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Ancient Rome: Birthplace of Populism?

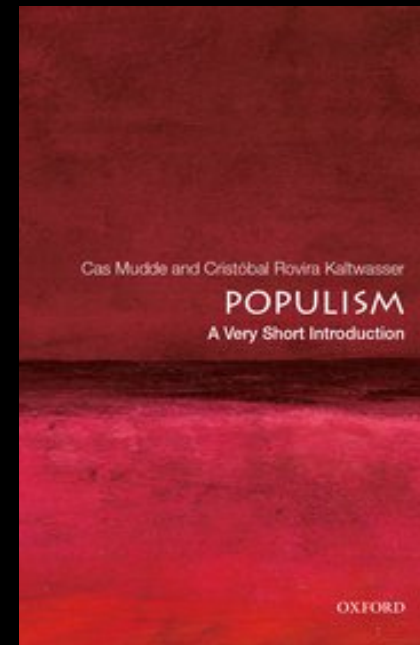
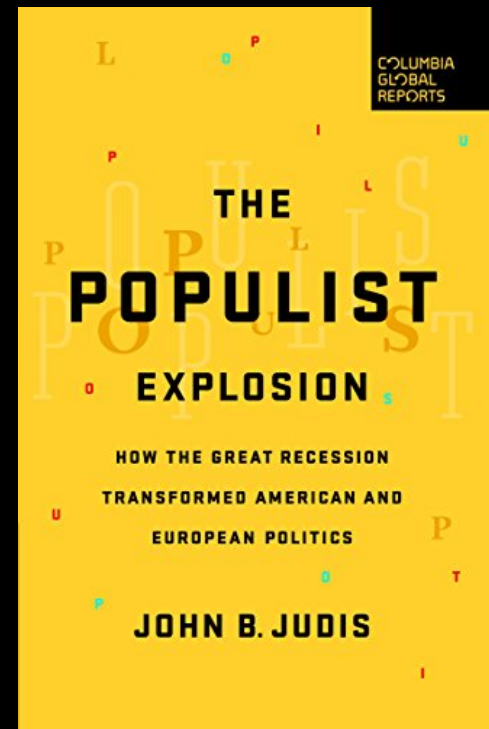
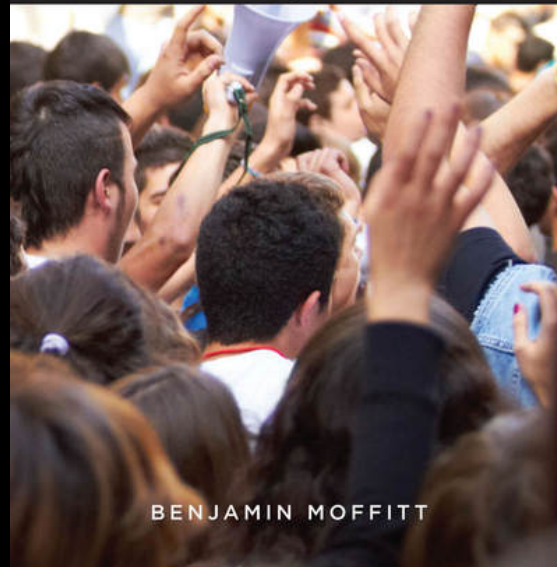
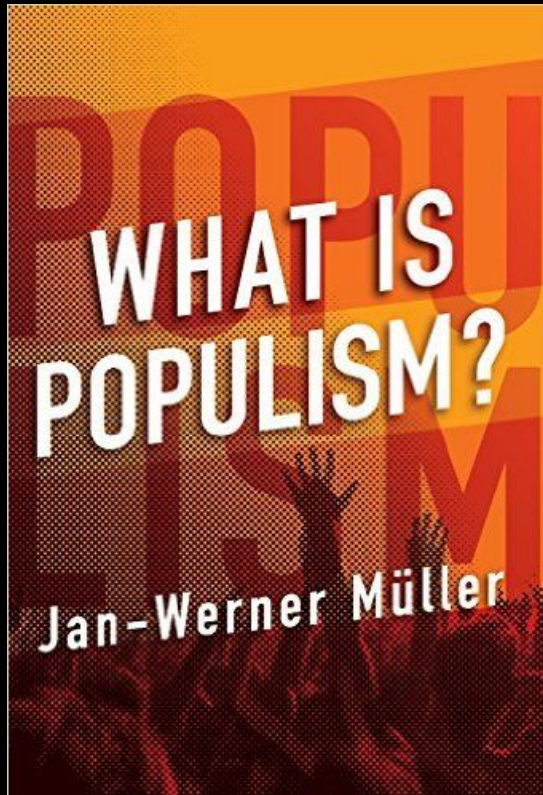
Criteria of Populism (Müller):

