

E. Goldsmith: The Great U-turn. Deindustrializing Society. Green Books, Hartland, Bideford, Devon 1988.



'But in the UK, it's the barbarians who build our cities!'

The Fall of the Roman Empire

A SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

There is the moral of all human tales;
'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past;
First Freedom, and the Glory—when that fails
Wealth, Vice, Corruption—Barbarism at last
And History, with all her volumes vast,
Hath but one page.

Byron

IT IS SAID of the Bourbons, that during the time they were in power, they neither learnt nor forgot anything. This could equally well be said of our political leaders, probably too, of the scientists and economists who advise them. It is a great tragedy that we seem incapable of learning the lessons of history.

Of these, one of the most instructive would undoubtedly be that of the fall of the Roman Empire. The parallel it affords with the breakdown of industrial society, which we are witnessing today, is indeed very striking. The two processes differ from one another in two principal ways. Firstly, the former was a very slow one, spread out over hundreds of years, whereas the latter is occurring at a truly frightening pace; and secondly, the role played by slavery in the former case is fulfilled in the latter by machines.

In both cases, the collapse was unexpected. In the same way that even today many intelligent people cannot bring themselves to believe that the industrial world is about to disappear for ever, the intelligentsia of Imperial Rome undoubtedly found it impossible to accept that Rome could be anything but 'eternal' and that its great civilizing influence could ever wane.

Surprising as it may seem, Rome's barbarian conquerors also seemed to share this belief. The Vandals belied their reputation and never really destroyed Rome. They had far too much respect for what it stood for. Even after Odoacer had defeated the last Western Emperor, Romulus Augustulus, and had assumed the government of the Western Empire, he carefully refrained from proclaiming himself Emperor. His letter to Emperor Zeno of Byzantium, after his victory, illustrates his great respect for the institution of the Empire. First of all as we learn from Gibbon, he tried to justify rather apologetically his abolition of the Western Empire, on the grounds that, 'The majesty of a sole monarch was sufficient to protect, at the same time, both East and West'.¹ Then he goes on to ask the Emperor to invest him with the title of 'Patrician', and with the Diocese of Italy. His successor, Theodoric, it seems, shared Odoacer's respect for the institutions of Rome.

THE BARBARIAN INVASIONS

It is customary to regard the barbarian invasions as the main cause of the fall of Rome, just as a thermonuclear war might one day mark the end of our industrial society. However, though the invasions undoubtedly contributed to the plight of Roman society, they were probably but a minor cause of its collapse.

Let us not forget that the Roman armies had been successfully fighting migrant German tribes since the days of Augustus. Why should they suddenly be overcome by those they came up against in the sixth century?

In fact, Samuel Dill considers the invasions of the third and fourth centuries to have been considerably more formidable,

but, 'The invaders, however numerous,' he writes, 'are invariably driven back and in a short time there are few traces of their ravages. The truth seems to be that, however terrible the plundering bands might be to the unarmed population, yet in regular battle, the Germans were immensely inferior to the Roman troops.'² Ammianus, who had borne a part in many of these engagements, also points out that, in spite of the courage of the Germans, their impetuous fury was no match for the steady discipline and coolness of troops under Roman officers. The result of this moral superiority, founded on long tradition, was that the Roman soldier in the third and fourth centuries was ready to face any odds.

It would thus appear that if the invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries were more successful than the previous ones, it was not because of the increased strength of the invaders.

THE BARBARIAN RULE

If the fall of the Empire cannot be attributed to the invasions, still less can it be ascribed to the subsequent barbarian rule. From all accounts, life during this period suffered no radical change. If anything, it changed for the better under the rule of the very able Theodoric, who, according to Gibbon, re-established an age of peace and prosperity, and who did everything he could to restore the facade if not the spirit of the old Roman State, and under whom the people 'enjoyed without fear or danger the three blessings of a capital:- order, plenty and public amusements.'³

It must also be remembered that barbarian generals had taken over long before. Odoacer defeated Romulus Augustulus, but, for reasons already mentioned, were content to remain in the background, allowing the Empire to survive under the titular head of an emperor who had some claim to legitimacy.

