

THE CAUSES OF DISINTEGRATION
AND FALL OF EMPIRES:
SOCIOLOGICAL
AND HISTORICAL ANALYSES*

I

The preoccupation with the causes of fall of Great Empires has been a continuous focus of interest and object of fascination for historians, philosophers of history and social scientists. It was in their dealing with the causes of downfalls of Empires that historians had at least to imply some of their more general assump-

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tions about human nature and about the nature of society, about the moral and natural forces which sustain or break a social and political order. It was here that even the most antiquarian or matter-of-fact historians were often entrapped into discussing such general problems and had to "show their hand" with regard to such more general questions or assumptions.

An examination of such attempts may therefore be of interest from the point of view of analysis of such wider assumptions used in historical research, and of the relations of these assumptions to systematic sociological analyses of social and political systems.¹

Recently there have appeared several important articles by leading historians which take up again the problems of the decline of great Empires and which can serve as a good starting point for a discussion of this sort.

One is that of A. H. M. Jones in "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire."² This constitutes the first attempt in this field after Baynes³ lecture in 1942, and it has elicited some interesting comments from A. E. R. Boak,⁴ comments which are of interest from the point of view of our discussion. Another is that by B. Lewis on the Decline of the Ottoman Empire,⁵ in which Lewis refers back to Jones' article.

¹ The following discussion is based on a comparative sociological analysis of historical political systems on which the author has been engaged for several years and which will be published in 1961 by the Free Press, Glencoe, Ill. For some preliminary formulations see: S. N. Eisenstadt, "Political Struggle in Bureaucratic Societies," *World Politics*, Vol. IX, Oct. 1956, N^o 1, pp. 15-37; S. N. Eisenstadt, "Internal Contradictions in Bureaucratic Politics," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. L, Oct. 1958, No. 1, pp. 50-76.

² A. H. M. Jones, "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," *History*, Vol. XL, Oct. 1955, No. 140, pp. 109-277.

³ See N. H. Baynes, "The Decline of the Roman Power in Western Empire," reprinted in *Byzantine Studies and other Essays*, London 1955, pp. 33-97.

⁴ A. E. R. Boak, "The Role of Policy in the Fall of the Roman Empire," *Michigan Alumnus, Quarterly Review*, LVI, 1950, pp. 281-284.

⁵ B. Lewis, "Some Reflections on the Decline of the Ottoman Empire," *Studia Islamica*, IX, 1958, pp. 112-127.

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The work of G. Ostrogorsky,⁶ which encompasses the whole history of the Byzantine Empire, also continuously refers to some underlying causes of its ultimate disintegration.

Some interesting analyses of the processes of disintegration of the Abbaside Empire can also be found in some of the recent work of Cl. Cahen on the Social History of Islamic Middle Ages.⁷

II

What do then all these teach us about the causes of the decline of these various Empires? Great parts of their expositions are necessarily devoted to the analysis of many historical details—such as the various invasions which influenced the fall of the Roman Empire or of the changes in the trade routes and the art of war which have greatly influenced the decline of the Ottoman Empire or to influences of the personalities of rulers in these political situations.

But beyond these details all of them go into somewhat "deeper," more general causes. Jones stresses the decline of civic spirit, lack of any imperial patriotism, the growth of other-worldly spirit which deflected energies from the political scene; the continuous expansion of the bureaucracy which became a very heavy charge on the economy; and in the economic sphere—the shrinkage of the area of cultivation, shortage of manpower, general impoverishment and the development of a "parasitic" landed-rentier class.

He stresses that while these causes existed in general both in

⁶ G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, Oxford 1956, and for more succinct exposition of his analysis of the major trends of development of Byzantine Social and Economic Structure: "Die wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Entwicklungsgrundlagen des Byzantinischen Reiches," *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, XXII (1929) pp. 129-43; "Die Perioden der Byzantinischen Geschichte," *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 163, 1941, pp. 238-254.

⁷ Cl. Cahen, "L'Histoire Economique et Sociale de l'Orient Musulman Médiéval," *Studia Islamica*, Vol. 1, p. 55, pp. 3-116.

Cl. Cahen, *Les Facteurs Economiques et Sociaux dans l'Ankylose Culturelle de l'Islam*, in R. Brunsvick & G. E. von Grunebaum, *Classicisme et Déclin Culturel dans l'Histoire de l'Islam*, Paris 1958, pp. 159-217.

Cl. Cahen, *Leçons d'Histoire Musulmane*, Cours de la Sorbonne (mim.), Paris 1958, Vol. 1-3.

the Eastern and the Western Roman Empire, it was only in the West, where they were more pronounced and where the impact of the invasions was much greater, that they brought about the disintegration of the Empire.

Boak, in his discussion of Jones, stresses that in addition to such causes as impoverishment, depopulation and invasion, the very decisions taken by the Emperors, such as Diocletian's decision to establish his capital at Nicomedia, have often aggravated rather than ameliorated such conditions. Similarly, he shows that the very nature of the system of military administration established by the Emperors enabled the generals (often barbarian generals) to compete with the Emperors and contributed to the disintegration of the Empire.

