EUROPE, ROME AND EMPIRE: INDIVIDUALISM, SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND DECLINE

Is Europe following in the footsteps of ancient Rome, asks **Greg Melleuish**

Much of the documentary *Decadence: The Decline of the Western World* by Australian filmmaker Pria Viswalingam follows the familiar left-wing stratagem of denouncing the evils of capitalism by using the usual clichés. But some aspects of it, particularly those on religion and family, would resonate with those of a more right-wing persuasion. In fact, well-known conservative John Carroll was among those interviewed for the documentary.

The themes of decadence and the fall of the West seem ubiquitous since the turn of the century. Scores of commentators and scholars on both sides of politics have written about 'the coming apocalypse in America and the end of Europe.'[1]

People, in and of the West, tend to think in terms of empires rising, flourishing, then declining and falling. It happened to Rome in the ancient world, and it is happening to Britain, which is living in the afterglow of its empire unsure of where its future lies. In recent times, commentators have announced with glee the approaching demise of the 'American empire' without giving any real thought as to what such a fall would entail. It appears that only China goes on forever as the mandate of heaven is passed from one regime to the next.

A few years ago, it was fashionable among writers of a certain type to unfavourably compare America with Europe, and even to proclaim the coming of a United States of Europe that would eclipse America as a model for the world.[2] Such comments are now nowhere to be seen as the reality of Europe's plight sinks in.

For Steyn, America and Europe are headed for oblivion as the population keeps declining and a bureaucracy keeps growing. Both America and Europe are becoming increasingly rigid and governed by an ever-growing, complex and restrictive set of rules and regulations. They are both slowly being throttled not so much by red tape as by a red silken cord that caresses as it squeezes the last dregs of life from them.

Is this the appropriate way to think about the past and future of Europe? Is there indeed a historical pattern through which civilisations pass and a fate to which they must succumb? For the children of the West, the model they look to is Rome and its decline, as Gibbon saw it, from the glorious age of *Pax Romana* to the final ignominious fall of Constantinople. To consider this issue, it is worthwhile to give a sketch of the Roman 'course of empire.'

The Roman Empire was, in many ways, quite different from our modern world. For one thing, it was created through conquest rather than trade, and the Roman elite always regarded commerce as an undignified occupation for members of the elite. But that did not mean that the Roman Empire was not subject to the

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same sorts of economic principles that govern our society. In the glory days of the *res publica*, when Roman armies took on enemy after enemy, from the Carthaginians to the Greeks to the Gauls, and trounced them all, the Romans combined a strong sense of social solidarity with a powerful individualism, especially among its elite, the *nobiles*. This combination of individualism and willingness to work together also characterised the Athenians in the fifth century when they defeated the mighty Persian Empire, built an empire of their own, and created democracy and some of the greatest cultural achievements of Western culture.

The conquests of the republic brought great wealth, especially to the Roman elite. It also created an empire that proved to be ungovernable by the old republican forms. The result was the Principate, or rule by one man backed by the army. The empire had expanded as far as it could, and the flow of wealth into Rome slowly dried up as there were no more enemies to be enslaved or booty to be taken. Instead, the Romans found themselves having to pay for the defence of their empire, which meant maintaining a large army. Over time, the Principate destroyed individual endeavour as the despotic rule of one man made the Roman elite servile and craven. Slowly, but surely, the costs of empire became a very expensive burden.

The empire also had to face the trials of migrating barbarians, perhaps stimulated to move because of declining climatic conditions and the ravages of disease. The rulers responded to the ever-growing costs of the empire by debasing the currency, or inflation.[3] The empire almost collapsed in the third century through a mixture of economic and political chaos as the coinage became worthless and emperor succeeded emperor.

Recovery came with the emergence of a new type of imperial regime that increased the size of the army, imposed many more bureaucratic controls, and restored the currency. The solution to the crisis was not greater freedom and increased involvement by citizens, but greater control and central direction. And it worked in the short term. But it was an increasingly brittle regime that was always on the defensive. To pay for its armies, it had to assert more control over its citizens, and the cost of ensuring survival became increasingly greater. Rome slowly died as it became more despotic and struggled to put armies in the field to defend its vulnerable territories from those who wanted to enjoy the benefits of its civilisation. As Rome became more despotic and sought to extract more from its subjects, it lost any great sense of solidarity. In its place, the Christian Church provided social cohesion; only that cohesion was no longer political and military in nature but religious.

