CHAPTER 3

Rumours, Gossip and Conversations in Roman Political Life

Politics is a constantly changing field. Like a chemical reaction, it changes in contact with news, gossip and rumours. Roman politicians were aware of this fact and acknowledged that the force of a rumour, similar to wind in the sails of a ship, could change the course of the State: 'The interval of one day, – the lapse of one night – often throws everything into confusion. The slightest breeze of rumour sometimes changes the entire opinions of people.'[1] Rumours and gossip should be analysed not only as part of political life but also as a process in themselves: how they circulated, how they propagated, their forms, and how they changed individual and collective political life. This chapter postulates that gossip and rumours were the mechanisms through which opinion was transmitted in Rome and through which public opinion was created and circulated.

Gossip was not initially of interest to historians or sociologists; anthropology was the field that pioneered its study.[2] Even today, gossip is an underanalysed field. The main reason is probably its negative connotations: scholars frequently claim that they are not defending this practice, only studying it. In 1963, Gluckman published a seminal and witty article that established the fundamentals of the study of gossip. Firstly, he claimed that gossip should not be dismissed as small talk or vain conversation, since it formed the moral order of the communities. In fact, he stated, anthropologists analyse it to observe the links between the maintaining of the cohesion of the group and its morality.[3] In opposition to its traditional negative image, gossip and even scandals share important virtues, such as maintaining unity, morality, and the values of social groups; they allow the control of competition and rivalry of individuals who aspire to a higher and more prestigious political status.[4] This is fundamental to understanding

---

[1] Cic. *Mur.* 35: 'Dies intermissus aut nox interposita saepe perturbat omnia, et totam opinionem parva non numquam commutat aura rumoris'.
[2] Historiography on the study of rumour and gossip in Froissart 2000.   [3] Gluckman 1963: 308.
[4] Gluckman 1963: 308; 313.

the importance of gossip in the Roman Republic: to a certain extent it helped to impose a moral and social order, through criticism of the ruling elite and, especially, of those members who have surpassed the moral limits that society imposed. Through that criticism, expressed through gossip, the rest of the community controlled the elite.

From another point of view, Paine argued that gossip also represented an important means of communication.[5] He disagreed with Gluckman, and considered that gossip was centred more on the individual and his own interests than on the community.[6] The person who distributed information through gossip (and, in the Roman case, also through rumours) selected the channel of information, sending the message that he wished other people to receive, to improve his own situation.[7] Lewis has distinguished between news and gossip in regard to the size of the public among whom an item circulates, leaving aside whether it was public or private.[8] Examining rumour during the repression of the Bacchanalian rites in Rome, Dubourdieu and Lemirre established a difference between rumour and gossip: the latter had a much restricted diffusion, whereas rumour circulated on a larger scale, since it included elements that interested the whole group.[9] This distinction will be used for the following analysis.

The sources make reference to rumours of all types, mainly preserved because of the potential interest for the receiver of the information. They were transmitted through letters addressed to members of the ruling elite, and thus almost unanimously featured the Roman political situation and trials of a heavy political nature. Rumours about economic issues, for instance, were in the minority. Different attitudes have been identified in regard to rumours. There are those who instigate it, who try to find a coherent explanation; the leaders of opinion, who impose their own view into the group; the 'apostles', those who try to convince others of the veracity of the rumour; those who 'flirt' with it, who delight in it although they are not completely convinced; and those who are resistant, even anti-rumour.[10]

The connection between gossip, rumours and women is the subject of scholarly debate. Hunter and Gottesman have pointed out that in Athens, gossip was immediately associated with women, who actually had few

---

[5] Paine 1967: 278. Word-of-mouth news has played an important role in other political regimes: in Soviet Russia, for instance, it was a complementary source of information for the elite and a substitutive for the lower classes. See Bauer and Gleicher 1953.
[6] Paine 1967: 279–282.   [7] Paine 1967: 282–283.   [8] Lewis 1996: 9.
[9] Dubourdieu and Lemirre 1997: 294–295.   [10] Kapferer 1987: 112–115.

occasions to go out into the street and talk.[11] When Plutarch discussed how swiftly rumours could spread in his treaty *De garrulitate*, he chose an anecdote featuring a woman, but plenty of men appear in the rest of the treaty engaged in gossip.[12] However, although the opposite may have been true, the discourse of gossip could be gendered.[13] Greek and Roman moralists and satirists lampooned women as chatterboxes.[14] However, looking specifically at Roman politics of the second and first centuries BC, political gossip and rumours were not gendered. They were forms of communication in which all inhabitants engaged, regardless of social class or gender.

Which concepts did the Romans use to conceptualise this category? In his speech in favour of Murena, Cicero tried to show Sulpicius Rufus, the accuser, that the advantages that he had enjoyed during the elections, such as the antiquity and renown of his family, had not been effective.[15] Murena, on the contrary, had two key cards in his hand: first of all, the presence in Rome during the elections of Lucullus' army, in which Murena had served; secondly, the expectation that he would organise big games, which Cicero mentioned using two terms, *rumor* and *sermo*.[16]

Sermo, meaning 'conversation', was also used by many sources as a synonym for *rumor*.[17] In a philological treaty, Varro derived *sermo* from *series* and succession, and put it on the same footing as conversation, as did Christian Latin authors such as Tertullian.[18] For Cicero, *sermo* took place in meetings, in discussions, in familiar gatherings and in dinners: that is, in places of informal conversation, with no rhetorical rules to follow.[19] The first Church Fathers used this term to translate the Greek word *logos*, the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John.[20] While the *Vulgata* preferred *verbum*, following a translation recognised since Augustin, Erasmus of Rotterdam defended *sermo*, basing his choice on philological and patristic

---

[11] Hunter 1990; Gottesman 2014: 60. On gossip and women in Athens, see Hunter 1990: 303–304, 316–321.

[12] Plut. De garrul. 11 (507–508). See pp. 1–2.   [13] Wickham 1998: 15.

[14] E.g. Juv. Sat. 6. 398–412, on this text Kartzow 2009: 89–93; see Lewis 1996: 11–12 on the importance of talkativeness of women in spreading gossip in the Greek city; Kartzow 2009: 67–116 on ancient representations of female gossipers.

[15] On Sulpicius Rufus, see Michel 1975.   [16] Cic. Mur. 37.

[17] See OLD. s.v. *sermo, rumor*; O'Rourke Boyle 1977: 164 and n. 26; Bettini 2008: 358–361 on the etymology of *rumor*, linked by the Romans to 'ruminating' (*rumen*), as in the repetitive chewing of speech, collectively constructed. Lévy 1993 on *sermo* as characterised by the absence of confrontation; Remer 1999: 43–49 on *sermo* and Cicero; Damon 1997 on Livy's use of *sermones* as sources.

[18] Varr, De ling. lat. 6. 64; E.g. Tert. Ad Her. 20.4.

[19] Cic. Off. 1.132. By contrast, *contentio* took place in trials, *contiones*, and Senate. Rhet. Her. 3.23 on *sermo* as similar to everyday conversation.

