Was there a culture of the Roman *plebs*?

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CYRIL COURRIER, *LA PLÈBE DE ROME ET SA CULTURE (FIN DU IIe SIÈCLE AV. J.-C. – FIN DU Ier SIÈCLE AP. J.-C.)* (Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, fasc. 353; Rome 2014). Pp. xi + 1031, ill. 12, tableaux 25. ISBN 978-2-7283-0966-5.

The last few years have seen a groundswell of interest in the lives of non-élite Romans. Recent work on the Roman economy has shown that not only leisured élites but also many working people lived in relative comfort and left their mark on Roman culture.[1] Hundreds of thousands of working people lived relatively prosperous lives free from élite exploitation, without belonging to legally privileged orders such as the *ordo decurionum*. At this point, it has become uncontroversial to study successful artisans and traders as people "in the middle", but it remains a matter of debate how to conceptualize them historically.[2] Ancient literature, which was mostly written by educated political élites, was either disinterested in or dismissive of "the people", and, typically, portrayed them as a largely homogenous mass. Yet it is clear that the Roman *plebs* was an economically and culturally multifaceted group. As Horace put it, every citizen in Rome was *plebs* whose net worth fell below the census requirement of that of the equestrian order. If someone as culturally sophisticated as Horace could be *plebs* for being 6000-7000 sesterces short of the 400,000 needed to qualify as knight, the *plebs* of Rome was a rather diverse group indeed.[3] As the case of Horace shows, the problem with stratifying non-élites poses itself with particular urgency in the city of Rome. The capital was a microcosm of the Roman world, which not only included the imperial aristocracy of senators and knights but also hundreds of thousands of others from all over the known world who enjoyed vastly diverging levels of wealth and legal privilege. This makes Rome an excellent testing ground for analytical categories of non-élite society. Did the economic and social situation of the *plebs* give rise to specifically plebeian cultures and politics, and, if so, how can they be defined?

These questions are discussed in great detail on C. Courrier's first book, *La plèbe de Rome et sa culture*. Courrier is attempting to identify various social strata ("couches sociales") within the *plebs*. He further raises the question whether being *plebs* amounted to a cultural identity in its own right, primarily in Rome but also in other cities of the empire. Courrier is concerned with establishing that there was a demographically stable population of hundreds of thousands of Roman businesspeople ("gens de métier") who had their own political identity and could perpetuate a plebeian cultural memory ("mémoire plébéienne") in the Assmannian sense (547). Courrier moves from charting the economic conditions of working people and their expressions of professional pride in Part 1 (1-291) to collective political actions of the Roman *plebs* in Part 3 (427-736). Squeezed between these two main parts is a shorter "deuxième partie" (299-421), which engages with P. Veyne's concept of the *plebs media*. In short, Courrier is first and foremost interested in the connection between economy and politics, and not so much in other aspects of Rome's metropolitan culture — in particular, Rome's Babylonian mix of languages and religions, along with its diverse writing cultures, not just in Latin and Greek but also in other languages. This is a major omission, because Rome's multiculturalism was one of the main features of the capital's non-élite culture that set it apart from almost all other cities of the empire.

Throughout the book, Courrier's arguments are guided by an engagement with previous scholarship. Part 1 is a deft rebuttal of the idea that Rome suffered from an 'urban graveyard

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1   See, e.g., C. Holleran, *Shopping in ancient Rome: the retail trade in the Late Republic and the Principate* (Oxford 2012); N. Tran, *Dominus tabernae. Le statut de travail des artisans et des commerçants de l'Occident romain (Ier siècle av. J.-C. - IIIe siècle ap. J.-C.)* (BEFAR 360, 2013); A. Wilson and M. Flohr (edd.), *Urban craftsmen and traders in the Roman world* (Oxford 2016)

2   See, e.g., R. Knapp, *Invisible Romans* (Cambridge MA 2011) 5-52.

3   Hor., *Ep.* 1.57-59: *Est animus tibi, sunt mores, est lingua fidesque, sed quadringentis sex septem milia desunt: plebs eris.*

effect'. Part 2 challenges Veyne's notion of the *plebs media* as a "classe moyenne". Part 3 argues against the notion of an apolitical *plebs*, primarily by critiquing H. Mouritsen, Veyne and E. Flaig. Even though Courrier's work is, on the whole, theoretically well informed, he does not offer a coherent model for conceptualizing the Roman *plebs* and its culture. Still, he does provide an erudite and intelligent guide for thinking about the relationship between economics, culture and politics in the city of Rome and beyond.

