

Poppies and power

How to conquer a state without a single battle.

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Titus Livius (Livy), *The History of Rome, Book 1*

54. He was admitted to the meetings of the national council. Whilst expressing his agreement with the elders of Gabii on other subjects, on which they were better informed, he was continually urging them to war, and claimed to speak with special authority, because he was acquainted with the strength of each nation, and knew that the king's tyranny, which even his own children had found insupportable, was certainly detested by his subjects. [2] So after gradually working up the leaders of the Gabinians to revolt, he went in person with some of the most eager of the young men on foraging and plundering expeditions. By playing the hypocrite both in speech and action, he gained their mistaken confidence more and more; at last he was chosen as commander in the war. [3] Whilst the mass of the population were unaware of what was intended, skirmishes took place between Rome and Gabii in which the advantage generally rested with the latter, until the Gabinians from the highest to the lowest firmly believed that Sextus Tarquin had been sent by heaven to be their leader. [4] As for the soldiers, he became so endeared to them by sharing all their toils and dangers, and by a lavish distribution of the plunder, that the elder Tarquin was not more powerful in Rome than his son was in Gabii.

[5] When he thought himself strong enough to succeed in anything that he might attempt, he sent one of his friends to his father at Rome to ask what he wished him to do now that the gods had given him sole and absolute power in Gabii. To this messenger no verbal reply was given, because, I believe, he mistrusted him. [6] The king went into the palace-garden, deep

in thought, his son's messenger following him. As he walked along in silence it is said that he struck off the tallest poppy-heads with his stick. [7] Tired of asking and waiting for an answer, and feeling his mission to be a failure, the messenger returned to Gabii, and reported what he had said and seen, adding that the king, whether through temper or personal aversion or the arrogance which was natural to him, had not uttered a single word. [8] When it had become clear to Sextus what his father meant him to understand by his mysterious silent action, he proceeded to get rid of the foremost men of the State by traducing some of them to the people, whilst others fell victims to their own unpopularity. Many were publicly executed, some against whom no plausible charges could be brought were secretly assassinated. [9] Some were allowed to seek safety in flight, or were driven into exile; the property of these as well as of those who had been put to death was distributed in grants and bribes. [10] The gratification felt by each who received a share blunted the sense of the public mischief that was being wrought, until, deprived of all counsel and help, the State of Gabii was surrendered to the Roman king without a single battle. (Livy 1912, l. 54)

Artistotle's Politics

Aristotle explains that phenomena as follows:

Hence it is also possible to meet in this way the question which some persons investigate and put forward for some raise the question whether the legislator desiring to lay down the rightest laws should legislate with a view to the advantage of the better people or that of the larger number in cases when the situation mentioned¹ occurs. And 'right' must be taken in the sense of 'equally right,' and this means right in regard to the interest of the whole state and in regard to the common welfare of the citizens; and a citizen is in general one who shares in governing and being governed,

[1284a] [1] although he is different according to each form of constitution, but in relation to the best form a citizen is one who has the capacity and the will to be governed and to govern with a view to the life in accordance with virtue.

But if there is any one man so greatly distinguished in outstanding virtue, or more than one but not enough to be able to make up a complete state, so that the virtue of all the rest and their political ability is not comparable with that of the men mentioned, if they are several, or if one, with his alone, it is no longer proper to count these exceptional men a part of the state; for they will be treated unjustly if deemed worthy of equal status, being so widely unequal in virtue and in their political ability: since such a man will naturally be as a god among men. Hence it is clear that legislation also must necessarily be concerned with persons who are equal in birth and in ability, but there can be no law dealing with such men as those described, for they are themselves a law; indeed a man would be ridiculous if he tried to legislate for them, for probably they would say what in the story of Antisthenes¹ the lions said² when the hares made speeches in the assembly and demanded that all should have equality. This is why democratically governed states institute the system of ostracism, because of a reason of

