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HISTORY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The fall of Rome and the retreat of European multiculturalism: A historical trope as a discourse of authority in public debate

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Abstract: A feature of neo-conservative critiques during the course of this century, concerning public issues such as immigration and multicultural policy and Islamic terrorism, has been the use of a rhetoric based on historical imagery as a means to generate affective reactions to matters of debate. This article examines one example of such rhetoric, the claim by the economic historian Niall Ferguson that the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 represented a close parallel to the “Fall of the Roman empire” in antiquity which highlighted failures of France’s immigration policies. Interactions between media debate, ancient world scholarship, and popular history are explored.

Subjects: Political History; Philosophy; Cultural Studies

Keywords: Fall of Rome; Islamic terrorism; Late Antiquity; classics; immigration and multiculturalism policies in Europe; Edward Gibbon; Niall Ferguson

1. Introduction

History, as the papers in this volume show, can be used as a discourse of authority in a variety of ways. Most obviously, past events are used as causal explanations of present conditions (e.g., the critique that the reduction of taxation rates because of “trickle-down economics” in the 1990s led to inadequate government revenues now). History can serve as a moral imperative urging change (such as the argument that occupation of indigenous peoples’ lands by colonial settler societies



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

News sites and opinion writers often describe current tragedies and problems as similar to ancient events or ideas, in order to convey the sense that the problems we deal with now could, like events in ancient times, overwhelm society with catastrophic results. Descriptions of Islam as a “seventh century religion”, of a “clash of civilisations” between East and West, of mass migration as like “barbarian invasions”, and of the rise of China as a “Thucydides Trap” are examples. Such parallels with ancient history are made to give authority to arguments about current problems, and often sound scholarly. But as most people only have a vague knowledge of ancient history, this type of argument confuses discussion rather than clarifies it, because its basic aim is to appeal to emotional reactions through broad stereotypes rather than to actually draw any relevant lesson from real history.

demands redress). And history can be an affective discourse: a historical phenomenon with no immediate connection to the present can be deployed to suggest that past conditions could be replicated now; past historical periods can serve as templates for the present not because of actual causation but because of the sense that patterns of history may be repeated. In the early twenty-first century, such affective use of history has been particularly apparent with the invocation of “Classical” history, the history of ancient Greece and Rome. As Classics, once a mainstay of European education systems, has become increasingly peripheral, Classical tropes have nevertheless maintained or perhaps increased their appeal for argumentation from simile, especially for conservative commentators. The year 2017 alone has seen popularisation of the “Thucydides Trap” as a model for predicting great power competition between China and the USA, and public debates between British Classicists and Brexit supporters over the implications of the end of the ancient Roman Republic for British immigration policy and Brexit (Allison, 2017; “Mary Beard v Arron Banks”, 2017). This paper examines one recent incident of the use of a highly charged trope of Classical history, the Fall of the Roman Empire, as a discourse of authority in current public debates on western multicultural policies, in relation to the tragic events of the Paris terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015. The public debate over this incident involved the intersection of multiple political, cultural, and academic factors: neo-conservative critique of multicultural and immigration policies and liberal responses; “neo-medievalist” interpretation of Islamist terrorism; the cultural status of Classics and Eurocentric “grand narratives” in British education; popular history and its use in online venues; and academic revisionism and reaction.

Two days after the 13 November 2015, terrorist attacks in Paris and Saint-Denis that killed over one hundred and thirty people and left another two hundred wounded, the Harvard historian and public intellectual Niall Ferguson posted an opinion piece on the websites of two major international daily news outlets, the US *The Boston Globe* and in the UK *Sunday Times*, as well as in *The Australian* (like the *Sunday Times*, a News Corp publication). It opens:

Paris and The Fall of Rome:

I am not going to repeat what you have already read or heard. I am not going to say that what happened in Paris on Friday night was unprecedented horror, for it was not ... I am, instead, going to tell you that this is exactly how civilizations fall.