Anti-Elitism

Anti-Pluralism

Voice of the People

Disregard for Political
Institutions

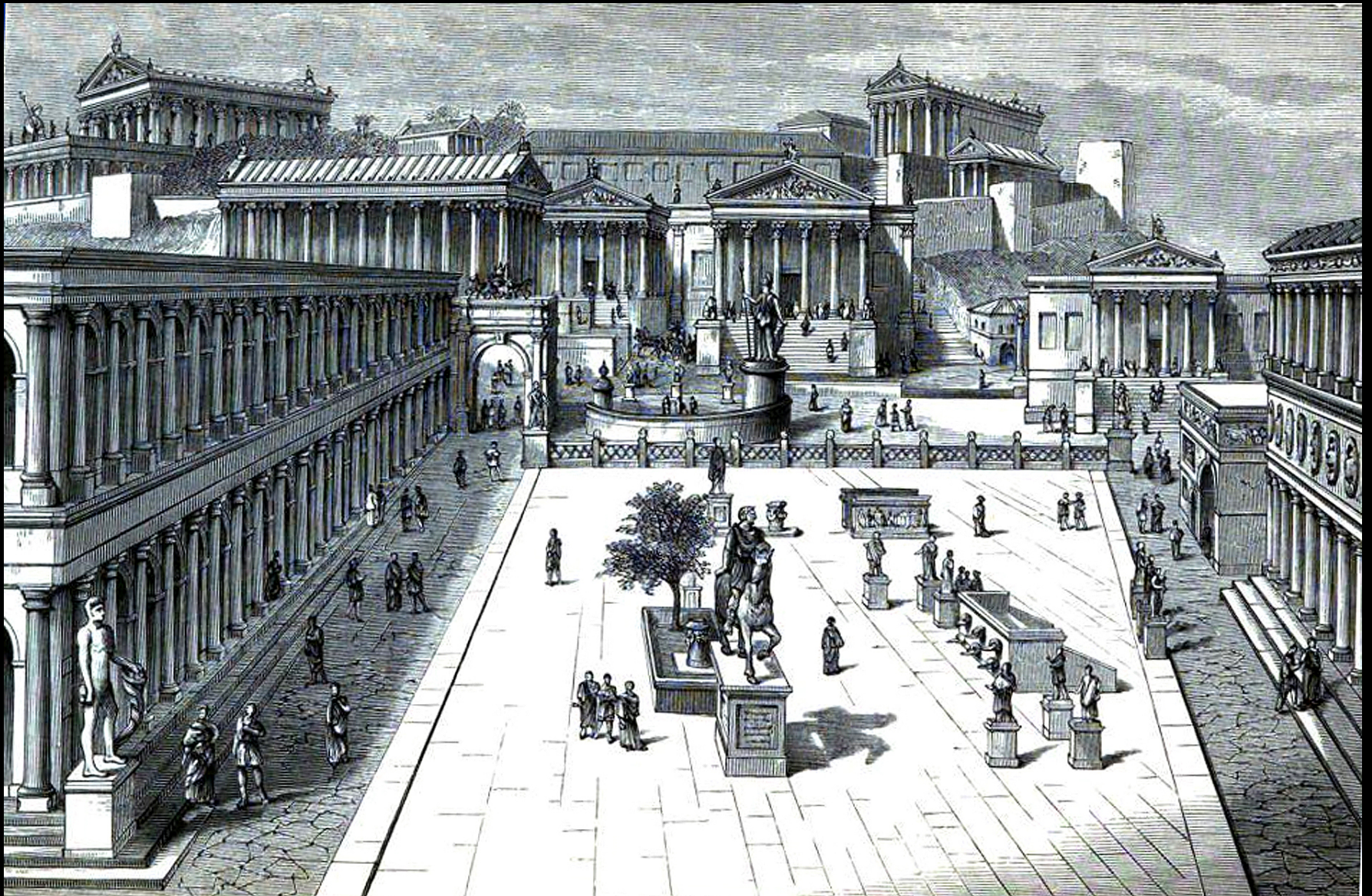




