

This is the INTERLUDE between  
chapters 6 and 7 of:

# The *Crux* of WORLD HISTORY

by Francisco Gil-White © 2005

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Volume 1.

## The Book of Genesis

The Birth of the Jewish People

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## INTERLUDE

### Warfare, and the reproduction of class in the Roman system

**The Roman culture of murder and war • How Roman warfare reproduced Roman class • Revolution, and how the Romans dealt with it • *Pax Romana*?**

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In my hypothesis, Judaism was launched as part of an ambitious Persian strategy to defeat the fascists and liberate the entire world, at a time when the most powerful fascists were *Greeks*. Not long after Judaism was launched by Ezra, Nehemiah, and Artaxerxes, the Greco-Macedonians destroyed the Persian Empire. By then, however, the Persian-backed Jewish movement had been diligently lodging itself into every country in the Mediterranean and beyond, working to convert the oppressed pagans and liberate them, one by one. The incubation period was over: the Jews would stand for themselves and fight the Greeks on their own.

Soon, however, the clash between the ancient left wing and the ancient right wing became one between Jews and *Romans*. The Greeks didn't disappear, but the Romans became masters even over the Greeks, and it was the Roman Empire, supported in the Eastern Mediterranean by its Greek allies, that

the Jews would have to contend with. It is now time to narrate, then, how the Jewish-Roman clash developed, as we make our approach to the anti-Jewish genocide perpetrated by the Romans in the first and second centuries.

First, however, I shall give you an image of the foe. Chapter one already gave us a taste, and this interlude will round out the picture by focusing on how the conduct of Roman war determined almost everything about the remarkably stable Roman system. The point of this exercise is not only to familiarize ourselves with how the Roman value system endorsed murder and sundry other forms of brutality, but also with the manner in which this institutionalized violence reinforced an oppressive equilibrium that lasted a millennium.

I have always been very fond of a group of anthropologists who call themselves 'structural-functionalists.' These are students of human behavior who are fascinated by the phenomenon of societal stability: in many ways, large and small, societies tend to be conservative, sometimes preserving basic aspects of social organization over astonishingly long periods of time. The structural functionalists are interested in discovering which social processes feed back into which, thus *functionally sustaining* each other and keeping society as the same kind of *social structure* from one generation to the next. The Polish genius Bronislaw Malinowski, whom you may remember from chapter five, is a founder of this school of thought. Precisely because the Roman Empire is one of the more stable social systems that a historian will encounter, the structural-functionalist approach is especially useful here. I have therefore approached the Roman Empire from a

structural-functionalist perspective, seeking to explain the social mechanisms that kept it stable, *as that kind of system*, from one generation to the next.

## The Roman culture of murder and war

The Romans inherited much from the Greeks, and intensified it; thus, Roman culture and values revolved around doing violence to people. I shall begin with the Roman prestige system, which contains a wealth of useful information about Roman values, teaching us that the Romans did not kill merely for plunder, but for ‘glory.’

A scholar of the Roman prestige system writes:

Emperors advertised their military success on triumphal arches and other victory monuments and in spectacular triumphal ceremonies, as well as on coins announcing territories ‘captured,’ ‘conquered’ and ‘subjugated’... Poets and panegyrists praised the emperors’ military victories at every opportunity, and their victories were accumulated and celebrated in the imperial titlature itself. The martial element in this titlature was quite prominent... It is significant that ancient [Roman] sources perceive a relationship between a martial, victorious image and the loyalty of the army. We might well believe that such an image also had a great deal of appeal for the emperor’s own class—the senatorial aristocracy—as well, and that the emperors themselves must have shared these values... — Mattern (2004:189)

In Rome, everybody who could, announced, to the limits of extravagance allowed by their budget, their individual military successes. The highest honor was the ‘triumph,’ mentioned above, and awarded to a general who had won an outstanding victory against a foreigner (but not against a secessionist or revolutionary), and “celebrated by a procession through Rome from the Campus Martius to the Capitoline hill. In these exceptional circumstances, the triumphant general (*triumphator*), dressed like the god Jupiter, rode in a chariot, and was permitted to march his army inside the *pomerium*”<sup>1</sup> (Boatwright et al. 2004:490). To picture the returning general engaging in such over-the-top antics is to realize that the ancient Roman aristocrats were incapable of self-conscious irony. Not unlike the equally humorless modern fascists, they took themselves quite seriously.

The constant competition among Roman aristocrats for this... ‘glory,’ or military renown, resulted in much frivolous domestic and foreign policy. For example, when the Romans sent one mediocre legion after another to be destroyed by Spartacus’ well-led insurrection because the *real* generals could not be bothered with a slave revolt (Sheldon 1993). No matter how big the slave revolt, you see, it couldn’t get one a ‘triumph’ because this was a *civil* conflict (triumphs were not awarded for victories in those), and what’s the point of slaughtering thousands of people if you don’t get to tour the city of Rome in a chariot, dressed like the god Jupiter?

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<sup>1</sup> This was the *literally* sacred (blessed by a priest) boundary of the city of Rome, inside which one usually could not do that.

