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## Disintegration by integration: the Roman pattern

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### Introduction

In a period when the European integration process seems to be threaten by external factors, my thoughts go back in the Ancient age when the integrity of the Roman Empire seemed to be dissolve also by external forces. Then there were two main enemies: Barbarians invasion and attacks of others actors. Institutional and social establishments were threatened along with commercial networks.

In another confusing period, in interwar attacks that Nazi politics carried out against the liberal democracies of Europe, the German novelist Lion Feuchtwanger wrote his famous romantic novel *Spanish Ballade*. In its preamble, the author sketched another image of the Dark Ages in Al-Andalus or Muslim Spain. It was about an Iberian world in which three different cultures seemed to interfere: Christian, Jewish, and Islamic. This world where the German novelist introduced his characters was dated, more specifically, in the 8th century. At that point, it was increasingly clear to any contemporary that hoping for a return of the Roman Empire to the past was an illusion. Probably, the elders lurked their children with stories about the legends of heroic Roman legionnaires.

About that community and the reality of those times, generations of historians were concerned about deciphering their meaning. The world historiography has retained the seminal work of Belgian historian Henri Pirenne. His thesis, formulated in 1935, has strongly influenced the interpretation of historians from the following decades. Pirenne, on the basis of sources available eight decades ago, developed a theory that explains the economic crisis of the West in the eighth century as an outcome of the disappearance of Pax Romana that had assured the Mediterranean unity, and on the other hand of the impact of the Arabs on maritime trade.

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Beyond the dramatic character of that reality, the Belgian historian offers the image of two worlds that hardly find the ways of a dialogue. The obvious logic is that of a zero-sum game:

*“With Islam a new world was established on those Mediterranean shores which had formerly known the syncretism of the Romans civilization. A complete break was made, which was to continue even to our own day. Henceforth two different and hostile civilizations existed on the shores of Mare Nostrum. And although in our own days the European has subjected the Asiatic, he has not assimilated him. The sea which had hitherto been the centre of Christianity became its frontier. The Mediterranean unity was shattered.”* (Pirenne 1959: 152-153)

Can we consider that *Pax Romana* would have been able to preserve the Mediterranean unity in face of the Arabs intrusions? Obviously, this is a counterfactual approach to this issue. This is why I start by noting that *Pax Romana* was destroyed by the Roman Empire itself. Therefore, the economic crisis of the Western Europe was, actually, the outcome of the misgovernment of the Roman Empire.

My argument starts from Gene W. Heck’s explanation opposing the Pirenne’s thesis (Heck 2006: 13-35). Heck’s revisionist approach is grounded in three arguments: (1) there were not the Arabs who brought the Dark Ages to the West, but they brought back the instruments of capitalism and trade; (2) unlike the Carolingian West, Islam had adapted its doctrine to new realities; (3) when, finally, Christian Europe came out of the Dark Ages, it preplanned the corporate structures, the banking tools from the Muslims. (Heck 2006: 6-7)

If Heck focused his argumentation mostly on the seventh and eighth centuries to counterbalance the Pirenne’s thesis of Arabs impact, I would like to point out another aspect of Pirenne explanation saying that “the sea which had hitherto been the centre of the Christianity became its frontier. The Mediterranean unity was shattered.” (Pirenne 1959: 153).

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## **Pax as order**

What does ‘the Mediterranean unity’ mean? Always this unity has been associated to *Pax Romana*. Hardly can we translate the Latin word ‘*pax*’ into *peace*. A much contested term, peace in its turn means stability, order endorsing, in a holistic approach, different values and imposing the “moral circle” of a hegemonic power. Hence peace sets out culture and language.

*Pax Romana* was a system of governance of the Roman Empire. This was a concept encapsulating three attributes of the Emperor: *auctoritas* (guarantying

political and social concord), *imperium* (providing civil order) and his function as *pontifex maximus* (symbol of religious harmony) (Parchami 2009: 25).