In the absence of a sophisticated ancient Roman discourse on non-élites, social groups such as the Roman *plebs* cannot be studied based on literary sources alone. The most common approach to non-élites has therefore been first to study their economic conditions and then to move on to non-élite forms of cultural expression, such as funerary monuments. This allows for a comparison with élite culture that frequently segues into the question whether non-élite culture was a matter of élite emulation.[4] Courrier proceeds along this line of argument, but his findings suggest to this reader that the culture of the Roman *plebs* cannot be easily defined as an aspiration to aristocratic cultural norms. He provides evidence that all Romans were subject to the same forces of cultural change, which expressed themselves differently in different social milieux. Still, it is his achievement to have systematically demonstrated that the Roman *plebs* was not a faceless and impoverished mass but that it came in many layers and social classes, and that most of them lived better lives than it is generally assumed. He is at his best in Part 1, in which he discusses Roman living conditions that allowed for a relatively prosperous urban *plebs*.

While Rome may not have been as clean as a modern Swiss city, as noted by S. Panciera,[5] the majority of the *plebs* did not live in unhygienic and disease-ridded slums or frequently suffer from hunger — at least, not the *plebs frumentaria.* Courrier's careful analysis of food prizes for this privileged group shows that even an unskilled worker, who, according to Cicero (*Pro Rosc. Com.* 28), made 12 asses per day, could support himself, a spouse and a child by working around 300 days a year (48-82). Courrier also shows that Rome enjoyed remarkably high standards in public hygiene. Despite its well-known shortcomings, Rome did have a relatively effective waste management and sewage system, and, most importantly, an excellent supply of fresh water (82-104). Aware of the relationship between disease and water pollution, the Romans provided their cities with aqueduct water (100); this dramatically lowered the risk of water-borne illness, as is perhaps best illustrated by the introduction of aqueduct systems in 19th-c. Europe that put an end to frequent cholera epidemics in Rome-sized cities such as Vienna. Courrier's discussion of Regionary Catalogues and other sources suggests that there was a relationship between population density and the number of street fountains (92-98). If this were so, Rome's aqueducts would not only have supplied the imperial baths and other impressive waterworks but also the population at large — which should not come as a surprise in comparison to the freshwater supply of Pompeii and other Roman cities.[6] In sum, by today's standards Rome may not have been a very pleasant place to live, but it worked well enough to allow for some measure of demographic stability. To Courrier (46), the ability of the *plebs* to replenish itself forced Augustus to fix the number of the *plebs frumentaria* at 250,000.

Courrier is so invested in the demographic stability of the *plebs* because he sees a stable population as the prerequisite for a plebeian culture, but this is not a necessary condition for the emergence of a non-élite urban culture. Even cities with high levels of immigration could (and still can) develop distinct cultural identities. It is a blind spot in Courrier's argument to ignore the rôle that immigrants from all over the known world played in Rome's metropolitan culture. Rome was almost certainly not an 'urban graveyard', but it is unlikely that a city the size of Rome could sustain its population without immigration. Even today, big cities depend

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4   For an excellent study on the urban commerce and living, see N. Monteix, *Les lieux de métier: boutiques et ateliers d'Herculanum* (BEFAR 344, 2010).

5   S. Panciera, "Netteza urbana a Roma. Organizzazione e responsabili," in X. Dupré Raventòs and J. Remolà (edd.), *Sordes Urbis* (Rome 2000) 97, quoted by Courrier at 35.

