreign enemy’ (metus hostilis) unified Senate and people; once this fear was removed, division and decline followed.3

These ideas form a cluster, bound together by the logic of politics. War and the threat of war produce unity and success, whereas peace and security lead to class conflict and decline. The implicit premise is that the authority of the state (and the class which controls that state) must be maintained, and that the best way to do this is to cultivate discipline through war or the threat of war, ‘the bridle of fear’. This cluster of ideas therefore illustrates

the principle of Max Weber, that authority is legitimized by discipline and 'military discipline gives birth to all discipline.'

This cluster of ideas continued to figure in Roman political thought, and its subsequent development has been described elsewhere. What concerns us here, rather, is the question of origin. Where and when did the cluster arise? And does this tell us why it arose?

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That cluster first appears in the work of Polybius, and indeed in the section of his work — Book 6 — devoted to an analysis of the Roman constitution. He begins by stating that the three branches of government share in the control of the Roman state, and then describes how they co-operate. This, he says, makes it the best possible political system, and is the secret of Rome's greatness.

For whenever the menace of some common danger from abroad compels them to act in concord and support each other, so great does the strength of the state become, that nothing which is requisite can be neglected, as all are zealously competing in devising means of meeting the need of the hour, nor can any decision arrived at fail to be executed promptly, as all are co-operating both in public and in private. . . .

Polybius goes on to discuss what happens when external fear is removed, stating generally that 'in the enjoyment of this prosperity (Romans) are corrupted by flattery and idleness and wax insolent and overbearing.' Later in the work, however, he makes it clear that he is really speaking of the masses, who will no longer consent to obey or even to be the equals of the ruling class, but will demand the lion's share for themselves. When that happens, this state will change its name to the finest sounding of all, freedom and democracy, but will change its nature to the worst thing of all, mob rule.

In these passages Polybius presents the whole cluster of ideas sketched above, and he also makes explicit the premises underlying them. The question must naturally arise, what is the origin of these ideas?

An obvious explanation, of course, would be that Polybius developed them himself. But nobody, to my knowledge, has suggested that, and the

reason is clear. In general his ideas are derivative, and his analytic energies were focused on explaining the causes of wars.  

An equally obvious explanation would be that Polybius derived his ideas from his Roman hosts while interned in the city in the years 167-150 B.C., which is when he wrote Book 6. This might seem the more probable from the fact that in the preceding generation Caecilius Metellus had stated in the Senate that ‘he was not sure whether the victory over Carthage would be the cause of more good than harm to the Republic.’

That explanation, however, has been summarily rejected. Matthias Gelzer has stated categorically that ‘neither Metellus nor Scipio can have developed this analysis themselves . . . Both were acquainted with Greek literature and in particular with rhetorical handbooks.’ He then quotes three similar passages and concludes: ‘Naturally I don’t suggest that Metellus and Scipio knew precisely these passages; rather I consider these ideas (about fear) to have been rhetorical commonplaces.’

Gelzer’s explanation was advanced in 1931 and has remained uncontested. It was repeated by Walbank in 1957 in his commentary on Polybius: ‘they go back to Greek commonplaces,’ and he cites two of Gelzer’s three passages. And in 1967 Astin concluded that if in fact Scipio Nasica did use the argument for fear ‘he employed it merely as a rhetorical “topos” which was elaborated by writers of a later generation . . .’

These conclusions rest on unexamined evidence. Let us therefore examine that evidence.


(1) Xenophon is describing a dialogue between Cyrus and Tigranes about what punishment should be exacted of the rebellious king of Armenia. Tigranes argues (3.1.23) that nothing ‘breaks a man’s spirit sooner than abject fear . . . fear is a heavier punishment than real correction.’ Cyrus responds (3.1.26) that once fear is removed, the king, ‘who is insolent in success’ (Gelzer quotes this) will again become arrogant and cause trouble. Tigranes answers that clemency will bring loyalty, which convinces Cyrus because (3.1.28) he wants above all, servants who obey ‘out of goodwill and friendship (εύνοια και φιλία) toward me.’ What is involved here is the loyalty and goodwill (εύνοια) of an individual, not the cohesion

11. Valerius Maximus 7.2.3.
and co-operation (Polybius 6.18.2: συμφρονείν καί συνεργεῖν) of a community. There is no reference here to politics or class conflict; a crucial element of the cluster is missing.

(2) Plato recalls that the mighty forces of the Persian invaders inspired such fear in Athenians that it bound them in ‘a slavery to our rulers and our laws.’ This bears some resemblance to the fear-cluster, but in fact Plato presents his ideas in a totally different context; he is arguing that ‘complete liberty, unfettered by any authority, is vastly inferior to a moderate form of government under elected magistrates.’ There is no connection here with stability vs. class conflict.

(3) Aristotle is arguing that militaristic states decline when they are at peace. ‘The lawgiver is to blame, because he did not educate them to be able to employ leisure.’ There is no reference here whatever to class conflict or to the internal usefulness of fear.

My conclusion is that none of Gelzer’s examples prove anything. The ‘rhetorical commonplaces’ are imaginary.

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But the basic premise remains: a sophisticated political theory like this must be Greek in origin. Disproving such a presumption is, as always, difficult. One can only expect negative results, which are never conclusive.

Nevertheless a thorough search has been made through the resources of Thesaurus Linguae Graecae at the University of California, Irvine. The TLG data bank now has ca. 26 million words of corrected and verified text, representing the major works of Greek literature down to A.D. 300.

