Recensioni

Aaron French, *Max Weber, Rudolf Steiner, and Modern Western Esotericism: A Transcultural Approach*, Routledge, London 2025.

Beneath the appearance of a historical-philosophical comparison, Aaron French's work conceals a more radical ambition: to deconstruct the myth of Western modernity by interrogating its epistemological foundations. Rather than offering a mere genealogy of "alternative" thought, French develops an immanent critique of modernity's core self-narratives. In this sense, the book aligns itself with a growing body of recent scholarship—from Jason A. Josephson-Storm's *The Myth of Disenchantment* to Federico Campagna's *Technic and Magic*—which seeks to reveal how Western epistemic identity is far less rational, coherent, or secular than it has long claimed to be.

At the heart of the book is the unlikely juxtaposition of Max Weber and Rudolf Steiner: the prophet of disenchantment and the visionary of esotericism. Yet French is not primarily interested in tracing analogies or differences. His true target is the dismantling of the conceptual categories that render such a comparison unusual in the first place. The book thus challenges the binary logic that has underpinned the symbolic structure of modernity—science/religion, rational/irrational, West/East, knowledge/belief.

The strength of the volume lies in its refusal to treat esotericism as a folkloric residue or epistemic aberration. Rather, French considers it a constitutive—albeit repressed—element of modern subjectivity. He shows how both Steiner and Weber, despite their divergent frameworks, are animated by a shared concern: the crisis of meaning in an increasingly technologised world. Each, in his own way, seeks to recover the human dimension, striving for a reconciliation between reason and spirituality, method and myth. It is no coincidence that both figures engage with Eastern religions, alternative pedagogies, and expanded conceptions of knowledge that admit non-material dimensions.

Steiner's *science of the spirit* and Weber's sociology of religion emerge, paradoxically, as contiguous in their diagnosis of the present: a world emptied of meaning, dominated by technical systems at the expense of symbolic and experiential understanding. While Weber describes disenchantment as an inescapable condition of modernity, Steiner offers a potential transfiguration of that condition through a rationalised

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spirituality. Their shared horizon is not anti-modern nostalgia, but the pursuit of an alternative modernity – less fragmented, more integrative.

French's intervention also contributes to the methodological debate within esotericism studies, challenging the assumption that certain forms of knowledge are inherently pre-rational or deviant. Following scholars such as Wouter Hanegraaff and Kocku von Stuckrad, he demonstrates how the boundaries between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" knowledge are historically and politically constructed, serving to preserve the hegemony of Eurocentric rationality. From this emerges a potent critique of science as an absolute epistemic authority, and a call to reimagine reason itself along situated and post-secular lines.

It should be noted, however, that while French critiques the Eurocentric paradigm, his principal theoretical sources remain firmly rooted in the Western canon (Deleuze, Foucault, Campagna, Hanegraaff). His appeal to global epistemic plurality, though present in intention, remains only partially realised.

French's project is highly distinctive, yet its political relevance is far from marginal. In an age marked by ecological crises, epistemic fragmentation, and the erosion of public discourse, reclaiming space for alternative forms of knowledge is hardly a micrological concern. To entertain the possibility that esotericism is not a historical anomaly, but a necessary modality for inhabiting the present, is to destabilise the universalist pretensions of modern rationality and to open a path toward a plural ontological landscape of voices, memories, and intuitions.

From a political-philosophical perspective, the book raises questions that cannot easily be dismissed. First: what does "reason" mean in a world shaped by ecological, technological, and spiritual crises? The linear, instrumental, and purposive model of reason that undergirded Western modernity now appears inadequate to confront the very crises it helped to engender. French calls for a revaluation of the "irrational" – magic, spirituality, esotericism – not to repudiate modernity, but to lay bare its self-imposed limits. Ecological crisis confronts a reason that has severed the subject from nature; technological crisis exposes the perverse autonomy of calculative rationality, capable of producing ever more coherent systems that are simultaneously dehumanising; spiritual crisis reveals the void left by a rationality that has expunged meaning, mystery, and vulnerability.

What, then, do we mean by reason today? Can we still speak of reason in the singular, or must we begin to think in terms of *reasons* – multiple, situated, perhaps even in tension? And if they are to be transformative, must they not be allied with practices of disidentification, as Deleuze suggests, that break with the epistemic identity of modern subjectivity?