Looking long and comparatively with other conglomerates of nations that history has retained from Antiquity, the Roman Empire had about two centuries and a half of glory. From the eyes of other actors with whom Rome had entered into interaction, the Empire had a more destructive effect than a civilizational one. States like Persia had not ceased affirming their superiority and viewed their Western rival as an enemy that should have been stopped, if not pushed into its old frontiers.

The northern and eastern bounders were targeted by Germanic and Parthian incursions, and then more and more their territories were attacked by other tribes. Were Barbarians the only cause of Roman disintegration? The "barbarization" of the Empire was possible first and foremost with the complicity of the imperial authorities, but also encouraged by a general state of mind so plastic described by the French historian Maurice Bouvier-Ajam:

*"War, invasion, rebellion, misery, banditry, murder and debauchery wreaked havoc. Hate reverend everywhere: religious, racial, political, and social. The power was conquered by plotting and assassinated and was lost in the same way. Privileged abused their privileges while there was still time and without any illusions about tomorrow. Rich people's expenses were extravagant, and their vices did not know boundaries [...].The violence of the barbarian who did not respect the treaties, the army or cohort leader, the revolted or cupid soldier, the brigand knight or the highway bandit paralyzed everything and led to exodus."\** (2008: 15)

After 180 AD and up to 476 AD (if we take Gibson's thesis about the fall of the Western Roman Empire), four major causes of this geopolitical transformation in the West can be identified:

- a) The empire was over-militarized and over-bureaucratized, making it increasingly difficult to govern;
- b) Society had lost civic conscience and loyalty to the state, feeling increasingly abandoned;
- c) Imperial authorities had confused the 'integration' of barbarians with 'barbarism', resulting in a general state of anxiety among the Roman aristocracy;
- d) Since the fourth century, the emperors had encouraged unfair competition between the West and the East until their antagonism.

*Pax Romana* of the first two centuries after Augustus was undoubtedly a peace imposed on the world, by a hegemonic actor. How many peoples would

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\* This is my own translation after the Romanian edition of Maurice Bouvier-Ajam's book.

have been willing to accept its brilliance at the expense of their own civilizations? The ambition of the first emperors was to transform the Mediterranean Sea into a *Mare nostrum*, but at what cost to the conquered peoples and to the Empire? Elements of urban, economic, legislative and even military civilization can hardly be denied or overlooked. However, the lack of flexibility and adaptability of the Empire is known, which results in a certain degree of intolerance towards religious, cultural or administrative alteration in the new provinces (see studies by [Kurt A. Raaflaub 2007](#)).

What this Empire succumbed was misgovernment and corruption. This system was expected to be peaceful internally, but as every hegemonic power 'to secure its vast boundaries, it found itself constantly fighting wars and repelling incursions.' ([Parchami 2009: 35](#)). In other words, such a colossus needed both internal peace and a permanent external war. Of this binomial lacked internal peace, but instead it had the 'chance' of an external enemy that should have stimulated internal unity. Nevertheless there were too many external enemies, and society too much divided inside.

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### **When over is too much**

The expansion of the Empire had led to the need to increase the army's power, but the things have seen such a risky evolution. If Augustus had the wisdom to strengthen his army power by putting it under the control of the Senate, after 180 AD the Senate and the Army had come to compete for authority in the Empire. The absence of a cross-check and, in parallel, the expansion of bureaucracy at the level of the Empire, had led to the increase and gradually the generalization of corruption. This seems to have manifested itself freely during Commodus (180-192), becoming in time, even vital for survival or promotion depending on the situation. For example, Marcus Aurelius Cleander, who was at the forefront of the Pretorian Guard and the police forces, was only one day selling 25 consular posts, so popular was the traffic of functions. ([Cary and Scullard 1975: 489-490](#)).

