

# **Rome, Community, and State Violence, Then and Now**

**Conference Seminar  
University of Konstanz  
July 10-12, 2008**

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This seminar will focus on two perhaps antithetical areas where Rome has provided a political model: in offering a way to think about how a community comes together into a workable state and about violence within that community as it is exercised by citizens against each other, citizens toward the state, or by the state toward citizens. Rome can offer a mirror at a historical remove that allows, depending on the viewers' interests, for both justification and critique. In other words, Rome may serve as a tool for the development of ideology. This is a normative function, whether Rome's example is used positively or negatively. The familiar but alien other of the ancient past can offer a palette on which to define one's own community identity – no less real for being phantasmatic. This strand has been important in looking back to the past. Equally important is a more critical, ostensibly neutral vein, whereby the ancient model points up gaps in our understanding of later political structures. The discussion format of the seminar will allow for the exploration of the extent to which different methods of analysis put their commitments to the fore.

## **Rome as model**

Rome has been a model for political thought since the mid-Republic, when Polybius wrote his famous description of the Roman constitution along Aristotelian lines. It persists today, less a viable model, than as a historical lens through which to analyze the present. From elite theoretical texts, like Giorgio Agamben's books on the state of exception (*Homo Sacer* and *Stato di eccezione*), to Cullen Murphy's popular journalism (*Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*), Rome remains good to think with today.

This ancient city, however, does not provide a unified model with regard to either political form or ethics. Both Republic and Empire have at different times come into prominence as models, the former for America's Founding Fathers, the latter more recently as the Bush administration pursues warfare in the Middle East. The American formulation of republicanism, however, differs greatly from Machiavelli's, as American imperialism differs from, say, Napoleon's. Furthermore, the slave economy of antiquity provides an entirely different economic structure from modern capitalism, which allows for comparison between the different modes of imperial expansion.

One set of questions this seminar seeks to address is why go to the past? Why look back to Rome in particular, when it is so polyvalent and ethically problematic? One reason is that people have looked back to Rome before, but that again raises questions of models. It

would be hard to argue for a causal relation between ancient and modern historical structures, but this discontinuity turns out to be an advantage for thought experiments that are more about the reinvention of a past that can be used for the present than about historical inquiry. Another question is the role of historical accuracy as a check on recontextualization. If the image of Rome claimed by present needs does not correspond to a historical reality, does the inaccuracy necessarily undermine the value of the image? If studying history counteracts idealized versions of the past, to what extent does it then make the past irrelevant for the present?

## **Community and State Violence**

Rome offers both a paradigm of inclusion in its extraordinary and multicultural extension of citizenship and one of exclusion, where the citizen enemy must be destroyed for the cohesion of the whole. Either option displays fissures in the social construction of community without necessarily resulting in its wholesale destruction. Fergus Millar has suggested that the price of Roman-style democracy was tolerance for the eruption of citizen violence. The problem is that civil war eventually undermined the Republic's stability. The Empire that took its place offered security, but only to some, and that at the price of the loss of liberty among elites. Agamben's horrific theorization of the role of the *homo sacer* in the state of exception shifts critical focus from a Girardian understanding of violence, where exclusion of the scapegoat allows for community cohesion, toward the analysis of structures of sovereignty. Agamben cannot, however, explain how states formed on his model can achieve stability and the loyalty of citizens. Violence can serve as a social glue, or rip communities apart.

Some of the things that do hold communities together are a sense of shared history and a commitment to a state's constitution. In each case, dynamic social relations and channels of power interact with forms that are both malleable and resistant to change. History is constantly revised to serve contemporary understanding and needs. Politicians test the limits of what constitutions allow. Rome, with its history of both great stability and violent upheaval, offers a locus for exploring the interrelation between state building and state destruction.

## **Seminar format**

The seminar will take place over two and a half days and will focus more on discussion than on the presentation of formal papers. Each participant will choose a selection of primary texts totaling about 20 pages to circulate in advance. We expect these texts to cover ancient Roman material as well as the likes of Agamben, Arendt, Augustine, Bodin, Broch, Gramsci, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Nietzsche, Serres, et al. We welcome literary, historical, and legal as well as theoretical texts. Each participant will be responsible for presenting the text (15 minutes) and leading discussion (30 minutes).

Thursday, July 10: three afternoon sessions (2 ¼ hours)

Friday, July 11: two morning sessions (1 ½ hours); three afternoon sessions (2 ¼ hours)

Saturday, July 12: two morning sessions (1 ½ hours); two afternoon sessions (1 ¼ hours)