A second, equally pressing question follows: which forms of knowledge and practice can still offer ethical orientation without lapsing

into nostalgia or dogma? French does not provide prescriptive answers. Instead, his book gestures toward "minor," "unofficial," or "heretical" knowledges – esotericism, mysticism, Eastern philosophies – not in opposition to reason, but as potential contaminations of its grammar. From this perspective, Steiner appears not as a reactionary antimodernist but as a forerunner of an embodied epistemology – attuned to the symbolic, the relational, and the experiential.

Yet the risk of slipping into new forms of dogmatism cannot be ignored. How might one avoid the emergence of vertical spiritual authorities or the romanticisation of world-escaping gestures? Here lies the book's most subtle contribution: its ethical orientation does not emerge from doctrine, but from the capacity to dwell within complexity, to listen across ontological difference. It is an ethics of passage, of liminality. At the same time, the valorisation of esotericism as "other" knowledge walks a fine line: in legitimising marginalised forms of knowing, it sometimes underplays the historical ambiguities and dangers associated with certain esoteric milieus – spiritual authoritarianism, reactionary irrationalism, strategic orientalisms. French tends to frame esotericism primarily as a liberatory or resistant force, devoting less attention to its problematic dimensions. Are we culturally prepared to accept these knowledges as legitimate? And what is the role of political thought in this epistemic reconfiguration?

These two guiding questions – regarding the meaning of reason and the possibility of a non-dogmatic ethics –demand a serious rethinking of contemporary political philosophy. While French's call for a post-dogmatic ethics is compelling, it remains abstract. If knowledge is pluralised and rationality de-centred, what criteria remain for distinguishing between transformative visions and regressive or manipulative tendencies? French deliberately avoids prescriptivism, yet this refusal leaves a conceptual grey zone that weakens the normative traction of his critique. The issue is not one of "inclusion" of other knowledges, but of transforming the very notion of knowledge itself—and with it, the ideas of subject, world, and political action.

Fabrizio Sciacca

Eric Heinze, *Coming Clean: The Rise of Critical Theory and the Future of the Left*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA 2025

In *Coming Clean*, Eric Heinze advances a radical and philosophically rigorous reflection on the tensions underpinning contemporary leftist discourse, scrutinising practices of memory, ideological selectivity, and the normative assumptions often embedded in social critique.

At the core of the book lies a key conceptual distinction between

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the first and second phases of memory politics. The first consists in the denunciation of historical injustices—colonialism, slavery, patriarchy, institutional racism. The second, by contrast, entails the public and systematic integration of such memories into the cultural architecture of liberal-democratic societies, through education, legislation, civic rituals, and symbolic policies.

Heinze observes that this second phase has unfolded almost exclusively in relation to the historical responsibility of the West. With regard to oppressive regimes that enjoyed considerable legitimacy, and often enthusiastic encouragement, from the left, Western progressives do generally take this first step of acknowledgment. However, they uniformly decline to engage in that second step of public education regarding the left's own histories of support for regimes ranging from Stalinist Russia to Maoist China, from Pol Pot's Cambodia to North Korea. This asymmetry, Heinze argues, is not a contingent anomaly but points to an epistemic inconsistency that risks compromising the moral credibility of critical theory as such. Western societies are exhorted to engage in forms of visibly collective self-scrutiny regarding western histories, yet which the left never exhibits regarding the left's own histories.

According to Heinze, a form of critique that demands a rigorous ethics of memory when addressing others, yet fails to apply comparable scrutiny to its own intellectual heritage, risks *a performative collapse*, unable to justify its own presuppositions without invoking a form of moral exceptionalism. The point here is that leftists never claim that they reject their own autocritique, and indeed most of them truly believe that they do engage in self-scrutiny. It is precisely this sincere conviction that the book seeks to interrogate and ultimately refute.

Methodologically, Heinze distances himself both from the genealogical approach inspired by Foucault—viewed as self-referential and frequently resistant to normativity—and from the hyper-performative language of call-out culture, which tends to substitute argument with the moral exhibition of positionality. His proposal, less systematic and more allusive, draws on the Habermasian model of public reason, albeit reconfigured through a critical realism capable of sustaining the tragic nature of political action. Heinze does not deny the agonistic structure of pluralistic societies, but rejects the fetishisation of conflict as the sole engine of emancipatory politics.