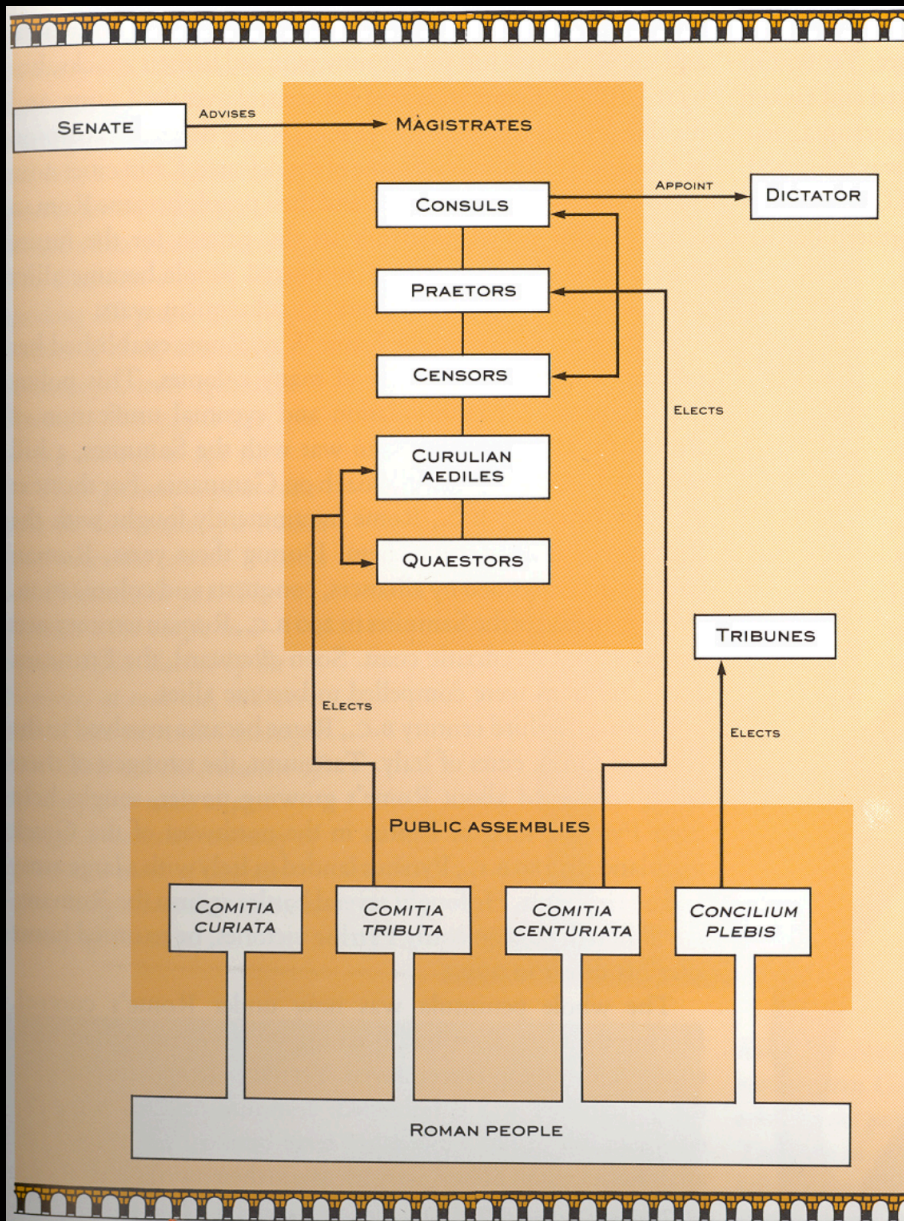
“Populism is
Back” – the
historical
dimension?



