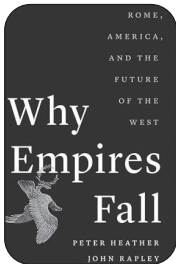


HOW EMPIRES ADAPT AND SURVIVE: AN EXERCISE IN COMPARATIVE HISTORY

Peter Heather & John Rapley,
*Why Empires Fall: Rome, America and the
Future of the West*, New Haven & London,
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Abstract: Although historical parallels between the fall of the Roman Empire and the current state of the West are not new in academic research or in public discourse, Peter Heather and John Rapley attempt to distance themselves from the prevailing approaches and the consensus they generated. The authors intend to provide a new perspective, built on the most recent archeological evidence, that simultaneously clarifies the imperial dynamics leading to decline and offers relevant insights regarding the dangers and possibilities the West faces today, when it has already lost its former global supremacy due to the rapid development of former marginal political entities. As a result, the book investigates how the periphery of an empire becomes politically and economically relevant and how negotiation is the key towards building a more prosperous future for all actors on the international scene.

Keywords: Ancient History; Contemporary History; Economic History; Comparative History; Geopolitics; Roman Empire; Imperial Decline.

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Why do empires decline and collapse? Were there clear signs of the upcoming fall of Rome centuries before it actually happened? Does the same fate await the modern West? These pressing questions are at the forefront of *Why Empires Fall: Rome, America and the Future of the West*, a volume co-authored by Peter Heather and John Rapley. An expert specialized in Roman history, Heather is primarily interested in life at the imperial periphery and how it is transformed by the dynamics of empire, while Rapley brings his expertise on political economy and globalization, being particularly concerned with the global market's impact on the developing world. By integrating research results from their respective fields, the authors wish to understand the present economic and political situation of the West, as well as to suggest how it may respond to current crises in order to remain a significant actor on the global stage.

Their work continues a long tradition of historical writing drawing comparisons between the rise and fall of Rome and the fate of the West, especially prominent in eras of perceived civilizational decline. Edward Gibbon's monumental *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* provides the framework for such histories seeking to identify not just the causes leading to the destruction of Imperial Rome, but why civilizations appear destined to ultimately decay and collapse. However, Heather and Rapley claim that Gibbon's narrative has had and still has such as

wide-ranging influence on historical and political discourse that its inadequacies are usually neglected. Other researchers have already noted how the rhetoric of decline has had a powerful and sometimes violent impact on contemporary politics, even if the parallels between Rome and the modern world are often based on emotional logic and cherry-picked facts rather than on historical evidence¹. These types of connections have created a meta-historical narrative that, although it “purports, in its various forms, to be a representation of some essential human and historical ‘truth’, it is better described as something akin to a myth or moral tale”².

As Cullen Murphy notes, historians are now generally averse to historical parallelism and to the lessons that may be drawn from it, since it has too often been used for various political agendas by over-emphasizing certain aspects while carefully ignoring others that may clash with its central narrative³. Nonetheless, the authors of the present book do not claim that Roman history has nothing to teach us. On the contrary, they contend that it needs to be reanalyzed from a different perspective in order to maintain its exemplary value for the contemporary West. The authors seriously doubt that the wish of returning to a golden age of the past is the solution to the current declining trend of Western civilization. On the other hand, resignation in the face of economic, social, cultural and political collapse constitutes an equally improper reaction. Instead, the West must realize that it cannot regain the global domination it once had. The brightness or bleakness of its future depends entirely on how its leaders and citizens rethink its place in a multipolar world order.

The first part of the book places the history of Rome and the rise of the “Western Empire” (as the authors collectively refer to Western nations) side by side, focusing especially on common political and economic aspects. In the first chapter, “Party Like It’s 399...”, the authors counteract the once largely accepted historical consensus that the Roman Empire was suffering from economic decline in the decades just before its fall, built on arguments such as the existence of *agri deserti*, the inflation of the silver denarius during the 3rd century, and the reduced number of inscriptions about the communal services of local political figures. However, more recent archeological research paints a different picture. Rural settlements still existed in all corners of the empire during the 3rd and 4th centuries. This means that Rome, being an agricultural economy, actually reached its highest Gross Imperial Product in the 4th century. The ‘deserted fields’ were not really deserted, the term referring only to land that was insufficiently productive in order to be taxed. Additionally, while silver coins were suffering from inflation, gold and other precious metals maintained their value in the Late Roman Empire. Lastly, the smaller number of laudatory inscriptions is a direct result of the new imperial power dynamics. Instead of competing for influence on a provincial level, the local elite was seeking to become part of the centralized bureaucratic system of the empire. Thus, local political conflict subsided and disseminating propaganda by commemorating generous acts done in service of the community also lost its purpose. Consequently, Rome’s collapse does not stem from a long economic decline, since the economy peaked just before the empire’s fall.

