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The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations

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The Social Causes of the Decline of Ancient Civilization

The fall of the Roman Empire was not due to external factors such as the numerical superiority of its enemies or the incapacity of its leaders. Indeed, in its last century the Empire was served by great statesmen, heroic figures like Stilicho who combined Germanic courage with sophisticated diplomacy. Yet whereas illiterate Merovingians, Carolingians, and Saxons could mobilize great forces and resist the onslaughts of Saracens and Huns, such feats were impossible even for Stilicho. The Empire had ceased to be what it once was, and the barbarian invasions simply concluded a development which had begun long before.

First, however, one basic point must be stressed: the civilization of Antiquity did not decline because the Empire fell, for the Roman Empire as a political structure existed for centuries after ancient civilization had passed its prime. In fact, this civilization had been in eclipse for a long time. By the early third century Roman literature was played out, and Roman jurisprudence deteriorated together with its schools. Greek and Latin poetry were moribund, historiography faded away, and even inscriptions started to fall silent. Latin itself soon gave way to dialects.

When, after one and a half centuries of decline, the Western Empire finally disappeared, barbarism had already conquered the Empire from within. Nor were the barbarian invasions followed by the establishment of new institutions to replace those of the Empire. Thus the Merovingian state, at least in Gaul, was for some time essentially a continuation of Roman provincial organization.

Hence the question we must answer is this: what caused the decline of civilization in the ancient world?

Many replies have been advanced, some quite mistaken, others making bad use of good ideas. For example, it is argued that

despotism stunted the minds of ancient men and their political life. Yet it is clear that the despotism of Frederick the Great was a force for healthy growth. Others have claimed that the alleged luxury and actual amorality of the upper classes called down upon them the condemnation of history. But luxury and amorality are only symptoms, not causes, and the decline of ancient civilization was due to forces far more significant than the vices of individuals.

Still another explanation focuses on the emancipated Roman woman, the dissolution of marriage ties among the ruling classes, which allegedly weakened the foundations of ancient society. The fables of a biased reactionary, Tacitus, about the German woman, in reality a wretched slave of a fighting peasant, are still repeated by reactionaries of our own day. The truth is that the idealized 'German woman' did as little to assure the triumph of the Germans as did the well-known 'Prussian schoolmaster' the victory of Königgratz. In fact, as we shall see, the decline of ancient civilization was connected with the re-establishment of family ties among the lower classes of society.

From an ancient witness comes another explanation: Pliny the Elder's statement, 'The large estates ruined Italy.' 'There you are,' says a contemporary commentator, 'it was the Roman Junkers who destroyed the Empire.' 'Perhaps so,' says an opponent, 'but only because the estates themselves were ruined by imports of foreign grain; had agriculture been protected by high tariffs, the Empire would exist to this day.' Yet we shall see that the fall of ancient civilization marked the start of the rehabilitation of the peasant class.

Nor are Darwinian theories absent, for recently it has been argued that the process of natural selection was adversely affected by recruitment for the army, which condemned the strongest to celibacy, with the result that the Roman race degenerated in late Antiquity. Yet we shall see that in fact the army was increasingly recruited from soldiers' sons, and that this development proceeded apace with the decline of the Empire.

But let this suffice to show what answers others give. First I shall make some preliminary remarks on method, and then I shall give my own.

A storyteller can always count on heightened interest if his listeners believe that the story applies to their own lives too.

Then he can end with a moral exhortation. My story, however, is not of that sort. There is little or nothing which ancient history can teach us about our own social problems. A proletarian of today and a slave of Antiquity would have as little in common as do a European and a Chinese. Our problems and those of Antiquity are entirely different. Therefore the story I tell has only historical interest. Yet it is one of the most absorbing man knows, for it describes the internal disintegration of an ancient civilization.

Our first task must be to define clearly the characteristics of the social structure of Antiquity. We shall see that these characteristics determined the cycle of development of ancient civilization.

First: the civilization of Antiquity was essentially urban in character. The city was the centre of political life, of art, and of literature. The economy too, at least in the early period of Antiquity, was shaped by what we usually now call 'urban economics'.

In Hellenic times the city was not essentially different from the mediaeval city. Whatever differences existed were due to contrasts in climate and race between the Mediterranean region and Central Europe, just as today there are differences between English and Italian workers and between German and Italian artisans.

Economically the ancient city was based on the exchange of its industrial products for the agricultural products of its rural hinterland, an exchange centred in the city's own market. The trade involved was directly effected between producer and consumer, and essentially covered all needs; no imports from outside were needed, and so Aristotle's ideal of urban self-sufficiency (*autarkia*) was in fact realized by most Greek cities.