The example of the Late Roman Republic 133 BC



A well-balanced system



- Conservative political culture: *mos maiorum*, based on formal procedures and informal rules
- Three branches of government: assemblies, magistrates, senate
- Senate has the highest informal power, assemblies have the highest formal power.
- Senate is the stronghold of patricians, *concilium plebis* of plebeians.
- Senate has two factions, *optimates* and *populares*.
- The Senate consults magistrates on legislation (*senatus consultum*), magistrates propose legislation to the assemblies, where they are discussed and decided upon.

Tribunus plebis is sacrosanct and has veto right against any propositions by the magistrates. Ideal position for a *popularis* from a Senate family

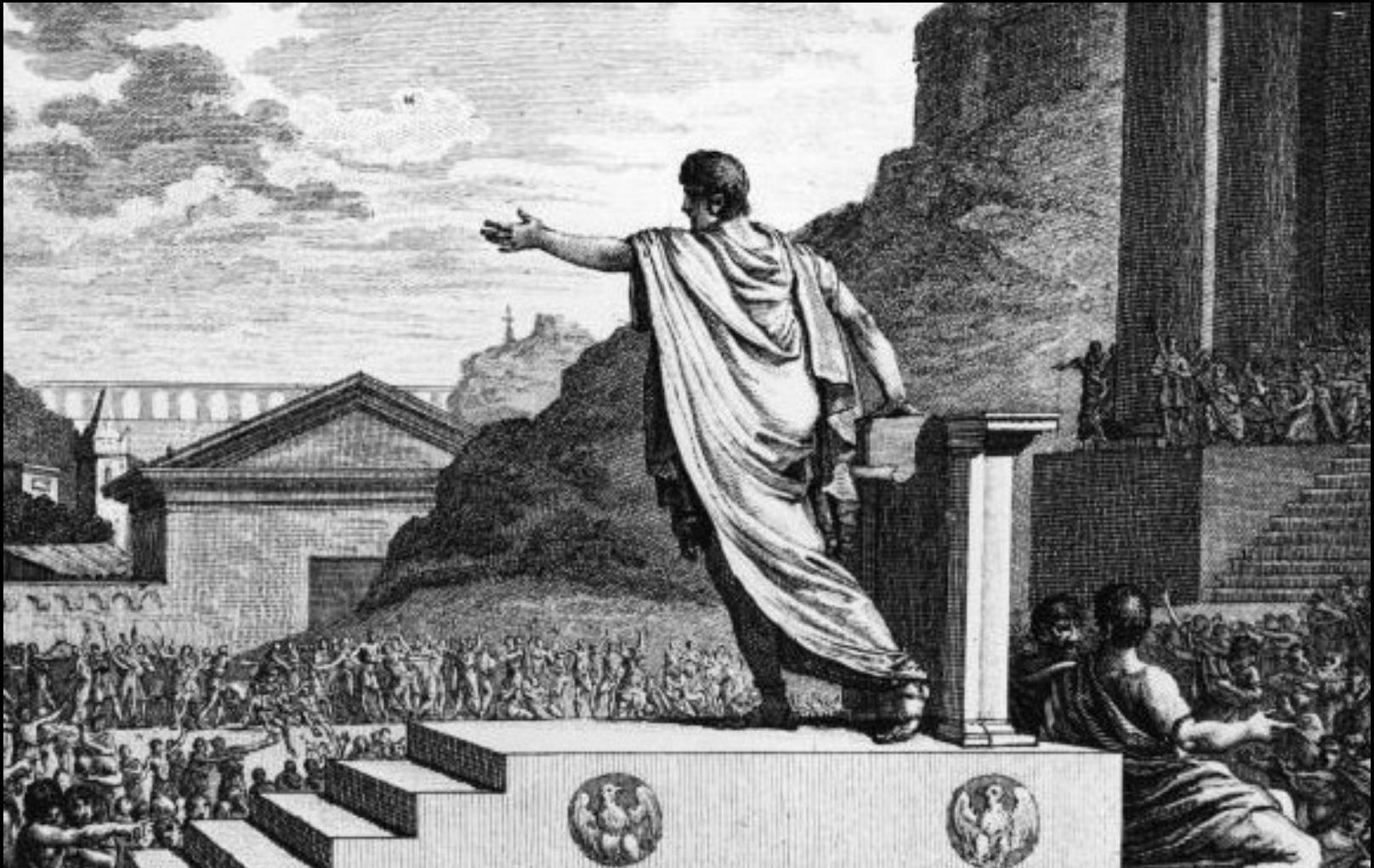


Tiberius und Gaius Sempronius Gracchus

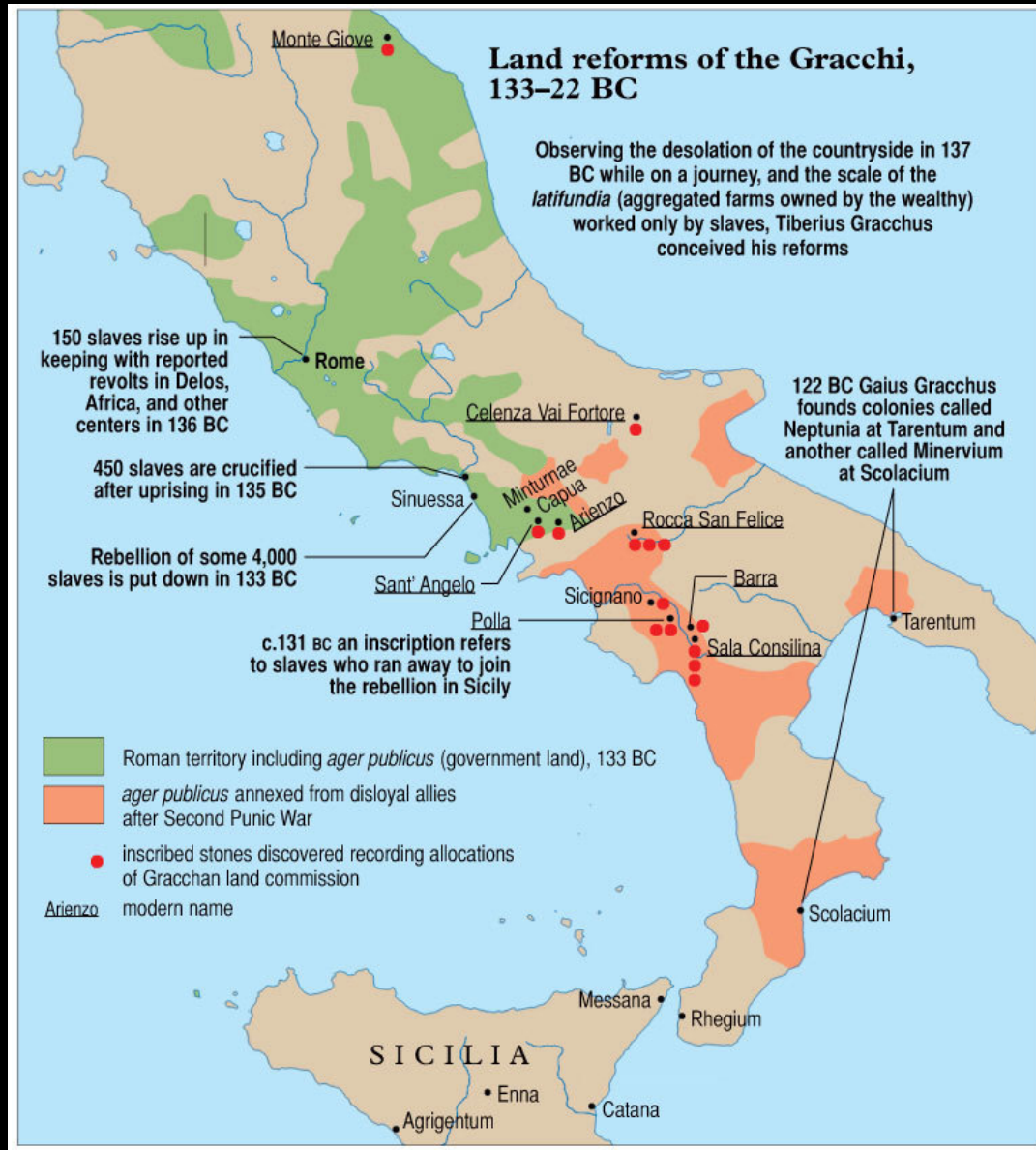
Growing social and political imbalances

- The Second Punic War (218-201 BC) leads to growing economic inequalities between patricians and plebeians, urban and rural populations.
- Roman peasant soldiers have to serve longer, many become impoverished and lose their farms to wealthy urbanites.
- The number of new recruits for the Roman army goes down significantly.