Here is how Edward Gibbon described the Goths' sack of Rome in August 410 AD:

In the hour of savage license, when every passion was inflamed, and every restraint was removed ... a cruel slaughter was made of the Romans; and ... the streets of the city were filled with dead bodies ... Whenever the Barbarians were provoked by opposition, they extended the promiscuous massacre to the feeble, the innocent, and the helpless ...

Now, does that not describe the scenes we witnessed in Paris on Friday night? (Ferguson, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

Ferguson proceeds to discuss scholarship on ancient Rome which, he claims, newly demonstrates that hostile barbarian invaders “destroyed a complex civilization [i.e. Rome] within the span of a single generation”, not over a much more prolonged period as he understands earlier scholarship to have assumed. He draws the conclusion that:

Uncannily similar processes are destroying the European Union today, though few of us want to recognize them for what they are.

Let us be clear about what is happening. Like the Roman Empire in the early fifth century, Europe has allowed its defenses to crumble. (Ferguson, 2015a)

These “defenses” included Europe’s “military prowess” and its “self-belief”—meaning the acceptance of multiculturalist policies rather than an assertion of traditional “European values”—but most importantly, Europe’s permeability to migration:

[Europe] has opened its gates to outsiders who have coveted its wealth without renouncing their ancestral faith ... they have come from all over the imperial periphery ... they cannot stream northward and westward without some of [their] political malaise coming along with them. (Ferguson, 2015a)

Ferguson concludes by unequivocally blaming France itself for the outrage:

Poor, poor Paris. Killed by complacency. (Ferguson, 2015a)

Ferguson's post generated immediate commentary: international editions of *Business Insider* reported on it the following day ("This is exactly how civilisations fall", 2015); and it was used as the basis for an online debate by the business site *Bloomberg* two days later ("Ferguson: Like Roman Empire Europe's Defenses Crumbling", 2015). Other publications also ran articles on Ferguson's views, including *UKIP Daily*, the daily newsletter of the UK Independence Party, which ran an approving top-of-the-screen piece, written by the newsletter's editor, the day after Ferguson's initial post appeared (Otridge, 2015). Ferguson himself posted a link to the original version on his Twitter account "In case you missed UK Sunday Times version" (Ferguson, 2015d).

The Boston Globe/Sunday Times commentary prompted critical responses also. While the right-wing *American Conservative* criticised Ferguson for not sufficiently castigating France for the abandonment of its Christian heritage (Callahan, 2015), left-of-centre criticism came, like Ferguson, from academic or para-academic contexts. The *Huffington Post* and *Reuters* ran posts by former academics or popular historians undermining the historicity of Ferguson's model of Rome's Fall and therefore the value of his analogy (Arnheim, 2015; Duncan, 2015). On private blogs, some reposted on professional sites, posts by academics castigated Ferguson for historical inaccuracy, for misrepresentation of modern historians, and for deploying ancient history in a highly politicised context to promote an anti-migrationist argument through fearmongering (Digeser, 2015; Halsall, 2015; Humphries, 2015; Sturtevant, 2015; "What Does Ancient Rome Teach Us About ISIS and Syrian Refugees?", 2015). The effectiveness of the response from ancient and medieval historians was somewhat marred by mutual contradictions in their depictions of the actual circumstances of Rome's Fall, a function of ongoing academic debate on the interpretation of this period of history. All the rejections of Ferguson by historians, however, were motivated not by concerns about factual inaccuracy or academic border disputes, but by passionate convictions that in appealing to past and present historians and to history itself in order to authorise his analysis of current political dynamics, Ferguson "abused" history.

