

## Resource Depletion and the End of Empires IV: Despotism

In the previous three parts of this series, I have explored the dynamics of how resource depletion affects the evolution of complex societies. In this final part, I shall illustrate how and why empires in decline tend toward coercive means to maintain themselves.

Empires by definition involve a substantial amount of specialization in social roles and the appearance of hierarchical organization. The specialization is the result of a society's internal problem-solving mechanisms under circumstances where resources are plentiful enough to allow a growing proportion of the population to be involved in activities not related to the primary production of energy.

In the case of the Roman Empire, the key source of energy was the sun, as harnessed by the agricultural activities of the Mediterranean basin and its contiguous regions. The Romans organized their society in such a way that a significant fraction of agricultural produce allowed for the creation of a complex hierarchy of bureaucrats, merchants, soldiers, skilled tradesmen and, at the very top of the social pyramid, a ruling Senatorial (later, Imperial) class. The whole system required not only that farmers produce more food than they themselves needed to subsist, but also that all those who are part of the system contribute to it not too grudgingly. People must be constantly reminded of the *benefits* of the socially stratified empire in order to accept the inevitable costs involved in participating in it.

The cost that the Romans imposed most systematically was taxation. A proportion of the goods produced by the primary producers (farmers) was collected and redistributed according to the needs perceived by those specialized in running the Empire, often to their own benefit. During prosperous times (i.e., when farmers were capable of producing a significant surplus off their land), the burden of taxation was counterbalanced by a number of advantages offered by the Roman system: 1) a competent, well-trained and disciplined army to keep the peace; 2) access to distant markets for the profitable sale of surplus goods not taxed away; 3) a network of roads that allowed for the easier distribution of goods inland; 4) a system of social assistance for the non-producing urban populations (grain dole); 5) organized mass entertainment (races, plays, pantomimes, gladiatorial combat etc.); 6) provision of water to urban populations (construction and maintenance of baths and aqueducts). With a bit of imagination, one could envisage a number of other advantages offered by the Roman system.

It should be noted that all of the above factors are possible only when a substantial surplus of primary production is available. Since the Roman Empire never had a formal budget (at least not until the time of Diocletian) or significant means of obtaining credit, it was dependent each year on the annual production of the territory under its control. If for any reason the surplus in any given year were less than what was needed to maintain the complexity of the system, a shortfall would be incurred, and the imperial fisc would need to make up for the difference through

the only means available to it: devaluation of the currency. This situation left the imperial administration vulnerable to a range of crises from crop failure to manpower shortage (whatever their proximate causes, e.g., plague, drought, flood etc.).

Over time, the resources available for redistribution become both more and more scarce, and increasingly employed simply to maintain prior commitments. The growing disparities of wealth created by a hierarchical system required constant efforts on the part of the elites to maintain the legitimacy of their control over the system and the people in it. Under such circumstances, each investment in legitimacy yields diminishing returns of loyalty on the part of those contributing to the system's concentration of resources. Under such circumstances, those at the top who tend to benefit disproportionately from the continued functioning of the system must resort to coercive means to keep it going.

In Roman society, this process of shifting from beneficent to coercive means of legitimation begins long before the end of the Republic. Augustus' program of reforms represents a flourish of apparently benevolent legislation, but serves to camouflage the shift to a formal autocracy. Subsequent emperors continued to justify their rule through military conquest (e.g., Claudius in Britain, Trajan in Dacia and Mesopotamia) or infrastructure investments on a vast scale (e.g., Vespasian and Titus' Colosseum, Trajan's Forum, Caracalla's Baths), but such efforts come to an end as the resources available to enable them disappear along with the end of the empire's territorial expansion. A sign of the desperation at the imperial court is the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, a law issued by Caracalla in 212 that granted citizenship to all free men in the empire. Such a measure may seem benevolent and legitimizing, as there were (in principle) benefits to Roman citizenship, but the true motivation was the ability to tax this vast new pool of citizens.

Imperial efforts grow more coercive as revolts spread during the third century and reach their critical point under the reign of Diocletian. His reforms of taxation, laws, the army, coinage, prices, manpower allocation, provincial administration and the public image of the emperor all served to remove the veneer of republicanism that Augustus has attempted to maintain. Thus, he created an overtly despotic regime devoted to forcing the empire's population to continue participating in the project of empire.

The epitome of his efforts is illustrated by his religious policy. Under the more prosperous times of the second century, marginal new religious movements such as Christianity were largely ignored rather than persecuted (with occasional localized exceptions). Diocletian, however, organized a systematic persecution of religious groups who refused to subscribe to his vision of the traditional Roman cults.

Although his successor Constantine reversed this policy through the Edict of Toleration of 313, it took less than a century for coercive religious policies to turn against paganism under Theodosius I. By then, large-scale efforts at securing

legitimacy through conquest and construction had ended – the founding of Constantinople in 330 was the last major investment of material resources for this purpose. From then on, there were fewer and fewer reasons for average residents of the Roman Empire to subject themselves willingly to centralized rule. Although it is hazardous to argue from a lack of evidence, the nigh-absence of voices mourning the loss of empire is the most potent illustration of the resentment the final centuries of coercion elicited among the Roman population.