

ROME AND THE NATIONS

I

The coming year introduces a notable name for commemoration—Simon Bolivar. Since his birth only two centuries have elapsed, it is true. Yet I propose to go back two millennia or more, to Rome: imperial Republic and world empire.

The past is too much with us, so it may be objected anywhere, and not least in the New World. Why bring up “portions and parcels of the dreadful past” (I adopt the phrase of an English poet)? The lessons of history, it will pertinently be observed, are either obvious or fallacious. That maxim need not deter rational enquiry. The experience of antiquity offers valid comparisons, if and when the social and political setting is similar. On that count, human history becomes real, alive, intelligible.

There will be no call to indulge in vast and comprehensive divagations in the manner of Arnold Toynbee. His vogue is passing, he joins the company of others who created doctrines and systems.

On a modest exposition, Rome is strictly relevant to Latin America, and congenial. To her conquests and colonies Spain gave the language and religion, the institutions—and the cities, on the Roman model.

II

Bolivar himself can furnish a text for the present discourse. Aristocrats or politicians are not in the habit of walking, in any epoch. But on an August day of the year 1808 Bolivar went outside the walls of Rome and climbed a hill in the company of Rodriguez, his friend and mentor. The site, Monte Mario, evoked history—the Mons Sacer, to which the rebellious plebeians made their secession.

Bolivar embarked on an oration. In the history of Rome, he declared, everything had been seen—but Rome had done nothing for human freedom. Liberty could only come from the New World. Bolivar therefore announced a solemn pledge. He would destroy the empire of Spain.

Like others in that generation, the Liberator drew encouragement from the secession of the Thirteen Colonies. He might also have given some thought to recent transactions in Europe—in a contrary direction, and as a warning. Paris under the Revolution made lavish appeal to classical antiquity, to its eloquence—and also to its forms and institutions. Orators declaimed about liberty, parading like tribunes of the plebes, and consuls were elected. In due course the First Consul of the Republic became a despot and established a monarchy.

III

Bolivar distrusted Rome. Other cities carried the torch of political liberty through the ages, ranging from Athens or Florence to London and Paris, to Philadelphia and Boston. On a surface view his indictment receives powerful support. Internally Rome was a republic, not a democracy, with an aristocracy ruling through tradition and consent. In foreign affairs that aristocracy, after subduing the peoples and cities of Italy, struck down the kingdoms founded by the successors of Alexander and in short space acquired a Mediterranean empire. As Cicero somewhere says, what condition is better than abiding at the same time in liberty at home and dominion abroad?

On a sober estimate, the *Libertas* in the name of which Cassius and Brutus became assassins was the predominance of oligarchy

and privilege. And, as for the conquered regions, Rome supervened only to curb and repress, it should seem.

Distinctions have to be drawn. Of the kingdoms east of the Adriatic, Macedon was a state built up around a nation, be it conceded. Not so Ptolemaic Egypt or Syria of the Seleucids. The true political units were the Greek cities, which went on to prosper under Rome of the Caesars. Subject to the suzerain, and deprived of an independent foreign policy, the cities enjoyed local autonomy. That is, republics in the form of government, ruled by the wealthy and educated class.

IV

It is high time to return to the Roman West. Caesar's conquest of Gaul has been deplored as a calamity: it destroyed the brilliant civilization of the Celts and cut short the emergence of a great nation. Thus Camille Jullian some eighty years ago, eloquent and patriotic. Brief reflection dispels the engaging notion. Nothing in the previous record of the Celtic peoples suggests that they possessed any inclinations towards unity or talent for central government. But for the Roman intervention (violent and murderous as it was) they would have been subjugated by the Germans, who had already made a firm beginning. They exploited the feuds and rivalries normally obtaining between tribe and tribe.

As did the Romans. The Gaul which Caesar conquered comprised a vast expanse of territory, but it was permeated by river valleys, with ease of communications. A decade sufficed for the task.

