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Cicero and Political Agency in Late-Republican Rome

Merlijn Breunese and Lidewij van Gils

1 Introduction

Cicero has taken up the role of *agent of change* in many fields, most notably that of education, philosophy, and politics.¹ However, he was always anchoring his innovations:² instead of presenting his ideas as disruptions or novelties, he prefers to present them as a logical continuation of preceding traditions. As a result, he has been judged a conservatist rather than an innovator.³ As a political newcomer (*homo novus*), Cicero was indebted to the traditional Roman educational and political systems, in which he could develop and use his rhetorical talent to achieve his personal and political goals. By defending many clients and by prosecuting a corrupt, but influential politician like Verres, he invested in a steadily growing network and gained a reputation of reliability, and he was able to participate successfully in political elections.⁴ It is understandable, therefore, that he would not support an alternative political culture based on military power instead of one based on forensic successes.⁵

In the first century BCE, however, the historical odds were against Cicero and a major political shift from a democratic republic to the supremacy of a princeps was, as it were, all up in the air. During his lifetime, Cicero was confronted

1 About Cicero's life, writings and influence, countless studies have been published. We mention a few accessible and relevant studies: Rawson 1975; Fuhrmann 1992 [1990]; May (ed.) 2002; Steel (ed.) 2013; La Bua 2019.

2 For the concept of *anchoring innovation*, see Sluiter 2017.

3 But see Gildenhart 2011 for Cicero's rhetorical use of well-known concepts for innovative ideas and van der Blom 2010 for Cicero's creative use of exempla in order to anchor his own persona (especially chapters 7 and 8).

4 For the way in which oratory shapes political careers in this period, see van der Blom 2016.

5 Cicero's thought about the republic as a political ideal connected to free speech and balanced powers can be found right from his early works, e.g., his early speech *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino* (80 BCE), and fully developed in his later philosophical and political work, e.g., *De re publica* (54–51 BCE). Relevant studies on this topic are Gruen 1976; Brunt 1986; Tempest 2011; Schofield 2021.

on three occasions with long-lasting military conflicts between generals who aim for totalitarian power: Sulla vs. Marius, Pompey vs. Caesar, and Octavian vs. Mark Antony. This was no coincidence, since Marius' reform of the social composition of the armies had given their generals more personal power than had previously been the case, as some of them realized all too well.⁶ The increasing power of generals on the one hand, and the more conservative political powers on the other, resulted in obfuscated alliances, perilous political debates, and extremely complex personal negotiations, especially for ambitious men from the aristocracy.

In this chapter, we shall investigate Cicero's explicit ideas about political agency and about his role as a political agent in the last of these conflicts, namely the one between Octavian and Mark Antony, focusing on Cicero's apparent awareness of the complex social dynamics and of his own (possible) influence on it. Cicero opposed the tendency to grant too much personal power to individual generals and strived for a restoration of the traditional *res publica*.⁷ We know that his efforts did not counter the tendency towards dictatorship that had already started with the civil war between Sulla and Marius, and maybe he had been fighting a losing battle from the very beginning, but he tried everything within his power to force a political change of direction. In this chapter, we consider whether he was aware of key elements needed for political or other social changes, whether he consciously used these elements, and if and how he reflected on their use.

In our analysis, we make heuristic use of concepts and terminology developed to describe successful social changes as presented by Malcolm Gladwell in his 2000 popularizing book *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell showed that crucial factors in reaching a tipping point in social changes are the presence of mavens, connectors, salesmen, a sticky message, and the right moment.⁸ In this chapter, we shall highlight a number of passages from Cicero's writing in which he reflects on some of these factors (obviously *avant la lettre*). We shall restrict our focus to the letters and speeches that he wrote after Caesar's assassination,

6 E.g., Sherwin-White 1956.

7 In a letter to his friend Marcus Marius in April 46 BCE (Cic. *Fam.* 7.3), Cicero explains why he had followed Pompey in the civil war between Caesar and Pompey: 'I wanted you to be acquainted with my whole mind and purpose, to know in the first place that I never wished any man to have more power than the state entire; but when by the fault of somebody or other a single person became too strong to resist, I was for peace'. All texts and translations in this chapter are by Shackleton Bailey 1999; 2001; 2002; 2009 unless otherwise indicated.

8 See Castelli, this volume, General Introduction, Section 4, for a discussion of Gladwell's key concepts. Gladwell's framework brings together ideas and concepts from other influential sociological studies, such as Dawkins 1976; Lynch 1996; Rogers 2003.

when he attempted to push for a particular political direction during the conflict between Mark Antony and Octavian in 44–43 BCE. Our overarching aim with this chapter is to add a relevant example of political agency to this volume's discussion of agents of change in antiquity.

