

Europe, USA and Fading Empires Economic Imperialism, Fiscal Impasse and 'Barbarian' Threats.

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Analysts often look to historical comparisons for answers to socio-economic crises. 'History may not repeat itself but it rhymes'. The EU, like the rest of the 'western' G7 bloc mired in economic stagnation, inflation and international frictions has been described as an empire; and can be compared to empires of the past. Obvious comparisons with the 1970s or the 1930s apart, Europe and America still resemble the European empires of old: interlinked former colonial/neo-colonial dependencies sustained by varieties of neo-imperialism. The EU - USA axis rules, not through territorial possessions, but by subordinating formally independent states – often ex-colonies – to financial and economic control through trade agreements, tariffs and conditional aid packages. Mechanisms operated by financial businesses and official bodies such as the IMF, or World Trade Organisation dominated by the EU and USA. ¹

After World War II the nineteenth century empires retreated but remodelled themselves through decolonisation and 'soft power'; including control over trade and finance. However, like 19th century imperialism, today's western domination can still combine economic and cultural power with military force. As shown in Afghanistan, Iraq, and French policing of sub-Saharan Africa, from across the political spectrum commentators now refer to the EU as a type of 'empire'.² However, it now seems that a decline comparable to the Roman Empire's fall is a plausible, maybe even imminent possibility.

So maintain historian Peter Heather and economist John Rapley. Their book, *Why Empires Fail* ³ identifies common threats faced by the political economy of both systems and three strategies through which Rome attempted to prevent collapse. A key argument is that Roman revivals partially succeeded and, but for random, uncontrollable events, could have provided restabilising institutional solutions for its own population, its satellites and for an accommodation with its rivals. Contrary to some traditional views, there was no abrupt collapse. In its final, critical period the empire was beginning to re-stabilise its economic base and institutional structure. These changes accommodated many of its 'barbarian' disruptors. Even after the imperial, political system broke up, important cultural elements persisted and shaped what eventually became the Europe we know today.

Rome did not face today's threat of a climate catastrophe; although some historians believe that barbarian incursions were partly driven by climate change

impacts on agriculture in north-west Europe. Otherwise, three threats, present in the EU's 'poly-crisis', are said to be common to both the contemporary West and Rome 1500 years ago. These are: i) apparently intractable conflicts with competing or would-be 'empires'; ii) economic stagnation and fiscal crisis; iii) massive immigration from the lands on the empires' periphery. To meet these challenges Heather and Rapley (H&R) advocate three potential solutions. *Firstly*, politico-economic pacts with the rising power of China and reformed trade and aid relations with the exploited and antagonised countries on the West's periphery. *Secondly*, fairer economic partnerships with peripheral nations to limit the 'push' factors behind migration. Complemented by, *thirdly*, correction of fiscal imbalances by more rational taxation and immigration policies: to rejuvenate work forces in North America and Europe and boost labour inputs and productivity.

There are three qualifications to the relevance of this comparison. *One* is that the roles of Europe/the EU and the US may overlap but their politics and dynamics may differ; even if they are interwoven economically and allied. Like the western and eastern halves of the Roman Empire one of these spheres could survive and prosper, independently of the other. The *second* caveat is that H&R's chronology could be wrong. Maybe the West's empire began dissolving between 1945 and c. 1980 and the reforms of that period, such as the Bretton Woods system then neoliberal trade hegemony, are equivalents to Rome's temporary resurrection between 300 and 500 CE. If so, then the West's last post-imperial opportunity to reform relations with states in and around its periphery has already gone. It must reconcile itself to a similar fate to what eventually became a bankrupt and dismembered Rome. There can be no second chance. *Third*, is the unacknowledged question of whether, if it transforms its neo-imperial character, could there still be a distinctively integral 'West'? By reforming its currently exploitative economic dominance would the Western club; particularly its EU component, be made redundant?

Bearing these broader doubts in mind, this paper begins by scrutinising these authors' historical analysis in order to evaluate the validity of the Roman case and identify crucial omissions. After that assessment I probe the utility of the H&R policy recommendations for the European case. From these analyses I conclude that the comparison *is* apt, that we can today identify forces analogous to the ones that moderated Rome's 'fall'. However the continuity of Roman institutions was mainly cultural and the obstacles to meaningful EU reforms are formidable. Europe's opportunity to maintain a viable political economy may already have passed.