By contrast, Spain: two whole centuries since armies first arrived in the Hannibalic War. It was left to Caesar Augustus to reduce the broad mountain zone of the North West, extending from Galicia to the Pyrenees. That was the earliest military achievement of his reign—and it took ten years.

Long rivers traverse the Iberian peninsula. They are of little use for penetration or for transit. In this respect as in others, Asia Minor offers a parallel (and the curious might further be moved to compare Madrid and Ankara, both cities of the central plateau). The land was broken and divided, with abrupt mountain masses

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almost everywhere. Hence a number of regions with diverse and distinct identities, as is all too apparent in the present season. Before the Romans came, those regions lacked cohesion, even in the civilized south (Andalusia). For the rest, most of the tribal units, otherwise than in Gaul, were very small and local. Add to which, diversity of languages, notably Iberian and sundry Celtic dialects.

Warfare and immigration introduced Latin, and along with it the habits and institutions of the imperial people. From the outset, Romans and natives began to fuse in certain areas. The process went on without abatement. In modern text books the term "Romanization" is put to frequent employment. It is ugly and vulgar, worse than that, anachronistic and misleading. "Romanization" implies the execution of a deliberate policy. That is to misconceive the behavior of Rome, whether republican or imperial. The government encouraged city life, to be sure, converting tribes into towns, for ease of administration in the first place. But it was at no pains to impose the use of Latin everywhere.

V

A pair of paradoxes in history may now be disclosed. First, the name of Rome stands eternal for dominance and for government. In the national epic poem the supreme deity announces rule without limits of space or time: *imperium sine fine dedi*; and the destiny of the Roman is proclaimed, *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento*. To subsequent ages, authority and hierarchy are suitably perpetuated in the Roman Church; and the imprint of Rome subsists in the laws and institutions of diverse nations.

None the less, when the behaviour of the Roman people is put under inspection, a different picture begins to emerge. The constitutions of the Republic (if such that peculiar product deserves to be designated) depended upon a division of powers. The possession of an empire led to the demolition of the Republic; and centralized authority was installed as the only remedy to ensure stability. In view of which, supreme importance accrues to the policy of emperors and to problems of empire.

On a contrary estimate, so it can be maintained, the central

government of the Caesars lived largely by expedients. It preferred to ignore problems until they were brought to its notice or could no longer be avoided. Roman statesmen would have concurred in the maxim of the excellent Antonio de Mendoza, the first viceroy of New Spain: "do little and do that slowly." That was the lesson of their own experience through long ages. The diffusion of Latin civilization in the western lands was a long process, begun in violence but promoted by peace and prosperity, not by the deliberate actions of any government.

In studying empire and emperors, historians and others have been prone to assume policy, or to invent it; and they duly asseverate the importance of "decision making," as they call it. Doubt and hesitations will commend recourse from time to time to the admonition of Edward Gibbon: "though we may suspect, it is not in our power to relate, the secret intrigues of the palace, the private views and resentments, the jealousy of women or eunuchs, and all those trifling but decisive causes which so often influence the fate of empires and the counsel of the wisest monarch."

After policy, administration. It never fails to earn praise and honour in the modern age, for it appeals to routine and favours careerism. The Romans consented to have as little administration as possible. They were inspired by an ingrained dislike of interfering with the habits of individuals or communities. That healthy abstinence comes out in various ways, most clearly in their normal attitude towards foreign religions: no cause for alarm unless morality was impaired or public order endangered.

Through tolerance or salutary neglect the Caesars were able to superintend a world empire without elaborate regulations or a horde of bureaucrats. Spain can furnish a cardinal example. Of the three provinces into which the country was divided, the largest by far took its name from Tarraco, the earliest Roman base. West and south of the Pyrenees, *Tarraconensis* extended as far as Coruña, Toledo, Cartagena. In the last years of Caesar Augustus, a senator of consular rank had charge of the province with three legates under him, while a single procurator managed the finances.