[20] Ev. of John 1.1.

reasoning.[21] The expression *sermo populi* only appears six times in Latin literature: four of them in Cicero's corpus (in three speeches and a letter to Atticus), one in Tacitus, and the last one in Pliny the Younger.[22] Expressions such as *sermo hominum* were more frequent: Cicero used it frequently in speeches, letters, or philosophical and rhetorical works.[23] *Rumor populi*, another similar expression, had already appeared in Ennius, Plautus, and Terence; nevertheless, after these authors, its use decayed, and only three more instances are found, of which two were rhetorical treaties (*Rhetoric to Herennius* and one of Quintilian's declamations).[24] Thus, *rumor* and *sermo* seem to have had similar meanings in Latin.

3.1   Rumours and Politics in Rome

Rumours were part of the habitual workings of Roman politics. In a letter to Atticus, Cicero praised him for painting such a lively picture of the tempestuous year of 59 BC through the *varietas sermonum opinionumque* that he imagined himself to be in the city.[25] Sociability and frequent contact between people meant the possibility of engaging in conversations, some of them possibly of a political nature. Rumours and comments could come from any source, about any subject related to the life of politicians: the orator warned his brother that some things should not be entrusted to the slaves, in order to avoid *sermo*.[26] In an exaggerated and literary manner, Cicero scolded the judges of the trial against Milo for not being aware of the supposed *leges Clodianae* which were going to destroy the government, by asking them *vestrae peregrinantur aures?* ('are your ears travelling abroad?'), since the whole city was allegedly talking about them.[27] Those who were not well-informed could be qualified as *imperiti*.[28]

   When Romans defined what constituted political information, rumours were given a principal place, since they were described several times on an equal footing with news or facts. Cicero told Atticus in 51 BC: 'Having no

---

[21] O'Rourke Boyle 1977: 161–165.
[22] Cic. Dom. 9; 2Verr. 1.129; Flacc. 82; Att. 2.5.2: Tac. Hist. 2. 96, 2; Plin. Ep. 1.22.5.
[23] E.g. Cic. 2Verr. 2.129; 3.49; 4.13; Cat. 1.23; Phil. 11.23; Cluent. 85; Rab. 2; Balb. 56; Mur. 16; Cael. 69; Sull. 59; De orat. 2.105; De orat. 2.32; De rep. 6.20; Parad. Stoic. 6.43; Att. 9.19, 4; Att. 11.12.1; Fam. 3.8.1; 15.14. 4; QF. 1.1.39; 1.2.1; 3.2.2.
[24] Enn. Ann. 7.254; Plaut. Cas. 11; Ter. Ph. 911; Rhet. Her. 4.41; Tac. Ann. 14.29.2; Quint. Declamat. Maio. 10.8.3.
[25] Cic. Att. 2.15.1. On conversations and rumours, see Achard 2006: 227–238.
[26] Cic. QF. 1.1.17. On slaves as a source of information and rumours, see p. 71.   [27] Cic. Mil. 33.
[28] Cic. Mil. 62.

news, I have nothing to relate . . . I believe something has been done in the Senate today. So send me a letter, giving not only all the facts but the gossip too.'[29] Caelius warned Cicero that, if anything really important occurred, he would write straight away providing information on what had happened, the opinions that had been provoked, and what was expected to happen.[30] These three parts comprised what a Roman politician needed to know about political issues. In the previous sentence, Caelius had described the contents of his letters, stating that they were full of everything: *senatus consulta, edicta, fabulae, rumores.*[31] Cicero's son mentioned that, during his sojourn in Athens, he was up-to-date with the political situation through news and rumours.[32] Thus, rumours were one of the main sources of information, together with letters and conversations: 'Others will write; many will bring me news; much too will reach me even by way of rumour.'[33]

Rumours by their very nature, and with few exceptions, were anonymous, or their origin was difficult to trace. Gossip and rumours were described by Cicero as 'headless, authorless'.[34] They could be characterised as a non-official source, which sometimes forced official powers to act.[35] This trait made them flexible ways of delivering information, because nobody had to stand out as responsible for their authorship.[36] At the same time, it left the door open to doubts about their veracity, which was one of the main conundrums that Roman politicians had to face.[37] Of course, these two aspects of rumours would be exploited by Roman orators in their speeches, as the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and Quintilian artfully suggested: 'There are those who consider *fama* and rumours as a form of consensus among the citizens and as public testimony. Others, however, consider it a discourse without any reliable source, which provokes ill-will and increases gullibility.'[38] Cicero's clamours for reliable information

---

[29] Cic. Att. 5.5.1: 'Habeo . . . nec quod narrem (novi enim nihil). Eo autem die credo aliquid actum in senatu. Sequantur igitur nos tuae litterae quibus non modo res omnis sed etiam rumores cognoscamus'.

[30] Cic. Fam. 8.1.2.   [31] Cic. Fam. 8.1.1.   [32] Cic. Fam. 16.25.

[33] Cic. Fam. 2.8.1: 'Scribent alii multi nuntiabunt, perferet multa etiam ipse rumor'.

[34] Cic. Fam. 12.10.2: 'sine capite, sine auctore'.   [35] Kapferer 1987: 24–25.

[36] Cic. Fam. 12.10.1, Cicero complained that the rumours were *sine autore*, even though they were constant and persistent.

[37] See Allport and Postman 1946/1947 who wrongly considered all rumours to be untrue. This conception stems from their role in the Office of War Information, charged during the Second World War of controlling rumours. On their work, see Kapferer 1987: 12–13. Ibid., 23, on the uselessness of defining rumour according to false or true lines.

[38] Quint. 5.3: 'famam atque rumores pars altera consensum civitatis et velut publicum testimonium vocat, altera sermonem sine ullo certo auctore dispersum, cui malignitas initium dederit incrementum credulitas'. See Rhet. Her. 2.12. See pp. 197–204.

pervade his letters.[39] Sometimes he asked Atticus for other rumours, since the ones he had had no basis, which he described in Greek as *adespotoi*.[40] Rumours could arrive and change every day.[41] However, the supple and adjustable nature of rumours and their wide range could lead to deception, since one could reject rumours that one did not like in favour of others. Reliability of information carried through letters was extremely subjective. Self-delusion about news could also play an important part. For instance, Cicero described the rumour that Caesar had left Alexandria as *non firmus*, though he knew that the source was Sulpicius Rufus, who was not pro-Caesarean and lived in Samos at that time, and that it had been confirmed by all later messages which had arrived at Brindisi, a city that was particularly well located in the Adriatic to receive fresh news from the East.[42] Sallust described the rumours about the siege of Cirta as *clemens*.[43] When deciding in 46 BC which way to go, Caecina questioned whether Sicily or Asia would be more suitable. Sicily won the discussion essentially because of the ease with which letters could be sent and received in order to gain Caesar's pardon.[44] A badly selected location could, in this case, mean political death. To be cut off from social networks that could provide accurate information about political events, rumours and opinions implied that politicians would not be able to interact with these opinions, which was part of a healthy and successful political career.