Lewis, in his discussion of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, also stresses the importance of the overgrown, inefficient bureaucracy; the heavy burden of a growing rentier class; the decline of commerce; the alienation between the non-Muslim (Jewish, Greek) merchant classes and the spirit of the martial, Muslim Ottoman polity, an alienation which in the changing circumstances of the 18th-19th century stifled all possibility of initiative and adjustment to changes.

Cl. Cahen also comments on the importance of the "feudalization" of the bureaucracy and the growing political apathy of the religious groups in the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate.

The main theme of Ostrogorsky's analysis of Byzantine economic and social history is the struggle between the forces of centralized polity and those of the aristocracy, with the rulers attempting to promote an independent peasantry, which could provide them both with manpower for military service and with revenues, and the aristocracy continuously attempting to encroach on this peasantry and ultimately succeeding in its efforts.

III

If we examine the list of these "causes," some similarities, such as the emphasis on the growing burden of bureaucracy, the shrinkage of economic resources and manpower, the loss of civil-spirit are striking.

Some of these "causes," such as the importance of civic spirit, seem, at least at first glance, to apply to all political systems.

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However, most of the other causes listed by the historians are more closely related to the more specific problems of the political systems of these Empires.

In this connection it is very interesting to note that most of these historical analyses are applied to a specific type of Empire or political system and not to others. Thus, they do not deal with "patrimonial" Empires such as the Achmenid or the Carolingian Empire, with patrimonial-conquest Empires, like the Mongol Empire or with feudal political systems. They all deal rather with Empires in which rulers, who maintained and claimed a traditional legitimation attempted to establish "centralized" polities, to free themselves from the fetters of traditional kinship and aristocratic groups, so as to be able to pursue their own political goals, and who have established or promoted a centralized bureaucratic administration which was to help them in the mobilization of the major resources needed by them.

It seems thus that many historians have been drawn, perhaps unwittingly, to a special type of political system, a type with some common characteristics and problems. It was the study of this type of political system that was perhaps most rewarding from the point of view of study of decline, disintegration and fall of political systems. Anyhow, the various assumptions of the historians with regard to the conditions of functioning of political systems and the causes of their disintegration were mostly applied to these types of political systems.

However, all these assumptions about the causes of decline of these Empires were not usually presented in a fully explicit and systematic way which would enable both to test them and to develop a comparison between the ways in which they have developed or operated in different societies.

It is here perhaps that sociological analysis of political systems in general, and of the specific systems of these Empires in particular, may come in and be of use in the systematic explication of these assumptions and of their application to comparative analysis.

IV

It is, therefore, necessary first to see what societies are included in this type of political system and then to analyse systematically its major characteristics.

This type of political system comprised many societies, the most important of which are:

- a) the Ancient Empires — especially the Egyptian, Babylonian and, possibly, the Inca and Aztec as well;
- b) the Chinese Empire from the Han period to the Ching;
- c) the various Iranian Empires, especially the Sassanid, and, to a smaller extent, the Parthian and Achmenid;
- d) the Roman Empire and the various Hellenistic Empires;
- e) the Byzantine Empire;
- f) several ancient Hindu states;
- g) the Arab Caliphate, especially from the reign of the Abbasides and Fatimides, the Arab Muslim states in the Mediterranean and Iran, and, finally, the Ottoman Empire;
- h) the West, Central and East European states from the fall of the feudal systems through the age of absolutism;
- i) conquest-Empires, i.e., the various political systems established in non-European countries as a result of European expansion, colonization and conquest—especially the Spanish-American and French Empires and the British colonial Empire in India.

The majority of these historical centralized bureaucratic Empires developed from either (a) patrimonial empires such as Egypt, or the Sassanid Empire; (b) dualistic nomad-sedentary empires (necessarily sharing many characteristics in common with the patrimonial ones); (c) from feudal systems, as the European Absolutist states; and (d) city-states (the Roman and Hellenistic Empires), and most of them became transformed either again into one of these types or into modern political systems. Thus, they stand, as it were, in between more traditional and modern political systems and this position of theirs is evident, as we shall see, in their basic characteristics.

V

The basic characteristic of these political systems of the Empires was coexistence, within the framework of the same political institutions, of traditional, undifferentiated types of political activities, orientations and organizations and of more differentiated, specifically *political* ones.

In order to be able to understand these characteristics, it would

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be best to describe briefly the concrete processes of the development and establishment of these Empires.

