

Interpretation

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Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798
- email* interpretation@baylor.edu

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DAVID FOTT

UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS

david.fott@unlv.edu

Jed W. Atkins's fine new book focuses on the relevance for contemporary times of the political thought of several ancient Romans. Its intended audience is undergraduate and graduate students—Atkins has aimed at a less advanced level than Dean Hammer's *Roman Political Thought: From Cicero to Augustine* (Cambridge University Press, 2014)—but advanced scholars will benefit from the book as well. At the center of Atkins's account is Roman republicanism, which he analyzes by devoting individual chapters to key concepts relating to that notion. By contrast, Hammer's approach was author-by-author. Cicero receives more of Atkins's attention than any other thinker. Polybius, Sallust, Livy, Seneca, Tacitus, and Augustine also appear frequently; less so, Lucretius, Plutarch, Quintilian, and Tertullian.

In most of the chapters, Atkins uses the wise practice of beginning by comparing some aspect of Roman politics with an aspect of our contemporary politics. Chapter 1, "The Roman Constitution in Theory and Practice," starts by noting one significant difference between the Roman and US constitutions: only the latter is written. The Roman constitution was a combination of custom and law, which Atkins explains with reference to Polybius and Cicero. The most interesting issue to arise is the extent to which popular sovereignty characterized the constitution. Polybius's account, which treats "the people" as consisting of the voting assemblies, supports the notion of popular sovereignty. According to Atkins, popular sovereignty existed "to the extent that popular consent, provided by the various voting assemblies,

was a necessary condition for the validity of laws and of the senior magistrates' *imperium* [command]" (19). Atkins uses Cicero to point out limitations on popular power ignored by Polybius: the votes of the centuriate assembly required ratification by the senate, and a priest called the augur had the power to annul popular legislation (20). (Cicero makes these points in his works *On the Republic* and *On the Laws*.) Puzzlingly, Atkins seems to forget those limitations when he appears to describe Cicero himself as characterizing the constitution in terms of popular sovereignty (7, 26, 34). But on the whole, Atkins succeeds in explaining Polybius's notion of the separation of monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic powers, which he calls Polybius's "enduring contribution to political thought" (24). And he accurately describes Cicero's verdict on the Roman constitution as "the best exemplification of the best possible constitution"—that best possible constitution being a mixture of the three elements identified above (26). Atkins concludes the chapter by noting the transformation in thinking that accompanied the emperor's transformation of the republic into what was essentially his private household.

The main lesson of chapter 2, "Liberty and Related Concepts," is that modern neorepublican arguments for liberty in the form of nondomination may undercut arguments for liberty in the form of political participation, in that a condition of nondomination is possible without widespread participation. As Atkins shows through analyses of Livy and Cicero, the Romans had notions of the rule of law, equality under law, and even individual rights; but those rights were based on civil law and custom, not on nature or the supernatural. He also examines Tacitus's *Agricola* as an exploration of the conditions for participation under tyrannical emperors.

The theme of chapter 3, "Citizenship and Civic Virtue," is that the Romans' understanding of citizenship was tied to the type of their regime, especially to elements of their social and political culture. Thus their understanding of citizenship changed with Rome's transformation from republic to empire. Under the republic citizenship encompassed political participation (eligibility to vote in assemblies and hold political office), legal protection, and status as a member of the political community; the second and third aspects were preeminent. Atkins's analysis moves from republican civic virtues of glory, honor, and rank (Cicero's *On Duties* is a key text) to a devaluing of glory in an empire where the ruler was above the law (Seneca's *On Mercy*, Dio Chrysostom's *Orations* 1–4, Pliny the Younger's *Panegyric*, and Tacitus's *Agricola* receive attention). The extension of citizenship to all free persons

under Roman rule in AD 212 also led to a deemphasis on the aspect of status. Then Augustine transformed civic virtue in light of Christian theology.

Chapter 4, “Political Passions and Civic Corruption,” contrasts Cicero, who maintains that political leaders are responsible for the presence or absence of corruption, with Sallust, who relies on the causative force of popular passions in relation to the Roman honor code. Atkins appears to side with Sallust as he examines works by Lucretius the Epicurean, Seneca the Stoic, and Plutarch the Platonist. Those three thinkers share an emphasis on “reverence and gratitude as correctives to the socially destructive emotions” (96). Atkins convincingly argues that gratitude encourages social interdependence, but he unjustifiably minimizes the import of the Epicureans’ alleged atheism for Lucretius’s championing of gratitude (105). He is eager to argue for the significance of hope as the virtue of “the oppressed”—despite the fact that the ancients looked down on it (110–11).