According to Sallust, a historian from the first century BCE, “competition for *gloria* was one of the key factors in Roman expansion” (Boatwright et al. 2004:99). Or else it was a key factor in its *non*-expansion. As Mattern (2004) relates, sometimes easy conquests were not attempted because they were *too easy*—resulting in too few deaths—and were therefore unlikely to bring much ‘glory’ to the local governor or general. And more than one Roman campaign was arrogantly launched in almost total geographic ignorance (see Sheldon 2002, for one example), with great costs to the soldiers, who were evidently considered expendable.

I hasten to add that when conquests were launched for reasons not primarily or directly motivated by the naked quest for *gloria* they were often not any less frivolous. What Boatwright et al. (2004:219) call the “typical senator’s predicament of having seriously overspent in their competition for political office” will sound familiar to modern American readers, but the ancient senators had characteristically Roman ways of solving their problem. The rising Julius Caesar, during the year in which he administered Further Spain,

...blatantly exploited his year as governor to recoup what it had cost him to win election as *pontifex maximus* and *praetor*<sup>1</sup> [elections were expensive

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<sup>1</sup> *pontifex*: (pl. *pontifices*)—(“bridge builder,” “pontiff”) Member of one of the major groups or “colleges” of Roman priests, headed by the *pontifex maximus*; from the time of Augustus onwards, this headship was always taken by the emperor. As in the case of the later Roman Catholic pontiff, once elected, the office was held for life.

because enormous sums were expended bribing all sorts of people]. The unprovoked attacks that [Caesar] launched on peoples in the far west of the Iberian peninsula yielded sufficient loot for him not only to clear his deep debts, but also to make substantial payments to the [Roman] treasury— Boatwright et al. (2004:232).

And he exterminated so many Iberians that he earned himself a ‘triumph’—so he got *gloria* out of that too. This campy lightness with which the all-powerful Roman aristocrats mass-murdered left and right underlines the degree to which the world was a playground for them.

But if a picture, as they say, is worth a thousand words, then perhaps a well-chosen example is worth a thousand explanations. I choose Cicero. Why? Because, as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* explains, Cicero “is remembered in

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*praetor*—Annual magistracy with *imperium*, an important step in the *cursus honorum* (series of magistracies which Roman senators sought to hold in order to become leading public figures).

*imperium*—(from the verb *imperare*, “to command”) Supreme authority in Rome’s affairs vested in certain officeholders, who alone (among other prerogatives) could command troops and impose the death penalty. The *imperium* of emperors was specifically made *maius* (“greater”) so that it outranked that of all other holders.

see Boatwright et al. (2004:479-490).

modern times as the greatest Roman orator.”<sup>1</sup> He was considered a towering legal mind who, in addition, wrote much philosophy. He was Rome’s giant intellectual—a man of culture. And yet...

...in public [Cicero] declared that military talent had brought eternal glory to Rome and compelled the world to obey her commands and that it was to be more highly valued than the orator’s eloquence (*pro Mur.* 21ff). He scoffed at the Epicurean Piso’s professed disdain for a triumph as preposterous and incredible (*in Pis.* 56ff), and for all his own rational expectation to be immortalized as the Roman Demosthenes and perhaps as the Roman Plato, he magnified his own petty [military] exploits in Mount Amanus in hope of the honor. The triumph, properly granted only to the general who had slain 5000 of the enemy in a single battle (Val. Max. 2.8.1), was itself the institutional expression of Rome’s military ideal.—Brunt (2004:164)

This is a remarkable window into the Roman value system. The requirement of 5000 slayings *in a single battle* to qualify for a ‘triumph’ does not flow from any political or tactical objective. And it does not specifically reward *valor*. Neither is it an economic objective, because if a general could win a victory decisively and quickly then more enemy soldiers

would be taken prisoner and sold into slavery, not to mention that more Roman soldiers would be spared. Those who angled for a ‘triumph’ therefore strove to demonstrate merely that they were *bloodier* (not more capable) than the next general. Cicero, the great intellectual, tried as hard as he could to be recognized for being a mass murderer on this scale. Why is that? Because “a triumph was generally held to be the highest distinction to which any Roman could aspire” (Boatwright et al. 2004:233).

Naturally, the competition among Roman aristocrats to earn a ‘triumph’ meant that, to them, the ideal Roman soldier was a psychopath lusting always for more blood, and so Roman soldiers were indeed trained to become just that. The following description of Roman warfare will speak for itself:

[The ancient Greek historian] Polybius... says it was customary for the Roman troops to kill all inhabitants of a city they subdued. Pillaging started afterwards, after a signal had been given. He adds that he thinks the Romans did this to strike terror... As a result one often sees in towns taken by the Romans not only dead people, but “dogs cut in half, and the limbs cut off from other animals.” ...A relatively minor skirmish between Macedonians and Romans in 200 BCE resulted in forty fallen Macedonian cavalry. However, the extreme violence exerted by the Roman arms caused panic among the Macedonians, who were not used to it. ...The Romans...are on record as resorting to mutilation of live victims, while the details of animal slaughter which Polybius himself gives also suggest a form of social pathology. ...Julius Caesar himself is quite open in his description of the slaughter of the Usipetes and Tencteri (*BG*\_4.14f.): “the rest, a mass

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<sup>1</sup> "Cicero, Marcus Tullius." Encyclopædia Britannica from Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

<http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:8668/eb/article?tocId=9082616>

[Accessed June 20, 2005].

of children and women—for the Germans had left home and crossed the Rhine with all their people—began to flee in all directions. Caesar sent cavalry to pursue them.” The whole crowd of Germans, children and women presumably included, were then pushed towards the junction of the Meuse and the Rhine where they were slain or perished in the river.—Isaac (2004:216-217)

It is worth pointing out that if the Macedonians, who were savage in war beyond anything the world had seen up to then (see chapter two), were shocked by the brutality of the Romans, then the Romans really were something. Those who surfaced above the citizen line through Roman military service were highly disciplined monsters at the service of the most rapacious and sadistic empire of antiquity.