The corollary to this economy of effort and personnel is patent: local autonomy. The city was the unit, not the province, despite the existence of a council of delegates, which convened once a year at Tarraco.

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After a time the fabric of the whole Empire, West and East, could be described as a federation of cities. A Greek orator from Asia proclaimed that edifying notion when speaking a panegyric on Rome before Antoninus Pius in the year 143. It will not be fancied that the orator in question (namely Aelius Aristides) was promulgating any kind of novelty.

In these terms imperial Rome can be regarded as a champion of freedom, even if that freedom be limited in that it reposed on a class structure. Furthermore, while the growth of separate nationalities was discouraged, the Caesars and their counsellors would not have conceived annoyance if some region or province developed a community of sentiments extending beyond local and parochial patriotisms.

Without devolution everywhere they would not have been able to manage the wide dominion that reached from Coruña and Cadiz as far as the edge of Caucasus and the river Euphrates. The system endured for long centuries. Its decline and fall will continue to furnish a theme of momentous debate. The phenomena, the process and the results do not lie beyond ascertainment. To weigh and estimate the causes is another matter.

In those frequent and ample discussions, an indirect approach has seldom been accorded proper attention. During the middle years of the Third Century the Empire came close to ruin and collapse. It was expedient to ask how and why it held together.

VI

The second paradox now comes into view. For brevity and convenience it may be styled "the open society," a term taken from the book of Karl Popper nearly forty years ago. That essay in political science won wide renown, as it amply deserved, but it fell short of total recognition from students of history. For the period intervening between Aristotle and Augustine, Popper's theme had little to offer. The Romans deprecated political theory (it was alien and superfluous) and they seldom bothered to write about it.

Instead, they could point to facts, to the structure of their system, a product of change and of long development through the ages. To refuse them political science does not entail a deficiency in that

political thinking which emerges from their achievement.

Granting which, the term "open society" applied to Rome can hardly fail to arouse disquiet or even scandal—at least on conventional beliefs. Roman society, however changing, continued to be based on clear distinctions of class and status: slave and free, citizen and foreigner, the upper order and the rest.

Some justification is required. It is found and declared in the nature of the Roman citizenship. The republics of old Hellas had been arrested in their growth because ungenerous with the franchise. By contrast, Rome was liberal, creating new citizens all the time as her dominion extended throughout Italy. A king of Macedonia (Philip V) bore firm testimony. The Romans, so he proclaimed in an official document, even admitted freed slaves when they founded colonies.

That was only one symptom. Entrance to the governing class was not refused to municipal aristocrats, whatever their ultimate origin. When processes of peaceful change had been accelerated by violence (the secession of the autonomous Italian allies in 91 B.C. and the sequence of civil wars), the country seemed to be moving towards some kind of unity.

The slogan "*Tota Italia*" might now be heard on the lips of politicians. It was still premature, but it was exploited with effect a generation later when the heir of Caesar, lacking legal authority in his contest for power with Marcus Antonius, appealed to the mandate of the nation and organized a plebiscite, with "*Tota Italia*" swearing an oath of personal allegiance to its leader.

The Empire of Rome was then in danger of splitting into two kingdoms, as language and geography dictated. From the war against Antonius and the Queen of Egypt emerged a fervent Italian patriotism which found singular and eloquent expression in the epic poem of Virgil. However, that type of patriotism was not destined to last. It failed to issue in an Italian national state under the rule of Caesar Augustus. The reason is plain. The *Populus Romanus* now extended far beyond the bounds of Italy.

What had begun with emigration and military colonies continued with native centres elevated to the rank of Roman towns. Southern France and certain regions of the Iberian peninsula thus come to resemble by their civilization the new land of Italy north of the river Po. Before long Narbonensis, the old "*provincia*" in

southern Gaul (an entity separate from Caesar's "*Gallia omnis*"), could be styled more truly Italy than a province.