The Roman Dominion and Its Challenges

The Roman political economy was based on the twin axes of land and the army. The empire grew through conquest by a professional army that gradually became a semi-autonomous force. As new lands were conquered the tax base was extended which, inter alia, provided the pay for the legions and further conquests. The army's professionalism was underpinned by the promise of Roman citizenship or land grants after a 25 -30 years of service. The army was also much more than a fighting machine. Its members included administrators, architects and crafts people. These could not only build ships and forts but also take on the building of new towns (*coloniae*) in conquered territories. These capacities resembled the even wider scope of later armed forces, such as China's Red Army. Of course, over time, the army also became the recruitment and selection channel for new emperors; and for deposing the existing *imperator*. This process eventually contributed to the destruction of the whole governance system. As recruitment from within the empire became more difficult, the army also became an unofficial conduit for immigration as barbarians from beyond its borders were recruited instead.

The empire's civil administration was largely devolved to local aristocracies in provinces such as Gaul, Spain or Britain. Their wealth and status was based on huge landed estates (*latifundia*) worked by slaves. As these elites also acted as tax gatherers for the central state, including the armed forces, the system locked together the different powers in the imperial society. The army won lands for agriculture, controlled mainly by provincial aristocracies, which provided both tax revenues to pay the legions and produce to feed them. Military victories also brought coerced new immigrants into the economy as enslaved enemies; which also benefitted landed elites. However, this conquer and exploit model began to falter as early as the year 9 CE with the catastrophic and bloody defeat of the Roman general Varus at the hands of an alliance of Germanic forces: the Battle of the Teutoberg Forest. From then onwards Roman strategists replaced outright conquest goals with trade and containment policies along the Rhine frontier; and, similarly, on the border between Britannia and, what is now, Scotland. Eventually the acquisition of new territory and revenues dried up. However, the armed forces defending the frontiers still had to be paid and/or rewarded with land grants. Failure to provide these benefits could precipitate revolts and the deposition of the emperor.

A frequent solution to a recurring fiscal crisis was either to debase the currency, which risked undermining the confidence of both soldiers and traders, or to raise the tax take. As the elites then, as now (!), were adept at avoiding taxation

demands the burden fell on the peasant farmers who were also unable to compete with the 'mass production' and slave-labour scale of the latifundia. The later Roman Empire is therefore clouded by increasing immiseration and indebtedness of the peasantry. Their only escape routes were military service or, more usually, surrender of free status into that of a slave – which at least guaranteed food and shelter. Already, by the beginning of the millennium (1 BCE) the total population of six million included about two million slaves (Hopkins, *Conquerors* 102). Later, many peasants became serf-like *coloni* subordinated, as debtors, to the authority of landowners. Despite their legal freedom these unfortunates' social status was almost equivalent and the practical difference between slaves and *coloni* became almost distinguishable⁴.

TABLE 1. QUANTIFYING THE NUMBER OF SLAVES IN THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE (HARPER, *SLAVERY* 59)

Category	% of Population	Range of Slave-Holdings	Average No. of Slaves	No. of Households	Total No. of Slaves
Illustrious	0.0048	100s–1000s	250	600	150,000
Elite	1.36	6 to 20s	20 (core) 6 (periphery)	85,000 85,000	1,700,000 510,000
Bourgeois	3.0	1 to 5	2	375,000	750,000
Agricultural	7.0	1 to 5	2	875,000	1,750,000

SOURCE: .Basta (2017), Table 1.

This social vortex of agrarian impoverishment and concentrated land ownership was further complicated by the transfer of Germanic peoples from the periphery into the Empire's northern provinces. Initially, individual 'barbarians' received land holdings from military service in Roman armies. However as the army became increasingly dependent on them to provide whole troops of soldiers, their barbarian leaders were able to extract collective land grants for their followers. Eventually, by the fifth century, imperial authorities had little option but to assign whole districts – and their governance – to Germanic chiefs. After mass incursions from across the Rhine in 409, the army's wars often consisted of one, favoured, barbarian people fighting, on Rome's behalf, the warriors of another designated as enemies. These enclaves eventually expanded or were agglomerated to the extent that provinces like Gaul or Hispania were governed by mixtures of Roman and Germanic elites and combinations of their respective legal systems.

Historians still dispute how many barbarians arrived into imperial lands in the

fourth and third centuries. However, at certain times their incursions would have severely stressed local landowners and farmers. Whether invited into the provinces by pragmatic imperial authorities, or trekking from the frontiers as 'illegal immigrants', or billeted locally as *'foederati'* - barbarian auxiliaries to official Roman regiments – they were extra mouths to feed or volatile tenants to accommodate. There are few records of the indigenous residents' perceptions but they would probably often voice similar sentiments to today's doomsters and warn and complain of being 'swamped' by aliens.

