

*Luca Fezzi*

## *A*PPEASING THE CIVIL WARS IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD<sup>1</sup>

Civil war is considered, at the geopolitical level, as the major form of organized violence, particularly harmful for two characteristics which distinguishes it from interstate conflicts: length and proneness to relapse. In relation to this, it is interesting to notice that eminent contemporary voices have remarked the lack of a political theorization of civil war.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the Graeco-Roman world, the situation is partly different. Despite not having originated the concept of civil war, the Graeco-Roman world experienced it profoundly and with a sense of fear, leading to the creation of thorough testimonies, histories, and reflections on the topic. Scholars and admirers of the Ancient World, from the Renaissance to the present day, have continuously reflected on civil wars. The related literature is extensive and well-grounded, showing a renewed interest in the ways of managing internal conflicts, with a particular focus on its less institutionalized aspects. Such complex and plural stances mirror the complexity of the issue. Indeed, we cannot overlook the fact that conflicts were approached from various perspectives; for instance, the concepts of *stasis* and *bellum civile* present distinct nuances of meaning within the context of the Greek and Roman worlds, and indicate a wide and flexible evaluation of conflict and its dangerousness.

The very definition of ‘civil war’, often delicate even nowadays due to the involvement of extraneous forces, the lack of recognition of the status of the contenders – sometimes self-styled revolutionaries and often labelled rebels by the

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank all the panelists and, on this occasion, extend my gratitude to Andrea Giardina for his precious and generous advice.

<sup>2</sup> Armitage 2017: 3–27.

opposing side – or the presence of more than two sides in the conflict. Moreover, the moderns tend to broaden the concept itself, also relating it to the international law, the law of war, and humanitarian issues.

After all, civil war, often internationalized, is the most widespread type of conflict since the end of World War II. But there is also the long history of the term ‘civil war’, in the modern world, always drawing from the Roman history; in fact, the Roman models strongly influence modern narratives of civil wars, which only at some point take on the title of ‘revolutions’.

If we want to start from the concept itself we have to go back to Rome. In the words of Appian, the Roman civil war was born in 88 BCE in Rome with Sulla and his first march on the city;<sup>3</sup> the term *bellum civile*, in the sense of an organized war of citizens against citizens, is first documented in 66, used by Cicero;<sup>4</sup> from that moment, as a concept and as a phenomenon, it became ubiquitous, going far beyond the Republican age up to the end of Rome, including Augustine.

In connection with civil war in Rome, there are several significant phenomena, such as proscriptions and the institutionalized persecution of dissidents, which constitute a particularly dramatic chapter in the movement of people in the Mediterranean and beyond. The moment a citizen is deprived of his status, he becomes a hunted stranger, sometimes, but not always, protected by a network of personal and patronage-type relationships. And then, starting from this point, there is another aspect to focus on, the geopolitical one: the civil war in Rome, in its further phase, with Caesar and Pompey, became a total war, involving the entire known world.

But it is important, and we did in our panel, to also address the Greek concept of *stasis*, although less institutionalized and involving a lower number of people. In line with this assumption, Cinzia Bearzot examines the different forms of reactions to the civil war implemented in Athens in 403 BCE: renunciation of vengeance and reconstruction of the common values. Returning to Rome, Adam Ziółkowski explores ways in which the Romans of the early and middle Republic managed to solve great internal crises without recourse to *bella civilia*, while Frédéric Hurlet investigates the end of the civil wars and modalities and stakes of the Augustan political recomposition with a particular focus on the Roman aristocracy.

One important element emerged from our panel once again, and one that I believe will be increasingly important in the future. If communication between diverse fields of research is essential, the historians of the Graeco-Roman world

---

<sup>3</sup> App. *BC* 1,259.

<sup>4</sup> Cic. *Manil.* 28.

have always practiced it, not only between the Greek and Roman history, but also between various approaches to history in general and to political theory.

At the end, I would like to recall Benjamin Constant, who, in reaction to the abuses of the French revolutionary classicism, theorized the first truly heavy political caesura between the ancients and the moderns in his famous *Discours* of 1819.<sup>5</sup> In May 1830, seven months before his death, however, he asked himself, following Joseph de Berchoux: ‘who will free us from the Greeks and Romans?’ And the answer he gave was: ‘no one’.<sup>6</sup> This, as we know, is not entirely accurate, but ancient historiographical patterns, including those from civil wars, remain relevant and productive even today.

So, how the Greeks and the Romans appeased civil wars? Panelists answered this question with valuable and innovative contributions. Let’s allow their voices to be heard.

## Bibliography

Armitage, D. 2017: *Civil Wars. A History in Ideas*, New Haven, London.

Constant, B. 1820: *De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes. Discours prononcé à l’Athénée royal de Paris en 1819*, in *id. Collection complète des ouvrages publiés sur le Gouvernement représentatif et la Constitution actuelle de la France, formant une espèce de Cours de politique constitutionnelle*, IV, Paris, Rouen.

Constant, B. 1830: ‘Qui nous délivrera des Grecs et des Romains?’, *Le Temps*, 1<sup>st</sup> of May.

---

<sup>5</sup> Constant 1820.

<sup>6</sup> Constant 1830.