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Harold James: The Roman Predicament

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Introduction

MODERN America is strangely fascinated with imperial Rome. Our Capitol, and our best train stations, look Roman. Roman and classical images surface in popular culture at regular but not chance intervals: the big films of the 1950s and 1960s, from *Ben Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), *Cleopatra* (1964), and *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) were also films of the Cold War, in which the imperial analogy looked very attractive. The classical blockbuster then stopped quite suddenly, however, with Vietnam-era doubts. The idea revived with *Gladiators* (2000), or *Troy* (2004) and *Alexander* (2004). Classical empires literally speak to us—but they require some interpretation.

This book is about what I term the “Roman dilemma”: the way in which peaceful commerce is frequently seen as a way of building a stable, prosperous, and integrated international society. At the same time, the peaceful liberal economic order leads to domestic clashes and also to international rivalry and even wars. The conflicts disturb and eventually destroy the commercial system and the bases of prosperity and integration. These interactions seem to be a vicious spiral, or a trap from which it seems almost impossible to escape. The liberal commercial world order subverts and destroys itself.

The central problem is that we need rules for the functioning of complex societies, whether on a national (state) level or in international relations. We do not, however, always comply voluntarily with rules, and rules require some enforcement. In addition, rules need to be formulated. The enforcement and the promulgation of rules are both consequences of power, and power is concentrated and unequally distributed. Even when we think of voluntarily negotiated rules, there is the memory of some act of power, the long shadow of a hegemonic strength—the shadow of Rome—falling on the negotiators. The propensity for subversion and destruction of a rule-based order comes about whenever there is a perception that rules are arbitrary and unjust, and that they reflect

INTRODUCTION

the imposition of particular interests in a high-handed imperial display of power.

Power protects commerce and peace, but power is clearly not necessarily a good in itself. It offers a basis on which there occurs a constant accumulation of greater power, as power is used to affect the outcome of social processes. One way of putting this is the frequently made observation that the exercise of power has an addictive quality. The adage that power tends to corrupt itself affects the way in which the holders of power behave. Even if the wielder of power resists the addiction, other people suspect the addiction.

Rules guide conduct at both national and international levels, and a central theme of the book is the interdependence of the rule systems on both levels. The book's goal is to bring together debates that are normally conducted separately, the separation of which has frustrated many analysts. Helen Milner recently complained that "one could caricature International Relations by saying that those who study security policy emphasize state actors, and those who study political economy focus more on societal actors."¹ Such a scholarly division of labor may make sense in terms of academic tradition, but scholars working according to this division are missing the complexities of a world in which minds shift continually from one area of concern to another, and in which policies are made in the light of such shifts.

The following essay examines the mental maps that shape our response to the confusion about the relationship of power to the rules we see around us. The fragility of order is a theme that has exercised much of the recent discussion in International Relations. Liberal internationalists are concerned with the difficulties of making and maintaining an open international order, while realists see the story in terms of tragic clashes.² Both approaches could benefit from a historical understanding of the way in which visions of order come about.

The imperial analogy has for long been one of the most attractive ways of understanding and criticizing political and economic power when such power appears threatening or arbitrary. The search for a predecessor or a model goes back even further than Rome. Ancient Romans were gripped by the image of Alexander the Great, and some of the most charismatic rulers actively sought an *imitatio Alexandriae*. Yet often the model is a negative rather than a positive one. In the eighteenth century,

for example, when the United States was founded in a revolt against imperial rule, the Roman analogy dominated discussion. The historical image offered a parallel to a quest for certainty and a demand for rules as a condition of justice.

The book begins with an examination of two very famous books on the subject, both by chance published in the same year, 1776—a year that produced not only the U.S. Declaration of Independence but also the first extensive elaborations of the debate about commerce and domination, drawing explicit lessons from the Roman experience: *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Adam Smith and Edward Gibbon wrote studies that became instantly celebrated, and whose basic ideas are still a familiar tool of debates in the twenty-first century. Most educated people today recognize a very simple set of ideas associated with Smith and Gibbon, even if they have never read these multivolume products of high eighteenth-century scholarship in their entirety (in the same way as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, or Keynes seem familiar to all of us). In this caricatured interpretation, Smith defended (or even invented) the free market; and Gibbon blamed monks for the fall of Rome. One of the goals of this book is to set out the surprising (and in some aspects quite unfamiliar) aspects of the complementary analyses presented in the *Wealth of Nations* and in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Smith and Gibbon were both concerned with the internal logic that eroded great accumulations of power. The authors of 1776 offered a package that is more alluring, and more relevant to our current debates, than the constructs of the later iconic thinkers.

