

CLIFFORD ANDO

Roman Social Imaginaries

*Language and Thought
in Contexts of Empire*



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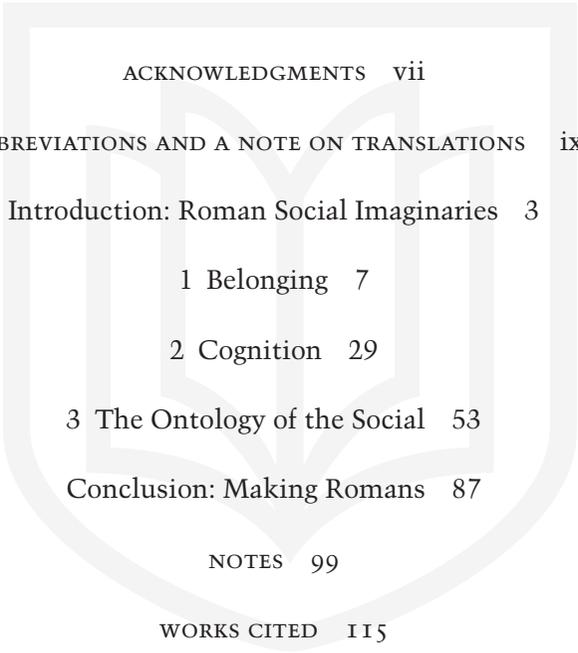
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INTRODUCTION

Roman Social Imaginaries

This book seeks to initiate two conversations about Roman antiquity, one of which might be described as substantive, the other as concerning method. The two are complexly intertwined. At a substantive level, the chapters focus on a set of topics – “Belonging,” “Cognition,” and “The Ontology of the Social” – as well as a series of subsidiary issues – political and ethnic identity, territoriality, geographic contiguity and conceptual affinity, consent and normativity, materiality and metaphysics – that stand in oblique relation to the explicit concerns of Roman political and legal thought, but which have been, and are today, central to social and political theory.

At the level of method, my concern lies not with the propositional content of some Roman social theory, but with the archetypal concepts and habits of mind that endowed that propositional content with structure and meaning, conditioned and shaped its articulation, and guided and constrained its development. Above all, I am interested in patterns of metaphor, metonymy, analogy, and ideation – those features of language that serve in particular traditions within cognitive linguistics to map fundamental structures of thought, specific to particularized linguistic and discursive systems.¹ Where Roman legal and political argument is concerned, it was these operations that simultaneously acknowledged and expanded the limits of their language and the conceptual and taxonomic apparatus to which that language gave voice and gives access. The focus of this book is therefore not simply on what Romans understood themselves to be saying and thinking,

but also on how they thought, and further, upon the constraints, both positive and negative, placed upon what they thought by how they thought.

Much might be embraced within such a program. One might proceed in a Lakoffian fashion and study the lexical apparatus employed in Latin to describe intellection – the use of verbs of sense-perception to describe understanding (“I see what you mean”), and the privilege thereby granted to sight, which finds echoes in the moral valuation accorded to light and dark, and so forth. From an almost infinite range of possible topics, I have selected material with a particular goal in mind, namely, to bring to light and to explore structures of thought that shaped and sustained the Roman empire as a political form: presuppositions in regard to political belonging – and identity more broadly – that undergirded a liberal, contractarian position in regard to immigration and manumission; patterns in ideation and argument that allowed a Latinate legal system to regulate the affairs of non-Latinate populations, dwelling in material and ecological conditions unimagined and perhaps unimaginable in the context of the law’s original production; habits of abstraction that permitted the reduplication of institutional structures across a heterogeneous landscape; and understandings of the social that sustained policies of pluralism in the domains of religion and law.

The title of this book pays homage to Charles Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries*, with which it shares certain historical and interpretive ambitions but from which it differs crucially in method (as well as historical period). Some explanation of how this is so might serve to clarify what is at stake in this project. Taylor describes the object of his inquiry as “the background understanding behind practice” (25) or, alternatively, the “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (23).² But where Taylor extracts propositional claims from philosophical and political literatures, sufficiently abstracted from their historical and linguistic context so as to enable an aggregated portrait of some modern (Western) thought-world, I study patterns of figuration, comparison, and ideation within a specific linguistic system. My notion of background or common understanding thus embraces those aspects of

language that might truly be said to lie in the background, susceptible of description as non-propositional operations through which other, properly propositional material is given voice.³

But while metonymic reach and the scope of analogical elaboration are not often at the forefront of conscious awareness and can legitimately be described as both background and shared, I focus on them precisely because they are themselves the product of historical developments (language coming to say that which we call upon it to do) and because their conventional and contingent limitations in turn shape what a language can say and a speaker can think at any given moment. What is more, the great historical sweep of the Latin language allows one to witness the birth, development, and naturalization (or death, if you will) of specific figures, or changes in the metonymic reach of certain clusters, and invites thereby historical reflection on the imbrication of linguistic-cognitive shift and contextual change. To return to the point above, it is therefore the necessary and essential role of figurative language in the construction of propositional content that makes the substantive and methodological aspects of this project truly intertwined.

This book should also be read as inspired by, and responding to, two further works: Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* and John Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment*.⁴ As regards Foucault, Roman studies has produced only tentative gestures towards an inquiry into the distinctive flavour of a Roman ordering of the world, one which respects the enormous prestige they accorded, and influence they granted, to the discipline and language of the law.⁵ This study suggests one route such an inquiry might take. Where Pocock is concerned, chapter 3 of this work can be read as taking up his arguments about the role of historicism and historical self-awareness, of temporality and finitude, in the Atlantic republican tradition. This work locates the roots of these phenomena in the remarkable historicism of Roman social thought. The work required to explain the passage of these distinctive ways of being and reflecting from the one context to the other, and the teasing out of the implications of this argument for Pocock's achievement, must however be postponed to another day.

Classical studies more generally, and even classical history narrowly construed, are disciplines with deep roots in philology. This project therefore exists in a relation of affinity to a number of lexical studies: Jean Béranger's remarkable inquiries into the languages of politics in the imperial period, for example, or John Richardson's essay on the emergence of a concept of empire, or Myles Lavan's recent book on metaphorical accounts of social relations between Romans and others in the early empire, to name only a few of which I am particularly fond.⁶ To my mind, these works recuperate and study a vocabulary, rather than a grammar, of Roman thought.⁷ This project, by contrast, concerns itself with the problem of cognition in the context of empire, in which a singular linguistic and discursive system is brought through political action into contact with, and then made to regulate, human societies in every way removed from the conditions in which that system had come into being. Political and practical realities can always race beyond a given culture's ontological commitments and the metaphorical apparatus available to render them meaningful, and so they did in the case of Rome. The problem of materiality as a component of political belonging – of belonging to the soil on which one was born and dwells – is a case in point. At the same time, the demands of empire nurtured and encouraged the creative potential of humans as linguistic and self-interpretive beings, and so new languages were born, by which the emergent realities of the high Roman empire might be described using language of absolute familiarity as nonetheless extraordinarily different.

This book is an effort to explain how that story might be told, by modelling three studies on Latin as a language of law and empire.