Our chapter is structured as follows. In Section 2, we shall focus on Cicero's ideas *about* (agents of) change. As we shall see, Cicero clearly recognizes the importance of the right moment, of connections and connectors, and of certain aspects of sticky messages. In Section 3, we shall explore tentatively Cicero's view of his own role *as* an agent of change and especially the way in which he presents himself as such during this political conflict. In this section, we shall also discuss the applicability of Gladwell's concepts to political change, and to Cicero's situation in particular. As we shall see, Gladwell's mavens, connectors, and salesmen are not easily distinguished in complex political changes, and some of these concepts need to be modified (in part) in order to be applicable to the political turmoil of 44–43 BCE.

2 Cicero on (Agents of) Change

Gladwell's study shows that for any social change properly to take off, it is crucial that the context is exactly right.⁹ Cicero, in his letters and speeches of 44–43 BCE, frequently reflects on the importance of the right moment, often in an attempt to inspire his correspondents or the Senate to take action. In November 44 BCE in the bay of Naples, Cicero writes to his friend Atticus that he is closely following the activities of the young Octavian, who is preparing for armed conflict with Antony. Cicero is convinced that Octavian's young age makes him unsuitable for political leadership¹⁰ and he prefers Marcus Brutus to take up the role of republican leader against Antony. In his letter, he addresses Brutus in a dramatic apostrophe.

(1) Brute, ubi es? quantam εὐκαιρίαν amittis! non equidem hoc divinavi, sed aliquid tale putavi fore. (Cic. *Att.* 16.8.2)

Ah Brutus, where are you? What a golden opportunity you are losing! I could not foretell *this*, but I thought something of the kind would happen.

⁹ Gladwell 2000, chapter 4 and 5.

¹⁰ In the subsequent letter to Atticus (Cic. *Att.* 16.9) Cicero actually says 'I don't trust his age' (*non confido aetati*).

Cicero here refers to a ‘golden opportunity’, as *eukairia* is translated by Shackleton Bailey.¹¹ The idea of grasping the moment when it presents itself is present also in other speeches and letters.¹² For instance, on 20 December 44 BCE, Cicero decides at the very last minute to attend a Senatorial meeting, because he realizes that the situation calls for the political support of Mark Antony’s adversaries in a conflict over the legal governorship of the provinces. If the senate overrules Mark Antony’s claim to ‘his’ province, their decision would mean a principled stance against his actions in general. Cicero conveys the significance of this particular moment in his speech to the Senate.

(2) Dies enim adfert vel hora potius, nisi provisum est, magnas saepe clades. (Cic. *Phil.* 3.2)

For a day, or rather an hour, often brings great disasters if precautions have not been taken.

And similarly in the fifth *Philippic*, delivered on 1 January 43 BCE in the Senate, Cicero repeats the importance of acting at precisely the right moment.

(3) *Minimis momentis, patres conscripti, maximae inclinationes temporum fiunt, cum in omni casu rei publicae tum in bello et maxime civili, quod opinione plerumque et fama gubernatur.*¹³ (Cic. *Phil.* 5.26)

Very small impulses, Members of the Senate, sometimes change situations dramatically: it happens not only in every crisis of the Republic, but particularly in war, and above all in civil war, which is apt to be ruled by public opinion and report.

Cicero’s speeches and letters thus frequently reveal the orator’s consciousness of the relevance of ‘the right moment’ for political agency: he tirelessly explains

11 Cicero frequently uses Greek in letters to his friends and especially to Atticus to express concepts or thoughts. See Bishop 2019 and Elder and Mullen 2019 for recent views on Cicero’s use of Greek.

12 In advocating this idea, Cicero draws on Demosthenes, his model for the *Philippics*. For Demosthenes as Cicero’s model, see, e.g., Wooten 1983.

13 In her commentary on this passage, Manuwald 2012 notes about *minimis momentis* that ‘it denotes that minimal (i.e. insignificant) movements / reasons may cause major (i.e. significant/decisive) changes [...]. Another possible meaning of *minimis momentis*, namely “shortest periods”, may also be relevant’. The phrase *minimis momentis* thus evokes the idea of the right circumstances as well as the right moment in time.

to the Senate, his friends, and political allies the importance of timely action. As we shall see in Section 3, however, in the particular context of 44–43 BCE, Cicero becomes frustrated by the slowness of the Senate, and in the end he must acknowledge his limited influence on the course of events.