The pathological nature of Roman culture, however, is perhaps best in evidence in certain forms of entertainment that could be had with the human booty that Roman soldiers brought back from each campaign. Some of the men captured in war (and also some citizens the Roman state had chosen to punish) would become *gladiators*. This was a special kind of Roman slave who was required to kill fellow slaves in armed combat—or else die—for the delight of corrupted mobs in Roman amphitheatres.

And the Romans truly could be moved to excess. For example, to celebrate that he had slaughtered many Dacians on the borders of the empire in the early second century, the emperor Trajan played to the crowds by forcing 10,000 captured men to try and murder each other, over several years, in the Coliseum (Boatwright et al. 2004:388). (And that’s just

in the city of Rome.) This was *television*, or ‘good clean fun,’ to the Romans: human beings would be dressed and armed, and the Roman crowd would pretend to be at a cock fight, waiting, on the edge of their seats, for the graphic climax of blood and death.

And yet this was not the most extreme of Roman entertainments. Consider Panegyric 6, written in the year 310 CE to celebrate a campaign by Emperor Constantine against the Bructeri. Most revealing is the tone:

“...countless numbers were slaughtered and very many were captured... all the villages were put to the flame; the [prisoners] whose untrustworthiness made them unfit for military service and whose ferocity [unfit] for slavery, were given over to the amphitheatre for punishment; and their great numbers wore out the raging beasts”—quoted in Isaac (2004:221-222).

It may be difficult to picture, but we must try if we are to understand the foes of the Jews: the panegyric is celebrating—celebrating!—how lusty masses at the amphitheatre cheered wild beasts as they tore apart and devoured countless *living people* who had survived a Roman extermination. And there were so many of them: “Their great numbers wore out the raging beasts...”

Now, to the Romans these orgies of violence were not just great fun; they were a political tool.

...every spectacle day at an amphitheater included public prayers to the gods and public homage to the emperor..., [in that] peculiarly Roman amalgam of imperial transcendence, public leisure, and the

creation of consensus that was standard in the theater and circus.—Boatwright et al. (2004:388).

Even the above description of Roman madness, genteel as it tries to be, cannot mask the functional similarities with the mass rallies of twentieth century fascist leaders. These are opportunities to create mass consensus around hailing the supreme autocrat—whose personality cult, if perhaps less religious than in Rome, is equally obligatory. The Romans rallied to their Caesar on the same day and place that they slaughtered the ‘subhumans,’ whereas the German Nazis rallied to their Fuhrer and slaughtered ‘subhumans’ at different times, but this is not a fundamental difference. We see striking symbolic convergences such as the personality-cult rally, I would submit, precisely because there is an underlying and deep *material* and *intellectual* similarity in the ancient Roman and modern fascist systems.

Once it sinks in that the German Nazis were bringing back to life many aspects of Roman culture, the horror that was Rome is more easily understood by the modern reader: the Roman Empire was like having the German Nazis in power *for one thousand years* instead of twelve.

Most people are deprived of this insight by a trick of historians that I call ‘time-relative morality.’ The same historians who above describe the murderous “spectacle” at the amphitheater as a moment of piety and social solidarity remark that “[the] Roman liking for ‘blood sports’...shocks many modern sensibilities” (*ibid.* p.386). One can hardly help reading the implication: that it didn’t shock ancient sensibilities. But of *course* it shocked ancient sensibilities. It just didn’t shock the crazy Romans—people we would quickly

put in prison or in a mental facility if we found them roaming the streets of a modern Western state.

In ancient Rome such criminals were not locked up for a simple reason: *they were in power*. Instead of pointing out this obvious fact—that in ancient Rome deranged beasts of prey not unlike the modern Nazis managed to stay in power for a long time—our historians pretend instead that what explains the routine barbarities of the Romans is the supposed gulf in moral development between the past and the present. It is implied, in a million gentle ways, that the Romans were entitled to their savageries because they were ancient: it was a different time...they didn’t have “modern sensibilities.” Fear not, then, goes the corollary implication: you may admire them without shame. Thus do the modern upper classes—from which historians mostly issue—heap yet another condescension on the ancient lower classes whom the Romans enslaved and murdered.