The dynamic and prosperous territories of the Roman West evoke without effort a modern term and an American Theory of nation-building. That is, the zone of the frontier. From the far West to the head of the Adriatic it comprised, on a rough definition, Andalusia and Catalonia, Languedoc and Provence, Lombardy and Venetia.

VII

Their earliest impact and visible sign was manifested in the field of Latin letters. Verse and prose, Virgil and Livy are the signal glories of Augustan Rome. Transpadanes both, they had come to manhood while Mantova and Padua still belonged to the sphere of a Roman proconsul. Then after an interval, follows the turn of Spain, with the omniscient Seneca and his nephew Lucan, who composed the epic on the fall of the Roman Republic. Cordoba was their *patria*, they represent ancient immigration of Italians—and a planter aristocracy.

With Martial and Quintilian the second dynasty of Caesars exhibits writers of more modest origins. They were Celtiberian, from the remote interior of Tarraconensis, and indeed of native stock. Each was fortunate to escape from his bleak and forbidding town: Calatayud and Calahorra.

So far the extraneous predominance in metropolitan literature. Meanwhile the governing order itself had been permeated by a steady invasion. As has been already stated, social rank was sharply defined. It was even visible and vestimentary. But there was no barrier that could block talent and energy when seconded by the patronage of Caesar and the friends of Caesar. Many of the new Romans of the West (Italian, native, or of mixed extraction) served as officers in the army or as financial agents. The Senate was normally accessible for their sons, and perhaps a consulship in the next generation and thereafter the command of an armed province.

When the dynasty produced Nero, a boy emperor, the government was superintended for a season in an admirable fashion (and largely negative) by Seneca, senator and consul, with the help of

the commander of the Guard, Afranius Burrus. The loyal and exemplary Burrus came from Vaison, in Provence. His ultimate extraction was indigenous, like that of the first consul from Narbonensis, namely Valerius Asiaticus, who, a magnate from Vienna of the Allobroges, outdistanced the descendants of Roman colonists.

The partnership between Seneca and Burrus shows Spain and Narbonensis mutually congenial. A pleasing but harmless fancy might evoke the pair in the role of precursors in government. The first extraneous emperor was Trajan, acceding to power through a veiled *coup d'état* three decades after the end of the first dynasty. Deriving from the ancient settlement at Italica (hard by Seville) Trajan, like Seneca, goes back a long way.

By rank and prestige (his father had governed the provinces of Syria and Asia) Trajan stood in the forefront of the imperial aristocracy. Elevation to the purple, he owed that to a potent nexus that had been forming at Rome between senatorial families from Spain and Narbonensis. The nexus continued valid, producing the dynasty of the Antonines. While Hadrian was the next of kin to Trajan, Antoninus Pius was Narbonensian (his family from Nîmes). Not that provincial origins mattered any more. Senators and their cities had been in symbiosis with Italy long since. And, for that matter, Italy declined into the semblance of a province.

In Rome of the Antonines the governing class was far from being merely an alliance of Romans new and old. One observes in passing that it exhibits a further development of the "open society." Victorious at Actium in confrontation with the Greek East, Rome could not disallow the parity of Greek civilization in the world empire now united. Results ensued that surpassed hope or fear or rational prediction. A renaissance of the Hellenes might have been foreseen under the peace of the Caesars. It occurred in the Second Century; and by paradox it followed rather than preceded a political phenomenon. The new Romans of the West, the aristocracies of Asia could not be held back and kept out. They are discovered already as consuls and as provincial governors in an early season. Not friends of Hadrian, the notorious philhellene, but coevals of Trajan, introduced into the Senate under the second dynasty. Society and government thus became cosmopolitan, while imbued with an imperial and Roman patriotism.

VIII

To revert to Spain and Narbonensis. The élite from the cities, conveyed to Rome by education and by ambition, chose to stay there, blending with comparable Italian families of substance and repute—and even intermarrying with the few surviving houses of the ancient aristocracy. For senators, no thought of going back to a drab and municipal existence. They soon lost interest in the old country. Their departure had an evident and not unwelcome consequence. It deprived the western provinces of potential leaders in secession or agents in the formation of separate units.