In the excerpt above, Cicero describes the crisis of the *res publica*, and especially the conflict in which it is involved, as a civil war. Interestingly, he explicitly labels civil wars as word-of-mouth epidemics, which are ‘apt to be ruled by public opinion and report’. This brings us to a second factor that Gladwell considers decisive in the spread of social change: the personality type of a *connector*. Connectors are people with many acquaintances who bring people in touch with each other. Since they typically belong to more than one social group,¹⁴ they effortlessly reach a great number of people, thereby facilitating the spread of a new idea. Although Gladwell does not include political examples, politicians seamlessly fit the personality type of a connector. Cicero also considers social connections as a crucial factor in spreading political messages and the assertion of political influence. For instance, in the following excerpt from *De officiis*, which was written at the end of 44 BCE, Cicero reflects on the necessity of a broad social network for the spread of political power outside Rome:

(4) Est autem etiam vehementer utile iis, qui honeste posse multum volunt, per hospites apud externos populos valere opibus et gratia. (Cic. *Off.* 2.64)

It is, moreover, a very great advantage, too, for those who wish to obtain a powerful political influence by honorable means to be able through their social relations with their guests to enjoy popularity and to exert influence abroad.

Based on earlier work by the sociologist Mark Granovetter, Gladwell distinguishes between different types of connections: friends and acquaintances.¹⁵ While friends occupy the same social groups as the connector himself, acquaintances typically move in other social groups. They are therefore much more important for the spread of ideas than friends. Interestingly, in *De amicitia* (22.29–32) Cicero makes the same distinction between close friends and acquaintances: the former are tied to each other by affection, while the latter are merely useful. Cicero thus seems to be well aware of the importance of an

14 Gladwell 2000: 48, 173.

15 Gladwell 2000: 54.

extensive social network for the spread of political ideas and of the particularities of such a network. We shall see in Section 3 that he frequently emphasizes his own great network in his speeches and letters during the political turmoil of 44–43 BCE, although he also admits that he has lost many connections over the years. We shall also discuss Cicero's apparent refusal to connect with the opposing parties during this conflict.

Politicians are typically good salesmen and Cicero is no exception. The need to adapt any message to the audience (one of the tasks of a good salesman) has been described by Cicero himself in his many rhetorical treatises and his success in applying this insight is clear from the admiration for his speeches both during and after his lifetime.¹⁶ In spite of these talents, however, we shall argue in Section 3 that Cicero did not succeed in winning over his potential early adopters, let alone the majority for his points of view. Although many factors may be responsible for this, part of this failure was his refusal to sell his message creatively by adapting it to the various parties involved as a result of his firm belief in the value of the *res publica*.

A final factor that we want to discuss in this section is the significance of a sticky message for social epidemics. Although the stickiness factor of a message appears to be the result of various factors that are at times difficult to grasp, Gladwell also considers the repetition of a message as an obvious way in which to make it stick.¹⁷ We may safely assume that Cicero had no difficulty in understanding the rhetorical relevance of a clear and often repeated message, as he was a master of rhetoric, both in theory and practice.¹⁸ In his most mature work on rhetoric, for instance, he enumerates a variety of rhetorical strategies pointing at their use ('like a weapon') and effects on the audience ('force' and 'charm', for instance). The insistence on a specific concept (*iteratio*) and repetition of a word (*geminatio*) are discussed as strong means of persuasion.¹⁹

(5) Orationis autem ipsius tamquam armorum est vel ad usum comminatio et quasi petitio vel ad venustatem ipsam tractatio. nam et geminatio verborum habet interdum vim, leporem alias. (Cic. *De orat.* 3.206)

16 In *Brutus* 264, Cicero observes how a great orator, Visellus Varro, was not *vendibilis* 'sellable' to a large audience: his message was not adapted to their understanding. See Culpepper Stroup 2010: 135 for a discussion of this passage. On Cicero's style, we refer to the monographs of Laurand 1965 and von Albrecht 2003, but many more publications could be cited. Precisely for this reason, we will not discuss Cicero's talent as a rhetorically gifted salesman.

17 Gladwell 2000: 92.

18 See also Tempest 2007 who mentions the importance of repetition in the structures of the *Verrines*.

19 For *iteratio*, see Cic. *De orat.* 3.202.

Then as to the actual diction: this is like a weapon either employed for use, to threaten and to attack, or simply brandished for show. For there is sometimes force and in other cases charm in iteration of words.

Gladwell's ideas on sticky messages have been further refined by Heath and Heath 2007, who point at six elements other than repetition which intensify the stickiness factor of a message: simplicity, credibility, emotional potential, narrative quality, unexpectedness, and concreteness. We shall come back to these criteria in Section 3, and apply them to what we argue was Cicero's message in 44–43 BCE—the *res publica*.

3 Cicero as an Agent of Change?

In the previous sections, we have highlighted a number of passages in which Cicero reflects on some of the factors that have been considered by sociologists and by Malcolm Gladwell as crucial for social epidemics, such as the right moment, connectorship, and a sticky message. In the present section, we want to explore some aspects of Cicero's political agency, focusing on mavenship and salesmanship, as well as—once again—connectorship and a sticky message. An important question to address first is whether Cicero can be seen as an agent of change, and how we can define change, especially in the context of political instability.