Rome, being the political centre, was generally buzzing with rumours. Tacitus described clearly how rumours appeared, escalated and circulated: '. . . at first, in whispered gossip, as is the way with forbidden news; soon, in a rumour which ran wherever there were fools with open ears, or malcontents with the usual taste for revolution'.[45] Rumours propagated in progressively wider circles. Caelius mentioned to Cicero that rumours expanded in small circles 'that you know'. Nevertheless, they would soon be divulged to the rest of the citizens, since Domitius 'put his hands around his mouth', mimicking a trumpet.[46] This last detail shows the filtration of

---

[39] E.g. Cic. Att. 16.13a[b].1.   [40] Cic. Att. 5.3.1; Fam.15.17.3; 12.9.1; 10.34a.1 (false rumours).

[41] Cic. Fam. 12.10.1.

[42] Cic. Att. 11.25.2. On the identification of Sulpicius as Sulpicius Rufus, see Beaujeu 1993: 277.

[43] Sal. BI. 22.1. This unusual turn has raised discussions since Priscian interpreted 'clemens' as 'non nimius', which most of the translators have followed.

[44] Cic. Fam. 6.8.2.

[45] Tac. Ann. 2.39.3: 'occultis primum sermonibus, ut vetita solent, mox vago rumore apud inperitissimi cuiusque promptas auris aut rursum apud turbidos eoque nova cupientis'.

[46] Cic. Fam.8.1.4: 'sed inter paucos, quos tu nosti, palam secreto narrantur; at Domitius, cum manus ad os apposuit'. Cavarzere 1983: 207–208 discusses the exact meaning of this gesture. See also Osgood 2014: 90, n. 327.

a rumour from the circles of power to larger groups. Rumours were created and then circulated by the meeting of people in the streets. Thus the news of the defeat at Lake Trasimenus spread in Rome: '[The citizens] filled themselves up with *rumores*, one from the other, and carried them home.'[47] Apparently, the bigger and more outrageous the rumour, the more interested people were: that is how Cicero justified the gossip that Fonteius, governor of Gaul, had imposed a new tax on wine so as to charge it several times.[48] Rumours anchor in reality and become political information if they are mentioned publicly by magistrates or discussed in the Senate, as happened during the affair of the Bacchanalian rites in 186 BC, when the consul Postumius delivered a long speech about their dangers, and the Senate reacted to it with decrees that outlawed the cult and investigated the participants.[49]

These conversations could be localised within some groups before an opinion was made public. At the end of 54 BC, a tribunician veto prevented the consul Appius Claudius from passing the *lex curiata*, which would bestow upon him the *imperium* to govern his province. This legislative question was the subject of many discussions. Appius Claudius had for a time been expressing his opinion in conversations (*in sermonibus*), before he finally expressed it out loud and openly (*palam*) in the Senate.[50] Cicero equated the open statement in the Senate, probably opposing speaking publicly and with the *auctoritas* of a consul, to a mere comment in the Curia to a small group of listeners.

Rumours could be long-lived. Tacitus reported that the rumour about Tiberius murdering his own son in AD 26 was 'so strong that it persists today'.[51] Oral tradition could thus ensure the survival of rumours for decades. In a *contio*, Cicero requested that the people pass on his triumphs and achievements by word of mouth, so that they could strengthen and live.[52] Even after the affair had passed, rumours were still important: Sulla defended himself against them in his own autobiography, so as to leave for posterity his own version of the events.[53]

Rumours could have a real impact in Roman politics. The *optimates* opted to name Pompey *consul sine collega* in 52 BC after rumours of him being named dictator circulated within the plebs.[54] The origin of the

---

[47] Liv. 22.7.8: 'alius ab alio impleti rumoribus domos referent'.   [48] Cic. Font. 20.
[49] Liv. 39.8–19; Dubourdieu and Lemirre 1997 for an analysis of the role of rumour in this affair.
[50] Cic. Fam. 1.9.25; on the legislative problem, see Pina Polo 2011: 225–248.
[51] Tac. Ann. 4.10: 'et non omiserim eorundem temporum rumorem validum adeo ut noudum exolescat'.
[52] Cic. Cat. 3.26.   [53] Plut. Sul. 23.3–5.   [54] Cic. QF. 3.4.1; Asc. Mil. 14.

rumour is unknown, but Pompey was a popular figure with the people. The *optimates* themselves might have circulated it to compel the rest of the Senate to make a decision about the matter. The possibility of naming Pompey as dictator grew, and the *optimates* decided to create a similar charge, deprived of the negative political connotations of the dictatorship for the *populares*, who had the ghost of Sulla in mind. Imperfect information deriving from rumours prevented the clarification of a confusing political situation.[55] Contradictory rumours about Tiberius Gracchus' actions provoked chaos, as people murmured that he had deposed the other tribunes, because they were not in sight, or that he had appointed himself tribune without voting. These contradictory versions outraged the Senate, and played a role in the events that led to Gracchus' death.[56] In 43 BC, rumours that Cicero was going to lead a coup d'état were so insistent that a tribune convoked an assembly, in which the people stated that they refused to believe the story.[57] In the same year, murmurs about the content of a letter by Munatius Plancus provoked the calling of a session of the Senate, with the full number of senators in attendance.[58] In 49 BC, rumours said that Caesar was marching towards Rome with his army; in reply, consul Marcellus charged Pompey with the command of the troops in Italy and the protection of the State.[59] This dependence on rumours was logical in a preindustrial society, in which means of communication and means of transport were relatively slow.[60]

Rumours were especially important during elections, when they could change the outcome of the voting.[61] The *Commentariolum petitionis* suggested encouraging wild rumours about competitors during the elections.[62] These could circulate quickly and ruin the chances of a candidate, as Publius Scipio Nasica realised when he was canvassing for the curule aedileship. Shaking hands with the crowd, as was the custom, he encountered a citizen who worked in the fields. His calloused hands prompted Scipio to ask, as a joke, whether he used to walk on his hands. 'Bystanders caught the remark and it spread to the public and caused Scipio's defeat. For all the rustic tribes thought he had taunted them about their poverty and vented their anger against his insulting

---

[55] 'Imperfect information' stems from game theory, and describes a situation characterised by the lack of information concerning key data. 'Asymmetric information', an analogous concept, describes the situation when one party knows more than the other. See Fundenberg 1998.

[56] App. BC. 1.15.   [57] Cic. Phil. 14.14–16.   [58] Cic. 10.12.3.   [59] D.C. 41.6.5–6.

[60] On transportation, see Yeo 1946: 221–244, on sea transport; Meijer and van Nijf 1992; Laurence 1998: 129ff; Morley 1996: 65; Beresford 2012.

[61] Cic. Mur. 35, 45.   [62] Comm pet. 52–53.

wit.'[63] The timeline of the anecdote is unknown: that is, how much time passed between Scipio's remark and the day of the elections. However, rumours were effective enough, and circulated sufficiently widely, to cost him election to the magistracy.