A particularly illustrative chapter concerns the hypothetical case of Braynington University, where a group of students and academics attempt to found an organisation to commemorate the institution's racist and sexist past. The initiative is rejected by the university authorities on the grounds that such events *belong to the past*. This juridical-moral parable exemplifies the paradox of an institution that professes inclusion and progressivism while simultaneously recoiling from authentic engagement with its own genealogy. The implicit analogy is with the

contemporary left as a whole: eager to demand historical justice in other contexts, yet hesitant to engage openly with its own ideological complicity in failed or destructive political projects, whilst expecting that others must openly engage with histories of western injustice.

What distinguishes *Coming Clean* from more polemical works is its literary and rhetorical refinement. Heinze's political argument is embedded within a dense symbolic structure, replete with erudite references. One of the most striking moments occurs with a quotation from Shakespeare's *King John*: "Thy tongue against thy tongue." The character's inner conflict becomes a metaphor for the modern left: a political movement that, while invoking truth, ultimately "swears against itself". Self-contradiction is presented as the structural drama of political modernity. This tragic framing recurs throughout the text, frequently evoked in the figure of the "tragedy of memory": a will to remember that, when incomplete, can become a form of masked forgetting. In this sense, Heinze aligns himself with the literary tradition of the novel of guilt and conscience, from Dostoevsky to Primo Levi, in which memory is invariably a site of internal conflict.

The allegorical dimension is likewise salient: the left becomes a divided character, akin to those of Greek tragedy or Elizabethan theatre, aware of its error yet unable to act with consistency. Stylistically, the book is composed as a form of critical drama: each chapter functions as a scene, each concept a line that gestures toward a past not yet settled.

In this, Heinze positions himself within a jurisprudential and philosophical tradition traceable to Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott: one in which moderation signals historical depth, and liberty arises from a tragic awareness of human fallibility. His call for what he terms as a kind of "new wokeness"—embodies a posture of self-critique, a tolerance for ambivalence, and a commitment to honest confrontation with historical truth. In the current intellectual landscape, this constitutes one of the clearest articulations of a renewed liberal-critical ethos for the twenty-first century.

The text expresses no hostility towards egalitarian aspirations or struggles for recognition; rather, it contests the illusion that moral justice can be achieved through ideological immunity. In a tone that is never rhetorical, yet consistently philosophical in rigour, Heinze asserts that truth is not the exclusive property of any identity, and that justice—if it is to be just—must contend with the entirety of the real, including the uncomfortable elements of its own past. *Coming Clean* is a work of striking speculative insight, offering a refined and penetrating meditation on the fate of critical theory. In an age defined by polarisation and the narcissism of difference, Heinze makes a compelling case for the return of critique as an art of measure, responsibility, and truth.

Fabrizio Sciacca

Frederik Juliaan Vervaet, David Rafferty, Christopher J. Dart (Eds.), *How Republics Die: Creeping Authoritarianism in Ancient Rome and Beyond*, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2025.

Although framed as a study of antiquity, *How Republics Die* ultimately addresses the present—and perhaps even the near future. In the understated manner of the best historical writing, this volume investigates the collapse of the Roman Republic while casting a critical eye on contemporary democratic fragilities and the conditions—both structural and psychological—that give rise to authoritarian tendencies.

This is an ambitious and interdisciplinary endeavour, in which classical history, political philosophy, social science, and current affairs are brought into sustained conversation. The demise of the Roman Republic is presented not as an exception to the historical rule, but rather as a paradigmatic case—a site in which the general dynamics of republican decline can be analysed with precision.

The central question that runs through the volume is a sobering one: why do republics, even those that appear robust, eventually succumb? And what warning signs precede their collapse? Rome is here employed as a distorting mirror, compelling the reader to recognise familiar features within the anatomy of its ancient crisis.

One of the collection's most forceful arguments is that republics rarely die by sudden violence. Rather, they deteriorate gradually, marked by institutional erosion, legal decay, the blurring of partisan boundaries, and—most perilously—a growing indifference on the part of the citizenry. Coups are rarely necessary when democratic apathy clears the way for those who promise order, clarity, and decisiveness.