Cicero's political enemies tried to frame him negatively as 'a new man' (*homo novus*), but he consistently countered such attacks by presenting himself and his ambitions as tied to Roman traditions.²⁰ His rhetorical force disrupted the expected outcomes of trials and elections, but since we have only his perspective on many events of the first century BCE, we are—still—persuaded by his message that he *conserves* traditions rather than challenges them. As a politician, he tried his best to present himself as the anchor rather than the innovation during political crises,²¹ taking on the role of a conservative politician who fights against new tendencies. This picture of Cicero immediately appears to contradict an analysis of the orator as an agent of change. But can we really speak of anchors and innovations, of new and old in (political) debates of this kind?

We believe that the description of opinions in (political) debates as new or old is (at least partly) a matter of rhetorical framing and depends on the

20 See van der Blom 2010 on Cicero's use of personal and historical exempla to position himself as a trustworthy Roman orator and statesman.

21 For anchors and innovations, see Sluiter 2017.

perspective that one takes. To give an example from our own times: is a choice in favor of or against vaccination one of conservative versus innovative viewpoints? Is it conservative to refuse vaccination out of fear for possible side-effects? Or is it conservative to follow the traditions of national vaccination programs? Everett Rogers describes the diffusion of ideas as a bell-shaped curve. New ideas initially spread slowly amongst a group of 'innovators', but this process accelerates when these ideas are taken up by the 'early adopters'.²² The so-called 'laggards', who are more traditional, constitutes the last 16% of the population to accept a new idea. In the example of the vaccination debate, we could ask the question whether the anti-vaxxers are laggards in a movement which relies on medical knowledge or early adopters of a new political (and medical) view on the pandemic. The answer to this question certainly depends on whom is asked.²³ In the case of social changes, including political ones, the direction of the curve of adoption can often be inverted if the perspective of the 'laggard' is taken.

In 44–43 BCE the political debate was about power. Cicero promoted the idea of a restoration of republican values, but another political idea had already proven successful, namely strong and unlimited personal power based on military strength. Caesar had already attempted to implement the political ideal of dictatorial power, and even though he had been killed by fellow politicians, this idea may have reached a tipping point at that time: an early majority of influential and ambitious politicians was within reach, convinced by the advantages of more dictatorial politics. From their perspective, Caesar's murderers and their friend Cicero were the 'laggards'. On the other hand, we can take the perspective of active opposition to dictatorship, and analyze their efforts to return to a more democratic system as the early adoption of a different idea. From this point of view, Cicero and like-minded politicians were advocating a movement that, although it was anchored in traditional ideas, was revolutionary and countered the tendency towards dictatorship. Despite Cicero's efforts to convince his fellow citizens, however, this movement would never reach a tipping point in the centuries to come.

In sum, we believe that in the political turmoil of 44–43 BCE, those in favor of dictatorship should not necessarily be seen as innovative and those resisting this inclination as conservative. Rather, we think it can be analyzed as a tug of war, in which conflicting parties attempt to convince a majority of their

22 Rogers 2003: 243–251.

23 As a sidenote, whether a certain view is seen as innovative or subversive also often depends on its outcome. Retrospectively, failed attempts at innovation, such as Catiline's *coup d'état*, are usually seen as subversive rather than innovative.

ideas. The following excerpt from a letter to Brutus written late in July 43 BCE illustrates these dynamics quite well. In this letter, Cicero explains to Brutus his worries about Octavian. After vouching for Octavian's loyalty on a previous occasion, Cicero is afraid that he may lose the young man's support because other parties are 'pulling the other way'. Cicero and his political adversaries are both trying to win over the influential Octavian to their side, recognizing the crucial role that he might play in the victory of one political direction over the other.

(6) *quamquam et hunc, ut spero, tenebo multis repugnantibus. videtur enim esse indoles, sed flexibilis aetas multique ad depravandum parati, qui splendore falsi honoris obiecto aciem boni ingeni praestringi posse confidunt. itaque ad reliquos hic quoque labor mihi accessit, ut omnis adhibeam machinas ad tenendum adulescentem. (Cic. *ad Brut.* 1.18.3–4)*

However, I hope I shall still hold him, though many people are pulling the other way. The natural quality seems to be there, but it is an impressionable age and there are plenty of would-be agents of corruption. They are confident of dazzling his good disposition by dangling in front of him the glitter of a false distinction. So this care is added to my load. I must move every engine at my disposal to hold the young man.