The second chapter, “Empire and Enrichment”, examines how the economic center of an empire is constantly in motion. The elites from the periphery wish to be integrated in the imperial system, thus encouraging local economic development. This, in turn, leads to the expansion of the bureaucratic system, since the empire tends to be governed from various centers closer to its border regions rather than from the capital. In addition, migration, be it voluntary or forced, helps redistribute wealth from the center to fringe territories. While an empire is initially forged through force of arms, an economic and legal infrastructure is what keeps it unified in the long-term. This is equally true for Rome and for the West, since the cooperation of Western nations was possible thanks to shared cultural norms and institutions, even if the United States functioned as the military superpower that was “able to ensure a measure of continuity and stability in the furthest outreaches of empire”⁴.

In the next chapter, “East of the Rhine, North of the Danube”, the authors distinguish between the internal and the external periphery of an empire. In the case of Rome, this difference depends on the distance between a province and the capital, since large distances were hard to cover and had a significant effect on trading possibilities. As a result, the internal periphery could take advantage of strong economic ties to Rome, while the external periphery was limited to commerce consisting of luxury goods. Modern imperial colonies can also be classified into “fully integrated provinces, substantially integrated inner periphery, and much less integrated outer periphery”⁵. But the aspect that separated them was not their distance

from the imperial center, but their connectivity to trading routes. As such, from a geographical point of view, the internal periphery (India, the Far East) could be further away from the capital than the external one (Africa). However, it is important to note that most provinces had a hybrid character, since they consisted of different regions that were mapped in various ways by the local governing bodies.

The final chapter of the first section, “The Power of Money”, deals with the rise of barbarian and colonial elites respectively, and how they affected imperial dominance and policy. As opposed to the barbarian confederations of the 1st century BC and AD, which usually disbanded after they were defeated or after they achieved their military objective, the barbarians were considerably better unified and organized in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. The smaller number of confederations and their larger size meant that they were more centralized, a reality aided by the fact that wealth gained from raids or from commercial relations with Rome mostly reached the hands of the military caste, who were able to recruit more troops and forge better weapons. This, in turn, determined Rome to modify its diplomatic strategy: instead of antagonizing these barbarian warlords, it offered very favorable terms in order to ensure their allegiance to the empire. Similarly, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the wealth gathered by provincial administrative elites, in the context of rising nationalist movements, meant that claims of colonial autonomy and independence gained more weight and could no longer be simply dismissed as easy to suppress local revolts. The western powers realized that governing their empires proved to increasingly

more difficult, which eventually led to a voluntary and mostly peaceful decolonization process. But this did not mean that the West abandoned its ambitions of economic domination. On the contrary, the global system established after the Breton Woods conference in 1944 showed that, although newly independent colonial nations were able to enjoy political freedom and economic prosperity, the West still had the instruments necessary to “punish” them if they wanted to exit its zone of influence. However, the current rise of political and economic actors from the former periphery highlights that the West has lost even this kind of indirect hegemony, and that it must reorient itself in order to adapt to the new circumstances of the 21st century.

In the second part of the book, Heather and Rapley pinpoint the factors leading up to the fall of Rome and reflect on how understanding them may be crucial for making sense of the West’s current position and for envisioning its future trajectory. “Things Fall Apart”, the initial chapter, provides an overview of the main causes that led to the collapse of the Roman Empire. First, resource distribution became more difficult as a result of the threat of the Sassanid Empire, which forced the Romans to invest more resources on their Eastern border. The new Persian rival determined Rome to institute an imperfect co-emperorship (even before the actual divide of the empire in two parts): one emperor guarded the East, while the other was focused on the West, thus reducing the empire’s ability to have a centralized resource distribution network. Second, the crises of the 3rd to 5th centuries were caused by an “exogenous shock”⁶: barbarians from the internal periphery were pushed inside

the borders of the empire because of the Hunnic threat from the external periphery. These barbarian confederations started conquering Roman lands and thus the empire entered a vicious circle: as rich provinces (for instance, North Africa) were lost, wealth was reduced, which led to lower funds for new recruits, which in turn meant that more provinces were lost due to the constantly weakening military force. In addition, local elites started siding with the barbarians, since they found that it was in their own economic interest to support usurpers to the Imperial throne. The authors highlight that all factors leading to the fall of Rome (except the threat from the external periphery) were direct or indirect consequences of the mechanisms on which the imperial state was built. Considering that the West has to manage many of the problems the Romans faced (mass migration, political tensions, rising rival powers), it may be able to learn how to deal with these challenges by understanding how and why the Roman Empire fell.