Despite the great variety in historical and cultural settings some common features in the first stages of establishment of such polities may be found. The initiative for the establishment of these polities has, in all cases, come from the rulers—emperors, kings or some members of a patrician ruling elite (like the more active and dynamic element of the patrician elite in Republican Rome). These rulers came, in most cases, either from established patrician, patrimonial, tribal or feudal families or were usurpers, coming from lower class families, who attempted to establish new dynasties or to conquer new territories. In some cases they were conquerors who attempted to conquer various territories and establish their rule over them. In most cases such rulers arose in periods of unrest, turmoil, or dismemberment of the existing political system—be they patrician city states, tribes, patrimonial empires or feudal systems—or of acute strife within them. Usually their aim was the re-establishment of peace and order. They did not, however, attempt to restore the old order in toto, although for propagandist and opportunistic reasons, they sometimes upheld such restoration as political ideology or slogan. They always had some vision of distinctly political goals and of a unified polity. They aimed to establish a more centralized, unified polity in which they could monopolize political decisions and the setting of political goals, without being bound by various traditional aristocratic, tribal or patrician groups. Even when they were conquerors—as in the case of Roman, Islamic or Spanish American Empires—they also had some such vision and attempted to transmit it to parts at least of the conquered population.

These aims were very often oriented against, and encountered the opposition of, various social and political groups. However great the turmoil, unrest and internal strife may have been, there have always existed some groups which either benefited from it, or hoped to do so, or aimed to re-establish the “old” order in which they held positions of power and influence. These groups—generally consisting of some aristocratic groups, patrician or other traditional urban groups, and traditional cultural elites—usually felt themselves menaced by the new aims and activities of the rulers. In many cases they saw the rulers as renegades,

upstarts or barbarians. But beyond these purely “social” reasons they felt that their position was menaced by the trend to political centralization and they were not willing to help in the implementation of this trend. Therefore, frequently they attempted to deny the rulers’ resources and support, plotting and working against them either in open political warfare or by sleight-of-hand, infiltration, and intrigues.

The rulers had to find allies, whether passive or active, in order to be able to implement their aims against these various aristocratic or patrician forces. They had to forge various instruments of power and policy with which to mobilize the various resources needed by them—whether economic resources, manpower or political support. The rulers tried naturally to find their allies among the groups and strata whose interests were opposed to those of the more traditional and aristocratic groups and who could benefit by their weakening and by the establishment of a more unified polity. These were, basically, of two kinds. The first were more active (mostly urban), economic, cultural and professional groups, who, whether by origin and/or by their social interests and orientations were opposed to the aristocratic-traditional groups. The second were the wider, politically and socially more passive strata—especially peasants and, to a smaller extent, also some lower urban groups who could benefit, even if indirectly, by the weakening of the aristocratic forces and by the establishment of peace and order by the rulers.

It was from these various groups and strata that the rulers hoped to mobilize the various resources which they needed. In order to be able to mobilize these resources and to implement their policies, the rulers had also to forge some instruments of political and administrative action on which they could rely, and which they could use to provide various services to the major strata which were their potential allies or supporters.

In most of the cases the rulers could draw on some existing administrative and political organs and personnel. But even when some such personnel and organs of administration were available, the rulers had to change and transform them in order to adapt them to their own purposes. Insofar as the existing personnel were related to the aristocratic forces the rulers had in many cases to change their personnel. But changes of personnel were not

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enough. The rulers had to assure that the new personnel would remain faithful to them and dependent on them, that they would not be "reconquered" by the opposing forces. Moreover, the rulers had to make sure that these organs would be so organized as to be able to perform various functions both for them and for their supporters among the major strata in the society. To this end, the rulers attempted to concentrate the nominations to these positions in their own hands. They tried, as far as possible, to appoint persons who were both loyal to them and who had the necessary qualifications for the execution of the tasks.

The rulers also attempted to control the budget of these organs and to have enough resources at their disposal to enable them to provide for the necessary expenses and to pay salaries of the officials.

The rulers always stressed that these officials were either their own personal servants, or servants of the polity which they wanted to establish, but not representatives of any groups or strata in the society.

In general the rulers attempted to make these organs insofar as possible independent of the more traditional and aristocratic strata and groups, and to give them some power and prestige vis-à-vis these strata. Here the rulers had, necessarily, to allow these organs some measure of autonomy and independence, and to enable them to perform some services to the population. Truly enough the rulers very often wanted to use these organs only or mainly for exploitative purpose—so as to tap the resources of the population. But even in conquest Empires, if the rulers wanted to perpetuate their rule they had to allow the administration to take into account some of the needs of some of the social groups—even if only to provide them with peace, security and some minimal services.

VI

It was within the social and political context described above that the rulers of these Empires have developed their specific goals and political orientations which shaped the basic characteristics of the political systems of these Empires.

The concrete goals of rulers of the historical bureaucratic societies varied greatly from case to case. They might include ter-

ritorial unification and expansion, conquest, enrichment of the polity, economic development and maintenance of a given cultural pattern or its expansion. But whatever the concrete aims of the rulers, the very fact that they were usually envisaged and implemented as autonomous political goals of a unified, centralized polity affected the nature both of the general political orientations of the rulers and their concrete aims and policies. This fact necessitated the development of some *general* goals, within the framework of which the more concrete policies of the rulers developed.

