

The View from the Top: the 'Poor' in Cicero's *Pro Murena*

Rome of Cicero's day would have been crowded and poor (Harris 2011; Holleran 2011), but it was not bifurcated between an economic and political elite and the impoverished masses (Jongman 2007; Scheidel 2006). Cicero, however, thought it was. In his defense of consul-elect Lucius Licinius Murena, Cicero reduces the complex classification system of the Roman census to a simple division between those in the senatorial and equestrian classes and everyone else. He does not and perhaps cannot distinguish between the social strata of Roman society beyond those sharing his own privileged status. From his precipitous perch, no matter how precarious his own social position (Tatum 1988), he sees all as undifferentiated mob.

Although the culturally freighted vocabulary of poverty makes it difficult to speak precisely about the poor (Morley 2006; Harris 2011), a younger Cicero offered a clear distinction between rich and poor when he posited that fate made a man *pecuniosus an tenuis* (*De. Inv.* 1.25). As a consul defending his successor, Cicero deploys the term *tenuis* as an indication of limited financial resources (Adamietz 1989:182). In the *contentio dignitatis*, he claims that Servius Sulpicius Rufus, losing candidate and then prosecutor, undermined his campaign by investing his time in preparing this very accusation. Cicero asserts that Sulpicius lost popular support because he enraged the *tenuiores* with a law against electoral corruption that targeted the plebs with a serious penalty (*Mur.* 47). The same law imposed exile on guilty senators, and these two punishments reflect a simple division of Roman society into only two segments. Cicero finds no rhetorical benefit in offering greater nuance to the political and economic elite of the jury.

When he later addressed the specific charges of bribery leveled by Cato, Cicero considers more extensively the inequality in Roman society and its political implications. Rejecting Cato's

accusation that illicit money bought Murena his crowds of supporters, Cicero contends that a traditionally reciprocal relationship balanced the generosity of the elite with the active campaigning of the non-elite. In fact, he is clear that electoral support is the only avenue available to *homines tenues* for maintaining that relationship (*Mur.* 70). When Cicero continues that line of thought by stating that those of the senatorial and equestrian orders could not be asked to invest entire days on campaign, he again divides Roman society into two, the elite and all others. He encourages Cato not to steal from *inferiori generi* what they received from the relationship, and he defines that lower order by their inability to function as elites (*Mur.* 71). Cicero concludes this line of argument by justifying the acts of alleged bribery as *commoda tenuiorum* (*Mur.* 73).

The modern reader might, then, have the impression that we are learning about the relationship between Rome's poor and its governing elite. That is unlikely (Mouritsen 2001). Cicero had little regard for the poor (Wood 1988), but here he has subsumed under the term *tenuis* a wider swath of Roman society. If the third and fourth classes of the census were not routinely at risk of deprivation (Scheidel 2006), and if the fifth class seldom had an impact on electoral outcomes (Mouritsen 2001), then Cicero has collapsed a more complex society into a simple binary. This elision of the middling may not teach us about the reality of Roman society, but it does teach us about the view of from the top.

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