The Spanish Empire furnishes a parallel, instructive because contrasted and negative. Large estates, flourishing cities and high education (as witness early universities at Mexico City and at Lima) duly produced their aristocracies. Few members of that class managed to return to positions of prominence in the Peninsula. It was not only distance that impeded, but the set policy of the Spanish monarchy. Furthermore, the creoles suffered frustration in their aspirations to local office and power. Few viceroys or even governors, and not many bishops.

As concerns the provinces of the Roman West a clear exception now calls for brief scrutiny and assessment. The Gaul which Caesar subjugated and annexed defied complete integration, since its structure remained rural and tribal for the most part. By contrast, the urban civilization of Narbonensis, a Mediterranean territory—and further to be defined by the northward limits of the olive.

The Roman government was anxiously alert to the danger of insurrections in Gaul that might assume a nationalistic shape. Against which, Claudius Caesar devised a partial remedy. He brought into the Senate a number of Gallic barons. The design was clear. Not so much to secure “representation” of their country in the governing class as to sever them from Gaul and weaken their local attachments and influence.

For various and known reasons, few Gallic senators are found in the sequel. The prime factor was an accident, twenty years later. One of the governors in Gaul, Julius Vindex, happened to provoke the revolt against Nero; the son of a Roman senator, but also a descendant of kings in Aquitania. A host of natives mustered to his call.

It therefore becomes legitimate to look for signs or chances that a Gallic nation might come into being later on with the efflux of time, through processes of peace or the compulsion of warfare. During the crisis of the mid-Third Century, when Germans broke through the northern frontiers, when at the same time the resurgent power of Persia attacked the eastern provinces, the Empire seemed likely to split into a number of separate groups or kingdoms. No single emperor could master the multiple emergencies.

Military proclamations occurred in diverse regions. Generals or local magnates assumed the tasks of the central government, to repel the invaders and avert total disruption. Invested with the purple by the soldiers (and some of them perhaps reluctant), they bear the unfriendly appellation of "usurpers."

In fact, Gaul abode under emperors of its own for some fifteen years. To invoke alienation from Rome or conscious separatism is premature and erroneous. In due course the last ruler of the "Gallic Empire" came round without much effort or discomfort. Submitting to Aurelian, he ended his days as a Roman senator, administering a part of southern Italy.

Unity was restored and enforced. In the classic definition of Gibbon, the Empire "was saved by a series of great princes who derived their obscure origin from the martial provinces of Illyricum." Those emperors are commonly called "Illyrian." The term is defective and misleading. Better, Danubian and Balkan, of mixed ethnic extraction.

To turn aside from race to geopolitics (a word likewise liable to misuse), their country is the land mass that held together an empire that otherwise had a perilously long extension west and east. To complete the conquest, to win balance and stability, was the prime achievement of Caesar Augustus. The central element in the design was not the Danube as a frontier but the route that links northern Italy to Byzantium and the East: by Zagreb, Belgrade, Sofia.

Those regions stand out as the latest accession to Roman civilization. Whereas the advent of the first provincial dynasty consecrated the success of education as well as prosperity and introduced a cosmopolitan government, Illyricum was harsh and impoverished, the emperors thence issuing rough and uncultivated, immune to the gifts of Hellas. They proudly proclaimed the "*virtus Illyrici*," they combined ruthless energy with undeviating devotion to Rome.

IX

Hence the "New Empire" founded by Diocletian and Constantine. It set out with fair prospects of enduring, although East and West were drawing apart in the course of the Fourth Century. After the death of Theodosius in 395 their governments separated. That was not the worst. Their western lands were afflicted by a fatal concatenation of invasions and calamities.