In fact, since the death of Theodorus, the emperors of Rome ruled in name only. During the reign of Honorius and until his murder in 408, Stilicho, a Vandal, was the effective master of the Empire. Among other things he prevented the Empire from falling to Alaric and the Goths. The Emperor

Avitus was named and supported by Theodoric. His successor, Majorian, was a nominee of the Suevian general Ricimer, as was his successor, Severus. So was the next Emperor, Anthemius, who reigned from 462 to 467. During the six years between the death of Majorian and the elevation of Anthemius, the government was entirely in the hands of Ricimer, who ruled Italy with the same independence and despotic authority which were afterwards exercised by Odoacer and Theodoric. The three emperors who followed were also the nominees of foreign powers, two of them owing their investiture to the Emperor of Byzantium, the third to a Burgundian prince. Finally, Orestes, a Pannonian, who had served in the army of Attila the Hun, took over power. He characteristically refused the purple though he accepted it in the name of his son, Romulus Augustulus, the last Emperor of the West, who was, in origin at least, a barbarian himself.

Nevertheless to refer to these men as barbarians is very misleading. As Dill points out, 'Many of these German officers were men of brilliant talents, fascinating address and noble bearing. To military skill they often added the charm of Roman culture and social pattern which gave them admission even to the inner circle of the Roman Aristocracy.' Valuable testimony to this is provided by letters of the Christian, Salvianus, who passionately decried the individualism and selfishness of the ruling classes of the Empire and 'considered the Barbarians to be without question their moral superiors'.

THE FORCES WHICH MADE ROME

The fall of the Roman Empire can only be understood if we examine what were the features of Roman society which assured the success of the Republic. One can then see what were the factors that caused the erosion of these qualities during the latter days of the Republic and of the Empire.

The first of these qualities was the tribal structure of Roman society. The Roman Republic was originally made up of three separate tribes, the Ramnes, the Tities and the Luceres, each of which was in turn divided into ten clans or 'curies', of which

many of the names have come down to us.⁴ Indeed, the institutions of the Republic as well as the structure of its army faithfully reflected these tribal and curial divisions until the reforms of King Servius, who, like Cleisthenes in Athens, established geographical divisions to replace tribal ones as the basic administrative units of the State. Nevertheless, the tribal character of the Roman City persisted throughout the Republic.

Tribal societies are remarkably stable. Like all stable systems, they are self-regulating or self-governing. Liberty, in fact, among the Greeks meant self-government, not permissiveness as it means with us today. The Greeks were free because they ran themselves, while the Persians were slaves because they were governed by an autocrat. Self-government is only possible among a people displaying great discipline and whose cultural pattern ensures the subordination of the aberrant interests of the individual to those of the family and the society as a whole. Under such conditions, there is little need for institutions and, as has frequently been pointed out, the only institution that one finds among tribal peoples is that of the Council of Elders whose role it is to interpret tribal tradition and ensure that it is carefully observed and handed down as unchanged as possible to succeeding generations. The qualities which the classical Roman writers extolled were in fact those which are usually extolled in tribal societies.

Ennius, for instance, attributed Rome's greatness to three factors: divine favour, which presided over Rome's destiny from the very start, the steadfastness and discipline of the Romans and, finally, their moral character. This he expresses in his famous line: 'moribus antiquis res stat Romana virisque' or 'the Roman state stands firm on its ancient customs and on its men (or heroes)'.⁵ It is significant that he makes no mention of the form of the Roman State as such. One can only assume that he realized that political forms are of little importance when compared with the spirit which animates them.

If, in early times, the Plebeians did not participate in government, it was because they were not members of the original tribes, nor further organized into curies, gens and families. This meant that they could not practise the religion of the Roman State which consisted of the cult of the family gods, the Lares

and the Penates, of which the paterfamilias was the priest, the gods of the gens, those of the curie, the tribe and those of the City itself, of which the high priest or Pontifex Maximus was originally the king himself. An essential feature of these associated cults was their social nature. Without them the cohesion and stability of Roman society could not have been possible. It is significant that the Romans had no word for religion. 'Religio' simply meant 'matters of state'. The reason is very simple. There was no need for such a word, no more than there is in the case of any African tribe. All the beliefs and rituals which we regard as making up a society's religion were an essential part of its culture, which controlled its behaviour, i.e. which provided it with its effective government. As Fustel de Coulanges wrote, of the Ancient City: 'This State and its religion were so totally fused that it is impossible not only to imagine a conflict between them, but even to distinguish one from the other.'⁶

In the case of Rome, as in the case of many tribal societies, the land it occupied was itself closely associated with its religion. It was holy land, the land where the society's ancestors were buried. In the same way, Roman society was a holy society since its structure was sanctified by its gods whose own social structure closely reflected it.