The second chapter, “Barbarian Invasions”, tackles the problem of migration in the contemporary world. Whereas the barbarians had to take territory from the local Roman elite in order to settle there, modern immigrants do not have to fight for territory with the native population. In other words, the modern economic system is no longer a zero-sum game, as the Roman agrarian economy was. Consequently, Heather and Rapley argue that immigrants represent a net economic gain for Western nations suffering from an aging population and a great dependency on welfare services.

The following chapter, “Power and Periphery”, focuses on the rising influence of the external periphery in the 21st

century. The economies with the fastest development today are no longer those of Western nations, but those of regions that were formerly considered part of the imperial periphery, such as India, Africa and China. In fact, the authors compare the current situation with that of the 4th century, when barbarians started weakening Rome economically and militarily by taking over its richest provinces. The modern equivalent to these barbarian confederations are the rapidly developing economies that own an increasingly larger number of resources for industrial production and are able to muster a greater workforce than the West. Among them, China is certainly the most prominent. Like the Sassanid Empire for Rome, China represents the first superpower that can seriously challenge Western, specifically American hegemony. However, the authors underline that the West should beware entering an open conflict with its rival, since this policy managed only to weaken both the Romans and the Sassanids, without providing significant advantages for either empire. Instead, it should accept that China's influence will not vanish and that the only way forward is a collaborative one: establishing friendly relations with China and negotiating with other developing countries, which may constitute the first steps towards solving global demographic and climate issues, thus building a new world benefitting all political actors.

In the fourth chapter, "Death of the Nation?", the authors discuss the pressing economic concerns the West faces as part of its recession. In the Late Roman Empire, the loss of wealthy provinces meant fewer taxes, which in turn forced Rome to raise taxes in the provinces it still controlled. As

such, many landowners preferred making advantageous deals with local barbarian chieftains rather than paying higher imperial taxes. The contemporary globalized economy creates a similar problem. The former periphery has a larger access to the global market and thus gains more income from it, whereas Western governments, whose welfare services were established when money was still flowing from the colonies, are forced to reduce their expenditure in order to avoid a tax increase. This means that debt has become a way of guaranteeing access to commodities today rather than of investing in innovations for tomorrow, with everyone hoping that a revolution in productivity will take place sometime in the future in order to cancel the galloping debt rate.

The book's conclusion, "Death of the Empire", synthesizes the authors' diagnosis on the current state of the West, while also providing some recommendations regarding its future development. As in the case of Rome, the Western Empire finds itself in a crisis because of its own inner workings, which generated not only a rival superpower and the rise of the former periphery, but also an internal rift in its society due to economic inequalities. Instead of trying to recover its former greatness, the West should focus on two main aspects. Internally, politicians should present the economic effects of immigration in an honest manner, especially considering the long-term effects of low birth rates and an aging population. Externally, the solution is not isolationism, but cooperation. While the model of the nation-state is not obsolete, since it has offered more freedom and prosperity than any other one, developing countries and their people must be treated

in such a manner that the world of the future will become one in which all citizens, Western and non-Western alike, will enjoy equal care and respect. This, Heather and Rapley believe, may be the most important political legacy the West can leave behind for future generations.

Providing an overall evaluation of the authors' argument is quite difficult. On the one hand, the book boasts several strong points which also give it its originality. Firstly, it is extremely well-documented, each author providing his own expertise relevant to the historical parallelism they propound. Heather draws on very recent archeological evidence and on his own research on Roman history and the world of late antiquity in order to nuance or even contradict prevailing theories about the fall of the Roman Empire. Rapley looks at the decline of Western hegemony through an economic lens, while also trying to grasp how the consequences of the West's colonial history ultimately led to the rise of previously minor economic agents on the global market.