Ferguson is an eminent academic of world economic and imperial history, holding senior posts at the Centre for European Studies, Harvard, and the Hoover Institution, Stanford. Outside the academy, he also has an outstanding record in promoting public engagement with research: several of his major monographs have been published with Penguin Books, and he writes a regular column for *The Boston Globe* and *UK Sunday Times*, in which the post under discussion appeared. He has been involved in major documentary productions: as well as a 2011 film on Henry Kissinger, he has produced major television documentaries for BBC TV and PBS, *The Ascent of Money* (2008) and *Civilization* (2011), both with book tie-ins (Ferguson, 2009, 2012). *Civilization* in particular garnered extensive media attention for its thesis of six "killer apps" that, Ferguson argued, drove differentiation between "the West and the Rest" from ca. 1500, leading to European and American economic and political dominance. The series and book also argue that a precipitant collapse of contemporary European and American status may be immanent unless averted by informed, stringent policy measures. Ferguson's voice is highly influential, engaging academia directly with public debates on current issues, and is well received in particular by conservative media and politics.

Ferguson had previously used Gibbon's portrayal of Rome's Fall as admonition for contemporary ills in popular media pieces and in his major writings, indeed sometimes using the same quotation about the sack of Rome (Ferguson, 2004, 2006, 2012). In his earlier publications, Gibbon's account of Rome

stood as a spectre of internal political and societal decay rather than of the external threats of Islamicist terrorism, migration, and multiculturalism that are the focus of his column on the Paris attacks. Despite this penchant for deploying a multivalent Gibbon, Ferguson in his Paris post admits to his limited knowledge of the historical period of Rome's Fall—albeit rhetorically, in a backhanded modesty topos that underscores his image of relentless barbarian assault on ineffectual and disunited Romans.¹ He therefore pre-empts historians who criticise his selective and loose use of scholarship, as the force of his argument relies on what he regards as the moral demonstrations of the historians he cites who do work in the period. In that sense, Ferguson's critics could only be frustrated: it is the meaning of history, not professional fidelity to sources of information, that matter to his statement.

In critical online responses, academics mocked both Ferguson's rhetoric, the image of a cataclysmic end of civilisation as a portentous analogy of a comparable existential threat to western societies, and the manner in which it was prosecuted, by selective citation of modern historians. In particular, commentators derided Ferguson for reverently invoking Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as if it represented current scholarship, a soft target given the work's age: the first volume of Gibbon's work was published in 1776, shortly after the beginning of the American Revolution, and the final third volume in 1788, a year before the outbreak of the French Revolution. Indeed, Ferguson draws selectively from a very slim slice of Gibbon's voluminous text for dramatic description of set piece events and terms familiar to any teacher of a Western Civilisation survey course: the Sack of Rome by a "barbarian" army in 410, the source of his lengthy opening quotation; the collapse of the Roman army; and cultural decadence. His representation of Gibbon's views is restricted; a reader of Ferguson's posts would not know that the bulk of Gibbon's narrative extends a millennium after the fifth-century CE, or that Gibbon presented a positive view of early Islam (Fowden, 2014). Even the ghastly scenes of violence in Rome, cited without context from Gibbon, were moderated by both Gibbon and his ancient sources, minimising the actual significance of the events.² The value of Gibbon to Ferguson, however, is only partly his dramatic narrative. More importantly, Gibbon operates not just as a familiar name but also as a shibboleth of a University of Oxford education of his and former generations, members of which should have taken heed of the warnings of this classic English text rather than give credence to growing anti-imperialism and post-colonialism.³

While, to some academic critics, Gibbon represents an embarrassing anachronism for Ferguson, a less comfortable aspect of his column is his citation of contemporary historians. Gibbon is always useful as a widely known cultural referent, the more so because he is today largely unread. But Ferguson's relationship with academic ancient world scholarship is more complex than the flurry of postings promoting or critiquing his article suggests. Ferguson does not merely cherry-pick relevant scholarship for dramatic effect, but draws quite specifically from a body of work that in some ways anticipated and potentially invited his use of it. His intimation of imminent danger to western Europe is based on analogy not with Gibbon but with the views of what he described as "a new generation of historians", ancient world academics who reacted against current scholarship on what is now termed "Late Antiquity". The academic field of Late Antiquity represents, *inter alia*, an attempt to embrace both Mediterranean and Middle Eastern history of the crucial period that saw the emergence of the Christian character of the former and the Islamic culture of the latter (Humphries, 2017). While some of this reaction against Late Antiquity was conventional academic jousting, a series of publications by several UK and Italian scholars condemned the Late Antique project because of its perceived association with European multiculturalism policies of the 1970s/1980s. These critiques coincided with the "retreat of multiculturalism" in western Europe and the UK in the early 2000s. Ferguson represents a case study of feedback between current public discourses on multiculturalism, immigration, and terrorism; reactionary trends within academia; and popular history.