It is not surprising that the Plebeians were originally excluded from active participation in public affairs. If they had no place in the body religious they could have none in the body politic with which it coincided.

The story of their mass departure from Rome, and voluntary exile to the Sacred Mountain is well known. They left saying: 'Since the Patricians wish to possess the City for themselves, let them do so at their leisure. For us Rome is nothing. We have neither hearth nor sacrifices nor fatherland. We are leaving but a foreign city. No hereditary religion attaches us to this site. All lands are the same to us.'⁷ However, their voluntary exile was short-lived. This structureless mass of people was incapable of creating a city on the model of that which they had known. Consequently they returned to Rome and after many struggles established themselves as citizens of the Republic. If they were eventually enfranchised, it was that they had become culturally

absorbed into Roman society, but for this to be possible the latter had to undergo considerable modifications. It could, in fact, no longer remain a tribal city.

Thus, whereas previously it was the Patricians, an aristocratic elite, who ruled Rome, a new elite slowly developed to replace it, the Senatorial class, composed of both Patricians and Plebeians. Its power was not based on hereditary status but much more on wealth. Such a change in itself must have seriously undermined the basis of social stability, by substituting the bonds established by 'contract' for those dependent on 'status' as a basis for social order. The resultant society, however, was still reasonably stable and probably would have lasted a very long time if it had not been for Rome's expansionist policies which led to the establishment of the Empire. The changes which this slowly brought about to every aspect of social life were far-reaching and profound and it is to them above all that one must look for the causes of the decline and fall of Rome.⁸

FOREIGN INFLUENCES

Foreign influences were undoubtedly the first cause of the changes which overcame Roman society. The cultural pattern which holds together the members in a traditional society and controls its relationship with its environment rarely survives the onslaught of powerful and unfamiliar foreign influences. Consider how that of the tribes of Africa has been disrupted by the colonial powers. The literature on the subject is voluminous. Think of the terrible cultural deterioration of the society of South Vietnam as a result of harbouring in its midst half a million affluent and pleasure-loving American soldiers. Look at the havoc at present being wrought to the very essence of Indian society by the cinema—which reflects a spirit totally alien to the Indian tradition.

But what were these foreign influences in Rome? First of all, after Sulla's conquest of Greece, Roman society was seriously affected by Greek influences. Greek literature, Greek philosophy, Greek manners, Greek dress became the rage. It spread

from the fashionable circle of Aemilius Paulus and his friends to the people at large. These influences were not those of the Greek City States of the age of Pericles, but those of an already degenerate Greece—one that had been long subjected to autocratic Macedonian rule, that had largely forgotten its ancient traditions and with them its spirit of self-government. The warnings of the elder Cato were in vain. Greek influence was highly disruptive, just as several centuries later was the influence of a decadent Rome or the German tribes that had the misfortune to be attracted within its orbit. (It is indeed no coincidence that such tribes as the Suevians, the Vandals, and the Ostrogoths, who figure so prominently in Roman history, disappeared without trace, while their more barbarous cousins, the Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes, the Helvetiae, and the Franks, etc., who succeeded in remaining outside the orbit of the Roman world, developed into the modern nations of northern Europe.)

To the Romans, however, more destructive than Greek influence was that of the Eastern Provinces. In antiquity there had been stable traditional societies in Syria, Palestine, Persia and Mesopotamia. These however had been engulfed into the Empires of Babylonia, Assyria and of the Persian Achaemenids and their successors, and within them there had predictably arisen vast shapeless cities like Ninevah, Babylon, and Persepolis with their structureless and demoralized proletariats, which had much in common with the conurbations of our own industrial society.

Not surprisingly, there arose in these cities all sorts of monotheistic cults of the sort that tend to satisfy the requirements of alienated and demoralized people. As Roman society disintegrated, so did these cults appear ever more attractive to the urban masses of Rome. Indeed the vogue for Eastern religions spread throughout the Roman Empire. The philosopher, Themistius, during the reign of Valens writes of the 'mass and confusion of varying pagan religious views'.⁹ He thought that there were at least 300 sects and 'as much as the deity desires to be glorified in diverse modes and is more respected, the less anyone knows about them'. Christianity was in fact but one of these importations. It is probable that if it had not been adopted by the Empire, another very similar one

would have been adopted in its stead, possibly, as Ernest Renan suggests, Mithraism.¹⁰

If these cults spread so easily within the Roman population, it was because the ground was fertile for them. In fact the Roman people had grown more similar to those among whom these cults had originally evolved, and had developed the same psychological requirements which the cults were designed to satisfy. Undoubtedly they would have had little chance of spreading among the Romans of the days of Cincinnatus—no more indeed than would the strange sects (many of them too of Oriental origin) which are gaining ground today among the culturally deprived youths of our own conurbations to replace the discredited culture of industrialism.