Now it is also true that upon the foundation of this local trade an international trade developed in very early times, which covered a large territory and included many items. Much of ancient history centres round those cities whose ships were engaged in international trade, but because we hear of these cities we easily forget how insignificant this trade was in quantity. The civilization of ancient Europe was a coastal civilization, and its history was above all a history of the coastal cities. However,

alongside the highly developed commercial economy of these towns there existed – exactly opposite in character – the natural economy of the primitive peasants of the interior, living in tribal communities or under the domination of feudal patriarchs. A truly regular and stable international trade was maintained only via sea routes or on the large rivers. There was no trade with the interior in Antiquity, not even such as could be compared with that of the Middle Ages. The much-praised Roman roads were not used for anything resembling modern trade, nor was the Roman postal system. Hence the enormous difference between the rent derived from lands in the interior and that from lands on water routes. To be near a Roman road was considered a misfortune rather than an advantage, for it brought billeting and vermin. In short: Roman roads served the army, not commerce.

The natural economy therefore remained largely unaffected, and so commerce could not develop very far. Such trade as existed was mainly in a small number of expensive articles: precious metals, amber, fine textiles, some ironware and pottery, and the like. These were generally luxury items which, because of their high price, could be traded profitably despite the high cost of transport. Such trade cannot be compared in any way with modern commerce. It would be as if today only champagne, silk, and the like were traded, whereas all statistics indicate that the bulk of commerce is now in mass consumer goods.

It is of course true that certain cities such as Athens and Rome became dependent upon imports for their grain supplies. However, such instances were always historically abnormal, and the collection of these supplies was entrusted to public authority. The ancient city neither could nor would leave them to unregulated private trade.

Therefore it was not the masses and their everyday needs with which international trade was concerned, but rather a small stratum of the wealthy classes. Expansion of trade in Antiquity was only possible if there was an increasing differentiation in wealth. Furthermore – and here we encounter a third characteristic feature of ancient civilization – this differentiation took a particular form and direction: the civilization of Antiquity was based upon slavery.

From the first, free labour in the cities coexisted with unfree labour in the country; there was free division of labour producing

goods for exchange on the urban market, and there was also unfree labour organized to produce goods on and for rural estates, as in the Middle Ages. Again, in ancient as in mediaeval society, a natural antagonism sprang up between these two forms of organized human labour.

In general, economic progress is achieved by increased division of labour. When free labour prevails, progress at first demands expansion of the market, extensively by drawing new geographical areas into the exchange economy, and intensively by drawing more persons into it; hence the townsmen of Antiquity sought to break up manors and incorporate their serfs into the free market. When unfree labour prevails, economic progress is achieved by a steady accumulation of workers, for the more slaves or serfs are assembled the more specialization of unfree occupations is possible.

Now whereas in the Middle Ages the victory was won by free labour and free exchange of goods, in Antiquity the outcome of the struggle was just the opposite. Why was this? For the same reason that technological development in Antiquity was limited: human beings could be bought cheaply, because of the character of the chronic warfare of ancient civilization. Ancient wars were also slave hunts; they constantly supplied the slave markets and so promoted to an extraordinary degree the unfree labour sector of the economy and the accumulation of labour-power. The result of this was that the free sector ceased to expand; the crafts could not advance beyond the stage in which production was wage work done for customers by non-propertied artisans. No competition could arise between free entrepreneurs and free wage labourers in production for the market, which would have set a premium on labour-saving inventions such as those induced by competition in modern times.

In Antiquity, on the contrary, it was the economic importance of unfree labour in autarkic households which increased steadily. Only slaveowners could develop production based on a division of labour, and only they could improve their standard of living. More and more it was slave enterprises which could produce for the market after meeting their own needs.

This determined the deviation of economic development in Antiquity from that of the Middle Ages. In mediaeval society, free division of labour developed its market intensively within the local

economic territory of the city on the basis of production for both the individual orders of customers and the local market. Then as trade with non-local markets increased there was a division of production between local centres. First the putting-out system was used, then manufactures, creating new forms of production designed to supply external markets and employing free labour. The development of the modern economy was then inextricably connected with the tendency for the masses to satisfy their needs more and more through interlocal and then international trade.

In Antiquity, on the contrary, the development of international trade was connected with the consolidation of unfree labour in large slave households. Therefore the exchange economy was a sort of superstructure; beneath it was a constantly expanding infrastructure of natural economy in which needs were met without exchange, the economy of the slave establishments which perpetually absorbed human material and satisfied their consumption needs mainly out of their own production rather than from the market. The more the consumption of the upper class of slaveowners increased, the more trade expanded extensively, but the greater the extensive expansion of trade, the more it lost in intensity. Thus trade in Antiquity more and more became a thin net spread over a large natural economy, and as time passed the meshes of this net became finer and its threads became more tenuous.

In the Middle Ages there was a transition from production for individual local orders to production for an interlocal market. This transition was made possible by the slow ascent of capitalist free enterprise and the principle of competition, and their penetration into the centre of local economic structures. In Antiquity, on the contrary, international trade increased the growth of *oikoi*, autarkic establishments based on unfree labour, and these *oikoi* decreased the basis of the local exchange economies.