Besides these relatively benign intrusions, locals' livelihoods and lives would, periodically be disrupted and threatened by organised banditry. For example, in the so-called 'Barbarian Conspiracy' of 367/8 CE Rome lost control of Britannia to piratical raiders from the continent, Ireland and Scotland. Similar chaotic spells occurred in Gaul, where native rebels, 'Bagaudae' also joined in the general pillaging and bloodletting. In such circumstances, suggest H&R, both wealthy and peasant citizens must have wondered what security the imperial state was providing in return for the taxes they paid to it. A situation perhaps analogous to today's discontents with modern states' failing welfare and infrastructure provisions, generated by economic insecurity.

The Empire was caught in a vicious circle. Tax revenues were insufficient to deal with new threats. It lacked the military resources or suitable territories with economic potential to conquer and tax. Yet resurgent enemies threatened both its western and eastern borders. Moreover, barbarian migrations across the Rhine and the Danube still demanded heavy military expenditure. The tax take therefore had to be increased. However, the provincial elites who both paid and collected taxes were becoming disillusioned with the lack of returns for their services. To maintain their wealth they could only resort to further exploitation of their slaves and taxation of peasant tenants. The gradual, and eventually terminal, solution was that both the central state and the local elites resorted to sub-contracting military campaigns to barbarian 'mercenaries'; paid not in cash but in kind.

For H&R this crumbling of the imperial system was also stressed by its strategic logic of using military means against other rival powers on the periphery. Rome was able to contain the mishmash of Germanic 'tribes' on the northern frontier zones by playing off one ethnic group against another: alternately accommodating and fighting them. But this was not possible against the Persian-Parthian empire in the east. Wars to contain this rival pulled resources eastwards and distracted the eastern half of the Empire from quashing barbarian inroads across

the Danube into the Balkans and, eventually, Rome itself. Eventually these two empires fought themselves to a standstill; making both regimes vulnerable to eventual conquest by Islamic Arabs in the seventh century.

Rome and The Modern West Compared

Landed vs Financial Capital

The main economic difference between the modern West and imperial Rome is the nature of their principal assets. Financial capital, its costs, concentration and distribution, is the pivot of today's economies. The Roman world, however, lacked a comparable banking system. Lending institutions were localised private affairs. During the period of imperial decline, the safest way to conserve wealth was to bury it in the ground! The state raised funds either from taxation or one-off loans from the coffers of the wealthiest aristocrats. Land ownership was the nearest equivalent to financial capital. Valued and essential commodities such as cereals, olives, vines or livestock could be turned into commodities by land owners. Cereals especially, were essential to feed the legions and estate owners received profitable government contracts from farming. For example, the state bought wheat and other cereals from British estates and shipped it to Rhine frontier troops. When the Rhine armies were run down in the early fifth century estate owners' revenues dried up. Landowners' alternative source of income was renting to peasant farmers for smaller scale cultivation. Meanwhile increasing shortages of bullion led the later emperors to devalue coinage by reducing its silver and gold content. Some reckon the associated inflation killed off most of the private banks. ⁵

As shown dramatically by the 2008 financial crisis, today's capitalist economies depend utterly on the international money and credit system. Until recently Western banking and investment interests' superior financial holdings, allied to control of the international agencies, such as the IMF and World Bank, ensured their hegemony over 'developing countries'. Blackrock, the world's largest asset manager, has almost US\$1 billion of bond debt in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and Zambia. The value of its assets is 2.5 times that of Africa's entire GDP. ⁶

This dominance guarantees the West favourable trade terms and financial subservience of client states. France even managed to lock its former African colonies into a monetary system controlled by the Bank of France. This hegemony has weakened as their trade surpluses (in oil and manufactures) allowed competitor economies, notably Middle Eastern oil producers and China, to gain some independence from the international finance system and western banks. These allow

initiatives such as the Asia Investment Bank led by China and the BRICS grouping, led by Brazil, Russia, India and China, which aim, inter alia, to rival the US-dominated IMF and World Bank.⁷

The West's fiscal squeeze is intensified by its declining economic productivity. Facilitated by the western dominated World Trade Organisation, many business and industrial sectors have 'offshored' production to lower-cost, more profitable, mainly Far East locations: the far periphery of Empire 2.0. The metropolises' remaining service industries are more difficult to automate but easy to run with cheaper, often low-skilled labour. So productivity stagnates. Meanwhile, western societies face growing demands for public expenditure to service older and sicker populations without sufficient tax revenues to finance such expenditure. Governments in neoliberal regimes give preferential treatment to the wealthier, capital-owning classes. These can shield their assets from taxation through generous tax avoidance devices; or by registering their businesses and other interests in low tax havens abroad.