In this passage, Cicero attributes to himself an important role during the political conflict of 44–43 BCE. We therefore believe it is worthwhile to consider whether we find elements of an agent of change in Cicero's self-presentation at this time. In this section, we will focus on Cicero's role as a maven and a connector, and we will consider the stickiness of his message. We will see that Cicero's role in the political conflict of 44–43 BCE was entirely determined by his own political ideal of the *res publica*. Cicero's loyalty to this ideal seems to have limited his flexibility as a connector and salesman.

In Section 2, we discussed a number of excerpts that illustrate Cicero's awareness of the importance of the right moment for political change. Cicero typically emphasizes the significance of good timing when he advises his correspondent or the Senate to take a certain course of action. To his frustration, however, his suggestions are not always immediately followed, and he reflects on this in a letter to his friend Brutus in April 43 BCE:

(7) *non enim ignoras quanta momenta sint in re publica temporum et quid intersit idem illud utrum ante an post decernatur, suscipiatur, agatur. omnia quae severe decreta sunt hoc tumultu, si aut quo die dixi*

sententiam perfecta essent et non in diem ex die dilata aut quo ex tempore suscepta sunt ut agerentur non tardata et procrastinata, bellum iam nullum haberemus. (Cic. *ad Brut.* 2.1.1)

You are well aware of the importance of the right moment in political affairs, and what a vast difference it makes whether the same decree or enterprise or action be adopted before or after. If only all the strong measures decreed during this turmoil had been carried through the day I proposed them, or not put off from one day to the next or dragged out and procrastinated after action upon them had been taken in hand, we should now have no war.

In this excerpt, Cicero rues the Senate's refusal to implement measures that he had proposed on an earlier occasion. In his letters and speeches of 44–43 BCE, Cicero frequently presents himself in this way as a visionary leader who knew before everybody else what was going to happen,²⁴ but whose warnings were not heeded by the Senate, which ultimately caused the present, dire situation.²⁵ For instance, in the following excerpt from the fourteenth *Philippic*, which was delivered towards the end of the conflict, Cicero reflects on his futile warnings to the senators to declare Antony and Ventidius enemies.²⁶

(8) semper illum hostem, semper hoc bellum, ut ego, qui omni tempore verae pacis auctor fuissem, huic essem nomini pestiferae pacis inimicus. Idem Ventidium, cum alii praetorem, ego semper hostem. Has in sententias meas si consules [designati] discessionem facere voluissent, omnibus istis latronibus auctoritate ipsa senatus iam pridem de manibus arma cecidissent. (Cic. *Phil.* 14.20–21)

[I have] always called him [Mark Antony] an enemy and this conflict a war, so that I, who have at all times striven for true peace, was hostile to this name of a pernicious peace. Likewise I always called Ventidius an enemy, while others called him a praetor. If the consuls had been willing to hold a vote on these proposals of mine, the authority of the senate

24 E.g. in *ad Brut.* 2.1.1; *Phil.* 2.89; *Phil.* 12.17–18. In situations where Cicero is negatively surprised, the orator emphasizes that nobody could have foreseen what was going to happen (such as in *Phil.* 11.10 and *Phil.* 12.1–3).

25 E.g. in *ad Brut.* 2.1.1.

26 Cf. *Phil.* 2.24, *Phil.* 2.37, and *Phil.* 2.89 for other (earlier) warnings that had been ignored.

would of itself long ago have caused the weapons to drop from all those brigands' hands.

In passages such as these, we can in a way recognize Gladwell's personality type of a *maven*. Gladwell describes mavens as people who collect information and want to help other people by sharing this information with them. His examples of mavens often emphasize their awareness of a trend or development before other people do.²⁷ Similarly, Cicero presents himself as somebody who saw that something was about to happen before it did and warned his fellow senators and other influential people about this. Although Cicero's ideas may be different from some of the innovations that Gladwell discusses, he sees himself in the same visionary and advisory role that Gladwell describes for mavens.²⁸ He is especially explicit about this role in the seventh *Philippic*, delivered in January 43 BCE.²⁹

(9) Equidem non deero: monebo, praedicam, denuntiabo, testabor semper deos hominesque quid sentiam, nec solum fidem meam, quod fortasse videatur satis esse, sed in principe civi non est satis: curam, consilium vigilantiamque praestabo. (Cic. *Phil.* 7.20)

As for me, I shall not fail to do my part: I shall warn, I shall foretell, I shall give notice, I shall continually call gods and men to witness my sentiments; you will be able to count not only on my good faith, which may perhaps seem sufficient in itself but in a foremost citizen is not all that is required: you will be able to count as well on my care, counsel, and vigilance.