This development occurred in most pronounced form under Roman rule. After the victory of the plebs [in 287 B.C.] Rome was a conquering peasant state – or, rather, a conquering state of town-organized yeomen. Every war meant the annexation of more land for settlement. The Roman army was recruited from the younger sons of Roman yeomen; having no hope of an inheritance,

they fought to win land for themselves and so gain the status of a full citizen. This was the secret of Rome's conquering power. However, the situation changed once Roman expansion was extended to overseas territories, for the peasants had no wish to settle there; now the driving force was the aristocracy's quest for plunder from overseas provinces. Wars served as slave hunts and were followed by confiscation of lands; the lands were formed into domains, and leased for exploitation to wealthy contractors.

Then the peasantry of Italy was decimated by the Second Punic War; the consequences of its downfall may be called Hannibal's belated revenge. The Gracchan movement to restore small peasant agriculture was followed by a reaction which marked the decisive triumph of slave labour on the land. Henceforth the slaveowners alone benefited from a rising standard of living, contributed to increased consumer demand and developed production for the market. This does not mean that free labour disappeared entirely, but rather that slave-labour enterprises were now the sole dynamic element in the economy. Roman writers on agriculture take it for granted that the organization of work will be based on slave labour.

Finally, the importance of slave labour in ancient civilization was enormously increased when the Empire incorporated vast continental areas into the Roman world: Spain, Gaul, Illyria, and the lands along the Danube. The demographic centre of the Empire shifted inland, and an attempt was made to move ancient civilization to a different arena, to transform it from a coastal into a continental civilization. Ancient society now spread its economic system over an enormous area, one so large that even centuries would not have sufficed for the task of assimilating it to the commercial system and the money economy which had developed on the shores of the Mediterranean. For even on those shores, as we noted before, interlocal commerce was no more than a thin net, and when it was stretched out over inland areas it became still thinner. Indeed, the development of civilization in these hinterland regions on the basis of free labour and the development of intensive commerce was simply not possible. If these areas were to be gradually incorporated into Mediterranean civilization, it would have to be done through the establishment of a landed aristocracy, based on the ownership of slaves and of autarkic estates worked by unfree labour. In inland areas transport was

much more expensive than on the coasts, and so inland commerce was at first exclusively concerned with supplying luxuries for a small group, the wealthy slaveowners. Similarly the possibility of producing goods for sale on the market was available only to a small number of large slave enterprises.

Thus the slaveowner became the dominant figure in the economy of Antiquity, and a slave-labour system became the indispensable foundation of Roman society. We must, therefore, direct our attention to the peculiarities of this system.

Because of the sources available to us, we know most about the use of slave labour on the large landed estates of the Late Republic and the Early Empire. In any case the large estate was the basic form of wealth, for even money used for speculation was derived from it and usually a large-scale speculator was also a large-scale landowner. This was necessarily so, for land was needed as collateral by anyone wishing to engage in the most lucrative forms of speculation: tax farming, leasing domains, and public works contracts.

As a rule the Roman landowner did not manage his estates personally. He was, rather, a city dweller, active in politics, and interested above all in cash rents. The management of his estates he left to unfree overseers (*villici*). The main features of the resulting agricultural system were as follows.

Grain production for sale on the market was generally unprofitable. The city of Rome was not a possible market, since a state agency supervised the capital's grain supply, while the price paid for grain could not cover the costs of transportation from inland areas. Furthermore slave labour was not suited for raising grain, especially because the Roman technique of row cultivation needed very careful labour and therefore depended upon the self-interest of the worker. Because of these factors cereal culture was generally practised at least in part by leasing land in small parcels to *coloni* – descendants of the yeomen who had lost their farms. From the first *coloni* were not independent tenants managing their own affairs; the landlord provided seed and tools, and his overseer supervised cultivation. Furthermore, *coloni* from the outset often had to render labour services, especially at harvest time. Leasing land to *coloni* was considered one of the ways a

landlord could manage his estate, as the language shows: the owner cultivated his land 'by means of tenants' (*per colonos*).

The alternative type of estate management was for the landlord to exploit his land directly for the production of cash crops, mainly high-value products such as olive oil and wine, supplemented by garden vegetables, fodder, poultry, and luxury items for the discriminating palates of the very wealthy, who were the only ones with money for such things. Such products took up the more fertile lands, the remainder being left to *coloni* on which to raise grain. The directly managed estate was essentially a plantation, and its work force was made up of slaves who were considered part of the owner's extended household, his *familia*. Slaves and *coloni* worked the great estates side by side under the Late Republic and also under the Empire.

Let us first turn to the slave population. What was its situation?