2. Rome's Fall and its uses

"Rome's Fall" and "the Fall of Rome" are convenient, simple phrases used to gesture towards complex, protracted series of events about which we have only limited data, and the interpretation of which is highly contested (the use of these phrases here should be understood as referring to academic convention rather than to actual historical reality). The historical phenomenon was the

fragmentation of the Roman empire into a series of successor states. At the beginning of the third-century CE, the Roman empire occupied a continuous territory embracing the entire Mediterranean Sea and reaching also from the upper Euphrates and Nile rivers to the north of Britain; some thirty modern European, Middle Eastern, and north African states occupy this territory today. By the end of the fifth-century CE, the western half of the empire, in a line running roughly from the north of modern Croatia to the east of modern Libya, had fragmented into a series of autonomous states, as a result of military, political, and financial pressures which are only partially discernible from extant historical materials, while the eastern half of the empire maintained political and economic coherence.

Traditional accounts cast the period as one of the hostile invasions by foreign, “Germanic barbarians” (Demandt, 1998; Demougeot, 1969; Jones, 1964; Stein, 1959). More recent interpretations have stressed the dynamics of imperial government and its effects on peripheral regions as causes of change (Goffart, 1980, 2006; Halsall, 2007). The line of division between the ongoing eastern half of the empire and the western post-imperial regions represents the earlier internal political demarcation of the empire into western and eastern halves, with de facto independent administrations, since the early fourth century. The borders of the post-imperial autonomous states likewise roughly preserved imperial administrative boundaries. Within these post-imperial states, Roman demographic populations remained; likewise, many Roman social, political, and economic structures continued, albeit on much-restricted scales. Governance of these states, however, had devolved from the military junta of the late Roman state onto dynasties labelled “barbarian” in Roman terms. These elites were descendants of groups from smaller-scale societies adjacent the empire’s Rhine and Danube frontiers, who had for centuries been drawn into the economic hub and military-political structure of the Roman empire through trade and the provision of cheap labour, particularly in the military forces. These centripetal interactions were generally tightly managed by imperial control of frontiers (Whittaker, 1994). Nevertheless, “barbarians” were constantly represented as an immanent physical threat and occasionally actually were, justifying the militaristic political economy of the empire. From the late fourth century, groups of such military auxiliaries were co-opted into the Roman political system as responsibility for the military administration of certain unstable frontier areas was devolved onto their leaders. When a series of internal and external political crises caused the imperial government of the western half of the empire to implode in the later fifth century, these co-opted groups remained, by default, as military and civil administrations over the western provinces—post-imperial successor states or, from a modern European perspective, the first medieval kingdoms. The term “barbarian” was used by contemporary Roman writers to refer to the ruling elites of these states and is often imported as if unproblematic into modern historical studies, both academic and popular (Gillett, 2009). It is however a complex ideological term; at its most neutral, it could represent something like modern “economic migrants” or “ethnic minorities”, but its usage was not only pejorative but operated somewhat like instrumentalised racist terms in contemporary alt-Right political discourses. The degree of Roman and non-Roman/“barbarian” causation of the fragmentation of the western half of the empire is very much contested within academia. Popular history, too, has a fascination for this period of “barbarian invasions”, but with a much narrower focus of interest, almost exclusively focusing on military narrative with some excursions into Gibbon’s anti-clericalism.