Increasingly into this blender of private and public interests drown both Romans and Romanized barbarians. Naturally, there has developed a chronic suspicion of betrayal, detraction, assassination, or civil riots. Historians still wonder whether it was real corruption ([McMullen 1988](#)) or just about the rhetorical manifestation of aristocratic anxiety ([Kelly 2006](#)). Once again, the sources read and interpreted by historians give us competing images of the same age. In essence, it is about defining the cause and effect correctly.

Over-militarization had come as a natural consequence of the increase in the number of legions. For example, Septimius Severus (193-211) created

three new legions: two in Mesopotamia and one in Italy at Albanum (to counterbalance the power of the Praetorians). Observing the tendency of the Severan Dynasty to rely on the army, to the detriment of the Senate, military claims had to be met increasingly with new privileges, which were usually tax and financial. More in detail, David M. Nicholas (2014: 8-14) also shows the high level of corruption in the Roman administration where the public and the private were in confused contractual relationships.

In the third century, the Roman state was already over-militarized and over-bureaucratized. Under these conditions, the Decurions were hardly financially rewarded because of the lack of land, and more and more mercenaries had to be recruited. In essence, the recruitment base remained among the Laeti (non-free Germans, war captives who had received land at the border in exchange for military service), and later among the *limitanei* (soldiers who were asked to work the earth and defend the border) (*Ibid*: 16).

What the Roman historian Tacitus called "the secret of the Empire" became in the third century the seed of disharmony and disintegration. The remark of the ancient historian that emperors can be created anywhere outside of Rome was a conclusion of the fateful year 69, when at the death of Nero the imperial diadem was claimed by four generals: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian. This "secret of the Empire" provoked a half-century (235-284) of the assassinations until the coming of Diocletian (284-305). Beyond the chaos created, the effect on the system was profound. At a time, in the competition between the Senate and the Army, the emperors have come to ignore the tremendous value that "*cursus honorum*" had had for a stable and predictable policy. From an elective monarchy or a republican empire, the reality of the third century describes a military monarchy in which the Equestrian Order took over parts of Senate authority. This transfer is more clearly seen when, at the beginning of the 4th century, when the main duties of *praefecti praetorio* were taken over by military commanders (*magister militi*).

Finally, in the third century we will witness the tendencies of the Empire's crushing, and two of the most well-known cases were: the Galician Empire (260-274) founded by C. Latinus Postumus, one of Gallienus generals and the famous kingdom of Palmyra (260-273) with Zenobia in his head.

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### **Anxiety and Loyalty**

All the while, the communities within the Empire lived in a social, economic and religious diversity that were all too much rationales of anxiety in the absence of an effective relationship between the State and society.

Caracalla's decision, in 212, to extend the status of Roman "citizenship" was probably originally a purely financial calculation, as the budget of the Empire was getting thinner. Equally, it could be the signal of a uniformity trend that had not been capitalized by all of its successors. This policy of equalizing the conqueror's status with that of the conquest could have caused an anxiousness of the royal aristocracy, which saw, one by one, their status competed by a standardising policy. This anxiety also transpires in the literature of the time. However, since Septimius Severus (193-211), a Roman criminal law principle had been preserved, which was devastating in the Middle Ages. This principle was that the law takes individuals into account. In fact, Severus divided the citizens into *honestiores* (privileged) and *humiliores* (unprivileged) (Cary & Scullard 1975: 494).

On the other hand, the logic of tax privileges created a mentality among the people, damaging to the Empire. Social differences accompanied by a sense of insecurity had led both to civilian riots and to a decrease in loyalty to the Empire, which translates as either passivity to barbaric migration or through collaboration with newcomers.