Rumours could also be used artfully to defeat opponents. During his political fight against Mark Antony, Cicero stated that it was not only the policies that he proposed that would be helpful in deterring his rival but also the *rumor* and *fama* that they would generate.[64] While Pompey was still in the East, there were rumours about him marching into the city of Rome with the army and becoming king. His political opponent Crassus fuelled this talk and worsened Pompey's reputation by leaving the city with his children and money.[65] Cicero could not create an unfavourable and contrary opinion amongst the plebs against Clodius, because he lacked the means to convey it. Meanwhile, his rival could, and did so, ensuring Cicero's disgrace and exile.[66]

When was a rumour rampant? First of all, four conditions must be met: an interesting but ambiguous event; a greater demand than supply of news; people reluctant to act; and the group acting collectively. These four conditions, then, are usually met under three circumstances: firstly, when information is strictly controlled; secondly, in case of a scandal or disaster; thirdly, during moments of boredom (minor events). Shibutani tried to quantify the scale of rumours by the formula $R = i \times a$, R representing the rumour, i being its importance, and a being its ambiguity.[67] Thus, the scale and importance of a rumour would be related to its significance in the political world, and would be fostered by its ambiguity.

Not all rumours originated or circulated within the elite. Sources allude to rumours that travelled in a bottom-up movement, which originated with the people and reached the elite, causing a reaction.[68] A *quaestio* was convoked to investigate the supposed bribing by Jugurtha of several Roman magistrates because of the rumours of the plebs, despite the active opposition of most of the Senate.[69] When defending himself from the accusation of not having criticised the consuls of 57 BC, Cicero stated his position clearly:

---

[63] Val. Max. 7.5.2: 'quod dictum a circumstantibus exceptum ad populum manauit causamque repulsae Scipioni attulit: omnes namque rusticae tribus paupertatem sibi ab eo exprobratam iudicantes iram suam aduersus contumeliosam eius urbanitatem destrinxerunt'.
[64] Cic. Phil. 5.32.   [65] Plut. Pomp. 43.1.   [66] See Pina Polo 2010: 82–86.   [67] Shibutani 1966.
[68] On popular gossip and rumours as accommodation rather than opposition and as negotiation between the official and dominant culture and popular culture, see Ramos 2000: 888ff.
[69] Sal. BI. 40.5.

> And what were the opinions that I delivered? In the first place, that which the common conversation of the people had already previously fixed in our minds; in the second place, that which had been discussed in the senate on the preceding days; and thirdly, that which the Senate in a very full house adopted, expressing its agreement with me.[70]

When faced with the daunting task of somehow justifying the conviction of several judges from the previous trial in the Cluentius affair, Cicero alleged that they had been punished to please the people and their rumours.[71] Sometimes, there were two parallel rumours, stemming from the people and the elite. In 59 BC, Cicero wondered about the consuls of the following year, unsure whether the candidates favoured by popular rumours (*populi sermo*), that is, Pompey and Crassus, would be elected, or those whom his correspondents mentioned, Servius Sulpicius and Gabinius.[72] In fact, of the four prospective consuls, only Gabinius was voted into office.

The pressure the Roman people could place on a politician through rumour was far from contemptible. In 63 BC, when Cicero had what he considered enough proof to accuse Catiline of a plan to murder him, he addressed the Senate on 8th November, with the objective of making Catiline leave the city.[73] Cicero interpreted the silence of the senators about the accusations as proof that the latter were not going to defend him, thereby tacitly accusing him as well.[74] Nevertheless, Cicero did not charge Catiline of being a public enemy; he assumed it, and attacked him according to this premise.[75] The consul apparently achieved his objective: Catiline left the city, but many of his followers stayed in Rome.[76] Strange rumours began to circulate among the people about Catiline's destination: Cicero maintained that he had joined his troops. Nevertheless, people commented in Rome that he had had to exile himself in Massalia; this would imply that there was no such conspiracy, since the latter would not be the destination chosen by an exile wanting to return to power.[77]

---

[70] Cic. *Dom.* 9: 'At quam sententiam dixi? Primum eam quam populi sermo in animis nostris iam ante defixerat, deinde eam quae erat superioribus diebus agitata in senatu, denique eam quam senatus frequens tum cum mihi est adsensus secutus est'.

[71] Cic. *Cluent.* 126, 131.   [72] Cic. *Att.* 2.52.

[73] This objective had been debated. See Batstone 1994: 211–216; ibid., 223–224, discusses whether the speech took place on 7th or 8th. Hardy 1917: 185–218.

[74] Cic. *Cat.* 1.21.   [75] Cic. *Cat.* 1.1. See Batstone 1994: 215.

[76] It could be discussed whether Catiline left the city compelled by the speech before the Senate (Seager) or according to his own plans (Gruen; references in Batstone 1994: 215).

[77] Kelly 2006: 109.

We should also point out that there are no instances of Cicero addressing the people on the same day; thus, those rumours and gossip took as their basis the oral reports from the senators that assisted the meeting. They grew so much that on the following day, 9th November, Cicero felt compelled to deliver a speech before the people to calm them down. The second objective of the speech was to refute rumours that stated that Catiline had had to flee to Massalia due to political intrigue against him, and without him having been put to trial. These rumours were possibly distributed to the right channels by Catiline's supporters. Facing him before the Senate, in the first speech, the consul goaded him to leave, with the following ironic words: 'If you want to make me, your enemy as you call me, unpopular, go straight into banishment. I shall scarcely be able to endure all that will be said (*sermones hominum*) if you do so; I shall scarcely be able to support my load of unpopularity (*invidia*) if you do go into exile at the command of the consul.'[78] The *sermones hominum*, the rumours of the people, had circulated quickly in Rome, in only one day and had compelled the consul to justify his actions before the citizens.

Social networks, then, were crucial for linking oneself to information and, thus, to making sense of rumours and public opinion. Clients were crucial in circulating them, especially in the moment of the morning *salutatio*.[79] Laurence has argued that these networks were changed radically by Clodius, who in 58 BC used the *collegia* to spread opinions and to mobilise the citizens.[80]

Understanding contradictory and diverse rumours was a complex affair. In the uncertain days at the beginning of the year 49 BC, when civil war broke out, Cicero informed Atticus, who was in Rome, of the talk in the towns around Rome, in Campania:

> on the other hand, to judge from the indignation in the towns and the talk of my acquaintances, it looks to me as if Pompey's flight would be a success. Here there is an extraordinary outcry (whether in Rome also, I do not know: please tell me) at the city being left without magistrates and without the Senate. In fact Pompey's flight has made a marvellous stir.[81]

---

[78] Cic. Cat. 1.23: 'si mihi inimico, ut praedicas, tuo conflare vis invidiam, recta perge in exsilium; vix feram sermones hominum, si id feceris, vix molem istius invidiae, si in exsilium iussu consulis ieris, sustinebo'.

[79] Laurence 1994: 64–67. However, Pina Polo 2010: 79–80 points out that, as a client could have more than one patron (see Comm. pet. 35), this could result in 'complementary or contradictory information'.

[80] Laurence 1994: 68–71.

