

## Amoralism, Roman Republican Politics, and Historians in an Era of Disillusionment

This paper challenges what used to be a pervasive although unexpressed assumption held by many eminent Roman historians: that the political culture of the Roman Republic was amoral. By an “amoral political culture,” I mean an environment in which politicians are allowed to disregard ethical restrictions that apply to other people, for example, to engage in deception and flattery.

No ancient evidence supports the proposition that the Romans of the Republic accepted amoralism when it came to their internal political system. Many of the passages that might be adduced to support this proposition constitute criticisms made by Cicero of the simplistic morality of Cato, in which only one ethical precept is considered, instead of weighing various factors to make the morally best choice (Cic. *Att.* 1.17.9, 2.1.8, Cic. *Mur.* 61, 70-71). Sallust’s description of Roman politicians as people who pretend to act in the public interest, but fight for their own power, expresses not complacency about this hypocrisy, but outrage (Sal. *Cat.* 38.3). The *Commentariolum Petitionis* may seem to endorse the grant of a dispensation from normal morality that was granted to candidates for office, as Tatum (2007) has shown, but I subscribe to the analysis made by Alexander (2009) that this work was written tongue-in-cheek, and that it is, in fact, attacking the amoralism that it ostensibly endorses. Alexander’s reading of that work has by no means been generally accepted, but it has also not been challenged, with one exception (Feig Vishnia [2012] 164 n. 7). Cicero’s philosophical works explicitly reject amoralism, and insist that politicians should always do what is right (e.g., Cic. *Off.* 1.124).

Amoralism lay behind the form of historical interpretation that dominated Roman Republican political history for much of the twentieth century, roughly from Gelzer (1912) until Brunt’s (1988) dismantling of *clientela* as the glue that held Roman political groups together.

The most famous expression of this school is Syme's *Roman Revolution* (1939), which offers a quintessentially amoral interpretation of Roman politics. However, since Roman Republican political amoralism had not been explicitly formulated by historians, it was only implicitly discarded as a key premise, and thus has escaped scrutiny, as historians (not just ancient historians, but historians in general) have turned from seeing their job as uncovering a "behind the scenes" narrative obscured by political catchwords and sham, to trying to understand the outlooks and concepts that imbued whichever people in the past are the objects of their study---to "read" an alien society in a Geertzian way.

The assumption that the Romans accepted the absence of morality in their politics stemmed from a widespread disillusionment that marked the twentieth century up to the 1980's, from the slaughter of the First World War, through the revelation of atrocities committed during the Second World War, the disenchantment with Soviet Communism, the collapse of European colonial empires, loss of faith in technology, and disappointment with the expression of U.S. military might and with its internal political chicanery. It was easy to assume that all politics was dirty, and always had been. There is, however, no ancient evidence that an amoral political culture should be projected onto the Roman Republic.

#### Bibliography

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