If we look at the ideal plantation as described by the Roman manuals of agriculture we find that the slaves ('the speaking tools': *instrumentum vocale*) were housed next to the cattle ('semi-speaking tools': *instrumentum semivocale*), and that the slave quarters included dormitories, an infirmary (*valetudinarium*), a prison (*carcer*), and a workshop for the estate's craftsmen (*ergastulum*). Now anyone who has worn a uniform will instantly see something very familiar here. This was a barracks. In actual fact, a slave's life was generally very much like a soldier's. Slaves ate and slept in common rooms under an overseer's supervision. Their better clothes were stored away in charge of the overseer's wife (*villica*), who functioned as a quartermaster, and every month clothing was inspected at a special roll-call. Slaves worked under strict military discipline. They formed squads (*decuriae*) every morning and were then marched off under command of slave drivers (*monitores*). Nor was any other system possible, for it has never been feasible to use unfree labourers for market production unless they fear the whip.

Now one factor in this situation is especially important for the present argument: the slave who lived in a barrack was not only without property, he was also without a family. Only the overseer (*villicus*) lived in his own cell with his own woman, to whom he was bound in slave marriage (*contubernium*); his position thus

resembled that of a married NCO in a barracks today. The overseer, in fact, was supposed to be married, according to the agricultural manuals, in the interests of the landlord.

Then, just as always, private property and nuclear family went hand in hand: slave marriage was accompanied by slave property. The overseer, and according to the manuals only the overseer, could own private property, his *peculium*; as the word [from *pecus*, cattle] indicates, this was originally used for the overseer's cattle, which he grazed on the landlord's pasture, just as the estate worker does today in Eastern Germany. But the great mass of slaves had no *peculium*, just as they had no monogamous relationship. Their sex life was a kind of supervised prostitution, with bonuses for the slave girls who reared children, some receiving their freedom if they reared three.

Now this custom in itself suffices to indicate the situation that resulted from the lack of monogamous family life. Man thrives only in families, and so slaves condemned to live in barracks did not reproduce themselves. The barracks demanded constant replenishment; hence new slaves had to be continually purchased. Indeed this was assumed to be a recurrent expenditure in the agricultural manuals. The ancient plantation consumed slaves the way a modern blast furnace consumes coal. Hence a slave market regularly and amply supplied with human material was the indispensable precondition for a barracks slave system engaged in market production.

Slave-buyers spent little. Varro recommends the purchase of malefactors and such low-priced material; his reasoning is characteristic: 'criminals are more ingenious' (*velocior est animus hominum improborum*). This meant that the Roman plantations depended on a slave market which received regular supplies of human material. But what if the market failed to find these supplies? This would inevitably affect the slave barracks, just as today closing the coal mines would affect the blast furnaces.

In fact that is just what happened; which brings us to the turning point in the development of ancient civilization.

If we are asked to name the date at which the decline of Roman power and civilization began, then every German immediately thinks of the day when the Empire suffered its great defeat in the

Teutoburg Forest. There is in fact a kernel of truth in that popular idea, even though it is contradicted by the fact that it was later, under Trajan, that the Empire achieved the zenith of its power. The battle was not, of course, decisive in itself, for it was the sort of setback every nation expanding into barbarian territory experiences. It was the sequel which was decisive: the resolution by Tiberius to abandon the wars of conquest on the Rhine, a resolution later repeated on the Danube by Hadrian's evacuation of Dacia. These imperial policies meant that the Roman Empire ceased to expand. The entire area of ancient civilization was now pacified internally and (to a large extent) externally; but therewith the regular supply of human material for the slave markets ceased. As early as the reign of Tiberius the consequence seems to have become apparent: an acute shortage of labour. We are told that Tiberius was compelled to order an inspection of estate workshops, because the large landowners were seizing people. Like mediaeval robber barons they lay in wait on the roads, it seems; but whereas the barons wanted gold and goods, the landowners wanted workers to cultivate their deserted fields.

Even more important was the gradually increasing difficulty of maintaining a system of production based upon the slave barracks, for the barracks demanded constant replenishment and this was no longer possible. When the supply of slaves stagnated, the slave barracks were doomed to disappear.

At first, to judge by the later agricultural manuals, the increase in slave prices caused an improvement in technique as the slaves were given better training. But after the final offensive wars of the second century, which were in fact little more than slave raids, it became impossible to maintain the great plantations worked by slaves without family and without property.

To confirm and comprehend how the change occurred, we can compare conditions on large Roman plantations as described in the manuals with those on landed estates in Carolingian times as described in Charlemagne's instructions to the bailiffs of his domains (*capitulare de villis imperialibus*) and in the monastic records of the period. In both periods we find that slaves were used as agricultural labourers, that they were without legal rights, and that in particular they were subject to unlimited exploitation by their masters. There was no change, then, in these respects. Likewise many aspects of the Roman manor [*Grundherrschaft*]

were still alive in Carolingian times; they extended even to terminology: for example, the women's house of Antiquity was called *gynaikeion*, and this survived in the form *genitium*.

However, one aspect of the Roman manor changed radically: whereas Roman slaves lived in a collectivist barracks, the slave of Carolingian times had his own cottage (*mansus servilis*) on the land which he held from his lord in return for labour services. The Carolingian slave was really a 'small peasant'. In particular, he had his own family and his own property.

