

IDEAS

The End of the Roman Empire Wasn't That Bad

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IT'S TIME TO think about the Roman empire again. But not the part of its history that usually commands attention in the United States: the long, sad path of Decline and Fall. It's what happened later that deserves our curiosity. As a reminder, in 476 A.D., a barbarian general named Odoacer overthrew the legitimate emperor of the Western empire, Romulus Augustulus, who thus became the last of the emperors to rule from Italy.

The Eastern Empire, ruled from Constantinople, chugged along for many more centuries. But the Roman progression—from republic to empire to ruin—has played an outsized role in tragic imagination about the United States. If a civilization could descend from Cicero and Cato to Caligula and Nero in scarcely a century, how long could the brave experiment launched by Madison, Jefferson, and company hope to endure?

The era that began with Rome's collapse—"late antiquity," as scholars call it—holds a hazier place in America's imagination and makes only rare cameo appearances in speeches or essays about the national prospect. Before, we have the familiar characters in togas; sometime after, knights in armor. But in between? And specifically: How did the diverse terrain that had been the Roman empire in the West respond when central authority gave way? When the last emperor was gone, how did that register in Hispania and Gaul? How did people manage without the imperial system that had built roads and aqueducts, and brought its laws and language to so much of the world?

The historians' view appears to be that they managed surprisingly well. "It is only too easy to write about the Late Antique world as if it were merely a melancholy tale," Peter Brown, of Princeton, wrote in his influential 1971 book, *The World of Late Antiquity*. But, he continued, "we are increasingly aware of the astounding new beginnings associated with this period." These included not only the breakup of

empire into the precursors of what became modern countries but also “much that a sensitive European has come to regard as most ‘modern’ and valuable in his own culture,” from new artistic and literary forms to self-governing civic associations.

In his new book, *Escape From Rome*, Walter Scheidel, of Stanford, goes further, arguing that “the Roman empire made modern development possible by going away and never coming back.” His case, in boiled-down form, is that the removal of centralized control opened the way to a sustained era of creativity at the duchy-by-duchy and monastery-by-monastery level, which in turn led to broad cultural advancement and eventual prosperity. The dawn of the university and private business organizations; the idea of personal rights and freedoms—on these and other fronts, what had been Roman territories moved forward as imperial control disappeared. “From this developmental perspective, the death of the Roman empire had a much greater impact than its prior existence,” Scheidel writes. He quotes Edward Gibbon’s famous judgment that Rome’s fall was “the greatest, perhaps, and most awful scene, in the history of mankind”—but disagrees with the “awful” part.

Might the travails of today’s American governing system, and the strains on the empire-without-the-name it has tried to run since World War II, have a similar, perversely beneficial effect? Could the self-paralysis of American national governance somehow usher in a rebirth—our own Dark Ages, but in a good way? Naturally, my hope as an American is that the national government starts working better. And what I’ve learned from living through crisis cycles from the 1960s onward, plus studying those of the more distant past, is to always allow for the rebound capacity of this continually changing culture. But what if faith in American resilience is now misplaced? What if it really is different this time? I’ve been asking historians, politicians, businesspeople, and civic leaders to imagine 21st-century America the way historians like Brown and Scheidel imagine late antiquity. How will things look for us, duchy by duchy and monastery by monastery, if the national government has broken in a way that can’t be fixed?

Governmental “failure” comes down to an inability to match a society’s resources to its biggest opportunities and needs. This is the clearest standard by which current U.S. national governance fails. In principle, almost nothing is beyond America’s capacities. In practice, almost every big task seems too hard. Yet for our own era’s counterparts to duchies and monasteries—for state and local governments, and for certain large private organizations, including universities and some companies—the country is still mainly functional, in exactly the areas where national governance has failed.

Samuel Abrams, a political scientist at Sarah Lawrence, has been leading a multiyear national survey of “social capital” for the American Enterprise Institute. Among the findings, released this year, is that by large margins, Americans feel dissatisfied with the course of national events—and by even larger margins, they feel satisfied with and connected to local institutions and city governments. “When you talk with people, across the board they are optimistic about their own communities, and hopeful about their local futures,” Abrams told me. The AEI team found that 80 percent of Americans considered their own town and neighborhood to be an “excellent” or “good” place to live, and 70 percent said they trusted people in their neighborhood. Does this mainly reflect self-segregation—people of common background or affinity clustering together? “That’s been exaggerated,” Abrams said. “America is less monolithic, and more functional at local levels, than people think.” In *Escape From*

Rome, Scheidel writes that “a single condition was essential” for the cultural, economic, and scientific creativity of the post-Roman age: “competitive fragmentation of power.” Today, some of the positive aspects of fragmentation are appearing all around us.