OTHER-WORLDLINESS

I have already referred to the fact that the organization of the Roman gods reflected the highly structured Roman society of old. The Oriental cults which replaced the traditional Roman religion were very different. They were largely monotheistic and I think it can be shown that *monotheism is the creation of a structureless, and hence a disintegrated, society.*

In a stable tribal society, the supreme god plays but an accessory role, and is usually referred to as the creator or 'moulder'¹¹ and regarded as too divorced from human affairs to have any interest in tribal matters, let alone in those of the individual.

The society's protection is assured by the family gods and those of the clan and the tribe—ancestral figures who, rather than being regarded as having gravitated, at the time of their death, to some distant paradise, are, on the contrary, considered to have simply graduated to a more prestigious age-grade. Indeed, a tribe is often said to be composed of the living, the dead and the yet to be born—hence its great continuity or stability. The god of these new monotheistic cults, however, had no connection with any specific society, nor indeed any great interest in society as such. His interest was specifically with the individual. His character too had changed. He was no longer a worldly, pleasure-loving figure like Jupiter, but a stern

autocrat, and this undoubtedly reflected the autocratic nature of government in the structureless society within which these cults originally sprang. Also he possessed a wife and child. This, too, was a great innovation. Their function was probably to satisfy psychological requirements previously fulfilled by the now defunct family gods, which the stern male god could not fulfil alone.¹²

It is interesting to note how the same changes overcame the pantheon of Ancient Egypt with the disintegration of Egyptian society during the Ptolemaic era. Indeed, with the triumph of Christianity, statues of Isis holding the baby Horus in her arms were frequently identified with the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus, and unknowingly introduced into Christian churches.

As already pointed out, the essential feature of these cults was that they were eminently asocial. Duties towards society were replaced by duties towards God, and success in the next world was substituted, as the ultimate end of human activity, for success in this one. Lecky emphasizes this essential point throughout his history.

The first idea which the phrase 'a very good man' would have suggested to an early Roman would have been that of a great and distinguished patriot, and the passion and interest of such a man in his country's cause were in direct proportion to his moral elevation. Christianity diverted moral enthusiasm into another channel and the civic virtues, in consequence, necessarily declined.¹³

Among other things, this meant that there was no longer any moral authority to prevent asocial behaviour. Thus one finds the extraordinary spectacle of people who succeeded in combining the pious fulfilment of their religious obligations with the most socially aberrant behaviour. As Lecky writes,

the extinction of all public spirit, the base treachery and the corruption pervading every department of the government, the cowardice of the army, the despicable frivolity of character that led the people of Treves, when fresh from their burning city, to call for theatres and circuses, and the people of Roman Carthage to plunge wildly into the excitement of the chariot races on the very day when their city succumbed beneath the Vandal: *all these things co-existed with extraordinary displays of ascetic and missionary devotion*

As in our case, the inhabitants of Imperial Rome suffered from a cultural split-personality. They were denizens of two contradictory worlds—or rather half-worlds—since people have always required a spiritual as well as a physical existence—and in the stable societies of the past, they coincided.

THE IMPERIAL SYSTEM

People tend to ignore the important principle that autocracy is unknown among stable traditional societies. Yet it is a basic principle of stability that it can only be achieved by a self-regulating system.¹⁴ When stable societies were governed by kings, these were in no way autocrats. The Homeric king like the original Roman king could be dethroned by a simple show of hands just as his West African counterpart can be 'destooled' in the same way.

In the Homeric city, the sovereign power resided not in the person of the king, in fact, but in public opinion: 'demouphemos', as it was referred to. This power was institutionalized into 'demoukratos', the latter without the former being but an empty facade. The role of public opinion was to ensure the maintenance of the traditional law.¹⁵ This was further ensured by the prestige of the Council of Elders and also by the fear of incurring the wrath of the ancestral spirits—the ultimate guardians of tradition, and hence of the society's continuity or stability.