[81] Cic. Att. 7.11.4: 'Rursus autem ex dolore municipali sermonibusque eorum quos convenio videtur hoc consilium exitum habiturum. mira hominum querela est (nescio (an) istic, sed facies ut sciam) sine magistratibus urbem esse, sine senatu. fugiens denique Pompeius mirabiliter homines movet'.

Thus, we see the interplay of different opinions: Cicero, at first thought, did not agree with Pompey's decision to abandon the city of Rome with the Senate. However, he had had the impression that the elite of the nearby towns had been so shocked that the move could actually be fruitful. However, as he was uncertain about the same reaction in Rome, he asked Atticus for information about that, at the same time relaying the towns' comments to Rome, where they would be commented upon. Nevertheless, Cicero was aware that, being away from the city, his information was not complete, so he asked for clarification: 'Explain to me what it all means.'[82]

Cicero criticised dependence on rumours, a common attitude of Late Roman Republican politicians.[83] Nevertheless, this reproach was addressed to the social structure of the Roman political class: a small group, it was controlled by its peers from the inside, and by those on the outside through rumours and gossip. Despite this criticism, the Roman elite, as a ruling group, could not overlook rumours, since politicians risked being over-taken by the situation. Rumours shaped political actions the individual collective levels. After his consulship, Cicero decided to renounce his provincial governorship in Macedonia, and passed it to his colleague Antonius. It was rumoured that the clauses of the pact between the two included a division of profits; this rumour was probably fed by the news about the depredations carried out by Antonius in his province.[84] The falsehood of the accusations is not so clear since, in a contemporary letter to Atticus, Cicero complained about the slowness of someone named Teucris and that, due to this, he would have to go to Considius, Axius, or Selicius, three well-known money lenders.[85] It is possible that Teucris was a nickname for Antonius, or also possibly that of a middleman between Antonius and Cicero, perhaps Publius Sestius.[86] Guessing that he would be accused upon his return to Rome, Antonius asked his former colleague to defend him. Nevertheless, rumours about the involvement of the orator in the plunder of Macedonia prevented the latter from complying with Antonius' request, since he expected condemnation from both the *boni* and the people.[87] Rumours had become opinion (*existimatio*), further and more firmly extended; Cicero could not, and did not wish to, defend Antonius, in order to avoid further sullying his image.[88] This case

---

[82] Cic. Att. 7.11.4: 'Haec tu mihi explica qualia sint'.   [83] Cic. Sest. 115.
[84] Cic. Att. 1.12.1. On consuls and praetors who declined a province after their magistracy, see Blösel 2016.
[85] Cic. Att. 1.12.1–2.   [86] See Shackleton Bailey 1965: 297.   [87] Cic. Att. 1.12.1.
[88] On the meanings of *existimatio*, see p. 7.

represents a clear example of the use of rumours and gossip as a way to control the group's morality. Even though many Roman senators came back from their provincial governments enriched, this generalized behaviour was not morally approved.[89] Furthermore, the pact between Cicero and Antonius to share benefits was condemned by their peers; this encouraged Cicero not to defend his colleague, and to stay away from him. Rumours and gossip controlled and censored the actions of the members of the political aristocracy.

3.2 Circulation of Rumours Outside Rome

Not all rumours were restricted to the city of Rome. Were the inhabitants outside Rome interested in the rumours that arrived from the capital? An affirmative answer would attest to the interest of the provinces or Italy in Roman politics.

In the first place, rumours travelled on foot, in a chariot, or by horse (in Italy), or even by boat (in the provinces of the Mediterranean). The dates of some letters from Cicero and other internal references have allowed scholars to determine the speed at which these missives were transported. This also depended on the trustworthiness of the carrier, and the means at his disposal. During the civil war, a letter from Formiae (where one of Cicero's *villae* was located) to Rome could arrive in forty-eight hours, even though other letters could take three or more days.[90] In exceptional cases, distances could be shorter: in 80 BC, Cicero defended Sextus Roscius, accused of parricide. The night of the murder a messenger rode from Rome to Ameria to deliver the news; he travelled 56 miles in ten hours, changing his *cisium*, a light chariot of two wheels.[91]

Rumours usually travelled from mouth to ear, a much slower medium but one that allowed their expansion into a wider territory. Taking into account the absence of a public postal service, those who were not members of the elite had to trust someone who would make the trip to send messages to others. Some flows of the rural population to Rome were regular, such as those linked to markets: the *nundinae*, for instance, took place in the city every eight days, and connected Rome with the countryside; producers from nearby towns gathered there with their products, and circulated news in both directions.[92] Other less frequent occasions, such as censuses, drew

---

[89] See Rosillo-López 2010: 143–154.
[90] See Bayet 1967: 20; this allows the dating of the letter Cic. Att. 7.7. E.g. Att. 8.14.2 (three days).
[91] Cic. Sex. Rosc. Amer. 19.
[92] On these markets, De Ligt 1993: 51ff; 78–88; 128–129; Morley 1996; 2000.

a great number of people.[93] Finally, great political events could attract
people like magnets: the sumptuous funerals organised by the two sons of
the general Aemilius Paullus brought together a great number of people,
ready not only to honour the deceased but also to attend the spectacles,
among which there were two works by Terence (*Hecyra* y *Adelphoe*).[94]

Interestingly, sources mention several times that, in certain cases, rumours
could travel faster than messengers.[95] Cicero announced to Atticus that his
brother Quintus had got Asia as a province, a fact that had probably reached
his friend, he assumed, more quickly through rumour than through the
letters he received.[96] When he related the details of his return from exile in
a letter, Cicero clarified: 'Though I suppose you have had all the news from
your family or from messengers and rumour, . . .'.[97] Talking about one of the
Roman defeats against Mithridates, and wanting to present it as a complete
disaster, Cicero stated tendentiously that: 'It was so great that it came to
Lucius Lucullus' ears, not by means of a messenger dispatched from the
scene of action, but through the report of common conversation.'[98]
In 189 BC, a rumour circulated that the general Lucius Scipio and his
brother Publius Africanus had been captured and that the Roman forces
had suffered a crushing defeat: 'Then a report of the transactions in Asia
spread vaguely without an author; and a few days after, certain information,
and a letter from the general, arrived at Rome; which occasioned joy after
recent fears.'[99] Thus, again, rumours arrived at Rome in advance of official
and more trustworthy news, probably carried by merchants or travellers,
whose popular status made them unreliable in the eyes of the Roman
senators.

