

## Exploring Roman Materialism: Issues & Methods

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- A. Why Materialism? Sallust, Tacitus, Ovid
- B. Nature and Technology: Horkheimer & Adorno; Vitruvius
- C. Gadamer; Nero
- D. Unrealized capital in Plautus, *Aulularia*
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- A. Why Materialism?

Haec sibi proposuit thalamos temerare pudicos;  
nec tamen eloquio lingua nocente caret.  
fors me sermoni testem dedit; illa monebat  
talia—me duplices occuluere fores.  
scis here te, mea lux, iuveni placuisse beato?  
haesit et in vultu constitit usque tuo.  
et cur non placeas? nulli tua forma secunda est;  
me miseram, dignus corpore cultus abest!  
tam felix esses quam formosissima, vellem—  
non ego, te facta divite, pauper ero.  
stella tibi oppositi nocuit contraria Martis.  
Mars abiit; signo nunc Venus apta suo.  
prosit ut adveniens, en adspice! dives amator  
te cupiit; curae, quid tibi desit, habet.  
est etiam facies, qua se tibi conparet, illi;  
si te non emptam vellet, emendus erat.”  
Erubuit. “deceat alba quidem pudor ora, sed iste,  
si simules, prodest; verus obesse solet.  
cum bene deiectis gremium spectabis ocellis,  
quantum quisque ferat, respiciendus erit.  
forsitan inmundae Tatio regnante Sabinae  
noluerint habiles pluribus esse viris;  
nunc Mars externis animos exercet in armis,  
at Venus Aeneae regnat in urbe sui.  
ludunt formosae; casta est, quam nemo rogavit—  
aut, si rusticitas non vetat, ipsa rogat.

C

A

B

Ovid, *Amores* 1.8.19-44

B. Horkeimer & Adorno, Vitruvius

1. *Dialektic der Aufklärung*

- i. Die Könige verfügen über die Technik nicht unmittelbarer als die Kaufleute: sie ist so demokratisch wie das Wirtschaftssystem, mit dem sie sich entfaltet. Technik ist das Wesen dieses Wissens. Es zielt nicht auf Begriffe und Bilder, nicht auf das Glück der Einsicht, sondern auf Methode, Ausnutzung der Arbeit anderer, Kapital.

Kings control technology no more directly than trades-people: technology is as democratic as the economic system within which it develops. Technology is the essence of this knowledge, directed not at concepts and images, not at the the gain of insight, but at method, exploitation of the labour of others, and at Capital.

- ii. Was die Menschen von der Natur lernen wollen, ist, sie anzuwenden, um sie und die Menschen vollends zu beherrschen

What humans want to learn from nature is how to make us f it, in order totally to master both it and humanity.

- iii. Von nun an (i.e. in the Enlightenment) soll die Materie endlich ohne Illusion waltender oder innewohnender Kräfte, verborgener Eigenschaften beherrscht werden.

From now on the material world will be finally mastered, without the illusion of any controlling or immanent powers or concealed properties.

- iv. Der Mythos geht in die Aufklärung über und die Natur in bloße Objektivität. Die Menschen bezahlen die Vermehrung ihrer Macht mit der Entfremdung von dem, worüber sie die Macht ausüben. Die Aufklärung verhält sich zu den Dingen wie der Diktator zu den Menschen. Er kennt sie, insofern er sie manipulieren kann.

Myth transforms into Enlightenment and Nature into crude objectivity. Humans pay for the increase in their power with the alienation from that over which they exercise power. Enlightenment treats things like a dictator treats people. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them.

‘Der Begriff der Aufklärung’ in *Dialektic der Aufklärung*, - apologies for the absence of pagination - my translations

## 2. Vitruvius

i.

Omnis autem est machinatio rerum natura pro-creata ac praeceptrice et magistra mundi versatione instituta. Namque ni advertamus primum et aspiciamus continentem solis, lunae, quinque etiam stellarum, natura machinata versarentur, non habuissemus interdum lucem nec fructum maturitatis. Cum ergo maiores haec ita esse animadvertissent, e rerum natura sumpserunt exempla et ea imitantes inducti rebus divinis commodas vitae perfecerunt explicationes. Itaque comparaverunt, ut essent expeditiora, alia machinis et earum versationibus, nonnulla organis, et ita quae animadverterunt ad usum utilia esse studiis, artibus, institutis, gradatim augenda doctrinis curaverunt.

