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Introduction to the English edition: Roman culture in movement

Captatio

At the beginning of the second century, as its territory expanded, the Roman Republic became a world in motion on a large scale. During this period of expansion, in addition to issues about how to organize new territories and to feed the citizens, it faced the important problems of how to deal with the flow of wealth and people, and also the influx of new knowledge and ideas, due to increasing contact with Greek culture. This movement of goods, people and ideas on a new scale created a social and economic disequilibrium that led to a crisis of norms, rules, authority and consensus. Such was, at least, the interpretation that Roman authors of the second century have recorded.

This book does not challenge or assess the validity of their perspective. When I wrote it, however, I was – and I remain – interested in how members of the elite responded to the crisis they described. What seemed to me remarkable is that a common will of rationality characterized the period and that this rational will, which touched all aspects of their lives, both reinforced their own traditions and, at the same time, permitted them to adapt those traditions to the changing world in which they lived. Rationality was thus, for them, a way to understand their new world and to establish a continuity between it and their past.

The language of reason

The meanings of 'reason', 'rationality' and 'rationalization' are not universal. These terms can mean different things in different periods and societies and, for that matter, even within a particular period or society. In this project, I did not ask whether the Romans were rational in the modern sense of the word. Nor did I wish to consider whether or not they succeeded in their rational project. Instead, I sought to analyse at

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what kind of rationality the Roman elite aspired, to what kind of reason they referred and appealed. But my approach was historical rather than philosophical. It was therefore insufficient for me to focus merely on the uses of the word *ratio* in order to identify the Roman elite's *discourse of reason* and to study the practices it reflected. Since *ratio* has not always been used as a philosophical concept but could also mean 'calculation', 'cause' or just 'means', I also considered other words and phrases (*describere*, *digerere*, *in artem redigere*, *constituere*, *reddere rationem*, etc.) that converge to serve as signifiers of rationality, whether they had to do with systematization and organization, conceptualization and abstraction, or definition and distinction. I found that the ideas of activity, self-consciousness and choice, as well as order, method and efficiency, unified these uses and made up an ontology of reason. These ideas enabled action, transmission and thought. They permitted the type of selection that made the world *more legible* and more durable for the Roman elite. This is why I described this new trend towards rationality as an epistemological revolution.

***Narratio*: an epistemological revolution**

A critical spirit

The critique of tradition exemplifies this revolution. The Roman elite did not seek to abolish the traditions of their ancestors. Rather, in a number of ways, they sought to discuss traditional ways of believing, to distinguish which aspects of traditions should endure and which should not, and to propose new interpretations of those traditions. They also drew new distinctions between disciplines and concerned themselves with the problem of authority in reflections on religion (as in the case of Cicero's *De divinatione* or Varro's *Antiquitates*), remote history (hence the distinction between legends, *fabulae*, and history) or law (with the critique of juristic interpretation as oracular). Indeed, in each of these domains the reference to tradition, ancestors or the influence of a magistrate or a philosopher no longer sufficed to prove, justify or legitimate. In their analysis of the limits of tradition, Romans spoke of proof, reason and reasoning. And for the more radical rationalists, it was even necessary to think for oneself, to rely principally on one's reason and autonomous judgement rather than on tradition or authority. The impulse to do so represents a significant change in Roman culture. Even if what had traditionally been understood as good and

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true continued to be considered so, there now had to be a rational basis for such consideration. In other words, to be right – for a judgement to be acceptable or an analysis to be persuasive – one had to follow logical and formal rules.

Cicero's *De legibus* provides a case in point. In it, natural reason helps to provide objective foundations for traditional laws and to define institutions that could be extended to other peoples. In a similar way, for Cicero, *ratio* helps to distinguish *religio* and *superstitio*; to measure the extent (and the limits) of the assent to the Roman religion; to understand the nature of *divinatio*; to assess the primitive faith of the ancestors; and then to define a natural, universal and 'pure' approach to divinity. *Ratio* would thus help to enfranchise the mind. In short, the freer the judgement was, the freer the mind would be.

Cicero was not alone in considering the issues of objectivity and universality or, for that matter, the means of selection, definition and discrimination. Varro's reflections on language and Caesar's reform of the calendar also referred, even if in different ways, to reason. The latter's project aimed at replacing the pontiffs' traditional authority with natural rationality. As Macrobius would later state, 'Caesar forced the unstable development of time, vague and unpredictable until then, to enter into a well-defined order' (*omnem inconstantiam temporum, vagam adhuc et incertam, in ordinem statae definitionis coegit*),[1] and Caesar did so by calling on the help of an Alexandrian expert, Sosigenes. Nature and history were reconciled.