Here is the real relevance of the comparisons with Rome's imperial structures. Financial capital, like land in the ancient world, is less and less available, or willing, to support political structures and their fiscal needs. Mainly because capital resources are controlled by, or diverted to, the interests of the wealthiest interests both at home and abroad. Both types of society share the logic of an overloaded tax base. A material difference is that today's dominant resource of finance capital has migrated abroad, whilst Roman landed capital began passing to migrants who had come *from* abroad. In both contexts, economic insecurity and warfare propelled immigration from peripheral lands. Today it is fuelled by authoritarian governments and poverty arising from economic dependence on trade with the West.

Ageing populations in the USA, UK and the older EU members intensify the fiscal squeeze. The numbers receiving or needing state-financed incomes, like pensions, and health care, will exceed the younger age groups. Tax revenues to fund benefits and services should derive from their wages and salaries but offshoring of profitable industry and low-skill service employment (averaging 20% in the EU in 2020) preclude this⁸. States must therefore resort to borrowing; as must many citizens whose stagnating incomes are insufficient to pay for home purchases and other basic goods and services. High debt to GDP ratios - between 100% and 200% - put states at the mercy of international financial lenders. Their unwillingness to lend to over-indebted countries can topple governments; as illustrated by the 2019 fall of the Greek left-wing government in the delayed fall-out from the 2013 Eurozone crisis, and the demise of the short-lived Truss administration in the UK in 2022.

Migration

The Germanic tides flocking across Rome's Rhine and Danube frontiers around the turn of the fourth century are unlike the masses of economic migrants and asylum seekers besieging the USA, UK and EU from Latin America, the Middle East and Africa. Most of the Goths, Vandals, Alamanni and other ethnic groups could use force of arms to find living space in the Empire. They arrived not individually, like today's migrants, but in large groups as warriors or camp followers. Yet they were often 'seeking asylum' from wars and persecution in their homelands: like many Afghans, Syrians and sub-Saharan migrants today. The thousands of refugees trudging across the frontiers of Greece the Balkans and central Europe to find havens in Austria and Germany in 2015 resemble the trek of barbarian masses, evading border controls and crossing the Rhine frontier in the year 408 CE.

However, in general, Germanic barbarians' prospects for settlement depended on their utility for Roman authorities. Composed mainly of seasoned warriors they could replace the dwindling Roman forces as protectors of estates and communities, and combat other, more rapacious, or less favoured barbarian forces. *Today's* 'legal' immigrants are mainly recruited, not into military services nor into professional and technical jobs but into lowly paid, service work. The low cost of their labour further depresses indigenous wage levels and discourages productivity-enhancing innovation.

Despite the ultra-right's dire predictions, these migrants are unlikely to aim to topple western governments by force of arms. Moreover, contemporary historians reject the traditional interpretation that barbarian influxes finished off the Roman imperial system. H&R believe that empire eventually disintegrated not from the barbarisation of its northern provinces but from the disruption of imperial trade around the Mediterranean. After all, barbarian peoples had been settling within the empire for centuries; with official encouragement, or at least permission. In provinces like Britain Germanic figures had occupied top military posts for at least a century. As hinted by H&R, the presence of barbarian forces might even have preserved, at least a notional, Roman authority in provinces like Gaul. Prior service in the legions, familiarity with Latin and, eventually, a shared Christian faith maintained some deference to Roman authority and cultures. Mutual compacts and even inter-marriage suggest that fifth and sixth century some integration of regional elites with the newcomers.⁹

The H&R thesis is that economic growth would come from reformed and rationalised immigration systems. Immigrants could inject more youthful labour into

ageing workforces and also fresh skills and innovative capacities. If the annual volume of new patents is an indicator, there is a positive correlation between immigration levels and innovation in the USA. In Europe the association is more uneven. Between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s the volume of patents in France, Germany and the UK increased while immigration either steadied or declined. However, assuming time lags between immigrants' arrival achievement of patent-worthy innovations then the overall impact seems positive¹⁰. Nevertheless, immigrants' skill-levels may be crucial. The UK's official policy has been and remains one of encouraging highly-qualified immigrants and, with little success, discouraging entry of the lower skilled and qualified.

The H&R prescription also assumes that innovation is a crucial driver of growth. In reality, it is but one factor amongst several, including: investment capital, management strategy and market scope. Consider the British entrepreneur-innovator James Dyson. His innovative cleaning and sanitary products have been very successful but he re-located their R&D and manufacture mainly to Malaysia and Singapore. The immigration panacea also overlooks the substantial numbers arriving in the UK from the new entrant and poorer EU countries in central and eastern Europe in the 1990s. These influxes included well-qualified migrants able spurred productivity and innovations but their talents have been insufficient to achieve the prescribed levels of growth. Meanwhile, in much of the EU, there are parallel expansions of low-skill migrants competing for the low wage jobs to which much of the native workforce has been consigned.¹¹ Unlike the Roman case, migrations now stem from millions of individuals' decisions across diverse regions of the globe: but particularly from the Middle East and Africa into Europe, partly driven by climatological impacts on agriculture, and from across the globe through South/Central America into the USA. The Roman Empire's migration problem was confined to its European provinces and consisted mainly of armed contingents who could either be beaten militarily or co-opted through negotiations with their leaders.

