

Dean Hammer: *Roman Political Thought. From Cicero to Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014. 555 pp. \$ 90/£ 55. ISBN 978-0-521-12408-9.

With this book, Dean Hammer provides a summation of his considerable expertise in Roman political theory, culture, and practice. Since his *The Iliad as Politics*, two main themes have characterized his thinking: first, the concern to expand political theory to include a wide range of cultural forms and assumptions that enable people to live together; second, an interest in relating ancient political thinking understood in this inclusive perspective to modern political thought and practice. This book provides detailed studies of influential Roman intellectuals – historians, poets, orators, statesmen, an emperor and a bishop. The accent falls on providing a thick description of their political thinking and situating it within a range of significant ancient cultural discourses, but the book also lightly makes connections with modern political theorists. It should therefore be of interest to experts on the individual thinkers examined in the book (Polybius, Cicero, Lucretius, Sallust, Virgil, Livy, Seneca, Tacitus, Marcus Aurelius, and Augustine), to scholars of Roman culture and society from the Late Republic into Late Antiquity, and to modern political theorists interested in learning from the great thinkers of the past. Each chapter begins with a section introducing the life, works, and times of its central thinker, and helpfully provides brief sketches and syntheses of relevant interpretive and critical controversies. The book therefore operates successfully at two further levels: it should become essential for researchers, and could be used profitably within undergraduate courses on ancient politics and society.

Humanities scholarship has seen something of an ‘affective turn’ in recent years. Hammer’s goal to demonstrate the importance of distinctively Roman political thinking fits within this emphasis on the agency of emotions and desires. The book does treat legal frameworks and institutions. But the main accent falls on the ‘affective foundation of political life’ (3), the emotional bonds that hold communities together. Hammer’s is not a political history of Roman institutions nor a study of the legal and economic frameworks which established political institutions and sustained political authority. Still less is it an intellectual history of narrowly political concepts. Instead, he focuses on ways in which affective bonds were strengthened or perverted in Roman society, and the ways in which desire was organized to promote or corrupt communal living. This leads him to place tradition, memory, social values and virtues, and friendship, kinship, and love, rather than laws, institutions, and finances, at the heart of his political account. This is a significant contribution. It allows the Romans to emerge from the philosophical categories of Greek political thought by taking seriously the effects on their thought of the fragmented violence, the significant power shifts, and the associated sense of

cultural loss as traditional practices, virtues, and institutions were reshaped in the transition from Republic to Empire.

A commonly recurring theme across the individual studies is that the dangers and fragmentation of Roman social experience from the late Republic into the early Empire disrupted and perverted emotional bonds that made political consensus and individual and communal political identity possible. Hammer then argues that this social disruption generated distinctive attempts by different Roman thinkers to make renewed sense of their political experience by attempting in different ways to order desire, or explain the crucial need to direct individual and communal desires to shared goals. This is worked out over studies of authors often studied as part of the political canon as well as less obvious candidates. The cumulative result (if somewhat more implied than made explicit), is an impressive demonstration of the coherence, the range, and the ongoing significance of Roman political reflection.

It is impossible to capture the detail of Hammer's rich case studies of individual authors in a brief review; what follows, then, is inevitably impressionistic and partial. Hammer's Cicero does not aim towards utopias. Instead, we are given a politics where time matters, for experiencing political events, memorializing them, and reflecting on the traditions that give shape to present experience of political community. This aligns with a culturally-embedded view of justice, reason, and morality. Power differentials, class considerations, economic wealth, and material goods, are thus given more weight in Cicero's thought than in a classical Stoicism that discounts what is not up to us, and gives primacy to natural reason and law. Hammer's discussion of *potestas*, *auctoritas*, and *libertas*, and his tying of these different expressions of power both to economic metaphors of ownership and property and to modern debates about positive or negative liberty characteristically mediates between culturally situated accounts of Roman thought and modern problems (though here I missed engagement with Skinner on Republican liberty).

If Cicero hopes that memory of the *mos maiorum* can help provide shared reasons and values for political community, Lucretius replaces such cultural construction with a common physical understanding grounded in nature and the senses. For Hammer, it is not so much that politics is a false way to ensure ἀταραξία. Rather, law and politics are moved into the realm of nature to remove fear. So political metaphors for nature themselves do intellectual work by performing the naturalization of politics. In this move, two traditional arguments are in tension: the *mos maiorum*, the guarantor of virtues, is criticized on the basis that it leads to inappropriate attachment to material things. This allows Lucretius, in Hammer's view, to offer a politics of resistance by emphasizing the dangers of excessive attachment to the transient, anxiety-inducing world of material existence. Yet Hammer cannot see how Lucretius' politics can be constructive. Perhaps further investigation

of Lucretius on friendship could help here, as might a richer view of hope. The Garden may be a hoped for political transformation, but in Hammer's view, such hope is insufficient, since it does not include anticipation of impossible futures, living with imperfection, or political compromise. Yet the political power of hope may lie precisely in its refusal to give up on projects that seem impossible to actualize.