Roman imperial fragmentation has always been a crucial if paradoxical phenomenon in the western historical imagination. On the one hand, the Roman empire has constantly been seen as the template for the European-wide political organisation, which “new empires” from the ninth- to nineteenth- centuries CE have sought in various ways to emulate. On the other, the collapse of the Roman empire is conventionally understood to have created a *tabula rasa* that facilitated the establishment of the first medieval states which are seen as the political and ethnic origins of European nations. The territorial boundaries of these post-imperial polities were determined by Roman administrative boundaries used for tax-collection purposes, but from a modern perspective, several of these states prefigure the territories of modern western European nations, namely France, Spain, Italy, and England. There are both direct and claimed continuities between these post-imperial societies and modern European nations. This period therefore constitutes, in a very real sense, the origin myths of most modern western

European states, reformulated over centuries according to contemporary ideologies, from chauvinistic narratives of aristocratic conquest to visions of common origins of the European Union.

It is important to note the degree to which the phenomenon of the “Fall of Rome” is a Eurocentric construct, developed in the early Modern period and refined by the European historical tradition over centuries (Bisaha, 2004). The conventional linear path of historical continuity between Rome and western Europe—the Roman empire fell, western European peoples established new states in its remnants, but Roman and Classical culture continued to nourish these proto-nations throughout the medieval millennium to generate a globally dominant Europe—deletes great swathes of history. The Roman empire, as a state, in fact continued uninterrupted in the eastern Mediterranean until the fifteenth century. Modern scholars call it “Byzantium” to mark a difference from the earlier stages of the Roman empire, but right through its whole existence, eastern Romans, western Europeans, and inhabitants of the neighbouring caliphates and emirates all identified the state as “Rome” and its inhabitants as “Romans” (Kaldellis, 2012). The Ottoman conquest in 1453 maintained a high level of administrative and demographic continuity from this late Roman state (İnalçık & Quataert, 1997). Moreover, significant parts of both the eastern and western halves of the late antique Roman empire—Palestine, Egypt, north Africa, and Spain—had been absorbed by the colonisation of the early Islamic caliphates from the seventh-century CE onwards to contribute to the rise of the great Islamic centres of Baghdad, Cairo, and Cordova (so too had the second “superpower” of Late Antiquity, Sasanian Iran). Classical Greek and Roman philosophy and sciences were actively incorporated and built upon in Islamic scholarship, unlike early medieval European and “Byzantine” societies (Gutas, 1998; Dallal, 2010), Dominance of Eurasian trade by the caliphates shaped geopolitics in western Europe as elsewhere (Wickham, 2005). The historical posterity of the “Classical” and late antique Greco-Roman world passed alike through the Near and the Middle East and western and eastern Europe (a rough analogy might be the place of the USSR as a shared historical past for both Poland and the former Yugoslavian states), but that has long been obscured by European nationalist narratives and the taxonomy of historical knowledge into “European” and “Orientalist” divisions.

The trope of the “Fall of Rome” has therefore always had presentist, political functions throughout the Modern period. As the Roman empire represented a model to emulate, both as a political claim and as a spatial framework to embody and project power, so Rome’s Fall was a constant potential *momento mori* that could be used as a historical lens with which to examine contemporary anxieties. Edward Gibbon’s monumental narrative was by no means the first serious scholarly treatment of the topic, but it was for long the most influential and widely read. One of the first major intellectual works to be published in English language, its successive volumes were translated into multiple European languages immediately on publication. The timing of Gibbon’s publication, at the height of Britain’s first sea-borne empire, is significant. The triumphalism of his environment was already tempered by concerns of potential imperial implosion (Pocock, 1999). Gibbon nevertheless was more interested in narrating the events of late Roman history than in analysing it. His classic attribution of Rome’s Fall to “the triumph of religion and barbarism”, an intentionally ambiguous reduplication, should be understood as an expression of his anti-clericalism rather setting out two equally culpable forces. A long succession of later historians, however, has unambiguously proposed a litany of putative causes for the collapse of Roman imperial structures, many of which retroject contemporary concerns of the authors’ periods back to the historical crux of Rome’s Fall.⁴