First it was necessary to isolate the essential words. Taking Polybius’ passage (6.18.2) as the locus classicus, one can distinguish the ideas of (a) fear (φόβος), (b) coming from abroad (έξωθεν), and (c) compelling harmony (συμφρονεῖν καί συνεργεῖν) or some other political effect. The strategy chosen was to make a search for the first two ideas, and see if any passages containing these also contained the third, that is anything connected with harmony or politics in general. Such a correlation would represent a very close parallel to the cluster found in Polybius. Presumably a fair number would turn up if it were really a ‘topos.’

In the event not one did, except of course for the parallel passages in Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch’s life of Cato the Censor.

18. At present the TLG data bank has about 52 million words of text, of which about half has been verified and corrected. It is this half which has been searched. The remaining material dates from the period A.D. 300–600; its unavailability does not therefore, affect the present argument.
To be precise: thirty-four passages were identified in which the word ἐξωθεν occurred with the root φοβ- (φοβ- rather than φόβος was used in order to catch oblique forms of the noun, but of course adjectival forms also were registered). However in not one case was there the third element, harmony or anything else connected with politics. The passages are listed in an appendix below.

An especially instructive example is provided by a passage of Plutarch’s ‘Dialogue on Love.’ In discussing the qualities needed for a happy marriage he notes the temperance (σωφροσύνη) ‘that comes from without (ἐξωθεν) and in deference to usage is imposed by shame and fears (αισχύνης καὶ φόβων) rather than voluntary . . .’ This is probably the closest parallel to the cluster, and indeed suggests an interesting psychological element in the theory. But it is also quite clear that the passage has nothing to do with class conflict or maintenance of the status quo or anything else which is remotely political.

A second negative test is possible. Polybius says that common danger from abroad ‘compels them to act in concord’, — ‘compels’ being a form of ἀναγκάζω. If Polybius were using a topos, presumably he would have other passages in which a danger would ‘compel’ some political result. So I had the TLG search the text of Polybius for the root of the verb: ἀναγκάζω. 197 passages were identified. In not one, however (except of course 6.18.2), does fear compel harmony, or anything else remotely similar.

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Three negative findings, therefore: (1) the three passages adduced as Greek parallels are simply not parallel; (2) the corpus of Greek literature has no parallels, except where the debate on Carthage is discussed and a common source may be presumed; (3) Polybius himself does not use the ‘topos’ elsewhere.

A fourth negative finding is worth noting. Sallust gives a clear formulation of the ‘bridle of fear’ theory, as noted above. Now it is well established that Sallust depended heavily on Thucydides for his general ideas, and it is therefore significant that on the present issue there is no dependence. Thomas Scanlon has recently stressed that the two historians were quite opposed in their views of war. Whereas Sallust regarded war as at times a positive factor because it ‘was an effective deterrent to domestic dissent,’ Thucydides considered war a teacher of violence: they had ‘essentially

20. My thanks are due Professor Theodore Brunner for access to TLG’s data bank, which made this research possible.
different views on the desirability of international conflict.'

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If Gelzer's explanation be rejected, what can be put in its place? Let us suggest some probabilities, as the basis for further work.

First, it seems quite likely that Polybius learned about the 'bridle of fear' not from Greek sources of which all traces have unfortunately disappeared, but rather from his Roman hosts. The long exposition of Roman military institutions in Book 6 shows that he was perfectly able to listen and learn from them.

Futhermore, it would be well to place this in the context of the conscious development of political theory at Rome, which began no later than the dedication of the Temple of Concord in 216 B.C. A coherent set of ideas was developed by the Roman aristocracy as part of a conscious effort to maintain social peace. Greek ideas of homonoia played a role in this development.22

Finally, the source of the theory, at least as it reached Polybius, was probably Scipio Aemilianus. Scipio had an interest in general ideas, indicated for example by his remarks on the use of terror.23 An anecdote in Orosius specifically links him with the idea that once Numantia and Carthage were destroyed the result was discord and sedition.24

What remains to be established is when this theory arose, how it was connected with general ideas of human nature, and what effect it had on political thought and action.

One element of the theory, however, has been established: it was Roman. The link between war abroad and concord at home became a distinctive and important feature of Roman politics and culture, a key to its successes and also to its failures.

Appendix

Here is a list of the thirty-four passages mentioned above, in which *phob-* and *exother* occur together:

1. Aetius Amidenus, *Itatrica* 9;
2. Areteaus, *De curatione diuturnorum morborum* 2.13.1;
3-5. Aristotle, *Problemata* 903B, 948B (lines 13 &38);
6. Chariton 4.2.7;
7-8. Clemens Alexandrinus, *Paedagogus* 8.68.3 and *Elogae propheticae* 11.2;
9. Diogenes Laertius *Vit.* 7.89;
10. Euripides, *Electra* 901;
15-18. *De symptomatum causis* 7.203, lines 12 and 16; *De locis affectis* 8.191; *De melancholia* 6.9;
19-20. *Historia Alexandri Magni*, recension Beta, 3.29; recension Gamma, 30A;
21-22. *New Testament*, 2 Corinthians 7.5 and 1 Peter 3.3;
24-25. Plutarch, *Cato Maior* 27.3, and *Amatorius* 767E;
27. Rufus Ephesius, *Quaestiones medicinales* 24;
28. Polybius, *Histories* 6.18.2;
29-30. Septuagint, *Deut.* 32.25 and *Odae Sol.* 2.25;
33-34. Strabo, *Geographia* 2.3.4 and 16.1.9.