With Sallust, we return to a more positive evaluation of tradition. Sallust thinks that tradition is required for the proper ordering of individual and communal desires, which otherwise degenerate into chaotic individual preferences. Sallust thus places desire at the heart of politics: how to make the desire for power constructive rather than destructive is his central political problem (a quest Augustine will consider vain given very different anthropologies). The training of character virtues is much more than individual self-formation; it has political significance as the moderation of inappropriate passions. Memory has the political function of maintaining traditional shared experience; it anchors language in communally-accepted meanings, and thus resists political expediency and instrumentality. But memory can be dangerous when an idealized past interprets the present and thus gives poor grounds for action, or when the exempla it sustains amplify *gloria* to the extent that it turns to *ambitio*. Finally, history itself is deeply political, in that it transmits responsible accounts of, and *exempla* from, tradition, it maintains communally accepted meanings as they come under pressure from inappropriately ordered and directed desires.

Memory is again central for Virgil (*Musa, mihi causas memora* Aen. 1,8). In Virgil's politics one cannot merely read the future from the past: Aeneas is driven forward to a new land, dislocated physically from his origins, his own imperfect and unperfected life stands as an icon for the unfinished and imperfect compromises of Roman politics. Memory, like Aeneas, is dislocated in order to form new futures. But it is never left behind. Memory in Virgil is not eradicated in the removal of personal concerns on the way to the perfect life of the sage (as it might be for Stoics), but rather is a means of humanization. Virgil prioritizes particular affective relationships which strengthen memory and thus sustain sociality, most famously in the virtue of *pietas*. Virgil is clear about ways in which memory can be violent. Conversely, Hammer is eloquent on ways in which violence can traumatize memory. Again, Roman political thought is presented as foregrounding affect and dealing with the messiness of real communal experience.

Hammer's treatment of Livy again emphasizes ways in which affect shapes political ideas and practices and is bound up with memory. His discussion of monuments as sites of embodied memory, potentially constructive of shared political meaning, but contested to the point of disintegration at times of political crisis (think of the practice of *damnatio memoriae*) is especially

illuminating. In Hammer's hands, Livy's history identifies ways in which elites and masses compete to construct political meaning and memory. The *mores maiorum* are contested partly because Rome has multiple origins, and so can be constructed by different actors for different ends. This chapter includes brief discussion of several key episodes in Livy's history, with the accent falling on how emotions shape history: desire and fear in the Rape of Lucretia leads to political change; show trials transform individual feelings into shared political experience and action. Throughout, desire plays a key role in community formation. Livy's history of emotions has present and political significance as political and psychological therapy, in a move that echoes Sallust's view of the ethical significance of historiography. Tacitus too will claim that historiography can be therapeutic and that it has political significance in healing the emotions and preserving memory that provides a secure ground for self-formation, institutions, the exercise of the virtues, and political community. One common theme in Roman political thought is that responsible historiography is crucial for healthy politics.

We may take Seneca and Marcus Aurelius together, given Stoic influences (though each chapter has its distinctive contribution: for Seneca including informative discussions of jurisdiction, *οἰκείωσις*, and the *apocolocyntosis*; for Aurelius investigation of justice and love related to nature, masculinity and virtue, and contemplation). For both, Hammer sees political power in accounts of interiority. His Seneca emphasizes the need for a coherent self (and points to ways in which despotic politics leads to madness) if political judgement is to be rational, and if jurisdiction is to be properly maintained. In arguments which also resonate with those of Tacitus, Seneca argues that the arbitrary will of the emperor, and his increase in jurisdiction, undermines connections between law and nature, politics and the self, and thus threatens the rule of law. The connection between coherent self and political order is perhaps also Hammer's strongest contribution in the chapter on Marcus Aurelius. Rather than seeing interiority and contemplation as escapes from politics, in Hammer's view the emperor's contemplation is needed to properly orient him in the real world: paradoxically, without a cosmic view, individuals and politics itself are impotent.

Hammer's Tacitus is presented as offering a political psychology which goes far beyond a concern with individual character, since it examines the 'transformations in collective perceptions, emotions, moods, preferences, motivations, and calculations that serve as the impetus for political action' (323). The focus in the chapter is on the psychology of tyranny, a world without agreed markers for grounding action, as all are dependent on arbitrary power. Hammer points out that for Tacitus, despotism is terrifying precisely inasmuch as it is institutionalized and formalized. I would have liked further analysis of this tension: terror works both through arbitrary and conventional

power, as Seneca also recognizes in his examination of the effects of imperial power on jurisdiction. Law becomes both stronger and more centralized, yet also more dependent on a single individual under the empire. Revealing this entanglement between near absolute individual power and the power of institutions could be seen as a key contribution of Roman political thinking.