There is no moral difference between past and present. “To the peasant peoples of the Roman-dominated world,” as James Carroll (2001:80) correctly observes, “to the millions of slaves and petty laborers...no characterization of Caesar’s evil would have been too extreme.” It makes zero sense to say that the suffering of these multitudes is excusable because back then nobody supposedly understood justice. The ancient lower classes left a clear testament of their own standards of justice by repeatedly risking a new revolution even when previous ones had failed, followed by punishments much crueler than death. And even aristocrats outside the Greco-Roman world disagreed that this was the way to run a society. As we saw in chapter four, in Western Asia the ancient Persians built a large

empire that *was* just, on a foundation of social justice developed by the earlier Western Asian kings. So justice was understood in the ancient world; wherever it did not exist, this is because criminals had taken power (as happens also in the modern world). Thus, if Rome—by ancient standards no less than our own—was shockingly immoral, antiquity will not excuse injustice, and historians may apologize *neither* for Fuhrer nor Caesar.

By way of summary, would it be fair to say that the Romans were obsessed with murder and war? I don't think the Romans saw it like that. It hardly makes sense to say that fish are obsessed with water, or birds with song; war and murder were the Roman medium and mode of expression: their life. And the more candid Romans often laid stress on how the constant warfare reproduced their value system and military discipline. "In [Emperor Augustus'] own words, his [internal] peace was 'one secured by [external] victories'" (Boatright et al. 2004:304). In fact, he is supposed to have undertaken campaigns in Illyricum and Dalmatia merely to prevent leisure from corrupting his soldiers (Mattern 2004:190).

Were the ancient Romans right? Was war necessary for the reproduction of their society? I think so, yes.

## How Roman warfare reproduced Roman class

Ever since William Harris published *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome 327-70 BC*, in 1979, there has been a growing

consensus with his well-documented thesis that Rome's wars were essentially all aggressive because they were required as a basic component of her normal economic policy. Yes, in the short term the thirst for 'glory' caused many individual campaigns to be launched for frivolous reasons, but in the long term it was perfectly functional to the Roman economic system—as Harris shows—to have the incentives structured so that any Roman aristocrat who had been assigned a province (and who could therefore command a legion or two) would be not merely willing but itching to murder foreigners. Harris' explanation is a departure from the earlier apologias for Roman imperialism as spreading 'civilization,' or those which, with great pains, defended Roman military policy as *defensive*. Harris has become the standard against which others make their claims.

In a recent presentation of his argument, Harris says,

Roman wars were wars of plunder, at least in the sense that plundering was a normal part of them. If prisoners were lucky enough to survive, as a general rule they had to be ransomed or sold into slavery. Moveable private property—very widely defined—came into possession of the victorious army, and, whatever the precise legal status of such booty was, a share was seldom in practice refused to the soldiers... Officers, including those of senatorial rank, received a proportionately larger share... army commanders normally took a substantial share of booty for themselves...—Harris (2004:21-22)

In this, as in so many other things, the Romans were pupils to the Greeks; but here the student surpassed the master.

Plunder acted as a motivator for the Roman commander, officer, and soldier, by making it *worth* something to risk your life and go to war, which naturally made it easier to recruit soldiers for these campaigns.<sup>1</sup> Consider the extreme

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<sup>1</sup> For the upper echelons there were other things, too. As Boatwright et al. (2004:145) explain:

“Plunder was not the only reward of victory. Roman commanders who were assigned provinciae, together with their assistants, as well as legates either on embassies or on missions to observe and help settle affairs, all had regular opportunities for personal gain. Members of the Roman elite in the provinces routinely demanded that the local inhabitants feed and house them, often at great expense, and provide them with transport. The biographer Plutarch (*Cato the Elder* 6) claims that the general practice of governors of Sardinia was to make the Roman treasury pay for their personal upkeep and transport, while requiring Sardinians to bear the cost of maintaining their servants and friends in luxury... ..[T]here is no question that governors and legates did arrange support by these means, and some even demanded gifts as an inducement to reduce requisitions or to grant exemptions from them altogether. In addition, governors and their closest advisors received or extorted gifts from people who wished to ingratiate themselves or receive favors.”

In other words, the Romans were boorish gangsters toward the conquered non-Romans.

example of Pompey, who, after enriching himself fabulously by murdering and plundering in the East, disbanded his army, giving “[t]o each of his soldiers... a minimum of 6000 sesterces (a year’s basic pay was 450). Officers were far more lavishly rewarded...” (Boatwright et al. 2004:227). In other words, the least any soldier of Pompey’s got at the conclusion of his eastern campaigns was the equivalent of 13 years worth of salary!

But this sort of thing was not the only carrot. In addition, non-citizen free laborers who enlisted on their own, or were conscripted, were granted citizenship upon honorable discharge (the earliest evidence of this practice is from the first century but it quite probably occurred before that). By the second century, this was being done upon enlistment (*ibid.* p.421). Why was citizenship attractive? It is true that Roman citizens “without question... had the greatest social and political mobility” (*ibid.* p.422) and also the right to vote in elections and on legislation (at least during that phase of the Roman Empire that scholars call ‘The Republic’). But given that the voting system was completely rigged in favor of the aristocrats (*ibid.* pp.67-70), the strongest incentive for non-citizen free laborers to volunteer for the army and complete the many years of service was probably just the hope of graduating from ‘beast who could be flogged at will’ (because non-citizens, even if not enslaved, could be flogged at will) to ‘human being.’ (Or at least that may have been their hope, but as we have already seen, nobody preserved his humanity who fought for Rome.) In reward, the recruits were given a pension

or a piece of land, perhaps in the conquered lands.<sup>1</sup> And yes, a stake in the system—they were given that too.