In recent decades, “Fall of Rome” rhetoric has been used in the USA in particular as part of two overlapping discourses. As part of a long tradition deploying Gibbon as a cautionary model, “Rome” and its inherent decline has been a popular rhetorical device since at least the 1970s in addressing concerns of US economic and political-military decline after “the American century”, with arguments whether or not the USA is a “New Rome”, facing historically inevitable collapse. Contemporary anxieties are fostered or mitigated by the use of Rome as a historical mirror (e.g. Vidal, 1992; Smil, 2014). More specific to the twenty-first century, in the wake of 9/11 “Rome’s Fall” has formed one strand of what has been labelled “Neomedievalism”. This neo-Conservative discourse displaces analysis of anti-Western, Islamicist movements by conceptualising them as beyond the parameters

of “Modernism” and so outside the norms of modern civil or legal practice, casting Islamicist movements as a pre-modern phenomenon coexisting anachronistically with the modern. It is familiar from the trickle-down terminology in conservative press of “seventh-century religion” and imagery of the Crusades (e.g. Holland, 2015). This shift of temporality functions not only as a derogatory rhetoric but also as a justification for western breaches of conventions (Khanna, 2009; Holsinger, 2007, 2008, 2016; Monagle & D’Arcens, 2014). Ferguson’s deployment of the trope of Rome’s Fall partakes of both these discourses, America as the New Rome and Neomedievalism, in a context of feedback between public discourse and academic scholarship.

3. Rome’s Fall versus Late Antiquity

While critics of Ferguson’s Paris post focused on his use of Gibbon for lapidary dramatic quotations, Ferguson in fact claimed authority for his critique of western European migration and multicultural policies on the basis of what he described as “a new generation of historians”, academics whose relevant works came out of Oxford in the mid-2000s, naming Bryan Ward-Perkins (Trinity College, University of Oxford) and Peter Heather (Kings College London). Ward-Perkins is a senior archaeologist and historian of the later Roman empire with an extensive and important bibliography, *inter alia*, on changes to urbanism across the late Roman to early medieval periods. Heather is a mid-career historian whose early publications, based on his Oxford DPhil, concerned one of the major “barbarian” groups of the late antique period, the Goths, and who has more recently published a trilogy of books of history for a general audience covering late Roman and early medieval European history (Heather, 2005, 2010, 2014). Ferguson pairs the two historians because in 2005 both published books on Rome’s Fall, carried by Oxford University Press, that were written to be accessible to a general audience as well as to academics and which sought, in opposition to recent trends in late antique historiography, to privilege Rome’s Fall as a crucial world-historical event (Ward-Perkins, 2005; Heather, 2005). The two books complemented each other—Ward-Perkins’s a concise historiographic critique and Heather’s a lengthy narrative—and were commonly reviewed together, both in the press and in academic venues.⁵ Ferguson quotes from Ward-Perkins’ book and his references to the Roman empire disappearing “within the span of a single generation” paraphrases Heather.

These works were not randomly chosen. They represent not just relatively recent scholarship on the Fall of Rome, but were high-profile reactions against certain directions in scholarship of Late Antiquity between the 1970s and the 2000s that promoted a less western-Eurocentric view of antiquity than traditional paradigms. Some of the reactions from UK and Italian scholars against these trends explicitly or by implication drew connections between a highly crisis-driven vision of the Fall of Rome and European-UK multiculturalism policies. Prior to the 1970s, Rome’s Fall featured in European scholarship as a relatively peripheral area of Classical Studies. Classics and Ancient History, being essentially the study of what was understood as the ancient foundations of European culture, focussed primarily on the perceived moments of Antiquity’s greatest cultural and political achievements: classical Athens, the “birthplace” of philosophy and democracy, and the starting point of putative European history because of the Greek defeat of Persian “Oriental” dominance (Said, 2003, pp. 55–58; Hall, 1989); and republican and early imperial Rome, the largest empire of the ancient “western hemisphere”. Other academic disciplines overlapped in time with the period of the “Fall of Rome” (say, the fourth-century CE onwards), in particular Patristics, the study of the Christian theological writers who formed the foundation of the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, but even in Catholic countries, the historical and religious fields tended to be parallel rather than interrelated.