The creation of the new calendar thus exemplifies three important transformations. Firstly, experts competed with the *nobiles* as authorities. In the case of the calendrical reform, these experts were even foreigners; in the case of legal interpretation, they came more often from Italian cities rather than from the most ancient families of Rome.[2] Secondly, the model of traditional authority – that is, that of the pontiffs – was placed in question. Thirdly, the reform itself attests to an appeal for precision and certitude. We see similar appeals not only in contemporary works concerning chronology, philology and language, but also in the creation of land archives and in the codification of customs. Alexandre Koyré said that ancient peoples lived in a world of approximation. At the end of the Republic, this was no longer the case, or, at the very least, the Roman elite of the day sought to combat such a lack of certainty.[3]

[1] *Sat.* 1.14.2. [2] Wallace-Hadrill 1997: 3–22; Moatti 2003. [3] Koyré (1948) 1971: 318.

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Formalization and systematization

A second aspect of rationality addressed the problem of plurality and accumulation in the realms of knowledge, law and governance. The Roman elite confronted questions about how to understand, transmit and appropriate information and ideas in these fields. Their questions stimulated a great intellectual movement towards formalization and systematization. In efforts to create a homogeneous and logical order and to organize diversity, Romans classified, drew distinctions, and articulated new definitions. As a result, they subsumed history to reason.

One of the key words of this movement is *ars*, or systematization. It translates the Greek *technē* that Aristotle defined as one of the three levels of knowledge – the other two were experience (*empeiria*) and science (*epistēmē*). '*Ars* appears when from a plurality of experiences is extracted a universal judgement', said Aristotle; hence the importance of definitions, rules and divisions. In opposition to a practical knowledge based on the accumulation of experiences (*usus*), *ars* appeals to reason (*ratio*) and generality. Even if the Romans did not all agree on methods and results, attempts to systematize concerned all domains of knowledge (grammar, architecture, eloquence, law, etc.), politics or religion.[4] These attempts also concerned administration. Indeed, just as the disciplines were divided into general categories, conquered lands were divided into centuries, that is, generic and regular units. In the same way, after the Social War (91–88 BCE), Italy was divided into *regiones* and *municipia*, generic divisions that did not take into account the ancient identity of these territories. Through such categories, all was to be put in order and unified. Centuriation offered an administrative unity, just as the systematization of disciplines created networks of generic units, which nevertheless permitted the heterogeneous diversity of those disciplines to endure.

With such organizational practices, Rome imposed on the world its domination: what was Roman was formal, wherever the origin of the content and components. We might even see Roman citizenship in this period as a *genus* that unified human diversity and history (language, religion, laws), without effacing all distinctions. This is the meaning of Cicero's development of the notion of the Romans' two fatherlands: one of origin, the other (Rome) legal. This formulation captures well the notion of Roman universalism, a 'concrete universalism' which imposes

[4] In several articles, Rüpke systematically applied this aspect of my work to Roman religion, as he stressed in a more recent book (2012: 12).

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generalization but also preserves plurality. Indeed, Cicero describes Rome as the assembly of all the nations under the Roman name. Strabo would later say the same. In a way, Rome itself was thus a *genus* divided in numerous *species*. Such a conceptualization was possible only at the end of the Republic, under the impulse of this rational movement.

Development of writing

This epistemological revolution had a third important feature: the development of writing. As Jack Goody argued, writing helps one to criticize and to reach a kind of objectivity.[5] I would add that it also helps to emancipate people from social pressures linked to oral transmission. For the Romans of the late Republic, writing appeared as an important remedy to their crisis. It permitted them to systematize knowledge and to transform their *savoir faire* into disciplines. And it was foundational for the creation of a new consensus. In other words, Romans wrote down traditions, law and institutions not only in order to combat the so-called loss of knowledge – that is, to prevent it from being lost through negligence or from falling into oblivion – but also as a response to the extension of both the civic body and imperial territory. The creation of a new corpus of easily transmitted traditions would bind all the citizens not by a common experience, but by a common knowledge. Such was the purpose of jurists who compared, compiled and discussed Roman and Italian law; of augurs and pontiffs discussing the sphere of the different religious practices; and of historians writing about the Roman past and Italian history; it was also the goal of grammarians discussing the origin of the words and elaborating the concept of *latinitas*.