Hammer concludes by jumping forward to Augustine, read as both a culmination and an important departure from the Roman intellectual tradition. Sin casts Augustine back into the real world of memory, desire, habit formation, violence, imperfect institutions, and corruption. It foregrounds desire. But it also means that politics cannot be the solution: God, rather than human schemes and constructs, makes endurance in political community possible. Augustine is the most philosophically and theologically complex of the thinkers treated in the book, and the chapter can only scratch the surface of key points: about 10 pages are allocated to Augustine on language, grace, trinity, *caritas*, the transformation of desire, and the human condition. This means that the theological foundations of his politics can only be gestured towards, but the chapter does a good job of setting out the main elements a fuller treatment would require. Since the Augustinian human is sinful, politics is not the rule of reason, but the direction and organization of desires. Desire directed merely towards material things will always overflow into sinful attachment to what is not ultimate. The goal must be instead peace, obedience, reason, and desire directed towards enjoyment of God. Augustine's account of desire (built on his theology and anthropology) allows him to critique spectacles as the institutionalization of the enjoyment of suffering, and to explain tyranny as the passion for dominating. He sees *libertas*, *imperium*, and *gloria* as potential goods, but the will of humans is inappropriately limited, so *libertas* threatens to become license, responsible *imperium* over-reaches itself in tyranny, and *gloria* can be shameful servitude to the lust for *imperium*. Politics becomes confession, because it recognizes its own limitation, inadequacy, and provisionality, given the nature of post-lapsarian individuals and communities. The chapter concludes by relating Augustine to realist traditions, and considering other models.

I trust these partial sketches are sufficient to demonstrate that the individual studies are all illuminating. They each expand what counts as political in the thinking of the author they focus on, and so helpfully shift debates that often revolve around a limited range of questions in the scholarship (e.g. Tacitus and Republicanism, Aurelius and political withdrawal; Augustine and political realism). I missed a synthetic chapter to draw themes together, relate individual thinkers to each other in detail, and identify distinctively Roman contributions. The final chapter is perhaps best to this end, as Augustine is read as the culmination of a tradition of Roman thinking, emphasizing that politics cannot be systematized, the desire is destructive of community, and

that institutions fail. It is perhaps perverse to criticize a 555 page tome for being too short, but I would have welcomed additional synthetic argument. As it stands, a few pages of the introductory chapter and the last few of the final one are left to carry a good deal of the overall argument.

Perhaps because of this abbreviation, I wondered about some synthetic claims. Throughout, there are attempts to distinguish Roman from Greek political thought, part of the overall aim to rehabilitate distinctively Roman politics. We hear that Romans emphasize affect over Greek rationality, Greeks dream of utopias, whereas Romans are bound up in the experience of a fallen world, Greeks would withdraw from the world in ascetic isolation, whereas Romans are embedded in community, Romans know the tragedy of political failure and abuse of power, whereas Greeks idealize particular power structures. Autochthonous Greeks have a home to return to, whereas immigrant Romans are homeless, always on the way to an unreachable resting place. Roman politics knows the reality of violence and so aims for peace, and values *libertas* particularly strongly given the experience of its loss. These contrasts work as first order approximations, especially if Greek political thought is limited to the philosophical claims of a Plato or an Aristotle. Yet all are open to serious question. Think of Aristotle's claim that humans only go to war for the sake of peace, the construction of Greek freedom precisely in a rhetorical contrast with the age of tyrants, the ambiguity of the *νόστος* of Homeric heroes, who return only to a changed homeland. Think too of the Sophistic emphasis on the dangers of political rhetoric, Aristotle's perceptive writings on political ethics, emotion, rhetoric, and habits, or the devastating critique of political desire in Thucydides. Perhaps one further value of Hammer's work may be to prompt studies of Greek political thought that go beyond philosophical political theory, and thereby do for Greek historians, poets, and orators what Hammer has achieved across different Roman genres. A further expansion could be incorporating more thoroughly the political thought of Latin Christian writers. Hammer's chapter on Augustine does grapple with some of the Christian contours of his political thinking, while writing the bishop into a wider Roman narrative in illuminating ways. Closer attention to political theology in the period, including in thinkers such as Tertullian, Jerome, Ambrose, and Ambrosiaster, would expand the view of what counts as Roman political thought.

The book is certainly substantial: the 73 pages of bibliography and 40 page *index locorum* point to the magnitude of Hammer's task. The subject index, however, is barely 7 pages, and could usefully have been expanded to enable readers to chart connections between the studies of individual authors. In so weighty a work, some technical errors are to be expected. But the (few) typographical errors and the occasional missing bibliographic citation do not seriously affect the text's readability and utility. Overall, this is an excellent

volume which promises to set the agenda for studies of Roman politics and society for some time.

Michael Champion, Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry, Australian Catholic University
michael.champion@acu.edu.au

[Inhalt Plekos 18,2016 HTML](#) [Startseite Plekos](#)