6   Compare Pompeii's freshwater supply: R. Laurence, *Roman Pompeii. space and society* (London 2007) 45-50.

on an influx of newcomers, not because modern city-dwellers die of cholera or hunger, but because city life is expensive and most urbanites opt for raising only a couple of children. Such considerations are well attested in antiquity, where child exposure for economic reasons was common.[7] Still, Courrier is perfectly right to stress that the *plebs* at large could live relatively prosperous lives rooted in commerce and trade, and he provides a good reconstruction of Rome's urban economy.

Despite the help of the Roman government, even members of the *plebs frumentaria* had to work for a living: they needed cash to pay the rent and buy other necessities of life. Those who did not receive a grain subsidy had to work even harder if they did not want to squat in a tomb or end up unburied in the streets. Courrier, however, has little time for the condition of the poor and destitute: his *plebs* is made up of urban businesspeople of varying success and wealth, who were "une large 'couche moyenne' au sens moderne de terme" (739). It is their culture that Courrier is interested in, and, as in other recent studies, Courrier's inquiry into urban culture begins with a discussion of the physical spaces the Roman *plebs* inhabited.

Rome's *plebs* almost exclusively lived in rented accommodation of varying size and quality, which is why Courrier looks to Rome's *insulae* for reconstructing its communities (142-85). Undoubtedly, purpose-built apartment buildings served as a focus of community life, as did drinking fountains and neighborhood *balnea* (169). It is also likely that smaller urban units such as the *compita* (crossroads), and not the larger and official unit of the *vicus*, were perceived as a "quartier" in the modern sense (185-91). Such city quarters were, in part, defined by industry, because Roman artisanal production depended on the collaboration of highly specialized craftsmen working in close proximity to one another, and especially in as large a place as Rome.[8] The spatial relationship between work and living, however, was probably not as universal as Courrier suggests. Poorer artisans typically slept on the mezzanine of their shops, but successful master craftsmen could have rented apartments in *insulae* that were a couple of blocks away from their workshops. After all, some *tabernae* were installed in public buildings, the 'sotto-scala' rooms of theaters or even the podia of temples, unsuitable for comfortable living. The wealthy bankers of the *tabernae argentariae* on the Forum Romanum or Aufidius Aprilis, who identified himself as the *corinthiarius theatri Balbi,* almost certainly had to walk to work from their apartment.[9] That said, Courrier is absolutely right that urban life in Rome must have been shaped by the topography of business, which was not the result of zoning but of local artisanal tradition. Further, the *insulae* and clubhouses owned by professional associations clearly structured urban space.[10] The importance of work in the lives of the *pleb*s becomes the starting point for Courrier's discussion of the social hierarchies among working people and their remarkable expressions of professional pride.

Based on N. Tran's work, Courrier pays great attention to hierarchies between simple workmen, master craftsmen and workshop owners, primarily through a careful discussion of epitaphs and the funerary reliefs collected in G. Zimmer's classic *Römische Berufsdarstellungen.*[11] He confirms the (by now) well-established *communis opinio* that the professional pride expressed on these monuments reflects the value and social prestige that successful artisans and craftsmen attached to their work. Business people who were successful enough to afford a decorated tomb were not a downtrodden *Lumpenproletariat*, but in fact were downtreading

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7   On child abandonment for economic reasons, see J. Evans Grubbs, "Infant exposure and infanticide," in ead., T. Parkin and R. Bell (edd.), *The Oxford handbook of childhood and education in the classical world* (Oxford 2013) 88-91.

8   C. Hawkins, *Roman artisans and the urban economy* (Cambridge 2016); K. Ruffing, *Die berufliche Spezialisierung in Handel und Handwerk. Untersuchungen zu ihrer Entwicklung und zu ihren Bedingungen in der römischen Kaiserzeit im östlichen Mittelmeerraum auf der Grundlage griechischer Inschriften und Papyri* (Rahden 2008) 375-83.

9   On *tabernae* in the *podia* of temples and the *tabernae argentariae*, see Holleran (supra n.1) 108, 126 and 107. On Aufidius Aprilis, see Courier 186.

