

## [Daniel Kapust, \*Republicanism, Rhetoric, and Roman Political Thought\*.](#)

By: Jonathan P. Zarecki

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### **Abstract:**

The study of Roman political theory is undergoing a renaissance, and Daniel Kapust has added his own contribution to the discussion with this concise, accessible, and interesting volume. In this work, a revision and expansion of his dissertation, Kapust ‘explores rhetoric, liberty, and their relationship to social and political conflict in Roman thought of the first century BCE and the first century CE’ (6). He argues that the free exercise of rhetoric is inextricably bound together with the ideas of Republicanism and liberty. Rhetoric is necessary for political activity to occur, and represents the means by which a *res publica* is publicly defined and conceived (21). Kapust presents Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus as promoting, respectively, an antagonistic conception of rhetoric and community, a consensualist conception, and rhetoric as a means of navigating political unfreedom (22).

**Keywords:** book reviews | classical literature | republicanism | rhetoric | roman political thought

### **Article:**

The study of Roman political theory is undergoing a renaissance, and Daniel Kapust has added his own contribution to the discussion with this concise, accessible, and interesting volume. In this work, a revision and expansion of his dissertation, Kapust ‘explores rhetoric, liberty, and their relationship to social and political conflict in Roman thought of the first century BCE and the first century CE’ (6). He argues that the free exercise of rhetoric is inextricably bound together with the ideas of Republicanism and liberty. Rhetoric is necessary for political activity to occur, and represents the means by which a *res publica* is publicly defined and conceived (21). Kapust presents Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus as promoting, respectively, an antagonistic conception of rhetoric and community, a consensualist conception, and rhetoric as a means of navigating political unfreedom (22).

It should be stated at the outset that Kapust is a political scientist, not a classical philologist. Thus his interest in Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus derives primarily from their importance to later political theorists. He does not read the works under discussion as rhetorical works, nor does he view their authors as philosophers. He is not concerned with discovering a unique political philosophy for each of the authors under discussion, but rather the ways that rhetoric, liberty, and

conflict were conceived and expressed by them. Nor does he attempt to define the political nature of the Republic, though he does expressly state his opposition to Millar's concept of a democratic Roman state.<sup>1</sup> What Kapust does do – successfully, in my opinion – is to integrate modern political theory with a close reading of the ancient texts.

The book is divided into six chapters, inclusive of the introduction, with a short epilogue. Kapust's introduction is an impressive study in presenting modern political theory to a non-specialist audience. The author runs through the major schools of thought on Republicanism, touching on the theories of Skinner, Pettit, Hobbes, Habermas, among others, providing an excellent foundation for the discussion which follows. He demonstrates well the relevance of applying modern theories to the ancient sources, particularly the theories of Hobbes (who plays a large role in the second and third chapters).

The second and third chapters are devoted to Sallust. The second, "An Ambiguous Republican: Sallust on Fear, Conflict, and Community," highlights the necessity of antagonistic politics for the continued health of the Republic. Kapust reads Sallust through Hobbes, though Kapust's Sallust does not, like Hobbes, long for a state free from turmoil. For Sallust, conflict is both necessary and sufficient for the existence of the Republic. It was antagonistic politics which allowed Rome to become great, as men engaged in competition for personal glory, not world domination. While Cicero dreamt of *otium cum dignitate*, Sallust longed for *concordia cum certamine*. The lack of conflict, or rather, fear, is not a good thing, for when Rome lost her fear of external enemies, she turned against herself. Fear of external enemies is replaced by a fracturing of concord between the people and the upper-class. For Sallust, discord is part of the uncorrupted Roman past, though that type of struggle was 'a manifestation of the energies released with political liberty, a struggle for the rewards of virtue, not of power' (43).

The third chapter, "Channeling Conflict through Antagonistic Rhetoric in the War with Catiline", focuses on the speeches of Caesar and Cato. The most fruitful way to channel the antagonism described in Ch. 2 is through rhetoric. Rhetoric provides a means by which divergent elements in the state can be combined in a non-destructive fashion, and one of Sallust's goals is to demonstrate the importance of rhetoric even in a troubled Republic. Antagonistic rhetoric provides an outlet for the tensions inherent in republican government. Through rhetoric, the disparate elements of the Roman state can reach consensus. This consensus is itself fluid, being always an ad hoc response to a immediate conflict. Thus the focus on the speeches of Caesar and Cato, which are, 'a vivid representation of the problems inherent not just in the practice of rhetoric, but in a community like Rome, composed of different, conflicting, yet complementary individuals and groups' (77).

Chapter 4, “Exemplarity and Goodwill in Livy’s *From the Founding of Rome*,” is the only chapter devoted to Livy. The main argument here is that Livy stresses the importance of consensus and accommodation for the resolution of republican conflicts. Livy believes in a ‘cooperative and accommodative rhetoric’ which stands in contrast to Sallust’s ‘antagonistic conception of rhetoric and politics’ (84); Livy thus aligns himself more closely with Cicero and his conception of the *concordia ordinum* than with Sallust. Kapust rightly highlights the exemplary nature of Livy’s history, in which Livy describes the ‘moral community’ of the Republic as having been both enabled and strengthened by the examples of its leaders, who worked both to balance the disparate parts of society and to unite them for the common weal. The primary method available for Rome’s leaders was rhetoric. Rhetoric can build goodwill – if not actual trust – between the elites and the masses. Goodwill, as Kapust describes it, is rooted in the attraction to and admiration of virtue, and bears a strong relationship to the use of ethos and pathos by an orator on his audience. The use of rhetoric, and what Kapust calls ‘the rhetoricization of leadership’, promotes goodwill and consensus, both of which are necessary requirements for the continuation of republican communities.