The successful recruitment of vast numbers of men into the Roman legions, and the consequent multitude of slaves that resulted from Roman wars of aggression, produced a self-reinforcing cycle in the Roman economy. The operation of this process was perfectly obvious in antiquity to “some Roman authors,” who commented “that the demands of military service led wealthy landowners to shift away from hiring free laborers to employing slaves, who were not subject to conscriptions” (Boatwright et al. 2004:150). This put many free laborers out of work, making military service, with the prospect of citizenship, land, and some wealth upon discharge if one survived, attractive. Many displaced free laborers thus enlisted in the army, which made the Roman state more powerful, leading to newly conquered lands, from which came slaves—prisoners of war—to work the big landed estates, in turn putting more ‘free’ laborers out of work and with no option but to enlist in the Roman army, which made the Roman

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<sup>1</sup> Under Roman law, only Romans and Latins (aristocratic natives of the conquered lands who did the dirty administrative work for the Romans and in reward were elevated to Roman citizens), could own land around Rome, in colonies and in municipia, so the ownership of land was closely tied to citizenship (Boatwright et al. 2004:150).

state more powerful, leading...to newly conquered lands.<sup>2</sup> Soon, Rome owned the entire Mediterranean world.

Appian describes the situation in Italy: the rich built up their *latifundia* [big landed estates] and used slaves on them as farm laborers and herdsmen, since free labor would have been drawn off from farming into the army... Thus the powerful became extremely rich and the race of slaves multiplied throughout the country, while the Italians declined... The land was held by the rich, who used slaves instead of free men on the farms.—Harris (2004:23)

The appetite for slaves among Roman land-owning aristocrats at once created a demand for war and furnished the soldiers, by displacing the free laborers, so constant war was guaranteed in the Roman economy. This is particularly obvious when you consider that the people making the decisions about going to war were the *senators*, who did not get to be senators unless they were among the very largest landowners in Rome. It should be entirely unsurprising, therefore, that much Roman war was just ho-hum economic policy: routine and seasonal, like planting. In fact, “There were very few years in the Republic’s history when its forces saw no fighting” (Rich 2004:50). The fragrance of the Roman spring, every year, was sweet with the scent of blood.

War occupied a central place in the civic and religious structure of many city-states, but this was

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<sup>2</sup> I am simplifying a complex reality, of course. But a look at more complex models will show that I have not been unfair to this reality (see Hopkins 2004).

especially true of Rome. By the fourth century, Rome had evolved a pattern of warfare that centered on campaigns undertaken almost every year, a level of intensity that is unique among ancient city-states. In the process, warfare came to be deeply entrenched in Roman political and religious life, shaping the highest offices as well as the lives and careers both of the community's leaders and of its citizens.—Boatwright et. al. (2004:76)

No surprise, therefore, that “Rome in the period of its imperial expansion [became] an intensely militarized state” (Champion 2004:5). Champion adds that this is “in a way almost inconceivable to moderns,” but I think there are obvious modern parallels to the Romans. Mattern (1999:xii) explains that “The Romans behaved on an international level like...Mafia gangsters, or participants in any society where status and security depend on one's perceived ability to inflict violence.” But an even closer parallel, as I have repeatedly defended, would be to the German Nazis, who revived many of the basic structural, symbolic, and ideological elements of ancient Rome (including state-sponsored antisemitism culminating with a massive extermination of the Jews). As Erwin Goodenough pointed out already in 1940,

...the spirit of Roman rule corresponds most closely in modern times to fascism... This fascist power... began with proscriptions, exiles, and civil murders on a great scale...From subject peoples little was asked except complete submission and the prompt payment of very high taxes.—Goodenough (1940:66)

It is not exactly a coincidence, after all, that the term ‘fascism’ should be derived from the Roman *fasces*, the double-headed axe that symbolized a Roman consul's total power over life and death. One important difference, however, is that the program of plunder and enslavement to maintain a brutal distinction between citizen and subhuman was, in the Nazi case, a bit frenzied, so that the Third Reich went by in ‘fast play.’ Although the Nazis thought of themselves as the natural rulers of the world, just as the Romans also did, for the latter total geographic power was not an immediate and urgent goal. Rather, for the Romans world domination was the gradual and inevitable consequence of warfare as *upkeep*, providing as it did the income and labor to generate surplus agricultural produce, and extra income in the form of plunder to renew and improve physical structures. Warfare also reproduced the incentives that kept in place the class relationships upon which the elites depended for their comforts, privileges, and increasingly bizarre status contests.

Notice what this means. One usually imagines that a society can reproduce itself as that society unless it were to *lose* a war. The homeostatic unit of analysis is therefore ‘the society,’ and war is conceived as a threat *to* it, not a part *of* it. But that sort of analysis will give a bad approximation to the Roman system. Here war was a design component of very large-scale and mutually reinforcing population processes that reproduced themselves from one Roman generation to the next. “*Created by wars that required it, the machine now created the wars it required*” wrote the economist Schumpeter (1951:7) about the Egyptian New Kingdom after the Hyksos invasion. It applies equally to Rome: “Social, political, and religious

rituals, as well as the economy, sustained Rome's militarism at the same time as they depended on it" (Boatwright et al. 2004:319).