The first such general goal of these rulers was the very development and maintenance of a unified and centralized polity and of their rule over it. Second, the rulers of these Empires developed special general orientations with regard to mobilization of *continuous* and *independent* recruitment of such resources from various strata in the society. Their very *raison d'être*—in their battles with feudal or patrimonial elements—was based, to a large extent, on their ability to implement *continuously* various policies, to maintain a unified, centralized framework and some flexibility in the choice of policies and concrete goals. Moreover, they needed a continuous supply of resources for the maintenance of the administrative machinery which constituted one of the bases of their strength and the main means for the continuous execution of their policies. Thus, as a result of these aims and of their structural position in the society, these rulers always developed a basic interest in continuous mobilization of resources and manpower which would, to a large extent, be independent of the fixed ascriptive rights and duties of these groups and strata, and of the wishes of their members.

This interest was manifest in the rulers' desire either to concentrate most such resources in their own hands—as for instance by storing goods and money and accumulating state—property, or to further the development of various types of “free-floating,” mobile resources which were not tied to any ascriptive groups but could be freely accumulated and exchanged,—and which could then be controlled and used by them.

In order to assure the continuous existence of such free-floating resources of various kinds and their ability to use them for their own (usually very expensive) goals, and their continuous control over them, the rulers and the bureaucracy (insofar as

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their interests did not conflict) attempted to prevent any one group or stratum within the society from controlling the use of enough such resources—whatever the resources be—wealth, prestige, communication or political power and support itself—as to be able to challenge their control by the rulers.

Because of this the rulers and the bureaucracy always tended, in these Empires, to regulate, make dependent on themselves or reduce all other centers of power so as to minimize the possibility of their becoming entirely autonomous. For this reason these rulers always tried to create for themselves strategic positions enabling them to control most of the available resources and most of the social groups.

It was because of this orientation that the rulers of these Empires always attempted to weaken the various “traditional,” self-contained groups, especially various aristocratic groups and to promote, albeit in a limited way, some of the more flexible and differentiated middle and lower groups, especially the free peasantry or urban groups but at the same time aiming to control them.

However, their own political orientations and the social conditions within which they operated tended to limit the ability of the rulers of these Empires to implement their aims. These rulers perceived themselves always as bearers of traditional values and symbols and their own legitimation was couched in terms of such values, and necessarily limited in various ways—some of which will be discussed below—the pursuance of their distinctive, autonomous political goals.

Moreover, the social and economic structure of these societies tended also to set limits to the rulers' ability to implement their major goals and political orientations. In most of these Empires there developed several relatively differentiated types of economic activities—there tended to develop in them a free peasantry, some possibility of commercial transactions in land, and especially various wider trade and manufactural organizations—all of which gave rise to relatively complicated market systems. It was these activities which provided the various free-floating resources needed by the rulers. However, the economic base of almost all these Empires was mainly agricultural. Their economic systems were limited from the point of view of the level of technological production, of the extent of flow of various economic resources

beyond self-sufficient units or of the scope of purely economic-market activities.

Similarly, large parts of the social structure of these polities were still bound within relatively closed, traditional, undifferentiated units. It was only within the more central zones of their various institutional spheres—in politics, in cultural life and in social organizations—that a somewhat greater extent of differentiated, non-traditional activities and organizations tended to develop.

VII

It was out of the interplay between the various forces which were described above that the basic characteristics of the political system of these Empires—the coexistence of traditional and differentiated political activities and organizations and the development of a *limited* tendency to autonomy of political institutions—were shaped.

This last tendency was manifest, first, in the tendency towards political centralization, second, in the development by the rulers of autonomous political goals and third, in the relatively high extent of organizational autonomy of executive and administrative activities.

But the extent of differentiation of political activities, organization and goals was, in these political systems, still limited by several important factors.

First, the legitimation of the rulers was here couched in basically traditional-religious terms, even if they tended to stress their own ultimate monopoly of such traditional values, and tried to deny that other (traditional) groups could also share in this monopoly.

Second, the basic political role of the subject was not fully distinguished from other basic societal roles—such as, for instance, from membership in local communities; it was often embedded in such groups and the citizen or subject did not exercise any direct political rights through a system of voting or franchise.

Third, many traditional ascriptive units, such as aristocratic lineages or territorial communities performed, in these societies, many crucial political functions and served as units of political representation. As a consequence, the scope of political activity and participation was far narrower than in most modern and contemporary political systems.

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This existence of both traditional and differentiated political orientations and activities and organizations created within these Empires a complex interrelation between the political institutions and other parts of the social structure.

The rulers were in need of both "traditional" and more complex, differentiated political support and were dependent on both. The rulers' "traditional" dependence on other parts of the social structure was manifest in their need to uphold their traditional legitimation and the traditional, "unconditional" political attitudes and identifications of many groups. On the other hand, however, the rulers' tendency to political independence and autonomy made them dependent on types of resources which were not available through various ascriptive-traditional commitments and relations. The rulers were here, as was shown above, in need of more flexible support and resources which were not embedded in traditional, ascriptive groups and were not committed for more or less fixed goals, and which could be used by them for the implementation of their varied goals according to their own political consideration.

