

THE VULGUS IN TACITUS

Authors who are of, or who identify with, the upper class, tend to accept and foster stereotyped images of the lower classes. They are seen as fickle, gullible, idle, violent etc. This practice has been under scrutiny by historians and sociologists in recent years¹). Being aware of such stereotypes and being aware of the extent to which an author's usage of terms that refer to crowds, mobs or masses conforms with reality is a prerequisite to any sensible study of social groups. To examine Tacitus' attitudes to the masses is an immense task but a good deal of light can be thrown on the problem by restricting investigation to his use of the word *vulgus*.

The aim of this article is, then, to analyse and comment upon Tacitus' use of this word: who are the *vulgus*, what do they do and why do they do it? But because of the distribution of the word – two occurrences in the *Dialogus*, two in the *Agricola*, none in the *Germania*, fifty nine in the *Histories* and sixty in the *Annals* – it is also a comparison between the use of *vulgus* in the two major works. For statistical purposes, the four references in the minor works have been ignored²).

The *Histories* cover 239 Teubner pages, the *Annals* 394. *Vulgus* therefore occurs on average every 4 pages in the first work, every 6.5 in the second. There could be several reasons for this difference. Firstly, Tacitus evolved as a stylist and his predilection for certain words changed in his passage from *Histories* to *Annals*³). Secondly, two fifths of the occurrences of *vulgus* in the *Histories* refer to soldiers. Their mob-like behaviour is less prominent in the extant portions of the *Annals* and would perhaps have been less so in the missing portion of the *Histories*.

1) In the Roman context, see especially Z. Yavetz, *Plebs and Princes*, (Oxford, 1969). Cf. too G. Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty – a social study of 1763 to 1714* (Oxford, 1962), G. D. Berreman, Comparative analysis of caste, in *Caste and Race*, ed. A. de Reuck and J. Knight, (London, 1967), 48 ff.

2) They are: *Dial.* 7. 16, 20. 8, *Agr.* 41. 12, 43. 2. The full list of references is in A. Gerber and A. Greef, *Lexicon Taciteum* (Leipzig, 1903), art. *vulgus*.

3) R. Syme, *Tacitus*, (Oxford, 1958), app. 45–7.

Thirdly, it is possible that the frequency of *vulgus* in the Annals would be higher if the narratives for A.D. 29–31, 37–47, 66–8 had survived, years of some activity by the military and civilian population of Rome.

The remaining bald statistics are as follows: the figures in brackets give the distribution between Histories and Annals respectively.

1. *Location*. On 65 (29 + 36) occasions the *vulgus* is in Rome: 58 (31 + 27) outside Rome: 4 times both, i.e. the *vulgus* everywhere. Of the 54 occasions when the *vulgus* is entirely outside Rome, 12 times (11 + 1) it is in Italy, 39 (18 + 21) in the provinces, 3 (0 + 3) beyond the frontiers.

2. *Character and composition*. 31 (24 + 7) times *vulgus* is used of soldiers, 25 (13 + 12) of barbarians or provincials, 44 (11 + 33) of public opinion anywhere, whether ignorant or informed, 6 (3 + 3) of a crowd of lower class Roman civilians, 9 (6 + 3) of the population of the capital in general, including soldiers, but not necessarily meaning only public opinion or the lower class, 4 (3 + 1) of the lower class in Rome as a socio-economic group, but not a crowd or a mob, and twice *vulgus* does not fall into any of the above categories: it twice falls into more than one of them.

3. *Dynamism*. On 34 (22 + 12) occasions, the *vulgus* is violent-defined so as to include vociferation and threats. On 85 occasions the *vulgus* is not violent or the question does not apply. As an example of cases where the question does not apply, Antonius Primus asks his troops before Cremona whether they will stand round useless *ut vulgus improvidum* (*Hist.* iii 20.3). *Vulgus* is frequently the subject of a passive verb; or it is the object of a verb (someone addresses the *vulgus*).

