



PHILIPPE ROUSSELOT SIAC

CURIOSA : CALDWELL AND CICERO

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The Pseudo Cicero, he of the Invectives, of the Rhetoric to Herennius or of *Liber paradoxii*, has long appealed to the erudite. But just when the phantom of our studies seemed no longer to arouse curiosity, here he is again and in a most unexpected manner.

Among the Cicero quotations most frequently cited by American internet users is the following: “*The national budget must be balanced. The public debt must be reduced; the arrogance of the authorities must be moderated and controlled. Payments to foreign governments must be reduced, if the nation doesn't want to go bankrupt. People must again learn to work, instead of living on public assistance.*”

All research for this apocryphal Ciceronian passage has proved vain. It has made the rounds, particularly on web sites devoted to quotations, where neither the Latin text nor its reference are ever given, and for good reason. A simple internet query gives at least a hundred hits, making the passage one of Cicero's most favored quotations, at least in the United States. But the internet is only one facet of the phenomenon, as the forgery is especially popular in books.

For years, readers intrigued by the absence of a reference sought its origin. The most adventurous scoured the *De oratore* or the *De re publica*. Others felt the passage sounded like Cato or that it might be a variant of *Pro Sestio* 43, 103. But clearly the passage is neither Ciceronian nor even Roman. Intrigued by the discovery that the Roman Republic had its own bureaucracy and “public assistance for foreigners,” the most learned set off in many directions. Professor Collins of Northern Illinois University takes the prize for the decisive find. He published the solution to the enigma as letter to the editor in the April 20, 1971, issue of *The Chicago Tribune*. What Professor Collins discovered was that the passage was a pastiche cobbled together by Taylor Caldwell in her biographical novel *A Pillar of Iron* (Doubleday & Company, New York, 1965) of which Cicero is the hero. Highly successful in its time, the novel went through nine editions, was translated into several languages and figured on the *New York Times* best seller list for three months.

Professor Collins's discovery was barely noticed. How does a pretend quotation come to be and what, might one say, is its genetic structure?

Its principal role is utilitarian. Ours lends itself brilliantly to any discourse on State budgets or the uses of public money. One reader of Caldwell slipped it into a 1968 Congressional budget discussion¹. It was quickly appropriated² and soon diffused far and wide. Since then, it has

¹ *US Congressional Record*, April 25, 1968, vol. 114, p. 10635.

appeared in an improbable number of official reports, government documents³ among them. Is this contagion, mimicry or mere cribbing? The passage adorns OECD⁴ and IMF⁵ economic reports as well as public management⁶ studies. The quotation went on to infiltrate professional mathematics journals⁷, public debates in India⁸ and the philosophical musings of the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry John C. Polanyi⁹. In the course of its diverse apparitions, our formula never elicits in-depth reflection. Often introduced by “As Cicero said,” the quotation alternatively introduces a strategic question: “... And do you know who said that?” Pseudo Cicero thus becomes an infallible pontiff and his maxim, not only ornamental but imbued with *auctoritas*, speaks across centuries to convey an eternal truth, one of administrative wisdom which all governments and economists are invited to contemplate. It remains to note that in a milieu theoretically steeped in precision, no one has been troubled by the presence of a Ciceronian quotation devoid of any reference.

Ideology and politics put the forgery to yet other uses. The passage found favor with one group in particular, the ultra-conservative American right wing. Caldwell’s readers communed with the Pseudo Cicero who, in this fine passage, testifies to his contempt for indolence and his deep-seated mistrust of Government. It is instructive to witness the conservative political analyst John Harmer read the novel as a prophecy of what the United States would become by the end of the century¹⁰. While the passage never appears in texts by the American left, it flourishes in the prose of the right, from the most modest of politicians¹¹ to the most skillful defenders of taxpayers’ rights,¹² with the populist Ross Perrot¹³ thrown in for good measure. On one of the rare occasions in his political life that Ronald Reagan uttered the word Cicero, it was to refer to this passage. Tea Party web sites, invariably hostile to Obama, evoke the founding fathers in the context of the quotation¹⁴. Admittedly, Caldwell echoes the maxims of the founding fathers, upon whom the right so often calls. Thomas Jefferson claimed that “A government big enough to give you everything you want is strong

² *U.S. News and World Report*, July 29, 1968.

³ For example the *2008 Budget Briefer, Framework Assessment of the National Government Budget*, N°2007-02, Oct. 2007.

⁴ *International Labour Conference, The effectiveness and scope of fiscal stimulus in response to the crisis*, Jonathan Coppel, Office of the OECD Chief Economist, Geneva, 4 June 2009.

⁵ George Kopits, *Fiscal rules: useful policy framework*, N° 2001-2145, International Monetary Fund. Fiscal Affairs, 2001.

⁶ For example, H. George Frederickson, *Public management reform and innovation: research, theory, and application*, Jocelyn M. Johnston, 1999, p. 166, University of Alabama Press. The author felt obliged to note that Cicero doubtless meant to say “accounts” rather than rather than “budget.”