Similarly, the political demands made on the rulers by the various groups in the society were both of the traditional, "ascriptive" type, i.e., they consisted of demands to uphold fixed traditional rights and benefits of various groups, and of more complex and differentiated types of demands, such as demands for participation in the formulation of the political goals of the society: or even of determining the legitimation and accountability of the rulers. Because of all these factors even the "traditional" legitimation of the rulers was, in these societies, no longer based on "automatic," "fixed" support.

These different types of political activities and orientations did not coexist in these societies in separate "compartments," bound together only in some loose and unstable way. They were bound here together within the same institutions and the continuity of each type of political activity was dependent here on the existence of both types of political orientations. Because of this the activities of the rulers were, therefore, paradoxically oriented to maintaining basic *traditional* legitimation through manipulation of not only traditional but also of non-traditional support, and to the mobili-

zation also of "traditional" resources for politically autonomous goals and through non-traditional channels.

VIII

Hence, the political systems of these Empires could subsist only insofar as it was possible to maintain simultaneously and continuously, within the framework of their political institutions, both the traditional and the more differentiated levels of legitimation, support and political organization. The continuity of these systems was contingent on the continuous existence of a certain balance between political activity and involvement on the part of some parts of the population and of political non-involvement or apathy towards central political issues by the greater parts of the population. The limited political involvement could assure some of the more flexible political support, while the apathy, in its turn, was necessary for maintenance of the traditional legitimation of the rulers.

It was in this context that the rulers attempted continuously to promote some limited mobility and political activity which would bring the most active elements within the major groups into the orbit of the central political institutions, ensure their loyalty and have them as channels of communication through which the central political symbols could be transmitted to the more "passive" strata. At the same time, however, the rulers always attempted to limit the extent of such mobility so as not to undermine their own traditional legitimation and monopoly of political decision making.

The maintenance of such conditions was dependent on both the activities and policies of the rulers and on the political activities and orientations of the main groups.

In order that the conditions requisite for the continuous development of both free resources and traditional legitimation be maintained, it was necessary that the rulers, through their own policies, create or facilitate the development of conditions which were necessary for the continuous development of *limited* free floating resources.

However, within both the policies of the rulers and the political activities of the major groups there developed several contradictions. The contradictions in the policies of the rulers were rooted

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in the very context of the development and establishment of these Empires and in the basic characteristics of their political system.

The preceding analysis has shown that the rulers of these Empires tended to develop three major types of basic political orientations. First, they were interested in the limited promotion of free resources and in freeing them from commitments to traditional-aristocratic groups. Second, the rulers were interested to control these resources, to commit them, as it were, to their own use. Third, the rulers tended also to engage in various goals—e.g., military expansions—which may, in themselves, exhaust many of the available free resources. Between these various tendencies of the rulers, there could have easily developed serious contradictions.

IX

The contradictions between these different political orientations of the rulers, though not always consciously grasped by them, were nevertheless implicit in their structural position, in the problems and exigencies with which they dealt and in the concrete policies they employed in order to solve these problems.

The primary sphere exhibiting these contradictions was that of legitimation and stratification. As we have seen, the rulers often attempted to limit the aristocracy's power and to create new status groups. But these attempts faced several obstacles. Regardless of the extent of the monarchs' independent activities in this field, of the number of new titles created, of the degree of encouragement of new strata, the symbols of status used by the rulers were usually very similar to those borne by the landed, hereditary aristocracy or by some religious elites. The creation of an entirely new secular and "rational" type of legitimation in which the social groups or universalistic principles would be the foci of legitimation was either beyond their horizon and/or against their basic political interest. It would necessarily involve extending the sphere of political participation and consequently the growing influence of various strata in the political institutions. Therefore, the rulers were usually unable to transcend the symbols of stratification and legitimation borne and represented by the very strata whose influence they wanted to limit.

Because of this, the ability of the rulers to appeal to the lower

strata of the population was obviously limited. Even more important, because of the emphasis of the superiority and worth of aristocratic symbols and values, many middle or new strata and groups tended to identify with them and consequently to "aristocratize" themselves.

The contradiction in the rulers' policies and goals could develop also in a different direction. However tradition-bound the ruling élites may have been, their policies required creation and propagation of more flexible "free" resources in various institutional fields. The propagation of such free resources either gave rise to many religious, intellectual and legal groups whose value orientations were much more flexible from those of the traditional ones or promoted such groups. Moreover, the orientations and values of the broader middle strata of the society sometimes were similar to those propagated by these more active elite groups. Although in many cases all these elements were very weak and succumbed to the influence of the more conservative groups and policies of the ruling elite, in other cases—as in Europe—they developed into relatively independent centers of power, whose opposition to the rulers was only stimulated by these more conservative policies.

Similar contradictions may also be discerned in the activities of the rulers in the economic field. First of all, the main economic aims of the rulers of these Empires, i.e., the mobilization of resources for the implementation of any one policy at any given moment of time and maintenance of the conditions maximizing the availability of their independent "free" resources, posed before the rulers a series of dilemmas which could be extremely acute in relatively undifferentiated economic systems, and which could give rise to intensive contradictions between their long-term and short-term economic policies. The continuous necessity to mobilize extensive resources could often exhaust the available "free" resources, and make the rulers dependent on the more traditional forces. The big land owners and merchants who constituted important centers of economic power, quite often tried to intensify this contradiction by providing the government with short-term allocations at the price of buttressing their own positions and at the expense of the rulers. The rulers had to avail themselves of the various services and resources of these groups, giving them in turn

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various concessions, which often tended to undermine the long-run availability of various free resources and to weaken the position of the rulers.