Chapter 5 is titled “Rhetoric, Deliberation, and Judgment.” Atkins begins by noting the contemporary case against rhetoric as a tool of flattery and manipulation, echoing Plato’s *Gorgias* and *Menexenus*. Examining Cicero’s philosophical works on rhetoric gives Atkins the opportunity to criticize advocates of deliberative democracy because Cicero implies that a rhetorical appeal to the emotions makes speech accessible to a wider audience. Atkins exaggerates, however, when he claims that “Cicero believes that the judgment of the multitude and crowd is...not inferior to the judgments of experts” (120). For evidence to the contrary, see Cicero, *Brutus* 193, 199, 264. Yet that error does not lessen the force of Atkins’s thesis that the roles of orator and audience depend on a common “script” that determines appropriate arguments (122). That script, which has its sources in both nature and customs, provides a standard for political judgment, and it allows decisions to capture the public interest instead of being a conflict of private interests. Through an examination of Quintilian and Tacitus, Atkins tells the story of the decline of rhetoric as the empire took hold. He concludes the chapter by provocatively comparing Tacitus’s discussion of the suppression of political speech with today’s attempts at American universities to prevent discrimination through use of “bias response teams” (134).

Atkins begins chapter 6, “Civil Religion,” by helpfully comparing Cicero and Rousseau on this subject (although he unconvincingly implies that Rousseau is a Christian [136]). In the Roman Republic, a variety of priesthoods ensured the smooth functioning of the mixed constitution, while the first emperor, Augustus, developed an imperial cult that consolidated religious

authority in his hands. After exploring Rome's complex relations with Jews and Christians, Atkins gives an extended comparison of the arguments for toleration advanced by Tertullian and by Thomas Jefferson, in which both men champion religious liberty as the possession of individuals, not merely a people. Raising the question of how Rome exported its religion leads Atkins to Cicero's use of natural law as a possible basis for universalizing Roman rule. Atkins would have done well to note Cicero's skepticism about natural law, which can be found in *On the Laws* (e.g., 1.17–19).

Chapter 7 covers three issues: imperialism, just war theory, and cosmopolitanism. Polybius attributes Rome's empire to its religion, the authority of its senate, and its military might. He and Sallust look to fear of a foreign enemy to provide the internal stability requisite for pursuit of empire. Cicero's *On the Republic* features arguments against and for justice in international relations, including the claim that republics that violate natural law will meet a premature death, while in *On Duties* he avers that honor and its concomitant reputation are important sources of authority in international relations. Tacitus's *Agricola* seems to criticize Roman empire in the name of lost freedom. Atkins rightly looks to Cicero, not Ambrose or Augustine, for the origins of just war theory, and he helpfully contrasts ancient and modern just war theory. Cosmopolitanism was originally a Cynic and Stoic notion, and Atkins is concerned to show that Roman Stoics such as Seneca and Marcus Aurelius—as well as the non-Stoic Cicero—understand it to be compatible with participation in a particular regime. Ending with a nod to modern times, Atkins observes that “Roman republicanism's departure from realism stems from the central role of honor in republican thought” (190).

Atkins concludes his book (that is, before a bibliographical essay) by reminding us that we should take Roman political thought seriously, not only because of the continuities between it and modern liberalism, but also because of the discontinuities. For example, attempting to make Roman republicanism relevant by stripping it of its concern with national glory obscures a potential lesson, “for it is precisely through considering Rome's (to us) illiberal honor code that Roman republicans raise important concerns related to the desire for recognition as a motivating force” (195). Atkins's final paragraph returns to the theme of gratitude—not a leading virtue in modern liberalism, he notes, yet proven to be important for human happiness. Liberal regimes may be superior to the Roman Republic, but the extent of their superiority is “merely one of degree” (199). That claim seems to involve a poor choice of words because it may be read as denying fundamental qualitative differences

between the two. But Atkins immediately mentions the social stratification, violence, and slavery of Rome, and ends as follows: “If liberalism is a lie, perhaps it is at least in part a noble one.” If only, Atkins seems to wish, we could combine the noble features of liberalism with a modest respect for the role of religion in society. Finding that modest respect in Roman thinkers is but one way in which Atkins reveals how much *humanitas* the Romans had. He succeeds in informing his readers why, above all other reasons, Rome should continue to fascinate us and to inform our political judgments.