- Conquered land (ager publicus) is mostly acquired by urban elites, which use slaves to cultivate their lands in much higher numbers than before.
- Poor peasants move to Rome and other cities, where they mostly serve as daytallers.

Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus: Old patricians, new politics



Proposition: Reform of the ager publicus



- Confiscation and redistribution of public land owned by citizens with more than 500 iugera.
- Roman veterans and plebeians get small, but sufficient allotments of 30 iugera each.
- Italian confederates, who fought with the Romans, are not included in the redistribution.

Political Blockade and constitutional crisis

- A majority of senate members are big landowners.
- The chances of introducing legislation through the senate are slim.
- Tiberius Gracchus and his plebeian supporters treat reform as political imperative.

Three violations of the constitution

- Gracchus introduces and passes legislation through the *concilium plebis*.
- After being vetoed by the second Tribune, Marcus Octavius, Gracchus encourages the *concilium plebis* to vote him out of office and thus destroy his sacrosanctity.
- Tiberius Gracchus stands for a second term as Tribune to push through the reform, which is unprecedented.

The first sign of a slow destabilisation

- Tiberius is denounced as an usurper and killed by supporters of the Senate majority.
- Gaius Gracchus takes up his brother's Tribune ten years later, starts a second attempt at reform, fails and dies, too.



The Heir to Republican populism in Rome

- Caesar acts as part of the *populares*.
- He upholds the republican constitution formally, while undermining it informally in order to establish a new system of autocratic rule.



Three historical conclusions

- Roman populism was an invention by members of the political elite to shake up a political system that seemed incapable of solving urgent problems for both the state and a majority of citizens.
- The populists were forming only a minority within the political elite and expressed themselves as the voice of the people in order to put more pressure on the majority of the elite.
- Populist politics in Rome resulted in an unprecedented, but unsuccessful attack on political institutions. In the long run, however, the anti-populist *optimates* weakened the institutions themselves by fighting their opponents with unconstitutional means (death without trial etc.)

One general conclusion

If you want to fight populism it is not enough to fight populists. You have to address and solve the problems, which enable populists to thrive. Many governments are failing in this task.