To sum up, then, we can say that the slave was now separated from the *oikos*. This change occurred under the Later Empire, because slaves in barracks simply did not reproduce themselves. When slaveowners allowed their slaves to have their own families and made them hereditary dependants, they thereby assured themselves young slaves to take their parents' place and work the fields. This was now essential, since workers could not be purchased on the slave market, which indeed disappeared completely in Carolingian times. Furthermore, whereas the plantation owner had to invest capital in maintaining his slaves, this burden was now shifted to the slaves themselves.

This transformation was slow but irreversible, and its effects were profound. It constituted a great alteration of the institutions which shaped the lowest classes of society; they once again had a right to family life and private property. I can only note briefly here how closely this transformation was connected with the triumph of Christianity: in the slave barracks of earlier times Christianity would have made little headway, but in the age of St Augustine the free peasants of Africa were actually fervent supporters of a local heresy.

Thus the slave rose in social status to become an unfree serf. At the same time the *colonus* fell in status and became a serf too. This happened because the *colonus'* relation to his landlord became more and more closely tied to labour services. Originally the landlord was mainly interested in payment of money rent, although as mentioned labour on the estate was also exacted from the first. However, even under the Early Roman Empire the agricultural manuals stressed the labour services rendered by the *colonus*, and the scarcer slave labour became the more this tendency increased. African inscriptions from the reign of Commodus (A.D. 161-92) show us that the *colonus* there was already

a serf who held land from a lord in return for specified labour services. Thus an economic transformation of the position of the *colonus* had occurred, and then there followed a change in his legal position, formally codifying his role as the basis of an estate's labour force: he was bound to the soil. To explain the origins of this rule we must review briefly certain matters connected with public administration.

At the end of the Republic and at the beginning of the Empire the basis of Roman public administration was the city (*municipium*), just as the economic basis of ancient civilization was also the city. As new areas were incorporated into the Empire they were systematically organized into urban units, in a wide variety of gradations of political dependence. Thus the administrative form of the *municipium* was spread throughout the Roman Empire, and the city was everywhere the lowest unit of administration. The city's magistrates were responsible to the state for raising taxes and supplying recruits.

However, this system was gradually modified as social conditions evolved under the Empire. The great estates successfully sought to escape incorporation into the urban system, and the more the demographic centre of the Empire moved inland the more it was the agrarian population that supplied military recruits. Therewith, more and more influence on state policies was exercised by the 'Junkers' of Antiquity, the great estate owners. Today Junkers resist official incorporation of their Prussian estates into the administration of local communities. In the Roman Empire the reverse process occurred: estates were removed from urban jurisdiction and the government offered very little resistance. Great numbers of rural properties (*saltus, territoria*) started to appear alongside the cities as administrative units, and in these the landowners were the source of local authority, just as the German owners of baronial estates are today in the manorial districts of Prussia. The Roman state depended on the landowner and gave him authority because it was he who collected the taxes levied on his *territorium* (sometimes advancing the money due from his tenants, then collecting from them), and it was also he who supplied the contingent of recruits from his manor. Supply of recruits therefore came to be regarded as another public assessment levied on an estate - an assessment, be it noted, which decimated its labour force.

These developments in Roman public administration prepared the way for the legal provisions which bound the *colonus* to the land.

Here it should be remembered that no general freedom of movement guaranteed by law ever existed under the Roman Empire. Let it suffice to recall the Gospel of St Luke, in which it is taken for granted that for purposes of taking a census everyone could be ordered to return to his home community, his *origo*. That is why the family of Jesus had to return to the town of Bethlehem. In the country, however, the *origo* of a *colonus* was the manorial district of his lord.

Very early [under the Empire] we find in existence a legal process by which a person might be ordered to return to his home community to fulfil public duties. If a senator neglected to attend meetings of the Senate over a period of time he was merely fined; but if a member of a town council in the provinces, a *decurio*, neglected his duties, he was treated more summarily, and would be brought back to his town on request. That was frequently necessary, since the position of decurion in Antiquity involved liability for the town's tax levy, and was therefore a burdensome honour. Later, when juristic formulas fell into decay and confusion, a town's request for the return of a *decurio* took the form of the ancient claim to ownership of property (*vindicatio*), so that in effect towns pursued their errant councillors the way a village pursued a runaway bull from the common herd.

If this could be done to a *decurio*, the *colonus* could not expect any milder treatment. The labour services which he owed his lord were not distinguished from his public duties, since the lord was both estate owner and local authority, and so the *colonus* who fled his duties was returned to fulfil them. What this meant was that administrative practice demanded that the *colonus* remain in his home district and so made him subject to the manorial authority of the estate owner whom he served. The *colonus* had thus become a serf, bound to his land.