Rumours could be geographically localised. Excluding Rome, Cicero's
letters mentioned rumours mainly in connection with the bay of Naples,
especially Puteoli and the cities of Naples and Cumae. In the first place, the
port of Puteoli was more likely to receive news by sea, a quicker means of
travel. During the trial against Rabirius Postumus, Cicero admitted that

---

[93] Ev. Luc. 2.1–4.   [94] Diod. 31.25; Ter. Hec. 33–36; Pol. 31.28.5–6.
[95] Bettini 2008: 353–356 on *fama*, and divine intervention causing the quick spread of news. Dunstan
1982 proposes the use of the epidemic model as a model for the spread of rumours; Fan, Poonen, and
Poonen 1997 on a mathematical attempt to elucidate how fast gossipers can learn news; Sommerfeld
et alii 2008 on how multiple gossip statements direct towards cooperation.
[96] Cic. Att. 1.15.1.
[97] Cic. Att. 4.1.4: 'Nunc etsi omnia aut scripta esse a tuis arbitror aut etiam nuntiis ac rumore perlata'.
[98] Cic. Man. 25: 'Praeterire me nostram calamitatem, quae tanta fuit, ut eam ad auris [Luculli]
imperatoris non ex proelio nuntius, sed ex sermone rumor adferret'.
[99] Liv. 37.51.8: 'Fama deinde rebus in Asia gestis temere uulgata sine auctore, et post dies paucos
nuntii certi litteraeque imperatoris Romam adlatae, quae non tantum gaudium ab recenti metu
attulerunt'.

rumour had it that the accused had not come back empty-handed from Egypt. Such news had come from Puteoli, where Rabirius Postumus' ships had docked. The Roman people even knew the contents of the charge, composed of Egyptian products, such as paper, linen and glass. Cicero attributed these rumours to people who hated Rabirius and, detailing a possible and precise origin, to the very crew of the ships.[100] The information travelled to Rome, so these rumours or gossip (*sermones*) were everywhere. This reference indicated that rumours travelled not only in space but also in time: the rumour about Rabirius lasted for at least that summer.

After Delos became a free port in 166 BC, Puteoli became one of the main ports of Rome, at least until the third century AD; it surpassed Naples due to its closeness to the Appian Way in Cumae.[101] It was located in the bay of Naples, the Italian region where the Roman elite had owned *villae* since the end of the second century BC.[102] Cicero called Puteoli *illa pusilla Roma*, that little Rome, due to the numbers of the elite that could be found there.[103] This duality of Puteoli suggests two things: first of all, that rumours coming from outside the Italian frontiers entered through the port. Secondly, that gossip travelled in, and with, the letters that the Roman elite sent to kinsmen and friends, and with the elite themselves. Thus, Puteoli became a centre for the reception and distribution of information. In April 55 BC, Cicero informed Atticus about the *magnus* rumour about the restoration of King Ptolemy to his throne in Egypt by Gabinius. The news probably had arrived on the ships coming from Alexandria; even so, Cicero was not convinced of its veracity, and asked his friend for more reliable news.[104]

In a previous letter, Cicero transmitted to Atticus the rumours that circulated in Naples, 12 kilometres away from Puteoli, about the supposed tribunician veto of the census.[105] The Campanian region in general, where Cumae, Puteoli, and Naples were located, was pointed out as a redistributive centre of rumours.

Some rumours were even circumscribed to that part of Italy, and did not travel to Rome, since they were regional rumours. It is an interesting feature, because traditionally the city has been thought of as the epicentre of rumour, which would expand towards Italy and the provinces in concentric circles. In a letter to Cicero, Caelius informed him about the latest

---

[100] Cic. Rab. Post. 40. See more details in pp. 214–217.   [101] See Frederiksen 1984: 319–349.
[102] D'Arms 1970: 15–78.   [103] Cic. Att. 5.2.2.   [104] Cic. Att. 4.10.1.   [105] Cic. Att. 4.9.1.

gossip about the Transpadane matter (May 51 BC).[106] Even today, it is difficult to find a clear view of this case due to the contradictory ancient *testimonia*. The Transpadani had Latin citizenship, and Caesar wanted to make them Roman citizens, which would finally happen in 49 BC, to put them on the same footing as the other group of Cisalpine Gauls, the Cispadani, who had been Roman citizens since 89 BC.[107] Conservative Roman opinion was angered at hearing of Caesar's founding of the Roman colony of *Novum Comum*; the consul Marcellus whipped a member of the municipal Senate of this colony, thus negating the latter's status as a Roman citizen.[108] In May 51 BC, Cicero crossed this region, and wrote to Atticus from Trebulanus; in his letter, he pointed out: 'I beg you to write to me what reports there are on the political situation. In the country towns I notice there is much panic: but a great deal is nonsense. Please let me know your opinion about this and the date of the impending crisis.'[109] The fear that Cicero detected in the cities of Campania was probably provoked by the rumours about the conferring of Roman citizenship on the Transpadani by Caesar.[110] The date of the rumour is noteworthy, because it implied its quick mutability. The rumours that Caelius reported to Cicero should be put in this context: 'For those rumours about the *comitia* of the Transpadani were rife enough, until I got as far as Cumae; when I reached Rome, I never heard the slightest whisper about it.'[111] Why did Caelius mention Cumae as the limit to which rumours had reached? There could be many reasons: probably some senators who lodged in this region received a letter from Caesar's entourage in Gaul. If it had come from the *optimates*' circles, these rumours would be known in Rome. Having arrived at Rome, Caelius would probably have circulated them to others within his political circles, thus guaranteeing their diffusion.

A graffito from Teracina, halfway between Rome and Campania, represented another example of the transmission of news from Rome. The text expressed the happiness of the author about the murder of

---

[106] Cic. Fam. 8. 1, 2–3.
[107] Suet. DI. 8. Williams 2001: 100–140 suggests that the concession of citizenship to the Transpadani implied the inclusion of Cisalpine Gaul inside Italy and its frontiers. At that time, the northern frontier fluctuated, and it was discussed whether it should be located in the Apennines or in the Alps.
[108] Suet. DI. 28; Cic. Fam. 8.2.2.
[109] Cic. Att. 5.3.1: 'qui de re publica rumores scribe, quaeso; in oppidis enim summum video timorem sed multa inania. quid de his cogites et quando scire velim'.
[110] Budé's edition points out that it could also be a mention of the extension of Caesar's command-ment in Gaul (and thus, the enquiry about the date).
[111] Cic. Fam. 8.1.2: 'nam et illi rumores de comitiis Transpadanorum Cumarum tenus caluerunt; Romam cum venissem, ne tenuissimam quidem auditionem de ea re accepi'.

Clodius.[112] Cicero, in his speech in support of Milo, highlighted the speed with which the news about the death of the former tribune circulated to the countryside.[113]

During Caesar's consulship in 59 BC, Cicero, discouraged by the political situation, retired to one of his *villae* in the countryside. On 23 April, he wrote to Atticus an interesting letter, in which he set the non-existent gossip of the city against the frankness of the countryside, which was booming with rumours.[114] Cicero's statement is not completely reliable. Gossip did circulate in Rome that year: Cicero thanked Atticus for the variety of rumours, gossip, and opinions (*varietas sermonum opinionumque*) that the latter transmitted to him in his missives.[115] In fact, gossip and political conversations even grew stronger before what Cicero considered to be an adverse political situation.[116] This latest statement differed subtly from the supposed silence that he evoked at the beginning of the month (or perhaps gossip had progressed). Furthermore, in moments of political instability or crisis, the circulation of rumours, gossip, and ideas often increased. These cases showed how the mechanisms of the geographical transmission of rumours worked.