It is essential to realize that the kings of Rome were not thrown out because they were 'reactionary' and hence opposed to 'social progress'—the reason normally given for dethroning monarchs today—but *for precisely the opposite reason*. They were guilty of causing a departure from traditional law by attempting to incorporate the Plebeians into the body politic, which would have meant radically modifying its tribal nature.

In spite of the remarkable efforts of Augustus to establish a more 'flexible' type of government under his 'principate' which at the same time maintained as many features as possible of the Roman Republic, the Imperial system grew to resemble the latter less and less, until eventually it became its diametric opposite.¹⁶

The Caesars, as described by Suetonius in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* were Oriental tyrants with little regard for anything but the satisfaction of their ever more extravagant personal caprices.¹⁷ Suetonius may have been biased, but it is also true that where there is smoke there is usually fire. The Antonines were undoubtedly an improvement, but after them the quality of the emperors went from bad to worse.

At the same time the influence of the Senate, which itself was undergoing a considerable change, waned increasingly. Eventually sovereignty resided, in effect, with the army and the urban masses. In the fourth century these took it in turns to name the emperor, whose average reign was little more than two years and who usually met his death by violence. During this period the increasingly degenerate Senate succeeded in naming but two emperors, both of whom were able to remain in power for but a very short period of time. In the fifth century and after—certainly after the reign of Theodosius—the emperors, as we have seen, were but puppets in the hands of some barbarian general or of some foreign power.

THE CHANGING ARMY

Roman expansion also led to radical changes in the nature of the army. During the early Republic, it was a citizen army. The soldiers were very much part of the body politic and its members owed allegiance to the Senate like all other Roman citizens. It was only after the Punic Wars, when Rome had acquired an Empire which stretched as far as Spain and North Africa, which meant that soldiers posted in these far away places were forced to remain for long periods away from home, that it became necessary to establish a professional army. As a result, soldiers became isolated from the rest of the body politic, and their loyalty to the Senate became progressively replaced by loyalty to their local commander. If it were not for this there would never have been the civil wars, nor for that matter would the Imperial system have taken the form it did in its later phases when the legions made and unmade emperors at their leisure.

Later, as we have seen, the commanders were increasingly foreigners, and eventually so were the troops themselves. This reduced still further the efficacy and loyalty of the Roman army.

PUBLIC GAMES

Another disintegrative influence was the institution of the public games. As Lecky writes, 'One of the first consequences of this taste was to render the people absolutely unfit for those tranquil and refined amusements which usually accompany civilisation. To men who were accustomed to witness the fierce vicissitudes of deadly combat, any spectacle that did not elicit the strongest excitement was insipid.'¹⁸ Once more the parallel with our own disintegrating society is very striking. In order to pander to the increasingly barbarous audiences of twentieth century industrial society, TV and film producers vie with each other in their efforts to devise ever more garish spectacles based on increasingly exotic exploitations of the twin themes of sex and violence. Indeed not to do so, in the age we live in, would be to court inevitable bankruptcy.

It must be noted, however, that it is but in a very degenerate society that such spectacles would in the first place be tolerated let alone have any hope of flourishing. In tribal societies entertainments are of a very different kind. As Roy Rappoport shows, they take the form of feasts devoted to dancing, singing, eating and drinking in which everybody participates. These events are not frivolous entertainments. In all sorts of subtle ways, they play an essential role in maintaining a society's social structure and, at the same time, its stable relationship with its environment.¹⁹ They are in fact rituals and as a society disintegrates, so do social activities become correspondingly deritualized. As they do so they lose their social purpose, and become, socially speaking, random events: cathartic outlets at best.

SLAVERY

The institution of slavery was undoubtedly another cause of the fall of Rome. Among other things, it permitted the growth of large-scale business enterprises with which neither the artisan

nor the small farmer, who were proverbially the backbone of the Roman Republic, could possibly compete. As was the case with our own Industrial Revolution, and as is today the case in the Third World with the advent of the Green Revolution, artisans and small farmers were ruined and inevitably migrated to the cities to swell the ranks of the depressed urban proletariat. Rome had increasing difficulty in accommodating them. They were made to live in squalid and overcrowded conditions and to provide them with their sustenance became one of the major preoccupations of the Roman State, causing it to indulge in ever more distant military campaigns for booty and tribute and to adopt ever more destructive agricultural methods.