Between the state and the *colonus* there was now interposed an intermediate authority, the landowner. The landowners themselves, the *possessores*, formed a class of magnates who obeyed no local or provincial authority, only the emperor himself. We find this class in the Later Roman Empire, in Ostrogothic Italy, and in Merovingian Gaul. In short, the old simple distinction between free and unfree had been replaced by a division of

society into orders [*ständische Gliederung*]. A series of changes, each in itself quite gradual, together constituted a development towards this new social structure, which economic conditions had made inevitable. Feudal society had already started to emerge in the Later Roman Empire.

Thus the manor of the Later Empire had two types of peasants owing labour services: unfree peasants (*servi*) with unlimited obligations, and personally free peasants (*coloni, tributarii*) who owed precisely defined payments in money, produce, and then – increasingly – a share of their crops, as well as (usually, though not always) specified labour services. Once this is understood, it is obvious that the landed estate of the Later Empire has all the characteristics of a mediaeval manor.

Now it was impossible to maintain market production on the estates of the Later Empire with labour services of tenants, given ancient transportation. The disciplined slave labour of the barracks was indispensable for market production. Thus as soon as slave barracks gave way to peasant cottages, especially in the interior, production for the market disappeared and the thin net of commerce, which had covered the natural economy of Antiquity, frayed and then snapped. We can see this clearly in Palladius, the last important writer on agriculture; he recommends that the estate owner should arrange things so that his workers will supply all the estate's needs themselves, and so make purchases unnecessary. From ancient times the women of an estate had done the spinning, weaving, milling, and baking, but now craftsmen rendering labour service also did the work of smiths, cabinet-makers, masons, and carpenters. Finally the estates became self-sufficient, and as a result the small class of free craftsmen in the cities, most of whom worked for wages and food, now lost even their relative importance in society. The economically dominant establishments of the landed magnates were able to supply their own needs.

Thus the large estate became an *oikos*; more and more its main economic function was to supply its own needs with its own specialized labour. The great estates broke away from the city markets. Most of the medium and small towns lost their economic foundation – the exchange of labour and goods with their hinterlands. Thus the legal sources of the Later Empire reveal to us the decay of the cities. The emperors now constantly inveigh

against flight from the cities, and complain that the *possessores* are giving up and tearing down their town houses, taking off wainscoting and furniture to their country mansions.

The decline of the cities was hastened by the state's financial policies. The state too increasingly met its own increasing needs on a natural economy basis; the *fiscus* was run like an *oikos*, producing as much as possible what it needed and buying as little as possible on the market. The result was that it impeded the formation of monetary fortunes. Tax farming, a major form of speculation, was abolished; the state itself collected the taxes. A more rational method of transporting the public grain supply was found, using ships whose makers were rewarded with lands. A number of lucrative trades were made state monopolies, and the mines were also taken over, bringing great profit to the treasury. All these measures were beneficial from the subjects' point of view, but their effect was to arrest private capital formation and check every tendency towards the emergence of a class corresponding to the bourgeoisie of modern times. This financial system based on natural economy policies developed steadily as the Empire ceased to be an agglomeration of cities exploiting rural regions, with its economic activities centred on the coast and sea trade, and became instead a unified state aiming at the political integration and organization of large continental areas with a subsistence economy. The consequence was an enormous increase in state expenditure, that could not be met from monetary income because the exchange system was far too tenuous. Necessity therefore dictated the growth of the natural economy within the state's own financial system.

From the first the provinces had paid tribute to the state mainly in kind, especially grain; this was the grain with which the public storehouses were supplied. Under the Empire manufactured products were also collected as tax payments; deliveries were assessed on urban crafts; the craftsmen were often mobilized for this purpose into compulsory guilds. The state now increasingly satisfied its needs for goods in this way, rather than by purchase on the market or public contracts. Meanwhile the poor free craftsmen were forced into a position where they were in practice hereditary guild serfs.

What the treasury received from tax payments in kind, it used to cover expenditures in kind. This was the way it sought to maintain the two largest items in its budget: the bureaucracy and the army. Here alone, however, the natural economy revealed its limits.

A large continental state cannot be governed permanently without a salaried bureaucracy, something with which the city-states of Antiquity had been able to dispense. Under the monarchy established by Diocletian, the officials of the Roman state were paid largely in kind; their salaries were much like those now paid to day labourers on a Mecklenburg estate, only much larger: a few thousand bushels of grain, so many head of cattle, and proportionate quantities of salt, oil, and the other things needed for sustenance – all drawn from the imperial storehouses. To supplement this there was a rather modest sum paid in cash for pocket money.

Nevertheless, in spite of the manifest tendency towards provisioning in kind, the maintenance of a powerful and hierarchical bureaucracy demanded considerable money expenditures. Nor was this the only drain on the government's money supply, for even higher cash outlays were needed for the imperial army.