From Sulla to Caesar to Octavian, the volume traces the ascent of figures who retained republican appearances while hollowing out its substantive content. A recurring theme is that of competitive authoritarianism, in which democratic forms are preserved but increasingly subordinated to private interests—a pattern of backsliding that is all too recognisable today. Several chapters explicitly draw parallels between Roman and modern contexts. The discussion of Trumpism and the rhetoric of republican restoration—invoking Augustus as a point of comparison—goes beyond superficial analogy. So too do the reflections on social media as contemporary equivalents of the Roman forum, or the provocatively drawn lines connecting figures such as Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg to Sulla or Augustus.

What emerges is a cyclical logic of power: the rhetoric of republican salvation often serves as a pretext for its dismantling. Rome did not fall through revolution, but through a sequence of "necessary" laws—ever more concentrated, ever less subject to deliberative consensus.

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The volume also revisits the theme of failed reform. The Roman elite's persistent refusal to integrate newly enfranchised Italic populations is presented as a crucial accelerant of decline. The lesson is unambiguous: institutions that wall themselves off in defence of privilege, while ignoring social transformation, effectively script their own demise.

This is also, in a deeper sense, a philosophical work. It reflects on the very idea of the res publica, not simply as a constitutional form but as a *Lebensform*—a way of life founded on civic virtue, loyalty, restraint, and social responsibility. These are rare qualities in any age, and perhaps especially elusive in our own.

Yet for all its strengths, the volume is not without tensions that merit critical attention. The most significant of these stems from the very ambition that makes the project so compelling: the comparative framework. At times, the analogies drawn—between Caesar and Trump, Sulla and Musk, Augustus and Zuckerberg—risk becoming strained. While they serve to make the ancient world legible in modern terms, they can also slip into moralism or determinism, sacrificing historical nuance.

A related concern is the tendency, in certain essays, to assert that history "repeats itself," without adequate regard for the profound differences between contexts. The Rome of the first century BCE and twenty-first-century America are vastly distant in political structure, social composition, and material conditions. Collapsing that distance can lead to oversimplification and ideological projection.

Moreover, the repeated invocation of res publica as an ethically coherent and democratically virtuous model occasionally glosses over the historical reality of Roman republicanism, which was, in essence, an exclusionary, oligarchic, and frequently violent regime. There is at times a tendency to project a modern liberal-democratic ideal onto a past that did not, in truth, share such commitments. The implied equivalence between "republic" and "liberal democracy" is historically dubious.

With the exception of a chapter by James Tan, which offers valuable insights into the economic structures of the late Republic, the volume tends to focus on political, legal, and rhetorical dimensions. Questions of economic inequality, land concentration, and colonial exploitation—factors that played no small part in the Republic's collapse—are relatively underexplored. More broadly, the absence of a sustained reflection on the relationship between Roman capitalism and authoritarian transformation limits the volume's interdisciplinary reach.

Geographically and conceptually, the collection remains anchored in a Euro-Atlantic framework. Its implicit conception of the republic—as a fragile but essential form of collective political life—is

rooted in Western experience. There is little engagement with traditions in which political participation and sovereignty have taken forms other than the republican. This narrows the comparative field and somewhat weakens the global resonance of its claims.

Finally, while the editors emphasise the inclusion of diverse perspectives, the interpretive line that emerges is largely uniform: authoritarianism is a mounting threat, the republic is worth preserving, and contemporary parallels are cause for alarm. This is a defensible stance – but it ought to be acknowledged as such, rather than presented as the neutral result of detached academic inquiry.

The political vision underpinning the volume is clear and forceful, but it sometimes risks being framed as self-evident fact. This may leave limited space for more distanced or dissenting approaches – be they Marxist, systemic, or even conservative.

In sum, *How Republics Die* is a timely and thought-provoking work. Its greatest strength lies in offering a historically informed lens through which to understand the fractures of the present. Yet the very seriousness of its engagement with both history and political theory would have benefited from a more explicit awareness of its normative commitments – and from a greater openness to forms of pluralism that call into question the very ideal of the republic as the privileged model of political life. Like any serious book, it invites not only reflection but disagreement. And that, in the end, may be the highest tribute one can offer to a republic – ancient or modern.

Fabrizio Sciacca