There are also mentions of the long-distance circulation of rumours, in this case between Rome and Asia. During the trial of Lucius Flaccus (59 BC), governor of the province two years earlier, a rumour circulated around Asia that Pompey, Flaccus' sworn enemy, had pressed for his accusation and had put all his resources and influences at the accusers' disposal.[117] It could have been a rumour that circulated in Rome, and that Cicero projected into Asia to give the impression that the inhabitants of that province supported Flaccus. Alternatively, it could actually have been an Asiatic rumour, which Cicero mentioned in Rome. This rumour could have had many channels of circulation, such as the members of the embassies from Asia that came to the trial or even through Roman merchants, who represented a sizeable group in that province.[118] A third possibility would imply that that rumour did not exist, and that Cicero invented it to influence the opinion of the judges. Cicero would have presented the accusation against Flaccus as an attack against himself; in the year of his consulship, Flaccus helped actively to repress the conspiracy of Catiline. He took part in the action on the Milvian Bridge, the night that the Allobroges were arrested, and the letters that precipitated the detentions and the repression of the conspiracy were discovered.

---

[112] CIL I² 3109a: 'Publi progenies, Appi cognomine Pulchri, / occubuit letum'. See Solin 1981: 357–358; Tatum 1990: 301–303; Cugusi 2000.
[113] Cic. Mil. 98. [114] Cic. Att. 2.13.2. [115] Cic. Att. 2.15.1. [116] Cic. Att. 2.18.2.
[117] Cic. Flacc. 14. [118] On the *negotiatores* in Asia, see Hatzfeld 1919.

The rumour about Pompey, which perhaps alluded to Caesar, would make sense in this context. Cicero used here one of the typical arguments of the Roman tribunals: that is, to move the judges to compassion because the accused had to face a powerful rival. Was there really such a rumour in Asia? Since no further details are available in the sources, it is hard to decide; nevertheless, it is possible that the solution comes from the combining of some of these hypotheses. Cicero was evidently using Pompey's name and the enumeration of the latter's powers (*auctoritas, gratia, copiae, opes*) to influence the jury in favour of Flaccus. At the same time, the province of Asia knew about the trial against its former governor: several Greek cities and provinces sent ambassadors in his favour.[119] The cities of Acmonia, Dorilea, Temnos and Tralles, though, reported during the trial the insults committed by Flaccus.[120] Thus, it is possible that the rumour was known in the province. Furthermore, the accusers had time to collect testimonies against Flaccus, which would have contributed to the subject being hot news. It would then have been talked about both in the province of Asia and in Rome.

The study of the circulation of the rumours and their geographical scope has allowed us to consider the question of whether the inhabitants of Italy were interested in the rumours and news coming from the city of Rome. This matter also involves the political cohesion of the territory. The link between Puteoli and Rome is well documented, because many Roman merchants had businesses in the port. The rest of the rumours travelled within the Campanian region, where the Roman elite owned their *villae*. In 51 BC, Cicero stated that he had seen great fear in the *oppida*; nevertheless, he did not specify whether that fear came from the inhabitants of the town or from the municipal elites.[121] As we have seen, during the part of the consulship of Caesar that Cicero spent outside Rome, the latter commented on the impression that the news coming from the city left in Campania: 'In the countryside (*in agris*) nobody keeps quiet', he even told Atticus. Again, Cicero is imprecise about the sources of these comments.[122] Some months later he talked about 'Italian murmurs'. It is possible that, in peaceful moments, only the Italian elites showed interest in Roman politics. It was a group with which Cicero probably had relations. In moments of crisis, such as during the civil war, the inhabitants of Italian cities would

---

[119] Cic. *Flacc.* 62–63.
[120] Acmonia: Cic. *Flacc.* 34–38; Dorilea: Cic. *Flacc.* 39–41; Temnos: Cic. *Flacc.* 42–51; Tralles: Cic. *Flacc.* 52–59. On the dispute between the city of Tralles and Flaccus for the money of Flaccus' father, see Erkelenz 1999. On Flaccus' extortions, see Macrob. 2.1.13; Zehnacker 1979.
[121] Cic. *Att.* 5.3.1.   [122] Cic. *Att.* 2.13.2: 'in agris non siletur'.

pay attention to rumours about the city of Rome, since they might imply the passage of an army through the region.

3.3   Rumours, Gossip and Social Discipline

Anthropologists such as Gluckman explain gossip as a means of social control of a group, and even of a group over an individual. Times of crisis are usually key moments to the study of this social discipline, since an individual has to define his position in respect to a group that could exert pressure to influence his decision. This conjuncture is frequently found in moments of armed conflict, in which politicians had to take one of the two sides. An interesting case happened during the civil war between Pompey and Caesar, during which the positioning was even physical: Pompey's departure from Italy after Caesar's advance meant that the senators had to decide whether or not to stay on the Italian peninsula.[123] Some senators, such as Cicero, did not have such a clear position, staying for the moment in Italy without, however, supporting the Caesarian party openly. Due to his hesitant attitude, Caesar even courted Cicero in order to win his support. Nevertheless, the *boni*, the political circle to which Cicero belonged, exerted pressure on him through rumours and gossip as a means of maintaining group control and social discipline.

Between 4th and 8th March 49 BC, three letters exchanged with Atticus reveal Cicero's doubts and, above all, the pressure of gossip (*sermones*) of the *optimates* about his political decisions, or better, his indecisions.[124] In the first letter, Cicero received news of such rumours through Philotimus, his wife Terentia's trusted freedman: 'He says that the *optimates* are tearing me to tatters.'[125] Immediately afterwards, Cicero criticised them for shifting at that moment towards Caesar. Nevertheless, he feared these rumours and gossip, channelled through his freedman. He used the Homeric phrase *aideomai Trôas*, 'I fear the Trojans', as a way of expressing his dread of the opinion of the group.[126] In this case, Cicero's source was rather trustworthy, since Philotimus was a declared Pompeian at that time, even though later, in 47 BC, he was found in Caesar's headquarters. Probably, one way or another, Philotimus had indirect access to Pompeian circles. This is not unlikely since, as we have seen, Romans knew that the reputation of a member of the

---

[123] D.C. 41.6.5–6.   [124] Cic. Att. 8.16; 9.1.3; 9.2b; Plut. Caes. 33.5.
[125] Cic. Att. 8.16.1: 'is enim me ab optimatibus ait conscindi'.
[126] Il. 22.105 (Hector, cornered in the final battle against Achilles, states that he cannot go back to the city and suffer the reproaches and gossip of his fellow citizens). This expression, referring to fear of public opinion, had already been employed in Cic. Att. 2.5.

elite was transmitted to a great extent by the comments of his slaves and freedmen.[127]

In another letter of 6th March, Cicero told Atticus that he himself was badly criticised during dinners, probably by the *optimates*.[128] Two days later, Cicero was still obsessed with this matter: the information delivered by the freedman did not seem to him sufficiently trustworthy. He therefore asked Atticus to tell him what the *boni* thought about him, even though he remarked that he could not bear their gossip, their *sermones*.[129] Despite his strong criticism of the *optimates*, whom he accused of running towards Caesar and of staying in Rome, he felt deeply affected, even to the point of asking for news via two different sources: Terentia's freedman and Atticus.[130]

Cicero communicated these pressures and his uneasy position to many people. At the beginning of May 49 BC, he wrote to his friend Caelius: 'For I made no secret of Titus Ampius' comments, and you saw how I hated the idea of leaving Rome when I heard them.'[131] The man who criticised Cicero, Titus Ampius, had been praetor in 59 BC, the year of Caesar's consulship. He was a staunch Pompeian, to the point that the Caesarians nicknamed him *tuba belli civilis*, the trumpet of the civil war.[132] Ampius' criticism of Cicero followed the pressure exerted on him by the *boni*, with the aim of getting him to join the Pompeians properly, instead of remaining in an uncertain position.