Above all, religious diversity had fragmented society. This, as it increased its predominance, determined at different times an antagonism between the State and society. Diocletianus (284-305) temporarily restored imperial authority, but the relationship with society was far less inspired. Mentioned in Christian literature as "the Great Persecution," his order to destroy the increasingly numerous Christian communities shows, on the one hand, the maintenance of obsolete means of destroying the internal adversary, as in the beginning of the first century, and on the other hand, the inability of the authority to preserve internal peace in a society so complex and heterogeneously ethnic and religious. As a downed enemy does not mean a threat, his adversity will be overflowed when circumstances allow him.

Much more open to counselling, Constantine the Great (306-337) knew how to play the card of religious tolerance so well that the Christian community has remained grateful to him so far. In the letter he sent in 324 to the bishop of Alexandria and his doctrinal adversary, Arius, the Emperor said so clearly that the problems of the Empire were so many and complex that he would have wanted to have at least the Christian community and peace: ("Restore me then my quiet days, and untroubled nights, that the joy of undimmed light, the delight of a tranquil life, may henceforth be my portion.") (Vasiliev 1952: 55-56). From there, Constantine knew how to play the role of mediator among the various factions of Christians who accused each other of heresy. The Ecumenical Synod of Nicaea (325) is the most eloquent exposition in this respect.

Beyond this talent, the emperor still preserves the image of a brilliant reformer and organizer in the perspective of many historians. However, Constantine was the one who built his own city on the Eastern side of the Empire and made it his capital. Leaving aside interpretations that might reflect Imperial megalomania or any strategic calculation, Constantine's initiative burdened the budget of the Empire and also caused the onset of a division of the imperium that was not formally acknowledged until much later. Going forward with the same interpretation, we can see that the Egyptian province, recognized as a granary of the Empire, became part of the East, rather than part of the Empire. In less than a century, the West had become increasingly exposed to interactions with barbarian tribes and kingdoms.

Moving the capital was not by itself the factor that triggered the process of disintegration of the Empire, but a succession of chained decisions created the premises of such an effect. If in the third century we notice competition between the Senate and the Army, where the former came out visibly weakened, in the end of the next century we can notice the weakening of the central power in favour of the province. An effect of the tax system introduced at the level of the Empire, after the fourth century, was that the financial power moved from the centre to a group of richer individuals. When they wanted to weaken the power of the Senate, the emperors from the Severan Dynasty and their successors increased the number of senators. More and more, senatorial aristocracy preferred to remain in the provinces, having the effect of absenting in Senate assemblies. More and more deprived by civilian authority over the provinces, this aristocracy, increasingly critical of the ability of the central power to govern the Empire, had developed from generation to generation a financial potential that could not only a class survival, but also the influence in the territory. This is partly explained by the fact that many of the 5th Century contemporaries had not observed the *de facto* defection of the West Empire. The aristocracy had long been preoccupied with maintaining its own status and local authority acquired by tradition. Families such as the Sagrii, Pontii, Aviti, Apollinares, Magni (in Gallic territories) knew how to develop a matrimonial system that allowed them to slake financial power, surviving the Empire long after it ceased to exist (Geary 1988: 30). The Roman-Barbarian symbiosis became apparent in time, and differences were no longer found between the Romans and the Germans, but between the elite and the rest of the population.

We return to H. Pirenne who left us an interesting description of the 5th century Empire:

*“As against its advantages, we must remember that the Empire was obliged to keep armies in being on the frontiers of Africa and Asia while it had to face its enemies in Europe. Further, it had to deal with civil*

*disturbances; there were many usurpers, who did not hesitate to enter into understandings with Barbarians. [...] while the populations of the Empire were passive, and incapable of resistance; without civic spirit, they despised the Barbarians, but were ready to submit to their yoke.”* (Pirenne 1959: 21).

