

# ***ESCAPE FROM ROME: THE FAILURE OF EMPIRE AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN WORLD***

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“The days of empire are finished.”

Utopia in John Carpenter’s *Escape from L.A.*  
(Paramount Pictures, 1996)

## **Objective**

This book connects ancient and modern history in an entirely new way. The main argument is straightforward: that the absence of universal empire on a subcontinental scale in medieval and modern Europe represented a dramatic break not only with earlier conditions in that region but also with a well-established default pattern of serial imperial state formation in many other parts of the world; and that the very fact that nothing like the Roman Empire ever again emerged in Europe was the single most important precondition for modern economic growth, the Industrial Revolution, and worldwide Western dominance much later on. The book is unique in that it incorporates ancient history into the ongoing debate about the causes of the various facets of the “Great Divergence” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as northwestern Europe pulled away from China and the rest of the world in terms of economic performance and overall power. There is a very large and still growing literature on this topic, with numerous scholars advancing rival explanatory theses. My book seeks to make a fundamental contribution to this debate by putting these issues into much deeper historical context.

## **Structure**

Introduction	The Great Escape
1	The European Anomaly
2	Why Rome?
3	Why Only Rome?
4	The First Great Divergence
5	From the First to the Second Great Divergence
Epilogue	What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us?

In the Introduction, I emphasize the enormous changes in the human experience brought about by the onset of modern economic growth and transformative technological and scientific innovation, the “great escape” from traditional ways of life. I introduce key elements of my argument, as summarized below, and discuss analytical strategies, most notably a global comparative approach and explicit consideration of counterfactuals.

In Part 1, I establish the fact that as far as imperial state formation is concerned, Europe differed profoundly from other parts of the globe that supported major civilizations. After the fall of the

Roman Empire, the greatest powers in Europe never laid claim to more than about 20 percent of the total population of Europe (in contrast to the 80+ percent claimed by Rome). Likewise, the greatest powers that existed in the geographical space once held by the Romans never controlled more than a similarly modest proportion of later populations inhabiting the same space. This pattern is striking for two reasons: it reveals a sharp discontinuity between the ancient and post-ancient periods, and it differs dramatically from other parts of the world that used to be home to large tributary empires, such as East Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East and North Africa region. The phenomenon of one-off empire in Europe is remarkable because regions that supported very large polities early on can reasonably be expected to have done the same later on, and they usually did in fact do so elsewhere. In this respect, imperial state formation in South Asia and the Middle East – as well as in Southeast Asia, Central America and the Andes region – had more in common with East Asia (the classic example of imperial persistence over time) than with Europe, which represents a genuine outlier. This raises four questions, which are addressed in the following four parts: How did the Roman Empire come into existence – did its rise and success depend on unique conditions that were never replicated later on? Why was nothing like the Roman Empire ever rebuilt in the same part of the world? How do developments elsewhere help us understand the absence of very large empire from post-Roman Europe? And finally, did any of this matter for (much) later developments that eventually reshaped the whole world?

The second part explains the creation of a very large empire in Europe that came to encompass the entire Mediterranean basin with reference to two main factors: Rome's position at the margins of a larger civilizational zone that had expanded outwards from the Fertile Crescent region for several thousand years but had been exceptionally slow in incorporating the central and western Mediterranean into the political-military network that had formed in its core from the mid-second millennium BCE onward; and the combination of a culture of military mass mobilization (of an intensity unknown among state-level polities outside Warring States China and the Greek polis culture) with integrative capacities that enabled Rome to scale up military mass mobilization to levels unparalleled and arguably unachievable elsewhere in western Eurasia at the time. (Prolonged political stability at the conquest core and a fortuitous concatenation of circumstances that allowed Rome to establish effective naval hegemony across the Mediterranean at a relatively early stage of its expansion also contributed to this process.) None of these preconditions were – or in the case of the first factor even could be – repeated in later historical periods: Rome's rule had greatly expanded the boundaries of the original Middle Eastern political-military system; and large-scale military mass mobilization did not return to Europe until the French Revolution. Never again (or at least not until Trafalgar or WW2) was any one power or alliance able to establish naval supremacy across the entire Mediterranean basin. In addition to identifying the crucial factors that underpinned Rome's success, this chapter also considers the degree of contingency of this process with reference to counterfactuals: I ask at which junctures Roman expansion could have been derailed with plausible, "minimal rewrites" of actual history. This exercise suggests that the window for substantially alternative outcomes was fairly narrow, concentrated in the time of Alexander the Great: from the third century BCE onward, Roman capabilities (relative to those of its macro-regional competitors) made failure increasingly unlikely. Roman empire formation thus turns out to have been both highly contingent (in terms of its foundational preconditions) and highly robust.