But the institution of slavery had other consequences too. The great wealth which it generated changed, perhaps more than anything else, the nature of Roman society. It provided a striking contrast with the material austerity which was an essential feature of early Roman society and which was possibly a condition for the maintenance of the other virtues which characterized the Romans during that period.

It is worth quoting Lecky's description of the situation which developed in the capital as a result of these disastrous trends.

The poor citizen found almost all the spheres in which an honourable livelihood might be obtained wholly or at least in a very great degree preoccupied by slaves, while he had learnt to regard trade with an invincible repugnance. Hence followed the immense increase of corrupt and corrupting professions, as actors, pantomimes, hired gladiators, political spies, ministers to passion, astrologers, religious charlatans, pseudo-philosophers, which gave the free classes a precarious and occasional subsistence, and hence, too, the gigantic dimensions of the system of clientage. Every rich man was surrounded by a train of dependants, who lived in a great measure at his expense, and spent their lives in ministering to his passions and flattering his vanity. And, above all, the public distribution of corn, and occasionally of money, was carried on to such an extent, that, so far as the first necessities of life were concerned, the whole poor free population of Rome was supported gratuitously by the Government.²⁰

THE FREE DISTRIBUTION OF CORN

This played the same role as does our own state welfare system in the decaying conurbations of the industrial world. In New

York well over a million people (1975) subsist entirely on state welfare. In the US, as a whole, the figure is about fifteen million (1975). In Britain, according to a study undertaken by the Department of Health and Social Security in the 1970s, within the next two decades social work and 'caring' organizations will be one of the most significant employers in the country. In Rome, the scale of the free distributions of corn was eventually such that, in the words of Lecky,

To effect this distribution promptly and lavishly was the main object of the Imperial policy, and its consequences were worse than could have resulted from the most extravagant poor-laws or the most excessive charity. The mass of the people were supported in absolute idleness by corn, which was given without any reference to desert, and was received, not as a favour, but as a right, while gratuitous public amusements still further diverted them from labour.

The greatest damage done by state welfare, however, is to bring about the disintegration of the family unit itself. Indeed, this basic unit of human behaviour, without which there can be no stable society, cannot survive a situation in which the functions which it should normally fulfil have been usurped by the state. The family, in traditional societies, is an economic unit, as well as a biological and social one. If the father and the mother no longer have to make any effort to feed their children, if they no longer have to ensure their proper upbringing and education, then it must almost certainly decay.

A society in which the family has broken down is in the final stages of disintegration. Such is the case today in the ghettos of the larger American conurbations—not only in the US but in Mexico, in Venezuela and elsewhere. Such a society is characterized by all possible social aberrations, such as crime, delinquency, vandalism, drugs, alcohol, etc. which are indulged in by people as a means of divorcing themselves as much as possible from a social environment which is increasingly intolerable. One can only assume that these social deviations also characterized the depressed areas of urban Rome during the later Empire.

THE CONSEQUENT BREAKDOWN

All these changes led to the total demoralization of the Roman people and to the elimination of those qualities to which must be attributed the success of the Roman State in its earlier phases. One can do no better than quote Lecky again on this subject,

All the Roman virtues were corroded or perverted by advancing civilisation. The domestic and local religion lost its ascendancy amid the increase of scepticism and the invasion of a crowd of foreign superstitions. The simplicity of manners, which sumptuary laws and the institution of the censorship had long maintained, was replaced by the extravagancies of a Babylonian luxury. The aristocratic dignity perished with the privileges on which it reposed. The patriotic energy and enthusiasm died away in a universal empire which embraced all varieties of language, custom and nationality.²¹

Lecky could not be more eloquent in his description of the degeneration of Roman morals especially when he compares them with the moral qualities of the Romans during the early Republic.

In the Republic when Marcus threw open the houses of those he had prescribed to be plundered, the people, by a noble abstinence rebuked the act, for no Roman could be found to avail himself of the permission. In the Empire, when the armies of Vitellius and Vespasian were disputing the possession of the City, the degenerate Romans gathered with delight to the spectacle, as to a gladiatorial show, plundered the deserted houses, encouraged either army by their reckless plaudits, dragged out the fugitives to be slain, and converted into a festival the calamity of their country. The degradation of the national character was permanent. Neither the teaching of the Stoics, nor the government of the Antonines, nor the triumph of Christianity could restore it.