4. *Motivation or reasons for vulgus' behaviour*. It is not easy to produce statistics for this because the question of motivation does not always arise and because two or three reasons for the vulgus' action may be given. However, by counting a motive whenever it was given or implied, even if one of several, and by grouping related motives, the following figures emerged, figures which purport only to give a rough profile. A certain degree of overlap between categories is inevitable. Ignorance, false information, superstition, vulgar taste, rumour mongering, gullibility, impressionability – 21 (14 + 7). Frivolity, fickleness, irresponsibility, indifference to national honour; delight in mobility, sensation or being humoured – 16 (10 + 6). Hastiness,

excitability, lack of restraint, (love of) indiscipline and turbulence –	12 (9 + 3)
Fear, anxiety, alarm, panic, cowardice, horror –	12 (9 + 3)
Loyalty, patriotism, partisanship –	10 (3 + 7)
Admiration for clemency, honesty, lineage, eloquence –	8 (3 + 5)
(Love of) servility and adulation –	6 (6 + 0)
Anger, resentment, indignation, disgust –	6 (4 + 2)
Discontent, desperation, despair –	6 (4 + 2)
Guilt –	4 (3 + 1)
Hope, optimism, confidence –	4 (4 + 0)
Cruelty, bloodthirstiness, vengefulness –	3 (2 + 1)
Hatred, jealousy, envy –	3 (3 + 0)

Other motives are: surprise, perplexity; selfishness, self interest; curiosity; arrogance, pride; gratitude (all twice); custom; sympathy; uncertainty; greed; exultation (all once).

5. *Tacitus' attitude*. This was based on motivation and as given by Tacitus. He is usually explicit and when he is not, the narrative always contains some explanation of the *vulgus'* behaviour; and where more than one motive is given or implied, they are rarely mutually exclusive and such as to leave one in doubt about Tacitus' attitude. Having determined motivation, it is not difficult to determine Tacitus' attitude. While this is making assumption about Tacitus' values, it is not as unreasonable as it might appear. Few cultures are likely to approve of, say, bloodthirstiness, as a *motive* for behaviour: cultural differences are more likely to occur over the definition of bloodthirstiness. If Tacitus says that bloodthirstiness inspired the *vulgus*, we can hardly describe his attitude as neutral or positive. On 9 (3 + 6) occasions Tacitus' attitude was considered favourable⁴), 69 (26 + 43) times neutral (this includes most of the references when the *vulgus* is grammatically passive), 41 (29 + 12) times unfavourable⁵).

Before proceeding further, the following points about the above data should be noted.

i) The *Annals* has only one reference to the *vulgus* in Italy: of the 11 in the *Histories*, the majority refer to Roman soldiers.

4) Likewise in *Dial.* 7. 16 and both the *Agricola* refs.

5) There are a few references where the question of Tacitus' attitude does not apply; e.g. *Hist* ii 37. 2, where Tacitus is discussing someone else's theory of troop behaviour.

ii) *Vulgus* most often refers to soldiers in the Histories, to public opinion in the Annals.

iii) *Vulgus*, in both works, rarely refers exclusively to the lower classes in Rome, whether violent or non-violent, whether as a crowd or as a social stratum.

iv) Even with a wide interpretation of violence, in only about a quarter of the references is the *vulgus* connected with violence. Soldiers, provincials and barbarians most often make up a violent *vulgus*. Twenty one (out of 34) instances of a violent *vulgus* involve these groups. Of the 13 remaining instances, on 9 occasions it is impossible to attribute the violence exclusively to one social stratum or occupational group at Rome⁶). Only 4 times can a violent *vulgus* at Rome be defined as entirely civilian and lower class⁷).

v) Tacitus takes a sombre view of the impulses behind *vulgus* behaviour. One might say that of his view of human motivation in general but the emphasis on fickleness, turbulence, gullibility etc. is notable, if not unexpected (particularly in the Histories). But despite these elements of traditional stereotype, the *vulgus* acts from a wide range of motives, not all of them dishonourable.

vi) The number of negative references to the *vulgus* in the Histories (29) equals the number of neutral and positive combined: in the Annals, the negative references make up only one fifth (12) of 60 references. The extensive use of *vulgus* to mean public opinion in the Annals has something to do with this, since 27 out of 33 references to public opinion are either neutral (23) or positive (4). Another factor is that of the 34 violent references,

6) *Hist.* i 72. 3, 90. 3, ii 90. 2, iii 58. 1, iv 2. 3, *Ann.* i 77. 1, xii 47. 4, xiv 14. 2. Take, for example, the agitation for Tigellinus' head, conducted in the circus, theatres, Palatine and fora, *Hist.* i 72. There is no reason to assume that only the lower classes (i.e. plebeian order) participated in this, or that Tacitus meant us to assume this. It was *odium* and *invidia* that motivated the *vulgus*, and hatred for Tigellinus, as agent and betrayer of Nero, cut across social distinctions. And cf. the crowd who clamoured for Otho's head, *Hist.* i 35. Tacitus explicitly says that it included senators and *equites*, and he was fully aware of senatorial propensities to mob behaviour – a consideration to be born in mind whenever he generalises about the *vulgus*. The reasons for action attributed to the *vulgus* can often be paralleled in references to the senate. Compare e.g. *Hist.* i 19. 1, most senators on the day of Piso's adoption acting *obvio obsequio, privatas spes agitantes sine publica cura*, with the (lower class) crowd who applaud Nero *per incuriam publici flagitii* (*Ann.* xvi 4. 4) or the (predominately lower class) crowd who applaud Otho *ex libidine servitii* (*Hist.* i 90, 3): cf. Syme, o.c. pp. 194–5.