Similar to Gladwell's mavens, Cicero is also constantly busy with collecting information about the activities of those involved in the political conflict of 44–43 BCE. In his letters to Atticus and other friends and acquaintances, Cicero repeatedly asks for information concerning the proceedings in the capital and the entire *res publica*.³⁰ The excerpt below, a passage from a letter to Atticus written in July of 44 BCE, illustrates the orator's maven-like concern for gathering information especially well. From his house in Puteoli,

27 For example, the price increase of coffee or the imminent arrival of the British army; Gladwell 2000: 61–62, 67.

28 For Cicero as a visionary leader, see Gildenhard 2011: 387.

29 See also *Phil.* 6.17–19 for a similar promise to the people of Rome.

30 E.g. in *Att.* 15.23 and *Att.* 16.6.2. Cicero behaves similarly when he is away in October and November 44 BCE. See, e.g., *Att.* 15.13.2 and *Att.* 16.13a(b).1–2. See also *Att.* 16.14.2 for gathering intelligence as a reason to travel from Arpinum to Tusculum.

Cicero asks Atticus to send him reliable information about Plancus' deeds in Buthrotum, after numerous other inquiries have not revealed anything.

(10) De Buthroticis undique quaerens nihil reperiēbam. alii concisos agripetas, alii Plancum acceptis nummis relictis illis aufugisse. itaque non video sciturum me quid eius sit, ni statim aliquid litterarum. (*Att.* 16.4.3)

I have been making enquiries everywhere about the Buthrotian business, but can find out nothing. One account has it that the settlers were cut to pieces, another that Plancus deserted them for a bribe and made off. So it looks as though I shall not know the truth of the matter, unless you send me a line at once.

Not only does Cicero collect information, but he is also a source of intelligence to others. For instance, after his return to Rome in September 44 BCE, Cicero frequently provides Brutus with information about the affairs of the *res publica*.³¹ This brings us to Cicero's role as a connector. We saw in Section 2 that Cicero is aware of the significance of a good social network for the spread of political ideas and influence. Cicero frequently emphasizes his own role as connector as well, emphasizing his relationship with various individuals and groups.³² For instance, the orator explicitly comments on the extent of his social connections to the consulars in the eighth *Philippic*, which is shown in the following passage:

(11) Venio ad reliquos consularis, quorum nemo est—iure hoc meo dico—quin mecum habeat aliquam coniunctionem gratiae, alii maximam, alii mediocrem, nemo nullam. (*Cic. Phil.* 8.20)

I come now to the other consulars, among whom there is no one—I am entitled to say this—who does not have some personal tie with me, very close in some cases, not so close in others, but in every case something.

Although Cicero admits that he has lost some of his connections along the way,³³ he remains in close contact with all the important players in the political conflict of 44–43 BCE. He delivers speeches in the senate and in the *contio*

31 E.g. in *ad Brut.* 1.10.5. See also *Att.* 15.13.4 and *ad Brut.* 1.6.3.

32 E.g. Lucius Philippus in *Phil.* 3.25, Apuleius in *Phil.* 6.1, and Brutus in *Phil.* 10.2, as well as the citizens of Syracuse in *Phil.* 1.7 and the Roman people in *Phil.* 6.17.

33 See, e.g., *Att.* 16.11.7 and *Phil.* 13.28–29.

(the fourth and sixth *Philippic*) and he corresponds with individual leaders that were out of town, such as Lepidus and Plancus, as well as Octavian and, initially, Antony himself. Based on the mere extent of his social network and on the excerpts above, one could thus say that Cicero was a good connector and that he was aware of his connecting role.

It might be worthwhile here to digress briefly on Cicero's role as a connector between different people and groups. Apart from having a lot of connections, Cicero also occasionally presents himself as a person who connects people to each other.³⁴ His speeches and correspondence during the political struggle of 44–43 BCE, however, do not reveal someone who brought these connections together on a large scale. Especially when considering Cicero's treatment of groups, a different picture emerges than that of the ideal connector. Cicero tellingly summarizes his own position in this conflict—and his unwillingness to build bridges—in a letter to Cornificius at the end of May 43 BCE:

(12) omnibus inimicis rei publicae esse me acerrimum hostem prae me fero. (Cic. *Fam.* 12.28.3)

I declare myself a deadly foe to all enemies of the commonwealth.

Rather than being the link between a number of different groups, Cicero's rhetoric thus appears to be aimed at breaking society up into only two groups: those people who agree with Cicero, and who defend the Republic, and those who do not, i.e. Antony and his followers, who are presented as the enemy.³⁵ In a moment of political crisis, Cicero did not take up the role of connector or mediator between different groups, but he remains loyal to his ideals, which he sharply contrasts with the ideals of others.