Catastrophe evokes anger or despair. At the conclusion of a noteworthy book (published in 1947) Piganiol declared: *la civilisation romaine n'est pas morte de sa belle morte. Elle a été assassinée.* The peremptory verdict was extreme, deliberately so. It passed over the evidence for continuity and survivals in the following epoch; and it neglected the fact that Goths were already settled within the Empire, that German generals had commanded imperial armies long since.

The invaders caused enormous destruction. That was not the continuing purpose of all their leaders. The testimony of the Goth Athaulf, uttered about the year 415, is often cited. He had once hoped to establish a "Gothia" in the place of "Romania." In vain. Experience taught him. His own people was recalcitrant to civic life. He now sought no nobler fame than to be a "*Romanae restitutionis auctor.*" Athaulf was killed by some Goths at Barcelona not long after.

X.

So much in human affairs being the product of chance, conjecture about what might have happened need not be condemned as idle or noxious. Admitted from time to time in a modest measure, it can contribute to the understanding of historical transactions.

What then might ensue if the barbarian invasions were repelled or diverted? Not perhaps a "Romania" united in obedience to a single government, but rather a group of separate Latin realms. During the long centuries of Roman rule some of the features that distinguished Gaul from Narbonensis had become blurred or attenuated; and in Spain, despite the barriers of geography, sentiments of a common identity may have developed. In each country the

Christian Church (for all its propensity to schism and heresies) was a potent factor for unity. The authority of bishops operated, and regional councils.

Speculation is deterred when it considers the hazards that beset the birth of nations, the bright prospects of their infancy annulled or perverted. The danger subsists of anticipating the achievement of long ages, through manifold vicissitudes. Modern France contemplates in just pride its shape and its boundaries, as though predestined: "*l'Hexagone*," such is a recent appellation. A different area was once not inconceivable. For example, a Burgundian state, or Languedoc yielding to its deep affinities with Catalonia. Nor will the validity of Spanish regionalism be neglected—even without Catalonia and the Basques. And Portugal denies the specious unity of a peninsula that is almost an island.

XI

The origins and character of the Spanish nation is a subject of perennial debate. Two theses stand in sharp opposition. Sanchez Albornoz embraced the Roman tradition, and he enhanced it. In his view, Seneca is already a Spaniard; and some have been tempted to go further, discovering an Aragonese character in authors as diverse as Martial and Quintilian.

Now Seneca (style as well as sentiments) has proved highly congenial to Spaniards, over a long period. The same might be said of Cornelius Tacitus, at least for the sixteenth century. His *patria* is not on record: it has been surmised either in Narbonensis or in Transpadane Italy. As for Seneca, he reflects education and fashion of the metropolis. When an infant, he was carried to Rome in the arms of an aunt. Spain (and Andalusia in particular) can hardly come into the reckoning.

One asks what is to be made of Hadrian. A German historian writing in the *Cambridge Ancient History* (vol. XI, 1936) came out with a pronouncement, adducing race and soil and climate: "Hadrian's strength was born of the mingling in him of old Italian and Iberian and perhaps African-semitic blood; the ocean, the plain, now luxuriant now sunstricken, and the sluggish river at the south western edge of the Empire left their mark on his family and

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childhood." A small fact can sometimes subvert doctrine or mysticism. Hadrian, like most sons of senators, was born at Rome.

The other thesis was expounded by Amerigo Castro. To understand the formation of Spain he went back to the Middle Ages, and he put special emphasis on Arab and Jewish components.

EPILOGUE

No student of imperial Rome can fail to regard Spain with affection. It was the "oldest dominion," and its transmitted language is more archaic than Italian or French.

The present cursory essay has passed by many aspects and problems, among them Roman Africa, the curious fate of Balkan Latinity, or Britannia (marginal and ephemeral). Further empires and oligarchies have been allowed to engross the theme, not liberty, democracy or popular movements. No attention has been accorded to what Gibbon somewhere calls "the largest and more useful portion of mankind." Nevertheless, Rome, Spain and the Spanish Empire (which lasted for three centuries) retain primary relevance to the republics of Latin America.

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