⁷ *Cycles*, Vol. 41, Foundation for the Study of Cycles (U.S.), 1990, p. 126.

⁸ *Parliamentary debates*, Vol. 102, India Parliament.

⁹ *Science and society: The John C. Polanyi Nobel Laureates Lectures*, intro. Martin Moskovits, Anansi, 1995, p.40.

¹⁰ John Harmer, *Reagan: Man of Principle*, Cedar Fort, 2002, p.56.

¹¹ In his political platform Republican candidate for 5th district of Alabama Don Hudleston wrote “*Like Cicero, I believe that both national and state budgets must be balanced. Alabama has no reason not to have a balanced budget.*”

¹² Sid Taylor, a respected researcher for the *National Taxpayers Union Foundation* quotes the passage and adds: “*No matter how you say it, Cicero, the greatest Roman orator of 20 centuries ago, was right. Imagine, Marcus Tullius Cicero sitting in the Oval Office. ‘Vote Cicero and save your dough!’*” (John McCaslin, *Not This Time*, The Washington Times, January 18, 2005, p. A05).

¹³ The passage is mentioned by Ross Perrot during his campaign against Clinton: *Not for sale at any price: how we can save America for our children*, Hyperion 1993, p.95.

¹⁴ Numerous web sites, often mediocre. For example on a discussion web site: “*Did Obama Read Cicero’s ‘People must again learn to work, instead of living on public assistance’? Isn’t that a major problem today?*”. Or elsewhere “*What have we learned in 2,063 years?*”.

enough to take everything you have”¹⁵. Obviously not all of these readers are extremists. Nevertheless, they all share the same defiant attitude toward Washington. Here is what Caldwell had Cicero say: “A bureaucrat is the most despicable of men, though he is needed as vultures are needed, but one hardly admires vultures whom bureaucrats so strangely resemble. I have yet to meet a bureaucrat who was not petty, dull, almost witless, crafty or stupid, an oppressor or a thief, a holder of little authority in which he delights, as a boy delights in possessing a vicious dog. Who can trust such creatures?”¹⁶ The passage echoes our forgery. Caldwell’s Pseudo Cicero is a southern country squire lost in the twentieth century, embittered, impoverished and stripped of all resources save his anger against all who govern. This hatred of bureaucracy is perfectly captured in the passage on the budget which, given its emphatic cast, is pregnant with American collective memory. Its few words ring true on the ears of a conservative and traditionalist public. There is good reason for this.

Caldwell was sympathetic toward her hero, and it is easy to understand why. Cicero appears in the novel as a man jaded by the decline of private and public morals. As the title of the novel indicates, he is a citizen who has no intention of allowing himself to be had. Caldwell makes him the spokesperson for an America forever in revolt against an exacting and liberticidal State, an America of the extreme right. The novel was written at the end of Caldwell’s prolific career. In it, she gave free rein to her political opinions and hardly bothered to conceal her position. She gained recognition in such New Right journals, as *American Opinion*, *National Review* and even *Christian Crusade*. A fervent supporter of the John Birch Society, a fringe element of the right wing, she managed to have most of her biographers forget the time she spent in the openly anti-Semitic movement Liberty Lobby.

Her *Pillar of Iron* posits a systematic parallel between the history of Rome and that of the United States. This parallel, omnipresent in the literature of the American right-wing, owes much to Caldwell who was one of the first to popularize it in partisan journals. “Never before the rise of Rome, and never since, did two nations so remarkably resemble each other (...). In strange and amazing ways, we are the counterpart of ancient Rome. Her history, almost step by step, is our history. (...) Shall we continue along the path which led to the extinction of Rome? We have made her terrible mistakes, we have duplicated her crimes and stupidities almost to the letter”¹⁷. She continues: “Cicero delayed the days of final collapse, but only delayed it. He was assassinated. Rome then declined into despotism.... just as America is now declining”¹⁸. This is how *Pillar of Iron*, in the guise of a best seller, shows itself to be a novel with a thesis.

The tale of Pseudo Cicero shows how, on the basis of a curious novel, one passage has come to infiltrate the circle of public finance specialists for whom it should serve as a warning: “what I have told you can be traced back to the most venerable period of antiquity”. For the others, enthusiasts of anger and fear, it serves as a reminder that before them a man died in order to save liberty. This iconic image of Cicero is an interesting case of reception rooted in popular culture. It remains only to remember Cicero, the real Cicero, whose dream was that someone might devote himself to writing his life.

¹⁵ On the extreme right wing’s reading of the Founding Fathers, see the suggestive study, *The New Right, 1960-1968 (with Epilogue, 1969-1980)*, Jonathan Martin Kolkey, University Press of America, Lanham,

¹⁶ Taylor Caldwell, *A Pillar of Iron* (1965), p. 451.

¹⁷ Taylor Caldwell, *A Pillar of Iron* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday - Company, Inc., 1965).

¹⁸ Taylor Caldwell, *American Opinion*, June, 1965, pp. 71-72.