this nature; for these are the states considered to pursue equality most of all things, [20] so that they used to ostracize men thought to be outstandingly powerful on account of wealth or popularity or some other form of political strength, and used to banish them out of the city for fixed periods of time. And there is a mythical story that the Argonauts left Heracles behind for a similar reason; for the Argo3 refused to carry him with the others because he was so much heavier than the sailors. **Hence also those who blame tyranny and Periander's advice to Thrasylus must not be thought to be absolutely right in their censure** (the story is that Periander made no reply to the herald sent to ask his advice, but levelled the corn-field by plucking off the ears that stood out above the rest; and consequently, although the herald did not know the reason for what was going on, when he carried back news of what had occurred, **Thrasylus understood that he was to destroy the outstanding citizens**); for this policy is advantageous not only for tyrants, nor is it only tyrants that use it, but the same is the case with oligarchies and democracies as well; for ostracism has in a way the same effect as docking off the outstanding men by exile. And the same course is adopted in regard to cities and races by the holders of sovereign power, for example the Athenians so dealt with the Samians and Chians and Lesbians⁵ for no sooner did they get a strong hold of their empire than they humbled them in contravention of their covenants ,

[1284b] [1] and the king of the Persians frequently used to cut down the numbers of the Medes and Babylonians and the other races that had waxed proud because they had once been head of an empire. And the problem applies universally to all the forms of constitution, even the right forms; for while the divergent forms of government do this because their regard is fixed on their private advantage, nevertheless with the constitutions directed to the common good the same is the case. And this is also clear in the field of the other arts and sciences; a painter would not let his animal have its foot of disproportionately large size, even though it was an exceptionally beautiful foot, nor would a shipbuilder make the stern or some other part of a ship disproportionately big, nor yet will a trainer of choruses allow a man who sings louder and more beautifully than the whole band to be a member of it. Hence as far as this practice goes nothing prevents monarchs from being in harmony with the cities they rule, if they resort to it when their own personal rule is beneficial to the cities. Therefore in relation to acknowledged superiorities the argument for ostracism has a certain element of political justice. True, it is better for the lawgiver so to constitute the state at the outset that it does not need this medicine; but the next best course to steer, if occasion arises, is to endeavor to correct [20] the constitution by some such method of rectification. But this was not what happened with the states, for they were not looking at what was advantageous for their proper constitution, but their acts of ostracism were done in a revolutionary spirit. In the divergent forms of constitution therefore it is evident that ostracism is advantageous and just under the special constitution, though perhaps it is also evident that it is not¹ just absolutely; but in the case of the best constitution there is much doubt as to what ought to be done, not as regards superiority in the other things of value, such as strength and wealth and popularity, but in the case of a person becoming exceptionally distinguished for virtue. It certainly would not be said that such a man must be banished and got out of the way; yet nevertheless no doubt

men would not think that they ought to rule over such a man, for that would be the same as if they claimed to rule over Zeus, dividing up his spheres of government. It remains therefore, and this seems to be the natural course, for all to obey such a man gladly, so that men of this sort may be kings in the cities for all time.(Aristotle 1944)

In Australia and New Zealand, the phrase “tall poppy syndrome” is used to describe the tendency to criticize or undermine successful people.

Bible: The Return from Egypt

19 When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20 and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” 21 He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. 23 He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazorean.” (Mt 2:19–23)

It seems that St Joseph understood the story of the poppies exactly. If Herod was a tyrant, then Jesus was the first poppy to be cut short, proclaimed by the wise men as the future King of the Jews. That is why St Joseph chose to keep a low profile, even though he was from a royal family, the House of David. He chose a simple village and a simple occupation; they didn’t distinguish themselves through their clothes, speech or customs. They blended in with the other poppies in the field. This enabled him to keep Jesus safe until He was ready to reveal Himself to the world.

Compare: [The crab mentality](#)

Aristotle. 1944. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*. Translated by H. Rackham. Vol. 21. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook%3D3%3Asection%3D1283b>.

Livy. 1912. *Livy’s History of Rome*. Translated with Introduction by Rev. Canon Roberts. New York: E. P. Dutton and Co. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0026%3Abook%3D1%3Achapter%3D54>.