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## **An unfair competition**

The "barbarisation" of the Empire was accomplished with the Empire's complicity. Population movements in the north and east of the Empire had a long duration with varying intensities and impacts. The research of the last decades gives us more and more a complex image to those times. The interpretations are no longer so categorical, and the dissolution of the Empire in the West is no longer so dramatic on the part of these migrating nations. Poor governance and social and political instability in the interior have been the ones that have, in essence, determined a certain type of transition from the classical imperial period (*Pax Romana*) to the crushing of sovereignty. As the systemic crisis of the third century attracted the first strong attacks of Germanic peoples, so 376 AD remains a milestone in the awareness of the decline of this system. Thervingi Goths, Visigoths and then Greuthungs (Ostrogoths) have entered interaction increasingly closer and diverse Empire. Thervingi relations with the Romans were covered in 332 when Constantine the Great signed a treaty with their king, Ariarich, which recognized their status as foederati. What chance that they managed to achieve peace with the Empire, and got support from the state to consolidate imperial tutelage! Their admiration for the Roman world has now been transformed into collaboration. Of course, discontents and incidents still existed, but in 369 a new treaty treats these Goths as equal to the Empire, not just the foederati. As history is overwhelmed by peculiar moments that cause human society to question the opportunity of preserving traditions at the expense of saving solutions, so was the year 376 when the kingdom of the Turks was destroyed by the hunts of Asians who had come from Asia. From this moment on, the Thervingi relations with the Empire became complicated. By penetrating the Empire and retained in history by now as Visigoths, they had 40 years of migration and conflict in the Empire. It was not until 416 that the kingdom of Aquitaine was finally established, with its centre in Toulouse controlling part of Hispania.

Since the beginning of the 4th century, the western part of the Empire has been increasingly exposed to "barbarism." Since 395, Rome has ceased to be capital. Honorius settled his residence in Mediolanum (Milan), as seven years later, when the Visigoth Alaric besieged this city, the emperor moved to



Ravenna. Who encouraged Alaric to penetrate the Italian Peninsula? The sources tell us that it is precisely the co-emperor of Constantinople. In 397 Arcadius called Alaric military commander (*magister militum*) of the Eastern Illyricum Prefecture, being the first model to impose imperial authority on a Roman province. Finally, the complexity of these tensioning moments had found a too weakened empire to resist resistance. As a result, Honorius had no problem concluding a treaty with Athaulf, Alaric's successor. Motives can be framed in the logic of choosing the least evil, for this treaty put Athaulf in the post of the Empire's defender against Jovinus who attacked Gaul. The state ration of that time brought him the same Athaulf, in 414, into a marriage to the famous Galla Placidia, the sister of Honorius and Arcadius.

For a long time, we can remark that the Empire's policy of resistance to the Nordic and Eastern nomadic population movements has been replaced by a policy of compromise, increasingly condemned by corruption that has become systemic.

The ease with which the Roman emperors shared favours for various received services shows the loss of discernment or the inability to manage state affairs. For example, Arcadius, the Emperor of Constantinople, repudiated Fravitta, an ally got, as consul, because he defeated Gainas, another rival of Aryan who had threatened his capital. On the other hand, the same Arcadius had no reluctance to call Persian king Yazdegerd I as the guardian of his younger son, Theodosius II, which shows the precariousness of the system.

The introduction into the Roman army of whole bodies of barbarians in order to defend the Empire of other barbarians shows the degree of barbarism of the army. However, I think that the issue itself was not the "barbarisation" of the army, because in fact it was also an expression of the integration of new peoples, but the fact that the state did not work coherently. If the state and society were to continue to develop on the basis of a real partnership and the efficiency of governance, "barbarism" could have been called "integration" today and could be seen as a success. In all of this fifth century marauding, imperial power has lost its authority in the provinces, increasingly controlled by a local aristocracy that has learned to coexist and cooperate with a barbarian elite eager to integrate. The admiration of the Barbarian kings in the West is recognized for the ancient splendour of the Empire. In fact, they did not have the title of "Emperor" until "Carol" but "military masters", "consul" or "kings", always seeking, the Roman Emperor from Constantinople. When the Empire ceased to exist in the West and who inherited it, we will see in the next chapter.

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