In the early 1970s, however, a new field of scholarship in ancient world studies developed, rapidly, under the banner of “Late Antiquity”. This scholarship was inspired by the charismatic Oxford-trained scholar Peter Brown, whose career has been mainly based in University of California and Princeton University, reflecting the fact that Late Antiquity as a field has been most enthusiastically embraced in the USA. Following Brown, a generation of scholars sought explicitly to encompass co-temporal cultures traditionally separated by traditional academic disciplines: Classics and Ancient History, Patristics, early Medieval studies (itself largely a portmanteau of nationalist histories of early western European states), Germanic and Celtic studies, and the “Orientalist” fields of Byzantine, Syriac, and

Persian studies. Many of these disciplines had long overlapped in terms of materials and geographical and temporal areas, but pursued different academic purposes. The combination of Classics and Ancient History, traditionally regarded as the prehistory of western Europe, with Orientalist Persian studies, the traditional antithesis of western history, was a particularly dynamic move. In fact, this combination reflected the geopolitical reality of the late ancient world, which was dominated by not one but two superpowers: the Roman empire around the Mediterranean, and Iran controlling roughly modern Iran, Iraq, and southern Afghanistan (conventionally and misleadingly called “Sasanian Persia” in scholarship). Since the 1970s, the temporal framework for this field has expanded, starting from the third-to seventh- centuries CE but now extending to the tenth-century CE.

This programmatic attempt to embrace coeval cultures of the Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and European regions was driven partially by an expanding realisation of the artificiality of traditional boundaries of academic disciplines which dealt with the same or similar materials. Its theoretical basis, however, derived from the enthusiastic appropriation, shared with other areas of historical scholarship, of the works of new Anthropological scholars, particularly Clifford Geertz, which were understood as providing interpretative models for meaningful explanation of the seemingly irrational phenomena that characterise an era dominated culturally by the rise of religions, Christianity and Islam as well as Judaism and Manichaeism, as totalising cultural systems. The central topics of investigation in this loosely defined “school” have tended to be cultural: examinations of the functions of religious practice, understood anthropologically, and of the semiotic encoding of power, studied through extant written texts. A more-or-less unintended consequence of these emphases was that older topics of investigation of scholarship on statist history or material culture were overshadowed. Attention to the rise of new cultural phenomena displaced traditional narratives of the Fall of Rome, sometimes very explicitly and bluntly (e.g. Bowersock, 1996). By the late 1990s, this broad approach to late ancient studies had developed into a major academic industry, no longer representing only a fringe area of scholarship but highly visible, and developing the apparatus of a discipline in its own right: reference works, journals, book series, international conferences, and higher degree programs (Ando, 2008; Athanassiadi, 2006; Bowersock, Brown, & Grabar, 1999; Cameron, 2002; James, 2008; Johnson, 2012; Humphries, 2017; Marccone, 2008; Rebenich, 2009).

What was largely missing from the field of Late Antiquity—and in retrospect, the omission is striking, given the time at which this scholarship developed, the 1970s to 1990s—was a historiographic or theoretical critique that sought to address explicitly *why* multiple areas of scholarship on regions, cultures, and religions that were coeval, geographically adjacent or overlapping, and evidently inextricably entangled, had remained resolutely separated by academic practice. The bringing together into one field of scholarship of the origin myths of Europe (Rome’s Fall and the beginning of European nations) with study of the rise of Islam coincided with the explosion of post-colonial studies, in the wake of Edward Said, and of critical analysis of the role of academic History and Archaeology in European nationalism, in the context *inter alia* of the growth of the European Union. Embracing the beginnings of Europe and the Middle East, Christendom and Islam, was potentially a political act. But neither at its inception nor subsequently has Late Antiquity as a field undertaken an extensive, post-colonial critique of why the European historical tradition so firmly demarked the mutually influential cultures of the Mediterranean and Near East in the first millennium CE (Fowden, 2014, pp. 1–15). (It is striking that, even in the 1980s, the most obvious attention to Foucault in Late Antique studies was in regard to sexuality, not the archaeology of knowledge; Brown, 1988). Late Antiquity as a field remains primarily a confederation of source-based area studies aimed at Hermeneutic elucidation of practices, events, and belief systems, rather than a platform for interrogating the intellectual structures that the field has sought to merge and surpass.