That the various Roman processes all reinforced each other in stable equilibrium is obvious from the spectacular longevity of the system, but this stability depended on continuous military expansion (the slaves who had been worked to death needed replacements; new societies had to be plundered in order to maintain what the Roman aristocrats called their "dignified leisure"; and new peasants had to be dispossessed of their land so that plots could be found for all those citizens without encroaching on the *latifundia* of the aristocracy, whose appetites were not becoming smaller). While there was room to grow, Roman patterns would repeat themselves from one generation to the next, but the requirement of an ever expanding bubble would cause the system ultimately to burst. Despite the slogan *Roma Aeterna*, the empire was, unlike Judaism, not quite built to last forever.

And a good thing too, because the stability of Rome was the reliable reproduction of the violence at its core. It cried for revolution. But who would take the lead? The plebeian citizens? But they had been so well trained! (Military service had done that.) And they were 'on top' now. From among the non-citizen free men? Unlikely. They were only one step above slave, true, and sometimes worse off, *but they could become citizens, in principle*. To assist a revolution was to risk slavery or worse when you might have become a citizen if you had kept yourself out of trouble.

No, the revolution would have to come from the slaves.

## Revolution, and how the Romans dealt with it

As discussed in chapter one, perhaps as much as *half* of the population living in Italy was enslaved around the turn of the first century. And they were not well treated: "On plantations they were often worked in irons, and at night they were housed in underground prisons" (Sheldon 1993:70). Given the chance, they would lash out in hatred.

There were three slave revolts big enough to be called 'Slave War' by the Romans, each of them a quite serious affair lasting three or four years.

The most alarming instance of the danger created by extensive use of slaves occurred in Sicily, in full view of the Roman elite... The First Slave War began around the city of Enna in the middle of the Island. Eunus, the leader... recruited a number of slave-shepherds, armed and free to roam the countryside. One night in 136 BCE, he gathered them outside the city, encouraged them to break into the slave barracks on the estates that surrounded it, and to free the slaves housed there, who were usually kept shackled... Eventually, the rebellion spread to include about half the island. Its suppression proved a long, hard task.—Boatwright et al. (2004:152-153)

If the suppression of the above slave revolt had failed, we would call it a revolution. But it is silly to say that a revolt is revolutionary only if it wins, as the success or failure of a movement cannot retroactively affect its aims.

And yet even theorists of revolution who argue at length in agreement with me that success or failure *cannot* be the thing that determines whether a revolt is ‘revolutionary,’ such as Michael Kimmel, have convinced themselves that revolutions occur only in the modern world: “Revolution, as we have come to understand it, is a relatively modern phenomenon, a phenomenon that is specific to the last three centuries” (Kimmel 1990:84). This way of talking produces an irony, and here it is:

Revolutions are not made by a desperate people, a working class with “nothing left to lose but their chains” as Marx put it in that famous last line of the [Communist] *Manifesto*, but by people who believe that they have a great deal to lose if these twin processes of capitalist industrialization and state centralization are allowed to proceed unchecked.—Kimmel (1990:85)

Michael Kimmel, given the way he talks, is referring above only to revolutions in the last three centuries. He is right that Karl Marx’s grand theory gets a lot of things wrong about modern revolutions, but notice that Marx’s expression, if taken literally, is in fact perfectly appropriate to the conditions of Mediterranean antiquity, because here a great multitude of “desperate people”—of workers who, precisely, had “nothing left to lose but their [literal] chains”—were indeed those who made the revolutions. So the model produced by the first great theorist of revolution was in some ways a better fit to ancient Mediterranean revolutions, despite the fact that he did not believe revolutions occurred there.

The biggest slave war of all was led by an uncommonly talented Thracian gladiator, a former Roman citizen who had been punished with slavery for deserting from the Roman army: Spartacus. Spartacus’ desertion was itself symptomatic of a wider disaffection with the Roman Empire, and in fact quite a few Roman soldiers asked to join Spartacus’ slave revolt (he declined, as he didn’t trust them.) Although some modern authors have fictionalized Spartacus as a socialist, it does not appear that the leadership in the slave wars had great political sophistication (Spartacus himself, it seems, merely wanted to *escape* Rome, though his programme might well have changed if he had chosen to ally with the Roman deserters). The broader point here is that the revolutionary slaves were in need of a revolutionary intellectual class, and it is this that they lacked.<sup>1</sup> Only the *servant* slaves could provide this kind of leadership. They were, however, least likely to lead the charge.

Servant slaves were neither shackled at night nor worked to an early death plowing, digging, or pushing stone—nor, what is even worse, whipped daily so that they would make another trip into the horrible Roman mines—but lived in their master’s house in an arrangement that was not without

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<sup>1</sup> “In what is perhaps his most important analytic legacy to the sociology of revolution, *What is to be Done?*, Lenin argues that the working class needs to be led to revolutionary class-consciousness by a vanguard political party, a group of dedicated revolutionaries who are able to discern the opportunity for revolutionary activity even in the absence of a concerted revolutionary movement among the workers themselves” (Kimmel 1990:119).

material comforts, even if it was thoroughly humiliating and oppressive (including such things as rape at the master's will, and torture if it was a question of giving evidence in court). They were decently fed, some even received an education, and they could move around, more or less. The leash on them was the Roman state itself, for it would punish them severely if they skipped town and got caught (servant slaves were always 'on parole,' in other words). But because of their human and social capital, they were potentially dangerous, and Rome was in principle vulnerable. What could Rome do to avoid this danger?