SOIL DETERIORATION

At once both a cause and an effect of social breakdown was the steady decline in the productivity of the land from which the Roman masses drew their sustenance.

Like all governments which depend for their survival on the support of a growing urban population, that of Rome adopted a cheap food policy. Just as in Britain, agricultural decline was partly caused by the import of cheap foods from abroad whenever the occasion arose. It was also caused by forcing the farmers to pay taxes which they could not afford, and also, as we have seen, by creating conditions in which only the largest enterprises could survive. Everything was geared to the short-term and, just as with us, the long-term consequences of the totally unsound agricultural practices which inevitably arose led to the most terrible deterioration of the soil. To this day, Southern Italy is a semi-wilderness, and the Italian Government, rather than attempt to restore the soil's lost fertility, is misguidedly attempting to combat the resultant poverty with large-scale industrialization.

The deserts of North Africa, which was once the granary of Rome, bear even more eloquent testimony to the destructive agricultural practices of the times. The area bristles with the ruins of once magnificent cities. Thus, where there is now the wretched village of El Jem, once stood the Roman city of Thysdrus, of which the most conspicuous remnant are the ruins of a colosseum which once seated 65,000 spectators. Where there is now the equally wretched village of Timgad, once stood the great city of Thamugadi, built by Trajan in the year AD 100. That city was once supported by extensive grain fields and olive orchards, of which there are now no trace. To quote Carter and Dale

Water erosion, as well as wind erosion, has been at work on the landscape. Gullies have been cut out through portions of the city and have exposed the aqueduct which supplied the city with water from a great spring some three miles away. Ruins of the land are as impressive today as the ruins of the city. The hills have been swept bare of soil, a story which may be read throughout the region.²¹

Those who refuse to face the terrible destructiveness of large-scale commercial farming have often argued that all this was caused by a change in the weather. Research however shows that this was simply not so. Evidence of unchanged climate in

FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

A further problem was the financial cost of providing free corn and free games for the multitudes and that of paying for the army which was constantly clamouring for more money, and whose power grew in direct proportion to the helplessness of the people, resulting from the breakdown of their social structures. Failure to satisfy its demands generally led to the overthrow of the emperor and his replacement by one more sympathetic to army interests.

As social and ecological disruption intensified, the Government was faced with the increasingly serious financial costs of attempting, as it did, to mask the symptoms of a disease which it could not cure. Thus, to raise money in the form of tributes from conquered territories became increasingly difficult. Settled populations around the Mediterranean had already been conquered and expeditions had to be undertaken into ever more remote areas. The point was eventually reached when there were no peoples left to conquer who were worth conquering. A possible exception were the Persians, but those indomitable people the Romans could never subdue.*

One means of raising money, needless to say, was to increase taxes, and they eventually became prohibitive. Indeed if the rural population started grouping itself around local strong leaders, thereby giving rise to the feudal system, it was not in order to obtain protection against marauding bands, but against government tax collectors (Curiales).²⁷

In such conditions, the State's financial situation grew steadily worse and, not surprisingly, it resorted to precisely the same expedients to which governments of today are resorting to tide over their immediate financial problems regardless of the social and ecological costs involved. Thus we find debased currency

*In 53 BC the army commanded by the Consul Crassus was annihilated by the Parthians. In AD 260 the Roman Emperor Valerian was captured, together with his army. Little more than a century later the Emperor Julian was killed when leading an expedition against the Sassanids who also defeated his successor, the Emperor Jovian.

being put into use; silver and gold coins which contained neither silver nor gold. Inflation, needless to say, grew eventually out of control.

GOVERNMENT REACTION

The Roman politicians, like ours today, never really understood the problems with which they were faced. The Gracchi thought they could solve the problem by legislation. Land distribution under the Gracchi law, was a failure. There is no point giving people a few acres of worn-out land if social and economic conditions do not favour the survival of the small farm. *It is the social and economic conditions which must be changed.*

Once the fertility of the soil had become so reduced that some of the latifundia did not even produce enough grain to feed the slaves who worked them, the Emperor Domitian issued an edict forbidding the planting of grapes in Italy. He even went so far as to order each landowner in the provinces outside Italy, to destroy half the grape vines. Needless to say, that edict was unenforceable and had to be repealed. If grain was not grown, it was because socio-economic conditions did not permit it. *It was those conditions which had to be changed, and this he was powerless to do,* just as our politicians are powerless to change those in which we live, and which render unfeasible any sustainable agricultural practices.