The fifth and sixth chapters focus the works of Tacitus. In the fifth chapter, “Tacitus on Great Men, Bad Rulers, and Prudence”, Kapust argues that the *Dialogus de Oratoribus* and the *Agricola* present to their readers ‘a model of prudence that allows individuals to navigate the active life’ in imperial politics (26). Unfortunately, the section devoted to the *Agricola*, all three pages of it, seems like an afterthought, perhaps a remnant of a much longer discussion in the original dissertation. The chapter is thereby unbalanced, with a discussion of the *Dialogus* taking up the lion’s share of Kapust’s comments. The two main characters, *Agricola* and *Maternus*, are exemplars for how to treat the thorny problem of speaking with integrity while living under an autocrat – *Agricola* is to be emulated, *Maternus* to be denigrated. *Agricola*, milquetoast politician though he may have been, survived, and provides a useful paradigm for survival. *Maternus*, on the other hand, is not a good example of prudence, as he advocates only the extremes of blanket submission to the emperor or the complete withdrawal from public life. For the politically active Tacitus, the one avenue left open for the practice of rhetoric without the risk of obsequious encomium was history, with its potential to be both didactic and epideictic at the same time.

The final chapter, “Tacitus’ Moral Histories”, presents Tacitus as a writer not only of moral history but also of ‘rhetorical history.’ The *Annales* and *Histories* give exempla of different types of ruler. By using these types as paradigms, one can estimate how ‘free’ the exercise of rhetoric will be during the reign of any future emperor. The end result, as it was with the works in the previous chapter, will be the successful deployment of prudence, which will in turn lead to

success in public life. Tacitus engages in ‘practical theorizing suited to the cultivation of prudence,’ and, ultimately, an ‘implicit criticism’ of the principate (145).

The bibliography is generally up-to-date, though it is limited almost exclusively to English-language scholarship with a few striking omissions.<sup>2</sup> There are a fair number of typographical errors and strange turns of phrase, though they do not detract from the understanding of the author’s argument. Only two caveats deserve mention. First, the errors in citation style and historical background are often glaring, and for some reason seem to be centered almost exclusively on Cicero. Kapust uses only Loeb’s for his Latin texts and citations, a decision which leads to some unconventional citations. References to the *Pro Marcello* are given for example, as ‘3.8’ (p. 155, n. 63) instead of referencing the section number only. There are repeated references to *Rep.* 2.69a on pp. 82 and 101, though the Loeb of *Rep.* does not list a section 2.69a. Furthermore, n. 112 on pg. 101 reads, in its entirety, “Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, 5.6. Cf. Cicero, *De Republica*, 5.6.”; the two works are, of course, the same. He is misleading when he states that Cicero only speaks of ‘particular kings’ in *Rep.* 2; Cicero in fact speaks of six of the seven kings as having made positive contributions to the state, and even Tarquinius Superbus is praised for his occasional good deeds (*Rep.* 2.44). Cicero’s description of regal imperium in *Leg.* 3.8 is misunderstood on p. 96. There is confusion between Tarquinius Superbus, his son Sextus Taquinius, and the decemvir Appius Claudius. Tarquinius is named as the decemvir who attempted to abduct Verginia; in addition, the author states that it was Tarquinius Superbus himself, not his son, who raped Lucretia (103). A further confusion in chronology appears on p. 154. *Att.* 8.16.2 is said to describe ‘the conflict between Antonius [sic] and Caesar,’ but this letter, from early March 49, most assuredly refers to Pompey, not Antonius.

Second, whither Cicero? The title of Kapust’s book gives no hint at the central importance of Cicero’s political thought for the author’s argument. This is a book as much about Cicero and the reception of his political and rhetorical theory as it is about the three titular authors. Cicero is the sine qua non of the argument, ‘a point of comparison to the historians,’ and Cicero’s writings – his philosophical ones in particular – ‘serve as crucial sources of ideas and themes’ (6). Cicero is, as Kapust himself states, ‘the entry point’ (3), but in fact he is also the journey and the exit: ‘it is fitting that we return to Cicero by way of conclusion’ (175). Though Kapust does an admirable job of inserting Cicero into each phase of the argument, a stand-alone chapter on Cicero would have been a more than welcome addition.

Despite the errors, and this reviewer’s wish for a more unified exposition of Cicero’s thought, there is much of value in Kapust’s book. The lack of jargon, the extremely useful bibliography, the breadth of the sources used, and the skillful way in which the author integrates modern

theories with ancient, makes for a refreshing look at three well-known authors. While trained Classicists may find some of Kapust's talking points to be well-worn, this book is a welcome addition to the scholarship on republican political theory.

Notes:

1. Fergus Millar, *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.
2. The only non-English items are J. Hellegouarc'h's *Les Vocabulaire Latin des Relations et des Partis Politiques*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1972, and A. Leemnan, H. Pinkster, and J. Wisse, *M. Tullius Cicero, De Oratore Libri III: Kommentar Vol. 4*, Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1981. Absent are, surprisingly, F. Millar, *The Roman Republic in Political Thought*, Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002, and N. Wood, *Cicero's Social and Political Thought*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.