Rome sank into despotism and social disorder which was particularly characterised by the endless religious disputes that tore its unity apart in the fourth and fifth centuries as Christians in the empire fought over doctrine.[4] Invaders, including the Goths, Vandals and Franks, stripped much of the Western empire away in the fifth century, while large parts of the Eastern empire simply collapsed when facing Arab invaders in early seventh century. Such are the fruits of despotism, economic weakness, and internal conflict.

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Where, it might be asked, does the history of Europe stand in relation to the history of Rome? Both similarities and differences exist. Europe, the core of which can be defined as the territories that composed the ninth-century empire of Charlemagne plus England, was also a dynamic, energetic and expanding entity just as Athens and Rome had been before it. It did not just start expanding in the period of the maritime empires during the sixteenth century. Robert Bartlett argues there was constant expansion out from the Carolingian core during the Middle Ages: the re-conquest of the Iberian peninsula, the English expansion into Ireland, the Germanic move into eastern European, and, lest it be forgotten, the short term excursion into the Middle East or outré mer.[5]

European culture was dynamic and energetic from a very early stage. This dynamism was matched by inventiveness, and a capacity to develop popular political institutions. Certainly Europe was not as rich or sophisticated, as China, India and much of the Islamic world. But, in many ways, its relative poverty was an advantage. If it was to become affluent it needed to do things, make improvements, and trade with the rich parts of the world.

It is nowadays fashionable to point to the famous Chinese fleet of *Zheng He* comprising massive ships that travelled around the Indian Ocean in the early fifteenth century. In comparison, the ocean-going ships produced in Europe were tiny. The point, however, is that the Chinese fleet was there to gather tribute and never made it out of the Indian Ocean. A century later, the ridiculously small European boats were sailing all the way around the world.

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European restlessness can be linked to two aspects of Europe that were not found together in the rest of the world. First, Western Europe comprised of a myriad political units that still shared a common culture. Second, many of these political units were run on the basis of popular government. There were no democracies among them but there were republics based on popular rule, some form of constitution, and some election of public officials. Even within kingdoms, there were local communities that operated according to a charter and some form of representative institution that allowed for at least the most important members of the kingdom to be consulted.

Most importantly, European institutions allowed for the combination of both individuality and social solidarity. This can be seen most clearly in the development of the corporation, a legal entity that had the unique quality of being considered as an individual for legal purposes.[6] Europeans developed their capacities as individuals within the framework of being members of corporations. They had liberty but they also had the constraint of being members of associations that were devoted to the good of their members but limited by rules.

It was this balanced mixture of individualism and social solidarity created through membership of associations that distinguished European culture. It helped foster the energy that characterised European culture from the Middle Ages onwards. However, as with the Athenians and the Romans, there was a downside to such a vibrant culture. The first was the intense competition between European states for dominance, comparable to that of fifth century Greece. Over time, there was a consolidation of Europe into fewer and fewer political units. The small, popular republics lost out to larger territorial kingdoms and empires. Popular political institutions tended to be ground down as states became more and more powerful and rulers wanted to act without having to consult their subjects.

There is an opinion that early modern Europe is comparable to the 'warring states' period of Chinese history before the establishment of the Chinese Empire by the Qin in the third century BC.[7] As the competition between Chinese states became sharper, they became more ruthless and authoritarian until the most ruthless and despotic of them all, the Qin, triumphed over everyone else. However, the time of the warring states was the most intellectually fertile period of Chinese history, giving birth to a range of philosophies ranging from Confucianism to Legalism.

The 'warring states' period of European history was equally intellectually fertile. It gave birth to the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. This perhaps reflects Machiavelli's observation that it was disunity between the Plebs and the Senate that made the Roman Republic free and powerful.[8] The world has rarely seen such intellectual and cultural efflorescence apart from the Athens of Pericles. But it also saw the growth of the state, often in an increasingly despotic form, a 'police state' that considered the individual to be a tool to be used and regulated by the state to serve its purposes.[9]

Unlike China, this did not result in the creation of a despotic empire. For one thing, no

country was ever able to conquer Europe. Every aspirant who desired such dominance, from Charles V to Napoleon to Adolf Hitler, failed. More importantly, the growth of state power was ultimately matched by the growth of individualism and the desire for liberty. The strongest modern states, such as Britain, managed to combine strong institutions with popular government and the desire for liberty.