Although the Empire had private enterprises producing, mainly agricultural goods, across its provinces these could always be subordinated to the emperor's or the army's goals. Today's democratic regimes respond favourably to the complaints and influence of corporations. However, these mega-firms, dominating internet technology, agri-business and finance do share one feature with more primitive Roman ancestors. Vast, but local, farming estates, *latifundia*, tended to monopolise trade and production in agricultural commodities like grain, olive oil or livestock. The first century writer, Pliny the Elder claimed that: 'six owners were in possession of

half of the province of Africa' during the reign of the Emperor Nero.¹²

Latifundia were owned by wealthy aristocrats, often of senatorial level. Felicitously the same magnates were often *publicani*: officials who contracted to source taxes for the state. As previously stated, these tax farmers' powers allowed them to evade paying taxes themselves but shift the burden onto smaller farms, their tenants or peasants. Significantly, regime change in the empire's transition to semi-autonomous 'kingdoms' involved conversion of many latifundia, at least in the north, from exporters and suppliers to the army into workshops and small farms as the economy localised.

Saving the (EU) West

H&R's solutions fall into three categories: international relations, immigration and economic redistribution. Internationally, they recommend accommodation with China, whilst guarding against Chinese military expansion. They also urge more generous trading and financial arrangements with the economically stressed countries in the 'periphery'. For the EU that would mainly be the Middle East and Africa. Policies in these areas should be complemented, they argue, by more rational immigration policies: fairer entry arrangements targeted towards recruiting younger, economic migrants who could rejuvenate ageing western workforces. Finally they argue for a combination of wealth taxes and guaranteed income levels by policies such as Basic Income payments. All these strategies are theoretically feasible and appropriate but political factors make them problematic.

H&R depict the Ukraine war as a welcome capacity for international solidarity. However, the war's ramifications threatened to disrupt the international economic order in ways which threaten the very economic amity that they prescribe. Reduced grain supplies from Ukraine and Russia has increased inflation in Western countries, stressing low income households even more and triggering higher interest rates as central banks seek to reduce inflation. Consequences for dependent periphery countries are even worse as public finances worsen and more of the poor are pushed into migration as their salvation. Comparison: the western Roman Empire's economy was finally wrecked when barbarian forces, Vandals and Alans, conquered northern Africa. This cut off Rome from those fertile provinces' grain supplies and removed a substantial chunk of imperial tax revenues.

Rapprochement with China

The West could gain politically and economically through diplomatic and cultural

rather than military measures against the emerging super-power of China. However, the H&R comparison of that relationship to the ultimately destructive one between Rome and Persia seems misplaced. It ignores the fact that China's economic influence has now spread deep into the periphery of the west. Commentators believe that Chinese Initiatives such as the 'belt and road' project and generous subsidising of infrastructure throughout Africa is turning countries there away from their former subservience to the West. These developments would make reform of the region's economic ties to the West both more urgent and problematic. African re-alignments are also confounding Western policy towards Russia. Many African nations have not backed NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. With good reason: Russian grain exports help feed malnourished populations.

China's manufacturing engine depends on western consumer markets as do millions of workers for employment and living standards. The Chinese population seems prepared to forego political rights and collective freedoms in return for stable employment and rising living standards. Jeopardising this balance could threaten the dictatorship of the ruling elite. On the other side of the globalisation equation the USA's monetary hegemony and the Europe-dominated international banking system, depends on indebtedness to China's trade surplus with the West. China has been willing to continue to hold that debt in dollars thereby preserving the strength of the dollar and facilitating the US capacity to run fiscal deficits and financial lending to the rest of the world. With BRICs and the Asia Investment Bank China is edging away from this US monetary lock. It is promoting the renminbi as an international trading currency and leading regional trading blocs that favour this currency¹³. To check and accommodate China's economic advance the West would need to revise its policies in the 'intermediate' states that China is seeking to embrace.

Courting the ex-Colonial Periphery

As a counterweight to China's challenge H&R recommend a 'clean slate' approach to now more powerful nations that were either political or economic dependencies of the US-Europe bloc. This would entail boosting economic aid and compromising on democracy-building campaigns against authoritarian leaning regimes. Instead, they argue, the West should favour closer political and economic links with states such as India that, despite authoritarian tendencies, share some western values.