The pressure of the opinion of the *boni* was eventually fruitful: that same year, Cicero decided to leave Italy and join Pompey's army. Nevertheless, the experience was not successful. After the defeat, disillusioned with the Pompeian cause (and especially with its leaders), Cicero returned to Italy in October 48 BC, and decided to beg for pardon. Atticus, who had remained in the city, was his main supporter before the new Roman power. In a letter of March 47 BC, Cicero answered his friend's question: what explanation are you going to offer to Caesar about your departure from Italy? The reply is revealing and very clear: 'I could not put up with people's talk, although I wanted to.'[133] It was not an excuse. As we have seen, the *boni* were alluded to in this mention of the *homines*. Cicero added that he had referred frequently to this situation in his letters to

---

[127] Com. Pet. 17; 49; Cic. QF. 1.1.17.   [128] Cic. Att. 9.1.3.   [129] Cic. Att. 9.2b.3.
[130] Cic. Att. 9.1. 2.
[131] Cic. Fam. 2.16.3: 'Non enim te celavi sermonem T. Ampi; vidisti quam abhorrerem ab Urbe relinquenda, cum audissem'.
[132] Cic. Fam. 6.12.3.
[133] Cic. Att. 11.12.1: 'non potuisse, cum cupissem, sermones hominum sustinere'.

Caesar and that he had even charged many people to let the victor of the civil war know. This explanation discharged Cicero from some of the guilt: it presented him as a person of weak character in the face of gossip. Nevertheless, this sentence highlights the success of group control of the *boni*, since Cicero did not see any way out other than to yield before gossip. It is also noteworthy that Cicero thought that Caesar would consider this explanation as valid, which implied that the victor of the war would have understood perfectly the pressures of the opinions of a close group.

The demands of the *boni* with the aim of maintaining control of the group did not end with the defeat of the Pompeian side. In 46 BC, Cicero's son told his father of his desire to leave for Caesar's camp in Hispania, as his cousin, Quintus' son, had done already. Cicero tried by every means to avoid the departure of his offspring. Among other reasons, such as the superiority of his cousin in the Caesarian camp, Cicero admitted that he did not fear gossip, but the *vituperatio*: reproaches or censure. He even wrote to Atticus about two examples of these supposed recriminations: 'Was it not enough that we abandoned our weapons? Must we side with the enemy?'[134] It was the *boni*, again, who tried to maintain the cohesion of the group when the last Pompeians, led by the elder son of Pompey, fought in Hispania.

Criticism of Cicero was stronger because he had recently uttered similar recriminations towards Sulpicius Rufus about the behaviour of his son. Servius Sulpicius Rufus, a renowned jurist, followed a similar line of conduct during the civil war, and did not define himself at the beginning as belonging to one side or another; it was easier for him since he had no lictors or magistracy. He finally chose the Pompeian side, which he later abandoned. He achieved the pardon of Caesar in 46 BC, and was named governor of Achaia. Cicero criticised Sulpicius Rufus openly for having sent his son to serve with Caesar's army. When his own son wanted to fight on that side, Cicero was aware that this time there would be no mere gossip (*sermones*), but reproaches (*vituperationes*). Group control was exerted even by the same members that suffered it, as this case shows.

This analysis of the sources has demonstrated that Gluckman's and Paine's anthropological theories could explain and be applied to Late Republican Rome. Gossip was not, and is not, idle and futile chatter; it serves, among other things, to control the members of the group, and to maintain the latter's cohesion. When Cicero demanded from Atticus news about what the *optimates* said about him, he did not do so merely

---

[134] Cic. Att. 12.7.1: 'non satis esse si haec arma reliquissemus? etiam contraria?'.

out of the desire to know. He was being discredited by the members of his own group through gossip. He tried to defend himself by accusing them of collaboration with Caesar, but this was in vain: 'I fear the Trojans', that is, he dreaded public opinion and what it would say about him. This fear was natural in the bosom of the Roman political elite and much more so in Cicero's case because, as a *homo novus*, he had no prestigious fore-father. Only his own *fama*, his own actions, counted when he wanted to highlight his prestige. Gossip and rumour, especially from members of his own political circle, discredited him before the population or, at least, before the rest of the senators. This study has shown that the pressure of the opinions of a group, exerted by members over other members through gossip, could influence personal decisions of a political nature. It was not just an accessory element, but a useful means to maintain cohesion, and even control, within a group, particularly in moments of crisis.

In sum, public opinion could be negotiated in the Senate or in the *contiones*, but it was developed and transmitted in more informal settings and during socialising activities. Discussions in these spaces were necessary for the everyday functioning of Roman politics, which used rumours, gossip and elite or popular public opinion. Spaces of sociability varied according to the social class of the citizen. The Senate was a space for exchanging elite public opinion, as were dinners. *Contiones* could be extremely organised and were sometimes more of a display of public opinion than an actual exchange. Nevertheless, informal exchanges of public opinion were needed: at dinners for the elite; and in streets and probably in taverns for the people.

Social networks are fundamental for spreading rumours, since they accelerate their diffusion. Rumours are pieces of information. Furthermore, the truth of a rumour is not usually taken into account; even if people believe it as false, they will usually pass it on anyway. In fact, rumour leads to an agreement, since the process of a rumour usually eliminates at the beginning the most implausible explanations. The more a rumour circulates, the more veracity it will have, since people may compare and eliminate untrue versions. *Sermo*, a more informal type of talk, was also frequently associated with social control, which made it potentially important for politicians. All these conversations, rumours and gossip not only entailed peer control but also bottom-up control.

Rumours construct public opinion. News or facts are discussed and commented upon and part of the discussion relies on what is thought or felt about it, thus creating different interpretations of the news and, thus,

opinions that we want to believe.[135] When gossip is not true, it is a mirror of the attitudes of a social group and its conception of the world.[136] Rumours, as non-official sources of news, also allow the circumvention of formal and informal constraints on the topics discussed. They allow into public discussion issues that are rarely mentioned explicitly by political customs.[137]

---

[135] Kapferer 1987: 59–61; 99–102.   [136] Wickham 1998: 11–12.   [137] Kapferer 1987: 246.