As I suggested above, not all Romans refer to reason in the same way, nor do they locate rationality in the same place or agree on the capacity of reason to resolve all problems. But reason was a kind of horizon, a tool that would help them to terminate dispersion and fragmentation, to organize their subject matter, to propose objective foundations for authority and various kinds of knowledge, to argue with method, to render account of everything. This 'epistemological revolution' did not concern only the activity of the mind. Although some Romans thought that this effort of clarification and formalization was merely a matter of philosophy, and would debate over the best philosophical system to achieve their goals – see Cicero's *De natura deorum* – this development cannot be reduced to the

[5] For example, Goody 1986.

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appearance of philosophy in Rome. For this 'rational turn' also had a political aspect evident in projects of codification and legislative programmes (from Caius Gracchus to Caesar, and then Augustus), and this political aspect could be expressed, for instance, in the term *constituere*.

Refutatio

Some scholars maintain that tradition remained strongly influential: they suggest that there is little rationality in the action and political discourses at the very end of the Republic. I do not disagree with the substance of their observations. Indeed, it is why I propose to speak of an epistemological (and not cultural) revolution, which is attested in the period through the emergence of a new language and a new attitude towards tradition. I would even suggest that, in the end, this movement of rationality reinforced tradition by providing it with a new legitimacy, even if it was at some level reinvented – Varro did so often. The efforts of this Roman elite were so successful that the imperial generations, when referring to Roman tradition, tended to refer to late Republican authors rather than oral tradition or authors from the previous period. Like many pre-modern societies, Roman society advanced by accumulation, rarely by replacement of the old with the new. What changed, however, was the way the 'last generation' looked at its past – that is, with critique and curiosity alongside traditional respect – and at its future. It is for these reasons that I suggest that there was a change of paradigm in this period.

I speak of a 'change of paradigm' since the changes I describe are evident not merely in the works of some authors but, rather, in the fabric of society as a whole. Cicero, Varro and Sallust were undoubtedly important actors, but they were, above all, excellent *witnesses* of this 'rational moment' and of the contradictions that characterized their time. Further evidence lies in the works of numerous orators, philosophers and writers whose books on law, religion, language and history are known only by fragments or title. There is likewise evidence of this paradigmatic change in legislative projects, reforms and social developments. Thus, I did not focus on the authors as authors, except when I analysed their work per se (for example in Chapter 4). Moreover, throughout the book I sought to downplay any notion of 'intentionalism'. I focused my analysis on the *language* of the period, and I stress forms and actors, not contents and authors. I am less concerned with the ideas authors expressed than with the tensions between form and practice, the historicity of their categories of thought. This is the

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type of intellectual history I envision and sought to write, and here I stand in contrast to those who write the history of ideas or cultural history.

What were the political, social and intellectual implications of this 'rational moment'? Intellectually, it ushered in new views on the autonomy of disciplines, the passage from *savoir faire* to sciences, the possibility of knowledge, etc. Socially, it helped to foster a critical spirit that created, for the elite, an inner space of liberty, a liberty which could be developed either as part of intellectual sociability (the *societas studiorum*) or as a solitary activity. In the period of autocracy, this would be of great help. What about the non-elite? Is an epistemological revolution anything other than an elite movement? Our sources cannot really allow us to say; above all we do not want to essentialize 'the people' or 'the *plebs*'. However, we can see popular opposition to traditional authority, the participation of the non-elite in politically subversive movements, and a lack of interest in some cults. But it is difficult to say much more about the connection of these developments to the rational moment.

Politically, rationality finally created a new regime of truth. What did it mean to refer to reason, to look for objective rules, to classify things that are supposed to be fixed? The search for reason progressively led at least some members of the elite to desire not only a coherent and stable world but an *irrefutable* order. In that sense, rational truth did not always conflict with another truth but, rather, with fiction or error. Romans sought stable and objective definitions. They sought to put an end to the conflicts of sense that, as Sallust has shown in his *Histories*, had been a part of the political conflicts. And they searched for consensus at any cost, which also meant, for some Romans, the justification of emergency measures. In matters of power no less than those of knowledge, they needed certitude, clarity and definition. This would also be the case of Augustus, under whom this rationalizing impulse would filter into many other aspects of the government of people's lives (demography, marriage, sexuality). Viewed from this perspective, the Principate does not represent a rupture in the history of political reason.