A continental state with hostile neighbours must have a standing army. Rome's ancient army was recruited from citizen landowners who supplied their own equipment, but by the end of the Republic this had given way to an army equipped by the state and recruited from the proletariat – the army on which the Caesars relied. Under the Empire the standing army became in theory as well as in fact a professional body. Now in order to maintain a professional army two things are essential: men and money. Thus it was their recruitment needs which led mercantilist rulers in the age of enlightened despotism, such as Frederick II and Maria Theresa, to discourage large-scale agricultural enterprises and to forbid the enclosure of common lands. These policies were not motivated by humanitarian concern for the peasants, nor were the rights of the individual peasant protected, for his landlord could send him away without hindrance if he found another peasant to cultivate his land. The reason is rather to be found in a remark of Frederick William I, that his army would be recruited from 'surplus peasant lads'. But that meant that there had to be a surplus, and so enclosure of peasant lands was

prevented, for that would have reduced the peasant population, depopulated the rural areas, and so made recruitment much more difficult.

For very similar reasons the Roman emperors intervened to regulate the conditions affecting *coloni*, for example forbidding any increase in the burdens imposed on them. Other policies, however, unknown to Rome, were followed by Europe's mercantilist rulers. In particular, they fostered large-scale manufacturing because it would increase the population and draw money into the country. Frederick the Great issued warrants for the arrest of workers and manufacturers leaving the country just as he did for deserting soldiers. This policy could not be followed by the Roman emperors, for large-scale industry producing for the market with free labour did not exist in the Empire, and could not exist.

In fact what happened in the Empire was that as commerce and cities declined, and as society relapsed into a natural economy, rural districts were more and more unable to raise the steadily increasing sums of money demanded by the tax system. At the same time there was a shortage of labour, caused by the closure of the slave market, and so army recruitment among the *coloni* became a ruinous burden on the estates, whose owners tried to help their peasants evade the recruitment officers. Men eligible for the draft therefore fled from the decaying cities to the countryside and the safety of serfdom, for the great landowner (*possessor*) needed workers and would aid them to escape conscription. The later emperors struggled to stem the flight of townsmen to the countryside, just as the later Hohenstaufen struggled to stop serfs fleeing into the city.

Recruitment for the army therefore became more and more difficult, with effects that were soon readily apparent. From the reign of Vespasian onwards, Italy was exempted from conscription; from Hadrian on army units ceased to be mixed, each one being recruited as much as possible from the district where it was stationed in order to save money – the earliest sign of the Empire's disintegration. Furthermore, if we look at the place of birth given on veterans' discharge documents over the centuries, we discover that a steadily increasing number of soldiers are identified as 'children of the camps' (*castrenses*); under the Empire this group increased from a few per cent of the total to

nearly half. In other words: the Roman army increasingly reproduced itself. Just as the slave living in a barracks without a wife was replaced by a peasant living in the home of his own family, so in the army the celibate soldier in the barracks gave way – at least in part – to the married soldier who was really a hereditary and professional mercenary.

Similarly the increased recruitment of barbarians was designed mainly to husband the labour force of the rural areas, especially the large estates. Barbarians were also given lands in return for military duty on the borders, a measure entirely in the tradition of a natural economy and also noteworthy as a distant precursor of the fief. This form of land grant became increasingly common.

As a result of these developments the army which controlled the Empire became a host of barbarians with increasingly fewer ties to the native population. When the victorious barbarians from outside the Empire crossed its borders their invasions at first meant little more to the provincials than a change in the troops billeted on them, and actually the Roman system of billeting continued to be used. Indeed, in Gaul the invading barbarians do not seem to have been generally feared as conquerors, for many welcomed them as liberators from the oppression of the imperial administration. That was certainly understandable.

For it was not just recruits which the decaying Empire had difficulty finding in its own population. As the Empire relapsed more and more into a natural economy, cash taxes became a heavier and heavier burden on the population. But money is absolutely essential for maintaining a mercenary army. In consequence the state's efforts were increasingly concentrated on the problem of mustering ready money, while at the same time it became ever more apparent that the estate owners, who produced only for their own needs, were now economically unable to pay adequate money taxes.

Of course, the problem would have been solved if the emperor had said to the estate owners: 'Very well: have your *coloni* make weapons for yourselves, then get on your horses, and together we shall defend our country.' That would have been feasible for the estate owners. But such a programme would have meant creating a feudal army. The Middle Ages would have started.

In reality, a feudal social structure and a feudal military system were the natural conclusion towards which developments under

the Later Roman Empire tended. During the period of barbarian invasions this trend was interrupted briefly by the local appearance of Germanic peasant armies fighting for land on which to settle, but then previous tendencies reasserted themselves and by Carolingian times a feudal order had been established.

Now a feudal army can overthrow kingdoms and defend a march, but no feudal army has ever been able to maintain the unity of a great empire or stand guard against land-hungry invaders on frontiers stretching hundreds of miles. This explains why the Roman Empire could not shift to a feudal military system, of a type that would have corresponded to the Empire's natural economy.