A similar contradiction existed between the long-range and short-range policies dealing with problems of administrative manpower. In many cases there was not enough manpower available for the execution of various administrative and political tasks or, because of inadequate communication and technical facilities, it was very difficult to supervise such personnel effectively. It then became necessary to "farm out" various functions and positions either to local gentry and landowners or to officials who gradually became aristocratized.

The best example of how the social groups created by the ruling elite became partially opposed to its aims and basic political premises, is the development of the system of sale of offices, which was closely connected, in these Empires, with the entire process of recruitment into the bureaucracy.⁸ At first, this system was usually introduced by the Kings as a means of solving their financial problems and admitting new (non-aristocratic) elements into their service. But in time, in most of these societies, the bureaucracy came to regard its offices as possessions and either to transmit them in the family or to sell them in the market. In this way, the rulers, despite many efforts to the contrary, slowly lost control over these offices.

This was connected in general with the tendency by the bureaucracy itself—the very instrument of power of the rulers—to "aristocratize" itself, to acquire symbols of aristocratic status and to ally itself with aristocratic forces. In such cases the bureaucracy very often displaced its goals of service to the rulers for those of self-aggrandizement—with its members using their positions for enriching themselves and their families, thus becoming a growing burden on the economy and losing their efficiency.

This has necessarily effected the nature and extent of political activity and the scope of mobilization of political leadership. Insofar as the processes, outlined above, became intensified they usually depleted the supply of political leaders to the central po-

⁸ The best general survey on the system of sales of offices is K. W. Swart, *Sales of Offices in the 17th Century*, The Hague, 1949.

litical institutions. The more active elements became alienated from the regime—either “succumbing” to the aristocratic forces and to complete political apathy or becoming centers of social and political upheaval and change.

X

Similar contradictions tended also to develop in the political attitudes and activities of the major strata in these societies. Four basic attitudes of various strata and groups to the basic premises of the political systems of these Empires and to the basic aims of the rulers can be distinguished:

The first attitude (evinced chiefly by the aristocracy) was one of opposition to these premises and was manifested mainly in attempts to diminish the scope of free-floating resources in the polity, and to limit the political autonomy of the rulers.

The second attitude was one of passivity towards these premises, of “empirical” adaptation to the demands of the administration and central authorities. This attitude was evinced mainly by the peasantry and, sometimes also, by other groups which were interested only in maintaining their own limited local autonomy and their immediate economic interests.

The third attitude, which could be found mostly among the bureaucracy and parts of the urban groups and professional and cultural elites consisted of basic identification with the premises of the political system of these Empires, willingness to fight for their interests within their political framework and to channelize their own interests within the framework of existing political institutions and of the polities set up by the rulers.

The fourth attitude, developed mainly by the more differentiated urban groups and professional and intellectual elites, favoured changes in the extension of the scope of political participation beyond the premises of the existing political systems. This attitude most clearly evinced by European middle class and intellectual groups at the end of the 18th century, was manifest in various attempts to change the basic premises and values of the political system, to widen the patterns of political participation within it and/or to find referents of political orientation which transcended the given political system.

These attitudes often overlapped in concrete instances, and the

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concrete attitudes of each group and stratum varied in different societies and periods. Moreover, the attitudes of any one group were never homogeneous and stable, and they could greatly change according to conditions, demands of the rulers or possibilities. It was the concrete constellations of these various political attitudes of the major social groups that greatly influenced the extent of their political participation and the scope and nature of political leadership which tended to develop from within these groups. Here again the most significant tendency, from the point of view of the continuity of these systems was the bureaucracy's potential tendency to aristocratize itself and thus undermine the very conditions of such continuity.

XI

It was the interplay between the policies of the rulers and the political orientation and activities of the major social groups that constituted the crux of the political processes of change within these societies and could also bring about the development of the conditions which could facilitate the downfall of these Empires. In more concrete terms, the main factors generating processes of change in these Empires were (a) the continuous needs of the rulers for different types of resources and especially their great dependence on various flexible resources; (b) the rulers' attempts to maintain their own positions of control, in terms of both traditional legitimation and of effective political control over the more flexible forces in the society; (c) the possibility of the development in most of these societies, of what has been called "Primat der Aussenpolitik"⁹ and consequently of a great and continuous sensitivity of the internal structure of these societies to various external pressures and to political and economic developments in the international field; (d) the consequent needs of the rulers to intensify the mobilization of various resources in order to deal with problems arising out of changes in military, diplomatic and economic international situations; (e) the development of various autonomous orientations and goals among the major strata and their respective demands on the rulers. Insofar as there developed

⁹ This term has been often used by F. Altheim in his *Studies of Roman and Sassanid History*; see for instance, F. Altheim, *Gesicht vom Abend und Morgen*, Frankfurt, 1955, *passim*.

strong tensions and contradictions between these different factors, and especially insofar as the rulers emphasized very "expensive" goals which exhausted the available economic and manpower resources, or there developed strong autonomous political orientations among different strata, the rulers were often caught on the horns of the basic dilemmas inherent in their own political orientations, goals and policies.