Of course, this new system of truth, even if it rejected *in theory* any alternative, did not *in fact* eliminate other aspirations and programmes. Indeed, one does not need to look very hard to see resistance to this form of rationalization within government. For instance, we find it in the increasing legislative activity in defence of the people or in the rejection of a totalitarian conception of the *res publica*. But this resistance would finally be forgotten, subsumed by the discourse of those who tried to put an end to the movement of history.

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Exordium

The rational discourse I described in this book was not the first or the only one in the whole of Roman history. Important studies have shown, for example, the development of a form of rationality at the end of the fourth century BCE and its role in the reform of the city. In the same way, there was a rational trend in science and law during the Empire. Reason has a history, and my book concentrates on the late Republican moment of rationality, when critical spirit, systematization and abstraction became a way of thinking, a common or rather a dominant language of the elite.

It remains difficult to establish a clear chronology with this development. Some elements appeared earlier than others – for instance, the so-called 'secularization' of the law. Some, like the conception of politics as a consensual and unified space, lasted longer than others. More generally, it is always difficult to date the appearance of 'events of thought'. The temporality of this rational moment may therefore seem unwieldy. However, at some point in the first century BCE, the discourse reaches its greatest articulation and rationality forms a kind of 'monument'.

Let's follow the metaphor. We can say that the *monument* contains columns: these would be the different forms of reason, visible, identified, autonomous and at the same time linked to each other. Autonomous because if some of them disappear, others may continue to be in use along the centuries. At the very end of the Republic or under the early Principate, for example, the critical spirit has vanished while rationalization is reinforced. Some *columns* survive but the *monument* is in ruins.

The metaphor of the *monument* thus helps us to compare periods. The need for clarification, the development of critique and the formalization of reality can be found in other periods, such as in classical Athens or during the Enlightenment. Not only are the forms varied across time, but their conditions of production, their social and political values, and above all their relationships are different. If some columns are easy to find in other periods, the monument is specific to one period. This is what I call 'historicity'.

Indeed, this book offers a dynamic analysis of the historicity of the 'rational monument' of the late Republic. Let me be clear on that point. The dynamic I explored in this study is by no means the Roman contribution to the history of European or even Western rationality. Although there were aspects of Weberian rationality in this period – we could find them, for instance, in the treatises *de agricultura* – this book has nothing to do with a Weberian vision of progress in European reason across time.

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Instead, this study analyses the ways that members of the Roman elite tried to think in the *gap* – in the discontinuity opened by their crisis. I tried to locate Roman culture in this perspective and attempted to describe the intellectual transformation of the late Republican elite as they confronted the movement of history.

(translated by Jason Glenn)

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CHAPTER 1

Crises and questionings

> No historical crisis leaves a people with its earlier balance unaffected and that is how it is that every crisis, whatever its material results, is a revolutionary event.
>
> Léon Blum, *A l'échelle humaine*, Paris, 1945

The Romans of the last years of the Republic were in no doubt that their city had, for the past century, been experiencing the gravest crisis in its history. 'This is the fifth civil war to be waged – and they have all taken place in our own times!' Cicero exclaimed in 43, while Mark Antony was lining up to threaten the authority of the Senate and the liberty of the Roman people.[1] But the century was not over yet; and Cicero, who was soon to be assassinated, would not witness the last of the fratricidal clashes between Antony and Octavian, which would culminate in the battle of Actium in 31. Within the space of three generations there had been a century of crisis, a 'revolution' that had begun, in 133, with the assassination of the tribune of the *plebs*, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, and his followers. The end of this upheaval came when Augustus established the *Pax Romana*. It was celebrated by the inauguration of an Altar of Peace on the *Campus Martius*, the highly symbolic closure of the Temple of Janus and the restoration of the Temple of Concord. By this time the scale of destruction and the number of its victims were incalculable. After so much violence, all the proscriptions and confiscations of property, the armed clashes even in the Forum and on the Capitol, the Italic War, the slave revolts, the Catilinarian conspiracy, the troubles stirred up by Clodius and the clashes between Sulla and Marius, Pompey and Caesar, Octavian and Mark Antony, what was left of the *res publica*? In the prologue to his great poem, published in 55–54, Lucretius writes of 'the tragic times of our

[1] *Phil.* 8.3.8. All dates cited in this work are BCE unless otherwise indicated. Most translations in the text are from the Loeb collection, occasionally with slight modifications. For other editions, see the Bibliography.

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