In Section 2, we also discussed Cicero's view on the repetition of a message for rhetorical purposes. As we mentioned above, in addition to repetition, Heath and Heath (2007) introduced a number of other factors that influence the stickiness of a message: simplicity, credibility, emotional potential, narrative quality, unexpectedness, and concreteness. If anything in Cicero's political speeches and letters during the political conflict of 44–43 is a sticky message, it is the word *res publica*.³⁶ If we analyze the word *res publica* by looking at

34 See, e.g., *ad Brut.* 1.8; 1.7.2.

35 See also Breunese 2019 for Cicero's group construction in *Philippics* 1 and 3.

36 A search in Brepols' *Library of Latin Texts* (<http://clt.brepolis.net/llta/pages/Search.aspx>) reveals that Cicero uses forms of *res publica* more frequently (n = 321) in the *Philippics* than, for instance, *lex* (n = 112), *libertas* (n = 90), and *patria* (n = 58). Furthermore, the digital tool *Hyperbase* (<http://hyperbase.unice.fr/>), which takes the total number of words in

the elements suggested by Heath and Heath, it scores highly with regard to simplicity and credibility, it has emotional potential and narrative quality, but it has a rather low score with regard to unexpectedness, and, maybe, concreteness. In fact, we find a critique of this last aspect of the political concept of *res publica* by Caesar (according to his biographer Suetonius).

(13) nihil esse rem publicam, appellationem modo sine corpore ac specie. (Suet. *Jul.* 77)

that the state was nothing, a mere name without body or form.³⁷

In contrast to Caesar (as depicted by Suetonius), for Cicero, *res publica* was clearly a concept loaded with positive values and its protection a natural goal for all the 'good people'.³⁸ In fact, the insistence on *res publica* might not have been rhetorically motivated, but rather what Cicero genuinely believed to be the ultimate cause to fight for. In Cicero's rhetoric, anyone aspiring to personal political power is to be regarded as an enemy of the *res publica*.³⁹

The lack of concreteness in Cicero's often repeated message, however, also made it possible for Cicero's addressees to verbally echo and support his plea for the republic while in the meantime covertly joining the forces of Mark Antony. As White already noted, Cicero heavily leans on the rhetorical force of the word *res publica* in his letters to Plancus, at the time a general in Gaul and theoretically capable of opposing Mark Antony.⁴⁰ Cicero's correspondence with Plancus is preserved in the tenth book of Cicero's *Letters to Friends (Ad familiares)* and includes letters from Plancus to Cicero in which Plancus uses the word *res publica* as well, such as in the following excerpt:

(14) omnia feci qua re Lepido coniuncto ad rem publicam defendendam minore sollicitudine vestra perditis resisterem. (...) illud certe cavi et cavebo, ne mea credulitate rei publicae summa fallatur. (Cic. *Fam.* 10.21.1)

each author's corpus into account, confirms that the lemma *res publica* is used extraordinarily often by Cicero as compared to Caesar and Sallust.

37 Text and translation by Rolfe 1913.

38 *Phil.* 2.50 and *Phil.* 8.8. But see *Rep.* 5.2 where Cicero has one of the dialogue partners present the view that *res publica* had lost its substance and become merely an empty word. See Gildenhard 2011 for Cicero's creative construction of the concept of *res publica*, his personal role in defending and impersonating it, and its (invariably tyrannical) enemies.

39 See *Phil.* 11.6.

40 White 2010: 157 states: 'The watchword *respublica* itself is invoked more often in Cicero's letters to Plancus than in parallel exchanges: thirty-six times, or almost thrice per letter'.

I did everything in my power to combine with Lepidus for the defence of the commonwealth, so that I could oppose the desperados on terms which would leave you at home less cause for anxiety. (...) But at least I have taken, and shall continue to take, good care that the supreme interests of the commonwealth are not betrayed by my credulity.

The defense and interests of the *res publica* are served by Plancus but it remains unclear what this means in practice. In Cicero's political masterpiece *On the Republic* published ten years earlier (*Rep.* 5.2), we find the lament that the Republic as it was meant to be had unfortunately ceased to exist. But for Cicero, it remained the ideal form of state and something to be strived for.⁴¹ For him the term *res publica* therefore appears to have been, using the terminology of Heath and Heath mentioned earlier in this section, concrete, emotionally loaded, and full of narrative qualities, but for others it was merely a word. The *res publica*—and what it stood for—was thus not equally clear and convincing to all relevant parties during the conflict of 44–43 BCE. Most importantly, Cicero mentions in a letter to Brutus in the middle of June 43 BCE that the concrete ingredients of a functioning republic, like reason, moderation, law, and justice, are not attractive to the soldiers and their generals:

(15) illudimur enim, Brute, tum militum deliciis, tum imperatorum insolentia. tantum quisque se in re publica posse postulat quantum habet virium. non ratio, non modus, non lex, non mos, non officium valet, non iudicium, non existimatio civium, non posteritatis verecundia. (Cic. *ad Brut.* 1.10.3)

The fact is, Brutus, we are made a mockery by the caprices of the soldiers and the insolence of generals. Everybody demands as much political power as he has force behind him. Reason, moderation, law, tradition, duty count for nothing—likewise the judgement and views of the citizen body and respect for the opinion of those who come after us.