Despite its double authorship, the book is not disjointed in terms of style or content, since the parallels between antiquity, modernity and contemporaneity are created by using concrete historical examples that contextualize the more abstract economic and political points made by the authors. In fact, herein lies the book's innovative character. Many authors, such as Alexander Motyl⁷ and Peter Turchin⁸, have attempted to develop a "theory of empire", searching for causes underlying the cyclical pattern of imperial rise and fall, and then using examples in order to justify their theoretical models. Instead of creating such an abstract framework describing the

stages of an empire's lifespan, Heather and Rapley focus on practical aspects reflecting concrete historical realities and show how these may indicate the rising or falling state of an empire.

On the other hand, the book suffers from several oversights that are not addressed in a satisfying manner. First of all, the authors' almost exclusive focus on economic and, to some extent, military matters (with their political consequences) implies that these are the most important aspects from which one can extrapolate the state of a nation. However, an empire may be economically prosperous without being culturally dominant. As historian Arnold Toynbee observes in his *A Study of History*, "[w]hile the economic and political maps have now been Westernized, the cultural map remains substantially what it was before our Western Society started on its career of economic and political conquest"⁹. Although Toynbee wrote these words in the 1930s, before the worldwide export of American culture, the end of the Cold War did not bring an era of cultural hegemony for the West that could have complemented its global economic domination. On the contrary, the upscaling of American interventionism, with its excesses resulting from the war on terror, shook people's trust in the values of their own civilization. And the state of a society also depends on the citizens' faith in their own cultural values. A culture ashamed of its history and identity disintegrates itself from within, without being capable of establishing a cultural model worthy of being promoted and embraced by others. Nevertheless, it is true that a number of conservative thinkers have already focused on the cultural aspects of Western decline, often coupling it

with the idea of moral degradation¹⁰. Conversely, Heather and Rapley wish to avoid such tropes in order to draw a more balanced and less apocalyptic picture of how the West may develop in the future, even if they identify and criticize the shortcomings of current policies.

At the same time, the authors tend to focus only on aspects that can be easily quantified, thus their interest in economic matters. But one cannot overlook cultural factors simply because they cannot be measured. Ignoring them means they are either irrelevant or constant, none of which is true. This is especially evident in the chapter on mass migration. The authors highlight its positive economic aspects, but ignore cultural issues. Although they mention that barbarians quickly adopted Latin culture and the Christian religion when settling in conquered Roman territories, they do not reflect on the situation of contemporary immigrants who wish to preserve their own cultural identity, which may clash with cultural norms of the host country, thus breeding conflict. Similarly, forcefully imposing Western values on other societies may create (and has created) resentment and outright hostility, since these nations are left with the impression that their autonomy and agency are thus negated.

Therefore, Peter Turchin's concept of "metaethnic communities"¹¹ is extremely useful when looking at the cultural makeup of an empire. Distinct metaethnic communities show the greatest cultural differences and are the most likely to come into conflict with each other. Turchin believes that "social groups are not simple collections of identical particles, readily described by statistical physics; they have

complex internal structures"¹². But Heather and Rapley appear to view individuals as interchangeable units, irrespective of culture, since they are all economic agents. However, this universalizing view ultimately leads to a limited understanding of the cultural issues raised by mass migration and the export of liberal democracy alike. Instead, acknowledging these aspects is the first step towards finding solutions to tensions between different groups of people that equally value their identities. Even if Samuel Huntington's axiom that "[i]n the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political or economic. They are cultural"¹³ is certainly too categorical in the opposite direction, as the 21st century has shown so far, cultural identity is still an important aspect that, although complex and impossible to quantify, cannot be overlooked.

In summary, Peter Heather and John Rapley have managed to demonstrate that the Late Roman Empire encountered many of the same challenges the West faces today as a result of the current globalized and multipolar world. Even if the authors mostly consider the economic crisis common to Imperial Rome and the contemporary West, as well as its political ramifications, to the detriment of cultural factors, their study remains a simultaneously valuable and readable addition to comparative history. Above all, the book shows the 21st century reader that ancient history holds more lessons than we (and even certain historians) may think and that empires must always adapt and negotiate mutually beneficial agreements with other political actors in order to survive and thrive in the constantly moving geopolitical landscape.

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5. *Ibidem*, p. 46.
6. *Ibidem*, p. 90.
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10. See, for instance: Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, New York, The Penguin Press, 2011; Douglas Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
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