10   E. Mayer, *The ancient middle classes* (Cambridge MA 2012) 94-99.

11   Tran (supra n.1); G. Zimmer, *Römische Berufsdarstellungen* (Berlin 1982).

their own apprentices, slaves and freedmen. Entrepreneurs, who won major state contracts (e.g., the baker Vergilius Eurysaces or the builder Haterius Tychicus) could become so rich that Courrier feels free to call them "capitaines d'industrie" (383). The discussion of these sub-élites raises questions of social stratification among the *plebs*, their relationship with social élites and Veyne's definition of the *plebs media*.[12]

The term *plebs media* has enjoyed considerable popularity in recent years, because it appears to be a legitimate ancient term to refer to people "in the middle".[13] However, there are no more than 9 (possible) attestations of *plebs media* in Latin literature — which is why it is pretty much left up to the ancient historian to fill *plebs media* with meaning. The preference for a relatively obscure term over the use of modern sociological categories is a symptom of the reluctance of the field to analyze classical societies in anything but their own terms. Yet the widely diverging definitions of *plebs media* by Veyne and Courrier make one wonder whether it would not be more productive to use a perfectly sound and well-defined analytical category such as social class — as a combination of economic, legal and cultural conditions — to talk about "people in the middle". Veyne defined the *plebs media* as a "classe moyenne" that prided itself on work and enjoyed a pleasant and apolitical life. Courrier, on the other hand, sees the *plebs media* as a social stratum that straddled the equestrian order and stood above the "moyennes", whom he identifies (233, 425) with successful artisans and shopkeepers. In his mind, the *plebs media* were wealthy plebeians who held high rank in professional associations and the imperial cult, served as *apparitores*, and would possibly have been *decuriones* elsewhere but not in Rome, where the senate was effectively the city council (304). Courrier escapes the dilemma that *plebs media* literally means "middle *plebs*" by arguing that the term originally applied to middling plebeians as opposed to patricians, which would put the *plebs media* right below plebeian families of equestrian and senatorial rank (347-48). This is an elegant solution but, in the light of the scarcity of our evidence, beyond proof. No matter whether one accepts this definition, Courrier's careful and intelligent analysis draws attention to the social stratification among Roman businessfolk, some of whom were so prosperous that they could aspire to an elegant lifestyle.

What this lifestyle signified has recently emerged as a matter of debate that lies at the heart of whether there was such a thing as a "culture of the *plebs*". To Courrier, this lifestyle was primarily a matter of élite emulation. The internal organization of *collegia* with their ranks and offices, conspicuous tombs, and even images of joyful conviviality, he argues, all alluded and aspired to the dignity of political life with its public honors and social rituals that distinguished the "aristocracy" of office-holders from the *plebs* (381-421). This leaves Courrier with the paradox that his *plebs media* aspired to aristocratic dignity but also celebrated its trades on its tombs (a way of making money that leisured aristocrats looked down upon). To Courrier this is as much a paradox as an innovation ("un paradoxe autant que originalité") and an indication that the culture of the *plebs media* was a hybrid with practices that, because of élite imitation, were "incomplètement aristocratiques, imparfaitement plébéiennes" (407). But were aristocratic and plebeian cultures really so distinct that the culture of the *plebs media* could be classed as a hybrid culture ("une culture hybride") bridging two categorically different worlds (407)? Creating such a dichotomy invites reflection on the relationship between economics and culture, an issue mainstream social scientists would frame as a question of social — as opposed to economic — class. The problem with defining social classes in antiquity is that there was no obvious class conflict between socially and culturally self-conscious groups that would have resulted in something as public and politicized as a "bourgeois counterculture", rejecting the mores of an enfeoffed and mostly rural military aristocracy.[14] In the ancient world, social and status boundaries were too fluid for such conflicts. This puts the ancient world in marked contrast to feudal and modern Europe, where Weber's twin concepts of *Schicht* and *Stand*

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12   P. Veyne, "La 'plèbe moyenne' sous le Haut-Empire romain," *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales* 55 (2000) 1169-99.