Manumission: make the servant slaves *citizens*.

Not all at once, of course, and certainly not all of them. The whole point of a slave was to serve, after all. But Rome needed to increase its supply of citizens anyway, given all the wars it was always fighting (it was the citizens who did military service—25 years' worth), so Rome established traditions to enfranchise some servant slaves in order to do that and also preemptively to behead all revolutions.

In an article entitled *The Cultural Significance Of Roman Manumission*, Bonnie Palmer (1996) explains that any freed slave automatically became a citizen, so if a servant slave behaved, and pleased his master, and did not engage in any revolutionary activity, he might be given the Roman equivalent of winning the lottery. Not slavery to freedom, but slavery to *citizenship*. It was a big deal. Servant slaves therefore had a strong positive incentive not to make political trouble of any kind. If a servant slave got caught organizing revolutionary activity he would not become a citizen; he *would* be tortured

and executed. Why risk everything for an improbable revolution?

But even so the Romans didn't always trust that servant slaves would not make trouble once freed (because they had to know that the slaves hated them), and in such cases they would *pseudo-free* them, allowing them out of the master's house and about their business, but not really terminating the relationship of ownership, such that the slave could be recalled to services at the master's pleasure. With this arrangement, only the most politically timid slaves would have been freed outright, while the other ones were kept as property or 'freed' on a leash, the better to whet the appetite for citizenship while snapping the master's whip close to the ears—an education. Later the Romans found a better arrangement, making it legal for a former master to re-enslave at whim any 'freedman' who was not behaving (descendants of these freed slaves, however, apparently could not be re-enslaved). The Roman system also included less subtle carrots and sticks, of course. Carrot: "rewards paid to slaves who might give advance information of threatened uprisings." Stick: "the lingering death on the cross... [which] came to be regarded by the Romans as a terrifying punishment particularly reserved for [rebellious] slaves" (Westermann 1955:75).

It is worth pointing out that in addition to the dangers of being re-enslaved, "freedmen and freedwomen were expected to continue to provide services and owe deference and loyalty to their former masters" (Boatwright et al. 2004:151). Roman society, you see, was an institutionalized Mafia system. "All [Roman] aristocrats... enjoyed a wealth of retainers, freedmen, and clients, whose gratitude and services they could rely on in

ordinary and extraordinary circumstances” (Tatum 1999:114-115). Aristocrats would manumit slaves as a way of growing clientele whose votes or other politically relevant behaviors they could deliver, and in this way they would play their power games. It was better to be a citizen *by birth*, because *libertini* or freedmen were only as ‘free’ as the lowest rung in a mob organization. Such people are really just a different kind of slave: they belong to the boss, and this carries a stigma. In fact they were often derogated as slaves: “...it was Cicero’s habit, again reflecting the prejudices of Roman society, to refer to *libertini* in servile terms [as slaves] when he meant to depict them unfavorably...” (*ibid.* p.118). Better to be a citizen by birth.

The obvious effect of these institutions was (1) to create incentives for political timidity on the part of servant slaves, (2) to replenish the ranks of citizens with people who would serve the system, and (3) to ‘re-educate’ those who wanted to buck it or else keep them enslaved. If all this didn’t work, however, freedmen who were suspected of opposing Rome could be conscripted *en masse* into the Roman army (since it was the citizens who did military service) in order thereby to cull the size of populations brave enough to oppose the Roman system. This is what Tiberius Caesar did, for example, in the year 19 CE with thousands of Jews and converts to Judaism who were manumitted by their masters in what appears to have been a major tug of war between Judaism and the Roman system *in the City of Rome itself* (more on this later).

The Romans were also clever when it came to preventing compassionate aristocrats from leading the masses in revolution. They were adept at corrupting members of

foreign aristocracies and in this way kept the conquered provinces in check. This method did not work completely (there were still occasional revolts in the provinces), but it really was ingenious. By granting ‘Latin status’ to entire conquered communities, as Boatwright et al. (2004:421) explain, the empire “conferred Roman citizenship on those who served the community politically. This means reinforced the original link of citizenship to political duty and privileges.” If one puts it like that it doesn’t sound so bad, but in fact those “who served the community politically”—the local aristocrats—were doing *Rome’s* work, and so what the ‘Latin status’ strategy reinforced was the incentives of local elites—who otherwise might provide the intellectual leadership for opposition to Rome—to collaborate with the imperial system. Stretching all around the Mediterranean, the Romans thus created an international alliance of the rich against the poor that made it difficult for the conquered provinces to organize against the Roman center.