In sum, Cicero occasionally presents himself as an agent of change during the political turmoil of 44–43 BCE. Cicero presents himself as a visionary leader who knew what was going to happen before many others did, similar to Gladwell's mavens. However, he often considers his role as a maven unappreciated and neglected,⁴² and he regrets the senators' hesitation about his recommendations and their unwillingness to take his advice at the right moment. With regard

41 For a discussion of Cicero's political thought in *Rep.*, see Schofield (2021, ch. 3).

42 Interestingly, Brutus explicitly doubts Cicero's *providentia* 'foresight' in *ad Brut.* 1.6.3.

to his role as a connector, Cicero had a lot of connections and frequently put people in touch with each other. In his speeches and correspondence during the conflict of 44–43 BCE, however, he does not present himself as the ideal connector, but as an enemy to all people who threaten the *res publica*, and he forces individuals to choose between these two alternatives. Cicero's loyalty to his own ideals thus possibly impaired his flexibility as a connector. Similarly, although the *res publica* may have been a rather vague message to some, Cicero appears to have firmly believed in it, and his message could therefore not easily be adapted.

4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined Cicero's views on (agents of) change and on his own role as an agent of change during the political turmoil at the very end of the Roman Republic. Based on Cicero's speeches and letters in 44 and 43 BCE, we have shown in Section 2 that Cicero was remarkably aware of some of the factors that are essential for the success of social epidemics. The excerpts that we discussed there showed that Cicero acknowledges the importance of key moments (*minima momenta*) and the appearance of a 'golden opportunity' (ἐὐκαιρία) in this great political conflict. In other excerpts, Cicero discusses the importance of connectors and the repetition of an idea for the spread of this idea. Cicero thus seems to have been aware of the relevance of some of the factors that according to Malcolm Gladwell are necessary ingredients of any social change: the right moment, connectors, and a sticky message.

In Section 3, we discussed Cicero's reflections on his own role as an agent of change in late-Republican Rome. We started this section by discussing the applicability of Gladwell's framework to the political turmoil of this period and to Cicero himself, whose rhetoric presents him as a conservative politician resisting change.⁴³ We believe that the dynamics involved in adopting political beliefs are not dissimilar to those exemplified in Gladwell's framework, in which people are brought to new convictions leading to different attitudes than their previous ones. Given that politics is a domain that typically involves opposing parties trying to win over a majority for their ideas, we argued that the question what is new and what old, and who are laggards and who early adopters, is not straightforward and depends on the perspective that one takes and the value that one attaches to such categories. In modern times, anti-vaxxers can be framed as laggards in the vaccination campaign or as early adopters of the anti-vaccination movement. In the case of the political conflict in 44–43 BCE, those supporting dictatorial power probably considered

43 See Houghton 2009 for the application of Gladwell's framework to American politics.

Cicero and his followers as laggards and themselves as early adopters of the new political regime. The opposite camp, however, was convinced of their *own* ideal, attached a different value to the old, and was trying to win over an early majority as well.

We argued that, in this sense, Cicero's endeavors can be fruitfully analysed in terms of political innovation and Cicero can be seen as an agent of change. We suggested that Cicero's description of himself as a visionary leader who knew before everybody else what was about to happen in a way resembled Gladwell's discussion of mavens, who are also aware of trends before the majority of other people. The thirst for knowledge that we see in Cicero's letters also reflects the orator's maven-like quality, even though he does not explicitly tie this to innovation. From our analysis of Cicero as a connector and of his message of the *res publica*, however, an image emerges of the orator as someone so convinced of the values of the *res publica* that his ideology keeps him from developing these roles in the way that Gladwell considers crucial for the spread of social epidemics. Although Cicero's speeches and correspondence from this period provide ample evidence of the extent of his social network, his loyalty to the ideal of the *res publica* prevented him from connecting with the opposite side. And in a similar way, this loyalty was an obstacle to his capacity to adapt the message of *res publica*, which may have appeared vague to people other than Cicero himself.

The Roman society of the first century BCE was characterized by major political turmoil and political ideas were an important part of societal and private debates. It is difficult to recover the actual historical dynamics due to the small number of sources. We have to rely for the most part on the speeches and correspondence of one political leader who tried to steer the ship of state in a particular direction. Our ambition has been to look for awareness on Cicero's part of the relevant factors needed to create the major impact he was looking for. Our conclusion is that he seems to have been aware of 'the right moment', 'a sticky message', and the roles of mavens, connectors, and salesmen. However, the stickiness of his message, his connectorship, and his salesmanship are factors that possibly suffered from Cicero's hard-set loyalty to his political ideal, the *res publica*.

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