There are problems with this strategy. Often invisible to orthodox politics and economic policy-making is the disruptive but central role played by multi-national businesses in exploiting peripheral countries' resources to serve other businesses

and consumers in the West's metropolises. Many peripheral and former colonial countries, such as those in Latin America and Africa exist as cheap, raw material dependencies of the West. Yet others, further east, have become industrialising magnets for western investment; not only China and India but elsewhere in the oil-rich Gulf states and SE Asia. While investments in these countries benefits western financial and off-shoring industries, it denudes domestic sectors of profitable finance, helping to keep wages low to try to compete for residues of capital through 'shareholder value' policies.¹⁴

To boost the poorer peripheral economies Western governments would probably have to abandon or side-line the practices and interests of the past half-century. This neoliberal system is centred on international finance. Countries like those in sub-Saharan Africa are not actually in material debt to Western governments but to the banks whose bond purchases fund inter-governmental organisations' loans to debtor nations. Denominated in dollars the only way for debtor countries to finance repayment is by a perpetual export surplus. This priority makes it very difficult for 'developing nations' to develop agriculture and industrial infrastructure for their own domestic consumption and poverty reduction. Banks cannot surrender the bonds because that could reduce their own asset base and, depending on the size of the debt, endanger the western financial system; as with the domestic mortgage lending crisis in 2008. Export-dependency also means the global foodstuffs industry; in which a handful of corporations dominate the supply of seeds and fertilisers, can pressure governments to retain the status quo.

The EU's agri-food trade model revolves around importing low-value, raw products, such as cocoa, fruits and soybeans, and exporting high-value ones like wine and chocolate. EU states import: fruit and vegetables (30% of total EU food imports), fish (24%), plus coffee, tea, cocoa and spices (19%) often from less developed countries, whose economies are negatively skewed to such sectors¹⁵. So, changing peripheral countries' trade relationship with the West to build their domestic economies and political stability would first require the US and Europe to tackle the power of their own financial and trading corporations. Western governments are unlikely to change the international status quo while the war in Ukraine restricts its, and Russia's, supplies of grain. On the other hand, if that situation becomes critical it may force those governments to intervene to restructure the present unequal and corporatized system.¹⁶

H&R write as though western governments have straightforward powers to deliver a better deal for dependent economies in their periphery (Middle East and

Africa for Europe and East Asia and Central-South America for the US). They overlook the power and autonomy of international finance and multi-national agri-business corporations. However, if such improvements to these countries could be achieved, the other pressing political problem of economic migration to the metropolises could also be reduced.

Restoring the Broken Fiscal Contract

As H&R observe, much of the West's socio-economic malaise stems from the abandonment of the post-World War II welfare settlement. That compact had given wage-working citizens unprecedented economic security. The settlement has deteriorated because taxation on the wealthiest – elites and big business – has been eased. The poorer demographics have had to pay more tax but not enough to maintain benefits and public services which a disgruntled public now has to suffer. A situation that corresponds to the degradation of the peasant classes in the Roman Empire. While today's affluent classes avoid taxation systems through offshore tax havens, the less wealthy do so by tax dodging and the 'black economy'. What could restore or replace that settlement to prevent decline analogous to that of the Roman state?

Firstly, suggest H&R, the tax burden must be shifted from the wage earners to rich elites and corporate businesses by means of taxes on wealth and carbon emissions. Secondly, this shift should be supplemented by sustainable economic growth to deliver more tax revenues to finance enhanced public services and benefits to restore popular respect for democratic institutions and dissipate support for authoritarian populism. Thirdly benefits systems should be reformed through Basic Income schemes to provide minimal, universal security and extending life-time employment so that wage earners who are living for longer also work and pay taxes for longer.

Clearly, if the West's imperialistic economy is to benefit both the increasingly overtaxed and under-supported wage workers and the exploited, distorted economies of periphery countries the corporate trade order will have to change. Western mining and other extractive sectors dominate and distort the economies of South American countries, creating social unrest and political instability¹⁷. A pivotal case for considering such recommended 'periphery' reconciliation is the former French colony of Niger in Africa's Sahel region.

Niger: a paradigm periphery problem

A military coup in Niger made news recently. Symptomatic of the decline of 'western'

political standards this was the region's sixth military takeover in three years. Other African nations and Western interests became alarmed. France's neo-colonial hegemony over Niger centres on its military bases and direct involvement in the country's main export: uranium for nuclear power plants. However, China, which also imports Niger uranium, has also been investing in Niger; while Russia, through its proxy military, the Wagner Group, has been getting political and popular support as a more effective anti-terrorist force than the French. In Niger's classic post-colonial economy uranium, its principal export commodity, is under the control of foreign multi-nationals; while other significant, foodstuff, exports have been hit by soil degradation and droughts related to climate change. Estimates put 40% of Niger's population below the poverty line. Similarly to other deprived 'peripheral' states, Niger's relationship to the West and particularly Europe is becoming critical. France's energy supply and, by extension that of other EU countries, relies on nuclear power; which, in turn, depends on uranium. Two-thirds of France's uranium is imported from three countries. Of these three two – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan -are in Russia's post-Soviet sphere of influence and the third is Niger.