It was also in such situations that the special sensitivities of these political systems were brought out, and forces were generated which could undermine the delicate balance between political participation and apathy on which the continuity of these systems was dependent.

In such situations, the rulers' tendency towards maintenance of active control over different strata could become predominant, thus increasing the power of traditional forces, sharpening the conflicts between them and the more flexible, differentiated strata, and either destroying the more "free" groups and strata or alienating them from the rulers.

The excessive demands of the rulers which developed in such situations, the growing public expenditure and the consequent increase of taxation and inflation did very often, if not checked, strike hardest at those groups whose economic structures were based on more flexible resources and tended to deplete these resources.

This depletion may have taken on different, varying forms: outright demographic "apathy" and consequent shrinking of manpower, weakening of the more independent economic elements and their subordination to more conservative, aristocratic-patrimonial (or feudal) elements, and depletion or flight of mobile capital.

These processes were usually closely connected with "aristocratization" or ossification of the bureaucracy and with its growing parasitic exploitation of the economy, and with the depletion of active political leadership identified with the regime.

In connection with such depletion, there often developed a continuous flux of foreign elements into the centers of the realms. These foreign military groups initially were mere mercenaries, hirelings and personal helpers of the rulers. Gradually, however, with the depletion of the native strata and the growing external and internal exigencies, they succeeded in infiltrating into some

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of the important political posts (such as eunuchs, military commanders and viziers) and finally in totally usurping political power.

Similar developments could take place with regard to foreign merchants who sometimes, as in Byzantium or the Ottoman Empire, succeeded gradually to monopolize all the trade-posts "left over" by the depleted indigeneous merchants.

In those cases, like in Europe, in which these economically and socially more active strata were not depleted, they became alienated from the rulers, their policies and from the political institutions of the society, and became hotbeds of revolt and changes.

Such developments usually intensified the great sensitivity on the part of the rulers and the society to various external economic changes (in the routes of trade or in international price movements) and political (invasions, intrusion of foreign elements) changes and usually lessened their ability and capacity to cope with them effectively and in a statesmanlike manner.

It was in such cases that the rulers often tended to develop those short-sighted policies, based mostly on experience of the past and on their own limited and contradictory perception of the situation—policies which aimed mostly at the increase of their control, growing restriction of the main social groups and saw in such restriction the main means of dealing with their internal and external exigencies: and were unsuited to the changing situation of these societies.

XII

We see, thus, that the various causes of decline of these Empires, listed by historians, such as depletion of economic resources, growing burden of a parasitic, semi-aristocratized bureaucracy, decline of civic spirit and external pressures can be most fully understood as rooted in the basic characteristics of the political systems of these Empires, and not as either general causes of decline of any political system or as pure historical accidents.

Although all political systems are necessarily influenced by external exigencies and pressure, the special sensitivity of these Empires to such exigencies and pressures and to international economic fluctuations was rooted first, in their great emphasis of their rulers on military and expansionist goals; and second in the

dependence of these rulers on various resources, the availability of which was dependent on such international economic situations. The dangers to these political systems of excessive taxation and inflation were again rooted in the high expense of the implementation of the rulers' goals and in the great importance of various flexible resources for the implementation of these goals and for the general political position of the rulers of these Empires.

Similarly, while all political systems are influenced by, and dependent on, the efficiency and political loyalty of whatever administrative personnel exists within them, the special sensitivity of these Empires to the working of the bureaucracy and to the possibility of its becoming "artistocratized," "parasitic" and over-swollen was rooted first in the fact that the bureaucracy was the main instrument of the rulers in the implementation of their goals and in their struggle with their political opponents; and, second, in the constant danger of depletion of free resources by the encroachments of various aristocratic or traditional groups. Lastly, the sensitivity of these political systems to too great political passivity or "other worldliness" or lack of what some of the historians have called "civic spirit" was rooted in their dependence on the maintenance of a certain extent of *active* political participation—and not only on general identification with the regime or the rulers.

XIII

The preceding analysis may also help us in the systematic evaluation of the conditions and force which may have influenced the differential extent to which these processes of change and disintegration developed in different Empires.

Truly enough the general problems outlined above were rooted in the basic characteristics of the social and political structures of all these Empires, and they were common, even if in varying degrees, to all of them.

However, the exact ways in which these problems developed, and the exact processes which caused them varied in different Empires according to the specific constellation of the structural characteristics which were pointed out above, of various external processes which impinged on them and of unique historical circumstances.