Pertinax, in AD 193, offered to give land to anyone who would cultivate it, but there were few takers.²⁸ Eventually, Diocletian, AD 284-305, attempted more drastic measures and issued an edict binding all free farmers and slaves to the land which they occupied. This was the beginning of the 'Coloni' system which eventually led to mediaeval serfdom.²⁹

It is interesting to note that in 1975 both in China and the Soviet Union, the intolerable trend towards urbanization was also halted by legislation. The peasants were simply not allowed to leave their villages and were effectively tied to the land. These so-called progressive states have thereby adopted one of the principal features of the mediaeval feudalism which they have so vehemently decried.

However, such legislation was, in the chaos of the disintegrating Roman Empire, very difficult to apply, and in effect no government was ever able to contribute significantly to the reversal of the process of social disintegration, to which the Empire was irreversibly condemned. The wise Emperor Marcus Aurelius advocated a stoical attitude towards a process which could not be halted. As Lecky points out, no emperor could have survived an effort to eliminate the more obvious causes of social and ecological degradation. The free distribution of corn had become an essential feature of life in the capital, to which everything else had adjusted. The people were addicted to it, just as the population of our larger conurbations is becoming addicted to our state welfare system.

Against slavery they were equally powerless. To interfere with it would have been to disrupt the economy itself, which was as dependent on slavery as ours is on machinery. Without slaves, Rome's already precarious agricultural system would have collapsed, just as would today our equally precarious one were it to be deprived of its tractors and chemical poisons.

To re-establish a socially orientated religion in a mass society which had been deprived of its basic social structure, and which had largely forgotten its ancient traditions, was an equally hopeless task. The Emperor Julian tried. For his efforts, he has become known to history as the Apostate.

To reform the political institutions was equally impossible. Augustus, after the civil wars, tried to do so, or rather to reconcile them with his Principate. His effort was ingenious but the structure he built was a bastard one. The institutions of the Roman Republic were admirably suited to a City State but not, as Hammond shows, to an Empire.³⁰ It is not surprising that such diametrically opposite social forms could not be forced into the same institutional framework. By becoming an Empire, Rome was in fact forced to break away from its past, and to do so, as Burke pointed out, 'is the greatest tragedy that can befall a nation.'

Diocletian's efforts at reform were even less successful. In the absence of a real society held together by public opinion reflecting its traditional cultural pattern, there was no power-base

other than the army and the urban masses, both of which were only concerned with the acquisition of increasingly short-term benefits. This is true today of most of the disintegrating societies throughout the world, as they fall within the orbit of the industrial system.

In order to combat inflation, Diocletian tried to break the monopolies and suppress combinations in restraint of trade by fixing maximum prices for principal commodities such as beef, grain, eggs, clothing; in all seven to eight hundred items. In this respect, he was more thorough than our politicians, for the death penalty was prescribed for anyone who sold these goods at a higher price. He also fixed the wages of teachers, advocates, bricklayers, weavers, physicians and even of various unskilled labourers. Needless to say, efforts to control prices and wages proved as ineffective as they have in modern times.

The situation could only go from bad to worse. By systematically accommodating undesirable trends rather than reversing them, a chain reaction was set in motion which could only end in total collapse. Thus, welfare caused the increasing demoralization of the urban masses. The public games made them still more degenerate. Both helped attract more people to the cities, thereby increasing the dimensions of the problem.

In the meantime, the inevitable depopulation of the countryside and the ruin of the yeomen and rural middle classes, made agriculture increasingly dependent on slave labour, further accelerating rural depopulation and further swelling the urban masses. The shortage of money to buy food and the inevitable soil deterioration required further taxation and ever more expeditions undertaken in search of tribute and booty by an ever less effective army, whose loyalty to the State was ever more in doubt, and which eventually simply disintegrated along with the rest of the body politic.

Our politicians are today caught up in a very similar positive feed-back process, from which they appear even less capable of extracting us. With neither vision nor courage, they simply allow the Ship of State to drift into ever more turbulent waters and content themselves with superficially repairing its ever more battered hulk, for no other purpose than to defer, for ever shorter periods, the inevitable day when it must flounder

beneath the waves. Such is the price which must be paid if social and ecological exigencies are subordinated to short-term political and economic interests.

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