...leading provincials from all over the empire were recruited successively into each level of the imperial ruling hierarchy... A symbolic center did exist in the Roman cultural system, but it was located not in any one place or region but rather in the set of manners, tastes, sensibilities and ideals that were the common property of an aristocracy that was increasingly dispersed across the empire.—Woolf (2004:233)

We may say that the Roman machine had, on its expanding tentacles, magnets for the upper classes of every part of the Mediterranean, and once attached to its moving parts and corrupted, Rome would use such people to apply

pressure downward on the lower classes of conquered lands, extracting the labor necessary for the next round of expansion. The Roman aristocracy was quite conscious that its method of control over the provinces was the corruption of local elites to produce an international cartel of ruling classes against the poor, and candidly called it by its name. Tacitus, who knew emperor Agricola intimately, describes the latter's policy of getting the aristocrats in Britain used to the easy pleasures of the Roman high life, so as to corrupt them, making it impossible for them to find again the will to fight Rome (Isaac 2004:190-191). When the emperor Claudius made a speech before the senate arguing for including certain Gallic aristocrats as senators, he defended his policy by pointing out that they had proved themselves good collaborators with Roman rule (i.e. traitors to their country): "When my father Drusus was subduing Germany, it was these [aristocratic] Gauls who by their passivity afforded him a safe and securely peaceful rear..." (Boatwright et al. 2004:329).

## ***Pax Romana?***

From all this it can readily be seen that the expression *Pax Romana* expresses an absurdity. At least the historian Tacitus had the sense to realize that this self-serving slogan was a bitter irony for those under the Roman boot when he represented Galgacus, a Briton chieftain, accusing: "To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire: they make a desolation and they call it peace" (*Agricola*, 30). Galgacus was right. There was no *Pax Romana* despite what you may have

heard. The three Slave Wars were just the most important slave rebellions, and the borders of the Republic were always at war. When the borders ceased to expand, and the population in chains did not rebel, the result was not 'peace' because that word cannot be used to describe a state of slavery and oppression, and these were daily and crushing features of Roman existence for the great majority, whether or not there was armed conflict in the form of war or revolution.

In fact, even the most basic connotation of *Pax Romana* was not satisfied, as the Romans failed to establish even minimal law-and-order for ordinary people. Even in Italy, Sheldon (1993:72) writes, "the Romans generally allowed bandits and pirates to carry on their affairs as long as the ruling elite was not directly affected." The protection of ordinary people was even less in evidence in the provinces, as is obvious from the following short review of Wilfried Nippel's *Public Order in Ancient Rome* (1995):

[This] discussion of public order in the cities and provinces of the Roman Empire...suggests that, in general, governmental intervention was limited. Protection of property and personal security were the responsibilities of the citizens themselves. One had to rely on relatives and neighbors or influential patrons... State intervention was most interested in cases that were a direct threat to the Roman government—treason and sedition, counterfeiting, smuggling and brigandage. The majority of everyday crimes were left to be settled through private initiative and communal arbitration...—Sheldon (2003:125)

In sum, with the regularity of the seasons, the Romans arrived in a new place, conquered it using a terrorism so pathological that it scandalized *Macedonians*, plundered it, murdered much of the civilian population (making sure to rape many of the women first), took the remainder as slaves and thereafter worked them in chains all day in large agricultural estates or in mines, keeping them shackled in underground prisons at night. These slaves died an early death. Others became slaves to be used in human cock fights or were fed to the beasts while Roman crowds cheered in ecstasy. The lands of these conquered natives went to discharged soldiers but especially to Roman aristocrats. Anybody in a conquered aristocracy who didn't corrupt himself for Rome was purged (murdered); the rest were given Roman citizenship and even membership in the Roman aristocracy. Their job was to keep the natives oppressed by dint of military force and paying taxes to Rome. All the while, the Romans would do next to nothing to ensure public order and security for ordinary people.

Provincial governors served usually for no more than a year; in this way every member of the Roman aristocracy could have a chance to enrich and amuse himself by plundering and humiliating the local 'barbarians' or 'Asiatics' to whom he had been appointed. This was also an opportunity for these aristocrats to enjoy the pleasures of murdering foreigners on a large scale (and perhaps get a 'triumph,' if possible) by leading a Roman legion or two in a campaign beyond the present borders.

The expression *Pax Romana* was used without any sense of self-conscious irony because this mental experience seems to have been entirely foreign to the Romans, and they

apparently believed many of their own myths. Because most historians of Rome have followed suit, our picture of this society has been quite distorted. And yet if one takes into account the biases of the Roman historians, the proper picture emerges quite readily: Rome was *not* 'spreading civilization.' The historian Tacitus (*Annals* 1.2) conceded as much when he remarked that the provinces at first welcomed the totalitarian rule of Augustus, "for they distrusted the government of the Senate and the people, because of the rivalries between the leading men and the rapacity of the officials, while the protection of the laws was unavailing, as they were continually deranged by violence, intrigue, and finally by corruption." Coming from someone who, as we have seen above, believed the genocide of barbarians to be a 'glorious' thing, Tacitus' judgment that the Romans were too brutal in their administration of the provinces carries some force.

No, Rome was not pretty. From an engineering point of view, however, one must admit that the thing was well designed—the empire was enormous and the Roman system so stable that it lasted for about 1000 years—in the east, or Byzantium, 2000. The Romans, in other words, were brilliant fascists, and they remained at equilibrium for a long, *long* time.