

# Review

DEAN HAMMER, *ROME AND AMERICA: COMMUNITIES OF STRANGERS, SPECTACLES OF BELONGING*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xi + 252, illus. ISBN 9781009249607. £85.00

Rome has been in the air in recent years in the U.S.A., whether in films (e.g. *Gladiator*), television (e.g. *Rome*), scholarly work (e.g. M. Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America* (2009)), and even on social media with (mostly young) men being asked how often they think of the Roman Empire. America's interest in Rome, perhaps more visible of late, is hardly new; to cite one example, two Virgil-derived Latin phrases adorn the seal of the United States: *novus ordo seclorum* and *e pluribus unum*. Why does Rome loom so large in America's imagination? What are we to make of the oft-remarked similarities between the two imperial republics?

Dean Hammer, a leader in political theory approaches to Roman thought, takes up these questions in his fine book, exploring how Rome and America struggle with their collective identities (as H. puts it, 'dislocated identities', 8), and the constitutive role of the Stranger within 'nation[s] comprised of strangers' (6) — Trojan refugees, in the case of Rome, refugees and immigrants, with America. H. employs a broadly phenomenological approach, engaging figures such as Arendt and Foucault, along with empirical analyses of politics, especially in the fifth chapter. Each chapter features a close study of aspects of Roman literature and culture, along with a paired study of American literature and culture.

Ch. 1, 'Memory, Identity, and Violence: Founding in the *Aeneid* and *The Outlaw Josey Wales*', addresses the interplay between memory, identity and founding violence and the role played by the encounter with wildness in Roman and American identity. Ch. 2, 'Imagining Purity: The Corrosive Stranger and the Construction of a Genealogy', turns to the 'corrosive Stranger' (61) as an anchor to identities in communities 'constituted by other pasts' (64). The literary foci of ch. 2 are Cato the Elder, Varro, Cicero, Booker T. Washington, Noah Webster and W. E. B DuBois. In ch. 3, the foci are the Samnites and Native Americans; in exploring the 'wild Stranger' (97), H. argues that the Stranger serves as a 'reminder' (117) of the wildness behind and outside civilisation and reaffirms the civilising missions of Rome and the U.S. 'Playing Culture: Combat Spectacles and the Acting Body', the fourth chapter, turns to the 'taboo body' (134) of Rome's gladiators and nineteenth-century America's bare-knuckled boxers, which accentuate the 'rugged origins' (134) of both regimes' foundations. The fifth and final chapter — 'The Experience of Politics and the Crises of Two Republics' — treats the 'fundamental paradox that lies at the heart of the slow demise of the Roman Republic', and perhaps the American republic: 'there is nothing that suggests that there was ever an intention by anyone to overthrow the Republic' (185). H. argues that politics is an 'arena of identity contestation' (187), and that the conflicts that destroyed the Roman Republic, and their eerie echoes in contemporary America, cannot be reduced to material or institutional explanations so much as the inability of politics 'to project the community into the future' (189).

H.'s book is clearly written, crisply argued and engages a wide range of scholarship drawn from classics, political science, political theory, literary studies, film and other disciplines. Its scope is remarkable — I have already noted some of the objects to which he turns his eye, but omitted others, such as Robert Montgomery Bird's nineteenth-century American play about Spartacus, *The Gladiator*, Charles Eastman's autobiography, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, and a vast array of Greek and Latin texts. I would be remiss, too, if I did not note how creative H.'s approach is, and readers from a variety of disciplines will learn much from his account.

My reservations with H.'s argument, however, centre on a set of claims in the fifth chapter and, by extension, the overall narrative of the book. Hammer identifies and explores troubling similarities between the Late Republic and recent American politics, including 'polarization' (194), political 'obstruction' (195) and 'political violence' (196), culminating in the Roman context of norm violations begetting further — and greater — norm violations. H. sees similar phenomena in contemporary America, in which, at both the elite and mass level, we see a 'new Caesarism', most evident in the person of Donald Trump and the 'MAGA' movement, both of which bring together 'populist and autocratic' tendencies (215). H. makes sense of these phenomena with reference to the book's overarching exploration of identity, and thus 'how participants [in American politics]

understand themselves and the place of politics in relationship to a larger narrative of belonging' (203). My reservations with this argument have to do with the fact that democratic backsliding is far from unique to the United States; indeed, a recently published study (*Bedrocks of Democracy Under Threat Across the Globe* (2023)) by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance finds that almost 50 per cent of states surveyed experienced some element of democratic backsliding. If this is the case, then it seems that the story of America's democratic backsliding may have less to do with how Americans imagine their belonging, but rather with global, structural forces. H.'s argument illuminates much about how Americans — and Romans — have thought about and struggled over their collective identities and the boundaries of their communities, but I am less convinced that it illuminates phenomena associated with America's democratic backsliding.

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