Vitruvius 10.1.4

ii.

Attendamus enim primum inventum de necessitate, ut vestitus, quemadmodum telarum organicis administrationibus conexus staminis ad subtemen non modo corpora tegendo tueatur, sed etiam ornatus adiciat honestatem. Cibi vero non habuissemus abundantiam, nisi iuga et aratra bubus iumentisque omnibus essent inventa. Sacularumque et prelorum et vectium si non fuisset torcularis praeparatio, neque olei nitorem neque vitium fructum habere potuissemus ad iucunditatem, portationesque eorum non essent, nisi plostrorum seu serracorum per terram, navicularum per aquam inventae essent machinationes.

Vitruvius 10.1.5

iii.

Id volvitur continentur circum terram atque mare per axis cardines extremos. Namque in his locis naturalis potestas ita architectata est conlocavitque cardinas tamquam centra, unum a terra immane in summo mundo ac post ipsas stellas septentrionum, alterum trans contra sub terra in meridianis partibus....

Vitruvius 9.1.2

iv.

Namque non potest aedis ulla sine symmetrai atque proportione rationem habere compositionis, nisi ut ad hominis bene figurati membrorum habuerit exactam rationem. Corpus enim hominis ita natura composuit, uti os capitis a mento ad frontem summam et radices immas capilli esset decimae partis... etc

Vitruvius 3.1.1.

## C. Nero

i. Divitiarum et pecuniae fructum non alium putabat quam profusionem, sordidos ac deparcos esse quibus impensarum ratio constaret, praelautos vereque magnificos, qui abuterentur ac perderent. Laudabat mirabaturque avunculum Gaium nullo magis nomine, quam quod ingentis a Tiberio relictas opes in brevi spatio prodegisset. Quare nec largiendi nec absumendi modum tenuit.

Suetonius, *Nero* 30.1-2

ii. Multa sub eo et animadversa severe et coercita nec minus instituta: adhibitus sumptibus modus; publicae cenae ad sportulas redactae; interdictum ne quid in popinis cocti praeter legumina aut holera veniret, cum antea nullum non obsonii genus proponeretur; afflictis supplicii Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae; vetiti quadrigariorum lusus, quibus inveterata licentia passim vagantibus fallere ac furari per iocum ius erat; pantomimorum factiones cum ipsis simul relegatae.

Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2

D Plautus, *Aulularia* (text, De Melo, Loeb)

... salua res est. saluom est si quid non perit

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aurum huic olet

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nunc quoquo uenias plus plaustrorum in aedibus  
uideas qum ruri, quando ad uillam ueneris.  
sed hoc etaim pulchrum est praequam ubi sumptus petunt.  
stat fullo, phyrigio, aurufex, lanarius;  
caupones patagiarii, indusiarii,  
flammarii, uiolarii, carinari,  
aut manuarii, aut †murbatharii†,  
propolae linteones, calceolarii;  
sedentarii sutores, diabathrarii,  
solearii astant, astant molocinari;  
petunt fullones, sarcinatores petunt;  
stropharii astant, astant simul zonarii. and so on...

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E. Roman Materialism Today

Yet the Trump phenomenon is not the story of just one party. It is about the country and so, inevitably, the world. In creating the American republic, the founding fathers were aware of the example of Rome. Alexander Hamilton argued in the Federalist Papers that the new republic would need an “energetic executive”. He noted that Rome itself, with its careful duplication of magistracies, depended in its hours of need on the grant of absolute, albeit temporary, power to one man, called a “dictator”.

The US would have no such office. Instead, it would have a unitary executive: the president as elected monarch. The president has limited, but great, authority. For Hamilton, the danger of overweening power would be contained by “first, a due dependence on the people, secondly, a due responsibility”.

During the first century BC, the wealth of empire destabilised the Roman republic. In the end, Augustus, heir of the popular party, terminated the republic and installed himself as emperor. He did so by preserving all the forms of the republic, while he dispensed with their meaning.

Wolf (2016), *Financial Times*, 1.03.2016

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