So 'the West', particularly the EU, should seriously consider the H&R formula not only to prevent the latter falling towards Russian-Chinese authoritarianism but also to make up for centuries of imperialistic exploitation. However, this would mean putting some politico-economic meat onto their rather skeletal recommendations for policies to help preserve and nurture western values of democracy and social justice. Specifically policies to: 1) retrieve lost tax revenues; 2) reduce western multinational corporations' control of the country's resources; 3) revive and extend democratic processes, not only to political governance institutions, but over the economy and through civil society. However, West governments will probably find it as hard to take on and reform the financial-corporate complex as Rome did to reform the exploitative latifundia. For example, measures to meet the looming climate change disaster in the global South have stalled over the West's inability to make banks and financial institutions pay for defunding high-carbon industries.¹⁸

As H&R observe, a start has been made within the multi-country membership OECD by co-ordinating information sharing for states to tackle offshore tax havens. However, few multi-nationals expect to pay more tax as a result¹⁸ and critics, such as Tax Justice Network, advocate transferring responsibility for such policies from the OECD (a rich nations' club) to the United Nations to recoup more of the prospective US\$4.7 trillion in tax lost via tax havens over the next 10 years. Periphery countries' attempted nationalisations of Western multinational corporate have had mixed

results. The businesses affected fight tooth and nail to prevent outright state ownership; often using their political influence to get metropole states to obstruct or reverse nationalisations. Western states could pursue a less conflictual strategy if they helped set up joint-venture businesses with shared ownership by western interests and local public bodies. Investors and corporations would then still get a fair, but less rapacious return on their capital and while promoting more equitable contributions in taxes and job-creating investments.

A Bigger Picture: The Problem with 'Western Values'

Is the West, a la H&R, serious about promoting democratic values to counter civil conflicts and authoritarianism, epitomised by virtual dictatorships in China and Russia? If so it should start revitalising its own democratic systems. Illiberal regimes make much of the realities of 'Western democracy's inability to practice its vaunted values. To provide models for periphery countries and to win back its own disenchanted, exploited and under-represented demographics liberal democracy needs internal reforms. Too often, H&R talk as though the West's democratic model only needs polishing up and exporting. In reality, western 'democratic' institutions fail to correspond to the values, on which they are allegedly based. This deficit, in turn, fuels the prevailing politico-economic malaise; of which authoritarian populism is one response¹⁹.

The Roman system was able to renew itself temporarily and accommodate Germanic forces and, in its eastern Byzantine wing to continue for centuries because its civic culture changed. Starting with Constantine (the Great) in the early 4th century its rulers adopted, or adapted, the values and practices of Christianity into its civic institutions. By uniting doctrine and organization Christianity grew endogenously: because it promised 'other –worldly', individual spiritual salvation, legitimations through codified beliefs; as well as a 'this worldly' network of mutual protection and charity for its members. Christianity gave rise to cohesive self-help and benevolent communities, assisting the poor and the sick. 'It satisfied the need to belong in a way that the huge Roman Empire could never provide.'²⁰

Just as Christianity demanded complete renunciation of the Roman state's religious traditions, so today's economic actors need to demand a break with the dogmas of neoliberal markets and 'top-down' political decision-making. Rome's established order was discredited by its failure to provide security and prosperity. Christianity's humane values moderated classical Roman vices. Animal sacrifice was outlawed. The slaughter in the amphitheatres was ended by 404CE; crucifixion,

replaced by hanging, as early as 337CE. Occasionally it pacified barbarian armies' assaults on Europe's cities. Bishops' intermediation with Germanic generals promoted peaceful co-existence. More importantly, for the democracies of the future the post-Christian ruler/monarch no longer had unquestionable legitimacy. He could be held to the greater ethical authority of God; albeit as interpreted by churchmen.

The Christian church's officialdom began to overlap the civil authorities; with bishops becoming tribunes and vice versa. In effect the Church acted as a kind of parallel civil governance structure to the state during the barbarian transition. It acted as a bridge between these two cultures and a political auxiliary when the tottering imperial state failed to maintain order. Well into the post-Roman period there remained a cultural unity based on religion between the emerging barbarian kingdoms and either the papacy in Rome or the surviving imperial authority in Constantinople. What the Church could not do was solve the fiscal inequities of the state. Though it softened elites' attitudes to the poor and the enslaved it could not, and was not concerned enough, to erase their privileges. Modern analogues of Christianity would need to overcome this flaw.