7) *Hist.* iii 80. 1, 83. 1, *Ann.* xiv 60. 5, xvi 4. 4.

22 occur in the Histories and, in over two thirds of such references, Tacitus' attitude is, not surprisingly, negative⁸).

Some more details can be added to the character of the *vulgus*. Regardless of whether the *vulgus* is public opinion or a violent crowd, the *vulgus* can often be classified as being (a) predominately pro someone or something – expressing enthusiasm, admiration, adulation etc; (b) predominately anti-expressing criticism, threats etc.; (c) both, where it is difficult to distinguish – e.g. *Hist.* i 80.2, where the mutinous praetorian guards' hostility towards senators is a function of their loyalty towards Otho, or *Hist.* i 69, where the *vulgus*' mood changes from being pro to anti; (d) cases where the *vulgus* is neutral or where consideration of their attitude is not applicable or relevant – e.g. *Hist.* i 86.2, where the effects of flood on the *vulgus* are described. The respective figures are: (a) 38 (21 + 17); (b) 42 (22 + 20); (c) 10 (5 + 5); (d) 49 (21 + 28).

Another feature of the *vulgus* in Tacitus is the number of generalisations it attracts – 36. The frequency of such generalisations shows that the *vulgus* was expected to have an easily recognised character of its own, a kind of stock character in fact. The generalisations or the behaviour that provides a generalisation often occurs in unfavourable contexts, as one might expect. Of the 36 references, Tacitus shows a negative attitude in 17 (11 + 6)⁹).

Epithets with *vulgus* are not strikingly common: 21 occurrences have adjectives, another 7 have participles. Adjectives tend to be unfavourable and generalise – *mutabile*, *cupidum* (*motus novi*), *avidum* (*fingendi*), *pronum* (*ad suspiciones*), *immodicum*, *stolidum*, *credulum* (twice), *vacuum* (*curis*), *improvidum*, *ignavum*, *praeceps*, *pavidum*, *socors*, *imperitum*, *promptum* (*ad deteriora*); some are innocuous and simply categorise – *ceterum* (twice), *alacre*, *inbelle*, *municipale*, *inops*, *urbanum*. Participles include *ausurum* (*nihil ultra verba*), *insultans*, *solitum* (*mercari*), *conquisitum* *collectumque*, *cupiens*, *flagitans*. The addition of generally derogatory epithets is more common in the Histories: this coincides with the greater incidence of negative references but it may be another indication of the greater brevity of Tacitus' style in the Annals.

8) Of the 34 violent references, 24 (18 + 6) are negative, 7 (3 + 4) neutral and 3 (1 + 2) positive.

9) 17 neutral, no positive and 2 not applicable. 9 (8 + 1) generalisations occur when the *vulgus* is violent.

The widespread use of *vulgus* to denote public opinion, particularly in the *Annals*, calls for further comment. It commonly occurs with nouns such as *rumor* (8 times), *mos* (2), *favor* (3), *studia* (3), *os*, *opinio*, *fama*. In an autocracy, most opinion is relatively uninformed. Tacitus is explicit about the difficulties of unearthing the truth¹⁰). Naturally, members of the imperial household and senators close to the emperor were sources of unofficial information (cf. Dio lxi 8.5–6), but there were many *arcana imperii*. The selective news of the *acta diurna* would not satisfy all curiosity. Spreading rumours was a response to this censorship, a reaction to the apparent dullness of political life and a weapon of the political classes. Being at the centre of the empire, the inhabitants of Rome were constantly alert for information, whether it concerned themselves, their rulers or foreign communities. The insatiable curiosity of the Roman public for news or scandal was a consideration rarely absent from the minds of emperors, who had several means of ascertaining what current opinions were¹¹). This is not the place to expand upon the problem of *rumor* in Tacitus¹²) but he does make explicit state-

10) *Ann.* i 1, *Hist.* i 1, and cf. Dio's important statement, liii 19.