Smith and Gibbon were gloomy about imperial systems and saw decay and doom. Some of the doom was straightforwardly economic, since fiscal overextension was an obvious problem in the maintenance of an imperial order. The eighteenth-century writers also invited their readers to think about the difficulties inherent in sustaining a common set of values over a vast territory and a diverse population.

This study then (chapter 2) goes on to analyze in turn the fluctuating and occasionally ideological ways in which integration and globalization are seen by participants, policymakers, and critics. Does a globalized world need a single authority first to formulate and then enforce rules? Where does the legitimacy of the rules come from? Does a system

INTRODUCTION

of rules presuppose the elaboration of a value system? How is that value system derived, or is it necessarily imposed by an act of power? Is there a necessary tension between rules and power? Globalization requires rules that are formulated and elaborated in what might be termed “power centers.” There is a continuous instability, however, that makes for problems. Inequality can lead to challenges against the rule-making process; so does a diversity of tastes and cultures. The imperial analogy is a good or at least an easily available way of describing the development of power on the basis of inequality and its use to suppress cultural diversity. The inherent fragility lies in that whenever we interpret the rules that should guide our conduct as being part of a conspicuous exercise in imperial power, we are more likely to revolt.

The next chapter (3) then examines three areas of debate about the international economy today in which the tension between rules and power is particularly intense: the world trading system, the governance of corporations, and the international monetary order. A further chapter (4) is concerned with the sustainability of U.S. power in the modern world, and offers reflections on whether analogies with British power in the eighteenth century or Roman power in the ancient world are appropriate. Chapter 5 turns to conflict. How do international conflicts and wars—both small and big—affect the balance of perception between rule and arbitrariness? Chapter 6 looks at the tensions between center and periphery in imperial systems or systems of power. Empires seem most fragile in a historical survey at their most remote outposts. Does remoteness have the same meaning in a modern world with much higher levels of interconnectedness and with instantaneous communication? Finally Chapter 7 investigates the only model that is currently suggested as an alternative to the traditional idea of power: the apparently attractive idea that there might be a way of breaking out of the eternal yin and yang between rule and rulelessness. Europeans sometimes think that they have discovered in a new form of supranational management—the European Union—a new clue to stability that eludes the United States, which is trapped in the predicaments of being a superpower: in other words, in the Roman predicament.

Finally, the conclusion investigates another tradition of thinking about order, as part of a natural law basis for a global society. Might this offer a way out of the trap that Smith and Gibbon analyzed with such

acuity at the time of the founding of the American republic? Or is the slide from republic to empire an inevitable one? The problem that the natural law tradition seeks to overcome is the dependence of alternative visions on examinations of the processes involved in rule rather than the underlying moral and ethical basis. A discussion of values, rather than debate over procedures, is an eighteenth-century solution to the problem, a solution that also has an appeal in the twenty-first century.

This is not a book on globalization, which has produced a vast literature; nor is it a book on empire and whether the United States is or should be considered as an empire, on which there is also by now a rapidly expanding but often polemical and superficial literature. This book tries to place recent debates in a deeper historical and economic perspective: in my view, the problem with most books on foreign strategy debates (such as the recent works of Walter Russell Mead, Robert Kagan, or John Lewis Gaddis) is their almost total disregard of economic dimensions; while the books of imperial nostalgia (Niall Ferguson or Deepak Lal) or those attacking imperial revival (Chalmers Johnson, Andrew Bacevich, Emmanuel Todd, Michael Mann, to name but some of the most prominent) ignore important changes in the character of modern society and in the availability of knowledge that make our society quite different to that of past imperial societies.

There is, however, one constant that runs through these debates: it lies in the character of the relationship between social order and rules. That is the debate that Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* and Edward Gibbon in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* opened in 1776 with a brilliance and intellectual clarity that has never since been surpassed.