Moreover, a modern proxy for Roman Christianity ought to avoid that religion's anti-pluralist dogmatism. This, after all, is the creed of authoritarian populism: from Putin's Russia to Orbán's Hungary and Trump's MAGA movement. During its growth phase Christian theology remained soft and broadly defined, tolerant of some aspects of paganism or Judaism. After C.E. 313, as outside competition receded, the triumphant church became pre-occupied with internal doctrinal divisions. Romans' entrenched prejudices against barbarians were overcome as Christianity abandoned ethnic exclusivity. It punctuated, without eliminating, class division²¹ making cross-class solidarity possible. Christianity's eventual organisational and doctrinal rigidity is not recommended. That, after all was the recipe of Leninist communism and one of the causes of its eventual demise. What is valuable is the broader *culture* of early Christian movements, which spawned or influenced alternatives to imperial domination: from the monastic system of learning and artisanal production to the constitutional laws combining Roman jurisprudence with Germanic notions of equity; plus the germs of today's human rights laws.

Christianity was not an 'overnight hit'. It went through cycles of ascendancy, repression and revision before it formed the bridge between the barbarian and Roman worlds; between communitarianism and state control, between economic

localism and imperial monopolies. For these reasons it might serve as a model for today's attempts to reform Western imperialism. Starting with the anti-globalisation protests of the 1990s there have been movements to reform the economics of Western trade imperialism and its fulcrum - the multi-national corporate order. After the 2008 financial crisis these movements morphed into the 'movement of the squares'. These campaigns challenged: autocratic regimes in the Middle East and, with the Occupy! movement, neoliberal governance in the metropolises. The global justice movements brought together civil society movements, such as trade unions, from both the neo-imperial metropolises and those in the global South.

A common thread in these movements' was a demand for economic security based on meaningful citizenship: both within the hollowed out systems of political governance and in new forms of economic accountability to remove fiscal austerity. Often brutally crushed, as in Egypt, or more subtly defused, as with the Syriza coalition in Greece, Podemos in Spain, or Corbynism in British politics, these movements were unable to project effective policies in the formal political arena.²² History, however, suggests that elements of these movements could rise again. Hopefully, if there is a next wave, it will need more international coordination, governmental leverage and a broader desire for cross-national economic equality and human rights. Without such a change in political culture it is difficult to envisage the transformations needed to tackle the overlapping problems of economic inequalities, climate disasters and mass migration.

Conclusion

Exact similarities are debateable, but comparison common challenges in the partial, then complete disintegration of the western Roman Empire and the current crises facing the Euro-American 'West'. Despite vast differences in levels of technological and economic development the threats to the integrity of the Roman and contemporary western bloc are similar. Today's West could learn from the Roman Empire's almost successful efforts to stabilise its institutional structures. Although it might be more accurate to see Russia as today's Persia on the Empire's eastern flank and China as an avatar of Arabia. Arabic Islam's radical momentum eventually subsumed both Persia and most of the Byzantine-Roman empire. Is China playing a waiting game over the Ukraine war: content to let the West and Russia exhaust themselves and then exploit the resulting weaknesses? However, mutual interdependence from the globalisation of trade and industry limits the options of both the West and China.

Yet the Western Roman empire's eventual fate suggests politico-economic fragmentation may be the price to be paid to retain cultural and moral continuity. Moreover, Heather and Rapley's suggested remedies to prevent future decline - internal and inter-regional economic reforms and accommodation with China – lack political heft. In particular, both North America and Europe would need a currently absent political courage to reform their economic powers' fiscal privileges in finance and corporate trade; and their exploitative hegemony over the global South. A radical, reforming ideology – analogous to the culture and practices of early Christianity – may also be necessary to articulate, drive and embed such reforms. The most relevant agents for this catalyst -global justice and environmental movements – have been effectively side-lined from national and EU policy- making. A new 'City of God' is still on the drawing board..

NOTES

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<https://mycountryeurope.com/politics/is-european-union-empire/>
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4. Hannah Basta (2017), Slaves, Coloni and Status Confusion in the Late Roman Empire, *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council Online Archive* <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1544&context=nchcjournal>
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<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1171328/low-skilled-occupations-european-workforce/>
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14. See summaries in, inter alia, B. Jones (2015), *Corporate Power and Responsible Capitalism?* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
15. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20171016-1>
16. <http://sovereignty.org.uk/features/articles/candebt.html>
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