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Among the internal aspects of the social structure of these Empires which influenced the processes of change which took place within them and processes of their disintegration, were, first, the nature of the goals of the rulers—whether they were chiefly military, expansionist or more oriented to the maintenance of a cultural order or to economic advancement—and the demands which the implementation of these goals made on the various types of resources available in the society.

Second, these processes of change and disintegration were greatly influenced by (a) the major policies which the rulers developed for the implementation of these goals and the repercussions of these policies on the relative strength of different strata; (b) changes in the relative strength of such strata as a result of internal economic, religious or political developments; (c) the development of internal and external exigencies and the ways in which the policies developed to deal with them influenced the strength of different groups.

Third was the initial level of social and economic differentiation in any given society and, fourth, the initial social composition of these societies, i.e., the relative strength of various social groups—the aristocracy, the various urban groups and the peasantry, and the extent to which the rulers could find among them enough supporters for themselves and their policies.

Within this context of special importance was the extent to which there existed common, cultural and political bonds encompassing these major social groups and the rulers (as for instance in the case of the Confucian order in China) or the extent to which various social and cultural groups were bearers of independent cultural and social values and orientations and were not entirely identified with the rulers and the polity.

Among the more “accidental” or “external” reasons we should mention different extents of external pressures, major movements of population, conquests of nomads, or international economic fluctuations, or the degree to which there existed from the beginning ethnic heterogeneity in a given society.

Similarly, of very crucial importance were the specific geopolitical factors, the geopolitical situation of any polity—as for instance, the special geopolitic situation of Byzantium at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, of East and West, which has

greatly influenced both its vulnerability to invasions and its political self-conception.

It was the combination of these various factors that has greatly influenced the extent to which the different processes or forces which have been mentioned by the historians—be they growing burdens of the bureaucracy, or the weakening of the civil spirit, general impoverishment of free resources—have developed within each Empire and in each stage of its development, and the extent to which its rulers were able to cope with them.

In general, it was some combination of external and internal pressures and exigencies that brought about the precipitation of changes in the political systems of these Empires. Hence, the greater the intensity of these internal contradictions and of the pressure of external exigencies which could not be dealt with by the internal forces of the society, the quicker and more intensive usually was the accumulation of processes of change in these societies.

Thus, to give only some very preliminary examples, the fact that in China various invasions, rebellions and the famous “dynastic cycles,” have not undermined for a very long period of time (from the Han to the Ching) the basic institutional structure of the Chinese Empire can be understood if one remembers its geopolitical position, which made it to some extent relatively immune from the heavy impact of external forces; the fact that the relative weakness of the aristocracy, and the predominance of the gentry, tended to enhance the position of the centralized rulers and that the Confucian literati and bureaucracy, who constituted the backbone of the social and political structure and intervened between the central government and the major social strata, provided an indispensable framework of continuity and unity of the Empire. When we compare these with the geopolitical exposure of the Byzantine Empire, its strong sensitivity to invasion and international developments, the continuous struggle between the aristocracy and the free peasantry, or with the great importance of the autonomous religious and cultural groups in the Roman or Arabic Empires, as well as the different geopolitical position of these Empires, we may understand their greater vulnerability to external pressures and the lack of ability of their rulers to cope with the internal forces which developed within them.

XIV

These are but a few examples, more of which can be easily adduced.¹⁰ Each of the factors which we have touched upon has been mentioned in one way or another by the historians of these societies, but it is only within the framework of a comparative analysis which based itself on a systematic-sociological approach that their relative importance and their influence on a specific situation could be fully evaluated.

It is within the framework of these characteristics and problems that both the general and the specific historical causes that shaped the specific development of any given society could be fully understood and evaluated. It is also within these frameworks that even what the historians call the more accidental causes—the play of personalities, of different changing constellations of forces or of changing circumstances—were worked out.

These necessarily differed from place to place and to some extent they were purely accidental. However, their impact and influence can be fully understood only within the framework of the political systems of these Empires, of their settings, their specific problems and of what may be called their systematic sensitivities.

It is only through such systematic analysis of the structural characteristics and problems of these political systems that the specific forces which impinged on any specific point of time can be fully evaluated, and the nature of their sensitivity to these various external and accidental causes—as well as the differences between such different Empires—can be fully understood.

This does not mean that such comparative analysis can fully explain or describe the development of such a unique constellation, of all the different historical events which converge in a certain moment of time and space within a given society or on it. While many such events may be the results of systematic developments in other types of political or social systems, which impinged on that of a given Empire in which we are interested, yet this very constellation necessarily constitutes a unique event which cannot be explained in its uniqueness in terms of systematic laws or re-

¹⁰ A much fuller comprehensive analysis will be given in the forthcoming analysis of the social structure of these Empires.

gulations. Such systematic or comparative analysis cannot explain or describe a given historical development in the sense of a unique event or in the sense of the unfolding of the unique development of one society or polity in time.

But in our discussion we have attempted to show, however, that such a historical analysis which looks for causal explanations of the development and disintegration of political systems can greatly benefit from and be reinforced by full explication of its own assumptions in terms of systematic sociological analysis and by being tested through comparative analysis derived from such systematic explication.