The reader of Thucydides knows that fifth century Athens fell prey to the hubris of its ambition and its willingness to resort to increasingly violent and immoral practices, as can be seen in the 'Might is Right' doctrine espoused in the Melian dialogue.[10] It culminated in the madness of the Sicilian campaign that saw the destruction of a major Athenian army.

In a similar vein, Europe also found that it could not control itself. Europe, like Athens and Rome, was dynamic, energetic and somewhat violent. War and aggression went side by side with enormous cultural achievements. The great tragedy of Europe was that for all its extraordinary achievements, it almost destroyed itself through wars that more than matched in ferocity those of 'warring states' China.

The period from the late nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century was one of enormous European cultural flourishing. It was also one of escalating violence, which culminated in the absolute madness of World War II. This was the key moment of European history when amid scientific discoveries such as quantum theory and relativity and great cultural achievements, including the novels of Thomas Mann and Robert Musil, Europe came close to committing suicide.

Unlike Rome no European empire was created. Instead the competition continued until there was no one standing and powers from outside Europe had to come in and sort out the mess. European overseas empires ceased to be viable, and the Europeans had to retreat into their little corner of the world. What has happened since then only makes sense in the light of the enormous trauma of the first half of the twentieth century.

Europe forsook dictatorship for democracy. It sought to curb its aggressive tendencies and become the paragon of a civilised community. Now it appears smug as it looks down on the 'aggressive' Americans, the same Americans who helped save it from its worst vices. Europe has slowly but surely worked towards becoming a much more unified entity, seeking to create peacefully the empire that could never be created by violence. It imagines itself as having achieved something akin to the *Pax Romana*.

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It is worth remembering that the last great Roman authors, including Tacitus, lived during the early years of the Pax Romana, but they had been formed intellectually by their response to the violent years of the reign of Domitian. They had few successors. The *Pax Romana* was the time when the Roman arteries began to harden. Even if the Europeans ultimately achieve their unity by peaceful, rather than violent, means they still have to live with the logic of an empire. Moreover it can be argued that the key factor shaping their quest for unity has been the trauma that preceded it. After so much war, who would not want the 'perpetual peace' of Kant?[11]

What we can see in the *Pax Europa* of the past 50 years has been the slow and continuing growth of the state and the decline of individuality. Fascism and Nazism sought to subordinate the individual totally to the state. One would have thought that with their demise, the balance between individualism and social solidarity, so crucial to Europe's history, might have been restored. Instead, the rise of European unity has been matched by the growing power of the state. The cases of Rome and China both indicate that once political unity is achieved, it is only a matter of time before individuals lose power and it is vested in the hands of the ruler and the supporting bureaucracy. It may have taken 300 years in Rome from Augustus to Diocletian, but it did happen.

Unity may solve the problem of violence that competition creates but the end of competition brings a whole train of problems in its wake. There is the inexorable growth of a bureaucracy that demands more and more from its citizens. There is the drying up of cultural vitality; bureaucrats prefer peace and quiet to the disorder that accompanies innovation. There is the problem of a declining birth rate, a problem that began in Rome in the early days of the empire under Augustus. And finally there is the problem, now being faced by Europe, of the burgeoning cost of maintaining 'perpetual peace.' To maintain the gargantuan appetite of an imperial bureaucracy, and in Europe's case the cost of the benefits of the welfare state, the state must impose more and more controls on its members.

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In such circumstances there would appear to be only one solution: reverse the historical process, and for Europe, revert to being a melange of competing political units. Of course, such an idea raises a range of new questions. Is it possible to alter what seems to be the inexorable 'course of empire' in this way? Would such a reversion lead to an increase of violence? These are not trivial questions. But if Europe wishes to once again enjoy the intellectual and cultural vitality that was once its hallmark, it cannot continue down its current path.

Endnotes

1 For example, Mark Steyn, *After America: Get Ready for Armageddon* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2011); *America Alone: The End Of The World As We Know It* (Regnery, 2006).

2 T.R. Reid, *The United States of Europe: The New Superpower and the End of American Supremacy* (London: Penguin, 2004); Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

3 Joseph Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 128–151.

4 Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

5 Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (London: Penguin, 1993).

6 Martin van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Harold Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983).

7 Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and state Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

8 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Translated by Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcove (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16.

9 Keith Tribe, *Governing Economy: The Reformation of German Economic Discourse, 1750–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

10 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Translated by Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1972).

11 Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795).