11) Cic. *Cael.* 38 – *quotus quisque est qui istam effugere potest in tam maledica civitate?* Seneca advises a ruler to take care of his reputation – *vestra facta dictaque rumor excipit* (*Clem.* i 18. 1). The city of Rome is *avida sermonum*, knows everything, loves to speculate and find *materiam sermonibus*, especially on forbidden topics, and many let nothing happen without idle gossip. (*Tac. Hist.* i 4, ii 1, ii 96, *Ann.* xi 27. 1, xiii 6. 1, *Jos. AJ* xix 53, *Sen. Tran* xii 7, *Tert. Apol.* 35. 6). Trials (*Tac. Ann.* iv 24, *Suet. Tib.* 45), publication of wills (*Tac. Ann.* iii 76, vi 38, *Suet. Aug.* 66. 4, *Dio* lviii 25. 3) and lampoons, whether scattered in the theatre (*Suet. Tib.* 36. 1) or written on walls, pillars or statues (*Mart.* xii 61, *Tert. Ad Nat.* i 17. 5) were other means of propogating gossip or scandal – and the emperor got to hear of many stories (cf. *Dio* lxv 11. 1). The nature of the stories circulated were a guide to the popular mood (*Tac. Ann.* iv 64, *Dio* lviii 19. 1–2) and the imperial intelligence network could monitor oral transmission of gossip and opinion. Tiberius is commended for being patient in the face of *malos rumores et famosa de se ac suis carmina* (*Suet. Tib.* 28).

12) It is not always easy to determine whether *rumor* is the consensus of public opinion or a maliciously inspired fabrication spreading through credulity – Quint. *Inst. Or.* 5. 3. Nor whether a particular *rumor* was current at the time Tacitus is speaking of or was a later invention. *Vulgus* occurs in at least 15 contexts critical of a person, Tiberius (4 times) being the most common object. The rumours that drove Nero to persecute the Christians in A.D. 64 is a good example of the power of *rumor*. Tacitus employs phrases other than *rumor vulgi* etc. to denote opinion or discussion, e.g. *in ore omnium* (*Ann.* xiv 56. 1), *omnium ore celebratur* (*Ann.* xiv 22. 1) and *haec vulgantibus* (*Ann.* xiii 7. 1).

ments on the problems *rumor* created for him (*Ann.* iii 19.2, iv 11) and his references to the opinion of the *vulgus* are part of the authentic background to events. Only one reference to public opinion does not include the inhabitants of Rome (*Hist.* ii 78.4). On 13 (1 + 12) occasions Tacitus makes it clear or implies that the *vulgus*, or a section of them, are uninformed, gullible, superstitious or those with poor taste, e.g. *Ann.* i 47.3 – (*Tiberius*) *primo prudentes, dein vulgum, diutissime provincias sefellit*, *Hist.* iii 58.3 – *in metu consilia prudentium et vulgi rumor iuxta audiuntur*¹³). It is not always easy to decide in the remaining cases whether we are meant to infer ignorance on the part of the *vulgus* or whether the question of ignorance, as distinct from simple opinion, does not arise. We are not entitled to restrict ignorance, gossip, superstition etc. to the lower classes. The journey of Titus to Rome at the beginning of A.D. 69 aroused talk of his impending adoption by Galba – *vulgus fingendi avidum disperserat accitum in adoptionem* (*Hist.* ii 1). This speculation must have been particularly keen among the upper class. As Seneca says, the *chlamydati* as well as the *coronati* make up the *vulgus* (*Vit. Beat.* ii 2) and the prevalence of superstition among the educated and well born needs no illustrating.

To sum up: *vulgus* has a variety of meanings and uses in Tacitus. In the frequency of its application to soldiers and denotation of public opinion and in the attribution of violence and certain motives there are marked differences between the Histories and the Annals: the nature of the material narrated may have something to do with this. Tacitus' attitude to the *vulgus* is by no means uniformly hostile: much depends on context. Comparatively infrequently does *vulgus* mean a violent civilian or plebeian mob and it is equally capable of expressing support or opposition. Despite the acknowledged variety of motivation, composition and behaviour, the *vulgus* is to some extent conceived along stereotyped lines and the generally negative colouring of epithets add to its somewhat villainous aspect.

13) *Vulgus* is a word that needs to be translated with particular care when it refers to a group in Rome. A check on the instances of *vulgus* meaning primarily public opinion in three translations of the Histories suggests that only the Penguin translation by K. Wellesley gives accurate renderings. The Loeb translation by C. H. Moore (1925) and the Church and Broadribb (1888) translations are to prone to use words which suggest a social stratum, like the common people, rabble, mob etc.

One of the *vulgus*' main tendencies is to gossip or spread rumours, a habit which was an important factor in political life and which cut across social divisions.

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