13   See, e.g., A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome's cultural revolution* (Cambridge 2008) 454.

14   On "aristocratic counterculture" as an analytical category, see A. Wallace-Hadrill in *JRA* 26 (2014) 584.

(inadequately translated as "class" and "status order") work very well as key components in his definition of social class. In his own book, Courrier eschews re-opening M. I. Finley's Weberian debate regarding whether the ancient world was one of classes or social orders (300-1, 405), but some explicit modelling in a Weberian (or other) mode would have helped him gain analytical traction on defining Rome's *plebs vis-à-vis* Rome's 'aristocracy' of office-holders. In Weber's Prussia, ennobled and enfeoffed aristocratic families fiercely defended their dominant rôle in the officer corps and much of the civil service, and they greatly disapproved if one of their own aspired to as demeaning and bourgeois a career as that of a classics professor (like Ulrich von Willamowitz-Moellendorfs).[15] Conversely, in the Roman world the political aristocracy was not created by a monarchical act of enfeoffment or ennoblement. Joining the decurional and equestrian orders was primarily a matter of free birth, citizenship, and a minimum wealth requirement. Senatorial office was, in principle, open to all free-born citizens who met the census requirement and aspired to a life in high politics. As a result, creating a cultural dichotomy between aristocrats and plebeians is to resuscitate the anachronistic idea of class struggle that Roman history supposedly overcame, by describing the ancient world in terms of status societies; and indeed the evidence presented by Courrier does not suggest that we are dealing with a distinct aristocratic *versus* a bourgeois culture of businessmen, but instead with milieu-specific expressions of the same culture in distinct but overlapping life-worlds.

In his discussion of the value of work and professional pride, Courrier marshals a large number of Latin funerary inscriptions that celebrate not only the hard work but also the skill and technological ingenuity of the now-deceased craftsmen. Particularly interesting is the frequent use of the term *doctus* to refer to the highly skilled (270); this recalls respect for a *poeta doctus* in élite literary culture. Courrier brings up Cicero's *De officiis* in which Cicero famously opined (3.3-4) that all craftsmen were practicing a sordid trade, but in which he also pointed out that only craftsmen who used technical language could pass on the knowledge of their craft. Such a specialized vocabulary was associated with the *artes liberales* and the appreciation of mostly Greek science that emerged in the Late Republic.[16] This suggests that educated political élites appreciated theoretically-informed craftsmanship but not necessarily the craftsmen themselves. This attitude is found in other authors such as Plutarch, but it is also classic Cicero, who could praise the comportment of gladiators, who, though recruited from ruined men and barbarians, had acquired courage and self-control through *exercitatio, meditatio* and *consuetudo* — which rich and philosophically-inclined élites also aspired to.[17]

While Romans from commercial and political milieux claimed the same ethics for themselves as did men like Cicero, the political élites insisted that these qualities were best applied to a life of public service and not 'sordid' professions. The craftsmen who set up epitaphs asserting the contrary clearly thought otherwise, and it is questionable whether they were simply aping political élites in appealing to the same notions of competence and public dignity as the élite amongst office-holders. In this context, it is important to note that almost all of our Latin sources were written by equestrians and *homines novi* who moved to Rome from Italian towns and the provinces to seek a political career and who had, therefore, a vested interest in presenting themselves as a group apart. If we take the literary evidence at face value, we are dealing with attempts at social distinction from above, and not with emulation from below. This social distinction from above was necessary because men like Cicero were not predestined for a life of political success and could easily have focused their energies on high finance and literary culture, as did Cicero's friend Atticus (he was utterly disinterested in running for high office). *Homines novi* like Cicero could be mocked for being the sons of successful businessmen who, true or not, was ridiculed (Plut., *Cic.* 1, 1) for being a fuller's son. Such insults would not

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15   On U. von Willamowitz-Moellendorfs and family, see M. Hose, " '… und Pflicht geht vor Neigung'. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff und das Leiden am Grossbetrieb der Wissenschaft," in A. Baertschi and C. G. King (edd.), *Die modernen Väter der Antike. Die Entwicklung der Altertumswissenschaften an Akademie und Universität im Berlin des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin 2009) 446.