In the third part, I reject the extremely popular question why the Roman Empire fell – after all, all imperial entities in history that did not eventually morph into nation states disintegrated at some point – in favor of a much more salient question that is hardly ever asked at all: why did it (or rather something like it) never return? From a global comparative perspective, by the time Roman power disintegrated in the fifth to seventh centuries CE, this outcome had arguably long been overdue and can hardly count as anomalous or surprising. What is surprising is the failure of subsequent states to approximate its success. My argument in Part 2 already highlighted the peculiarities of the Roman experience in the ancient period. I now expand my analysis by considering trajectories of state formation in post-Roman Europe. I identify and discuss seven junctures between the sixth and the early nineteenth centuries at which similarly dominant imperial states might conceivably have been re-created in Europe itself: the East Roman attempt in the sixth century to regain large parts of what used to be the western half of the Roman Empire; the Arab expansion in the seventh and eighth centuries; the growth of Frankish power around 800; the development of the German “empire” from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries; the Mongol advance in Eastern and Central Europe in the mid-thirteenth century; Habsburg and Ottoman policies in the sixteenth century; and French policies from Louis XIV to Napoleon (with World War II added as a coda). I argue that on all these occasions, a whole range of specific and well-documented factors decisively militated against the re-emergence of anything resembling truly hegemonic empire: no plausible minimal rewrite of historical events was likely to lead to that particular outcome. I conclude that post-Roman political polycentrism in Europe was a perennially robust phenomenon.

In Part 4, I address a question that directly arises from this last observation: why did large-scale empire formation fail in post-Roman Europe even as it continued elsewhere in the world? I approach this problem through systematic comparison between trends in state formation in eastern and western Eurasia, with particular emphasis on Europe and China. I focus on this pairing because the imperial tradition in East Asia was unusually resilient and therefore represents an ideal-typical counterpoint to the abiding polycentrism of post-Roman Europe. This comparison allows us to identify several factors that favored serial imperiogenesis in East Asia and impeded it in post-Roman Europe: these include, at the proximate level of causation, fiscal arrangements, the characteristics of sub-Roman and post-Han conquest regimes, and more generally the nature of belief systems and the configuration of the principal sources of social power; and, at the ultimate level, geographical and ecological conditions that influenced socio-political development. Among the latter, the degree of exposure to the Eurasian steppe can be shown to have been a crucial determinant of imperial state formation, not only in Europe and East Asia but also in other parts of Afroeurasia. I argue that in all these respects, conditions in post-Han China differed profoundly from those in post-Roman Europe and account for enduring long-term differences in political centralization. I call this post-ancient divergence in macro-social evolution – centered on the sixth century CE – the “First Great Divergence.” I propose a taxonomy of factors that were conducive or unfavorable to empire-building on a large scale, which suggests that Europe was a priori less likely to be brought under the control of such entities than other regions: while East Asia experienced conditions most favorable to iterative universal empire, South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa region occupied an intermediate position. This comparative analysis reinforces the findings in Part 2 that the emergence of the Roman Empire depended on highly unusual preconditions: Rome’s success was a bigger anomaly than later failures of empire in Europe.

In Part 5, I argue that the “Great Divergence,” broadly understood as a uniquely European or “Western” breakthrough in economic and cognate capabilities, was causally connected with and ultimately dependent on the political “First Great Divergence” between Roman and post-Roman Europe (Part 3) and between Europe on the one hand and East Asia and intermediate regions on the other (Part 4) – a divergence between the enduring disappearance and the cyclical restoration of hegemonic empire. This is the case regardless of which of the very many theories about the proximate causes of the modern “Great Divergence” we accept. Leading contenders include institutional developments, the configuration of the principal sources of social power, the significance of New World resources and global trade, mercantilist colonialism and protectionism, the emergence of a specific culture of scientific and technological innovation, bourgeois values, the role of continuous military conflict, and a whole plethora of social and economic developments going back to the Middle Ages. I show that all of these explanations critically depend on the absence of Roman-style empire from Europe throughout its post-ancient history. For this reason, the fall and lasting disappearance of hegemonic empire was an indispensable precondition for later European exceptionalism and thus for the creation of the modern world we now inhabit. Multiple failures of empire prepared the ground for this great transformation: the failure of the Roman Empire to survive; the failure of subsequent European polities to attain a comparable degree of dominance; and the more general failure of other parts of the world with more persistent imperial traditions to overcome the twin constraints of an organic economy and a premodern worldview.

From this perspective, as I argue in the Epilogue, the absence of the Roman Empire had a much greater impact than its previous existence and the legacy it bequeathed to later European civilization. This may seem a bold claim, and I finish by revisiting Monty Python’s famous question, “What have the Romans ever done for us?” The afterlife of Roman traditions (from language and religion to law and elite culture) undeniably mediated the long-term consequences of the disappearance of Roman imperial power. However, we must ask whether a scenario in which a monopolistic empire first created a degree of shared culture but subsequently went away for good was more conducive to an eventual European breakthrough than a counterfactual scenario in which no such empire had ever existed in the first place. This question pushes us well beyond the confines of defensible counterfactual reasoning and towards runaway conjecture but is nevertheless worth considering: are there reasons to believe that the complete lack of Roman foundations would have derailed our tortuous journey towards the modern “Great Divergence?”



Bedtime with the barbarians