Therefore, in order to maintain the Empire, Diocletian found it necessary to try to reorganize public finances on the basis of uniform taxes in money, and the city was kept to the last as the official basis of the state administrative system. But the economic foundations of most cities were by now crumbling away; their main function was to obtain money for the state bureaucracy, while about them the land was transformed into a network of manorial estates.

It is clear, therefore, that the disintegration of the Roman Empire was the inevitable political consequence of a basic economic development: the gradual disappearance of commerce and the expansion of a barter economy. Essentially this disintegration simply meant that the monetarized administrative system and political superstructure of the Empire disappeared, for they were no longer adapted to the infrastructure of a natural economy.

It was on the basis of institutions which were adapted to a natural economy that the political unity of the West was re-established. This was accomplished by Charlemagne, who carried out Diocletian's will half a millennium later. The natural economy basis of his system is apparent to anyone who reads the instruction he sent to the bailiffs (*villici*) of his domains. These instructions, the celebrated *Capitulare de villis*, remind us by their homely knowledge and plain style of the edicts of Frederick William I.

Note that in the *Capitulare* the queen figures alongside the king for as mistress of the royal household she was the king's

minister of finance. Nor should this cause surprise, for Charlemagne's fiscal administration was mainly concerned with collecting food for his table and supplies for his household; the royal household's income and expenditures constituted the state's revenue system. Hence the bailiffs were instructed what to provide for the court: grain, meat, textiles, rather large quantities of soap, in other words, what the king needed for himself, for his courtiers, and for his servants, for example horses and transport vehicles for warfare.

From the *Capitulare* it is clear what has disappeared: the standing army, the salaried bureaucracy, and therefore the taxes (even the concept is gone) of the Roman Empire. The king feeds his officials at his own table or gives them land. An army recruited from men who supply their own arms, is about to become an army of cavalymen, and thereby a military order of manor-owning knights.

Interlocal commerce has also disappeared; the commercial ties connecting the self-sufficient cells of economic life have been cut, trade has relapsed to the level of peddling left to foreigners – Greeks and Jews. Above all else, the city has disappeared; indeed, the Carolingian age does not know this word as a term of administrative law. The manors are the centres of civilization, and they also provide the support needed by monasteries. Manorial lords run the political system, and the greatest manorial lord is the king himself, a rural illiterate in his way of life. The king has his castles in the country, and he has no capital; he is a monarch who travels about for sustenance, even more than do the monarchs of today. He travels so much because he goes from castle to castle to consume what has been stored up there for himself.

In a word, then: the civilization of Western Europe has become completely rural. The economic development of the ancient world has come full circle.

Looking back at the Carolingian Age, one might imagine the cultural achievements of Antiquity to have been entirely lost. Just as the commerce and the marble pomp of the ancient cities have disappeared, so too all the intellectual achievements and values of these cities seem sunk in darkness: their art, their literature, their

science, and their sophisticated commercial law. Meanwhile, on the manors of the *possessores* and seigneurs the songs of the troubadours were not yet heard.

It is impossible not to feel a certain sadness as we view this spectacle – a great civilization apparently approaches the heights of perfection, then loses its economic basis and crumbles away. Yet what did this mighty process really involve?

What we have described was a transformation of the fundamental structures of society, a transformation which was necessary and which must be interpreted as a tremendous process of recovery. For the great masses of unfree people regained family life and private property, and they themselves were elevated from the status of 'speaking tools' to the plane of humanity. Ascendant Christianity now surrounded their family life with firm moral guarantees; indeed even the laws of the Later Empire for the protection of peasants' rights acknowledged the unity of the unfree family to an unprecedented degree.

It is of course also true that at the same time a part of the free population sank to a position equivalent to serfdom, and the civilized aristocracy of Antiquity was barbarized. Furthermore, the natural economy now became dominant. It had always formed the infrastructure of ancient civilization, but the expansion of unfree labour had for a time relegated it to a subordinate position, although the more slave property caused differentiation in wealth the more it in turn grew. However, when the political centre of the Empire shifted from the coastal areas to the interior, and slave supplies dried up, then the natural economy imposed its pressures towards feudalism on the once commercialized superstructure of the ancient world.

Thus the framework of ancient civilization weakened and then collapsed, and the intellectual life of Western Europe sank into a long darkness. Yet its fall was like that of Antaeus, who drew new strength from Mother Earth each time he returned to it. Certainly, if one of the classic authors could have awoken from a manuscript in a monastery and looked out at the world of Carolingian times, he would have found it strange indeed. An odour of dung from the courtyard would have assailed his nostrils.

But of course no Greek or Roman authors appeared. They slept in hibernation, as did all civilization, in an economic world that had once again become rural in character. Nor were the classics

remembered when the troubadours and tournaments of feudal society appeared. It was only when the mediaeval city developed out of free division of labour and commercial exchange, when the transition to a natural economy made possible the development of burgher freedoms, and when the bonds imposed by outer and inner feudal authorities were cast off, that – like Antaeus – the classical giants regained a new power, and the cultural heritage of Antiquity revived in the light of modern bourgeois civilization.