16   Courrier 286-93; Wallace-Hadrill (supra n.13) 251-58.

17   Plut., *Pericl.* 2.1; Cic., *Tusc.* 2.41.

have worked in Weber's world of *Schicht* and *Stand*, where status and social boundaries were not nearly as permeable as in Rome. This is why the cultural differences between social groups in the Roman world were subtle and not categorical. All debates regarding cultural practice were concerned with who possessed the privilege of interpretation regarding what was right and proper. Was commercial success a praiseworthy expression of skill and character? Could Greek mythology be used as mighty comparisons in personal matters? Was a *sevir augustalis* entitled to the pomp of a *praetor*? Members of the *nobilitas* such as the author of the *Satyricon* would not have thought so, but in the cultural expressions of non-élites there is little indication that they saw such expression of dignity and accomplishment as an aspiration or challenge to the dignity of the holders of high office (to which realistically they could not have aspired). In the same light, the internal organization of *collegia*, modelled on civic institutions, should not be understood as a plebeian attempt to create a substitute for a lack of genuine civic honors; the civic model was simply the only one available for creating rule-bound communities — which actually could wield considerable political influence and whose richer members could be local politicians and leaders. In sum, the evidence presented by Courrier does not suggest that there were genuinely plebeian and aristocratic cultural practices, but, instead, a shared language of social values and achievement that was used in distinct but overlapping life-worlds. This also applies to plebeian politics, which forms the second half of the book.

Courrier's discussion of plebeian politics is based on the analysis of 295 "collective actions" of the Roman *plebs*, which support his claim that the Roman *plebs* was not apolitical, but stood up for its economic interests — a point that could also be made of professional associations and other non-élite groups across the empire. Most Roman historians will be familiar with most of these episodes but they will still appreciate Courrier's thorough interpretations. It is good now to have a statistical analysis that shows how political manifestations moved from the forum to theatres and amphitheaters under the Empire (650), and to read about the historical memory constructed around popular heroes such as the Gracchi and around venues of plebeian action such as the Aventine hill (549-54). But all of this only comes to show that the *plebs* constructed political memory like everybody else did, particularly through statues and festivals. Courrier is right that Rome was different from any other city in the empire because the *plebs* could directly communicate with leading magistrates of the Republic and, later, the emperors.

There was much more, however, to the relationship between the *plebs* and the empire's political élite. P. Zanker's observation that the emperors provided the *plebs* with "Villenglück fürs Volk" and exposed them to a luxurious way of life that could not be enjoyed elsewhere is an important aspect of the culture of the Roman *plebs*.[18] Thanks to the emperors' munificence, Rome's *plebs* could indulge 'aristocratic' pleasures such as strolling through magnificent gardens, picture and sculpture galleries, use the best libraries in the world, and relax in palatial baths. Conversely, at least some senators and emperors enjoyed 'popular' pleasures such as gladiatorial shows, chariot races, gambling, and, more scandalously, a good brawl. These complexities are essential for understanding the milieu-specific cultures of Rome. Those can be understood neither in terms of G. de St. Croix's economic classes nor M. I. Finley's equally-flawed status orders. There was just one language of achievement and dignity that expressed itself differently in different life-worlds, just as there was only one repertoire of images that could be employed in a variety of ways. In the light of the evidence expertly presented by Courrier, one therefore wonders why he chose to explain these complexities with the well-worn concept of élite emulation. Nonetheless, his monumental book will be essential reading for anyone interested in the city of Rome and its famous *plebs*.

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18   P. Zanker, *Der Kaiser baut fürs Volk* (Opladen 1997), with translation in B. Ewald and C. Noreña (edd.), *The emperor and Rome* (Cambridge 2010) 45-87.