Five years ago, after writing about a “can do” attitude in local governments in Maine and South Carolina, I got an email from a mayor in the Midwest. He said that he thought the underreported story of the moment was how people frustrated with national-level politics were shifting their enthusiasm and their careers to the state and local levels, where they could make a difference. (That mayor’s name was Pete Buttigieg, then in his first term in South Bend, Indiana.) When I spoke with him at the time, he suggested the situation was like people fleeing the world of *Veep*—bleak humor on top of genuine bleakness—for a non-preposterous version of *Parks and Recreation*.

At the national level, “policy work is increasingly being done by people with no training in it, and who don’t care about it, because they’re drawn into national politics purely as culture warriors,” I was told by Philip Zelickow, of the University of Virginia, who worked as a national-security official for both Presidents Bush. “There’s a fiction that mass politics is about policy.” The reality, he said, is that national-level politics has become an exercise in cultural signaling—“who you like, who you hate, which side you’re on”—rather than about actual governance. Meanwhile, the modern reserves of American practical-mindedness are mainly at the local level, “where people have no choice but to solve problems week by week.”

Based on my own experience I could give a hundred examples of this attitude from around the country, virtually none of them drawing national attention and many of them involving people creatively expanding the roles of libraries, community colleges, and other institutions to meet local needs. Here is just one, from Indiana: The factory town of Muncie is famed as the site of the Middletown sociology studies a century ago. It was the longtime home of the Ball Brothers glass-jar company, since departed. It is still the home of Ball State University, steadily growing. Like other manufacturing cities in the Midwest, Muncie has battled the effects of industrial decline. Among the consequences was a funding crisis for the Muncie Community Schools, which became so severe that two years ago the state took the system into receivership.

Last year, Ball State University became the first-ever public university in the country to assume direct operational responsibility for an entire K–12 public-school system. The experiment has just begun, and its success can’t be assured. But getting this far involved innovation and creativity in the political, civic, financial, and educational realms to win support in a diverse community. “I was talking with a state senator about the plan,” Geoffrey S. Mearns, who has been president of Ball State since 2017 and is a guiding force behind the plan, told me this year in Muncie. “After listening for 15 minutes, he said, ‘You’re crazy. Don’t do this. Run away.’ After another 15 minutes, he said, ‘You’re still crazy. But you have to do it.’” This craziness and commitment keeps a culture alive. A new world is emerging, largely beyond our notice.

Even when the formal ties of the Roman empire had broken, informal links connected its various parts. In the absence of the Roman state, there was still the Latin language as the original *lingua franca*; there was still a network of roads. Christianity in some form was a shared religion. Today the links include

trade, travel, family lineage, and collaborative research—links that, like the internet, were forged in an era of functioning national and global institutions but with a better chance to endure. “With the waning of federal government, you’d see some states really big enough to act as countries, starting of course with California,” Anne-Marie Slaughter, the CEO of the think tank New America, told me. “You could imagine Texas working with Mexico, and New England with Canada—and the upper-Midwest states as a bloc, and the Pacific Northwest.” She pointed out that states can’t sign formal treaties—but then again, the U.S. Senate has not approved a major treaty in years.

Morley Winograd, a former adviser to Al Gore and a co-author of the new book *Healing American Democracy: Going Local*, argues that networked localities have already taken effective control of crucial policy areas. “If recent trends continue,” he told me, “there’s no reason why community colleges won’t be tuition-free across the country, without any federal role. It’s happened in 13 states, and we’re near a tipping point.” After Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris climate accord, more than 400 U.S. mayors, representing most of the U.S. economy, said their communities would still adhere to it. “That is where most of the leverage lies on sustainability—with mayors and governors,” Winograd told me. He gave the example of planting trees, which might sound insignificant but, according to a new study by researchers in Switzerland, could be a crucial step toward removing excess carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. “This could spread city by city, state by state, with no federal involvement or limitation,” he said. Last year, the Trump administration said it would abandon the targets for cutting automobile emissions and improving fuel efficiency that the Obama administration had said automakers must reach. This year, Ford, BMW, Volkswagen, and Honda announced that they would ignore the shift in federal policy. Instead, they would “recognize California’s authority” to set strict emissions and efficiency standards, and would sell cars meeting those standards in all 50 states.

Peter brown observed that “a society under pressure is not necessarily a depressed or a rigid society.” The revival that followed the Roman empire’s collapse, whose full effects were visible only in retrospect, was possible because with the weakening of central government, Roman society became “exceptionally open to currents from below.” The world changes as we live in it; we’re all part of a pattern that we can glimpse only dimly. Historians in a thousand years will know for sure whether the American empire in this moment was nearing its own late antiquity. Perhaps by then Muncie and South Bend will loom as large in the historical imagination as the monasteries of Cluny and St. Gall do today. The ancient university towns of Palo Alto and New Haven may lie in different countries. In the meantime, we would do well to recognize and, where possible, nurture the “astounding new beginnings” already under way.