This absence becomes significant in relation to the academic reaction against Late Antiquity that arose in the late 1990s and 2000s, when a number of senior scholars, in Italy and especially the UK, published critiques of Late Antiquity as a model (Treadgold, 1994; Giardina, 1999; Liebeschuetz, 2001a, 2001b, 2004). In part, these critiques were attempts to reassert traditional statist and nationalist narratives as topics for investigations, against the cultural emphases of US-based Late

Antiquity studies. But several UK critiques explicitly faulted Late Antiquity studies not only for its academic practices but for its perceived sociopolitical purpose. To these scholars, the trans-regional scope of Late Antiquity studies was an expression of “underlying concerns” stemming from “the strength of multiculturalism among intellectuals in England, the US and elsewhere...a response to the end of the colonial empires and the rise of globalisation” and a worrying retreat from “national traditions”; Late Antiquity was, perhaps inevitably, termed a form of “political correctness” (Liebeschuetz, 2004, pp. 260–261; 2001a, pp. 5–7, 10).

These critiques reflect the anxieties of conservative historical scholars in the UK at the time, in the face of changes to their own discipline and the ascent of Postmodernism and theory throughout academia more widely. They may be labelled, neutrally, as reactionary. But there is a disconnect between these criticisms and the scholarship they attacked. As a field, Late Antiquity was certainly not irreproachable, but a driving impetus towards multiculturalism, if that were to be a fault, has not in fact been a discernible aspect of its scholarship. Rarely if ever have academics consciously working in the US Late Antique model engaged their scholarship at any level with contemporary issues. The absence in Late Antique scholarship of a post-colonial or other critique of earlier scholarship—indeed the absence of any sense of contextual analysis apart from what several commentators have labelled “triumphalism”—is an indication of the space between this scholarship and reactionary critiques of it.

The two academics cited by Ferguson were part of the reaction against Late Antique studies. Not only did they produce the first book-length monographs explicitly devoted to reversing academic trends and reinstating Rome’s Fall as a central world-historical event, but their books took critique of Late Antiquity out of the strictly academic contexts of conferences and journals and into publications for general and popular consumption. Ward-Perkins’ *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* is a wide-ranging, perceptive, and witty critique of US-style Late Antiquity scholarship that emphasises material cultural evidence for major dislocation and collapse of civil society. The final chapter contextualises the development of the field of Late Antiquity against the background of the late twentieth century drive towards the European Union. Ward-Perkins makes no explicit comparison between Rome’s Fall and the state of contemporary western nations, but the final words of the book invoke the venerable role of Rome as *momento mori*:

I ... think there is a real danger for the present day in a vision of the past that explicitly sets out to eliminate all crisis and all decline. The end of the Roman West witnessed horrors and dislocation of a kind I sincerely hope never to have to live through; and it destroyed a complex civilization, throwing the inhabitants of the West back to a standard of living typical of prehistoric times. Romans before the fall were as certain as we are today that their world would continue forever substantially unchanged. They were wrong. We would be wise not to repeat their complacency. (Ward-Perkins, 2005, p. 183)

(Ferguson ends his Paris column by quoting the last three sentences, followed by the echo: “Poor, poor Paris. Killed by complacency”). Accessible and authoritative, and rapidly available in a cheap paperback edition, Ward-Perkin’s book entered not only academic debate but also popular historical readership, whence—like earlier discussions of Rome’s Fall—it inadvertently lent itself as historical authority for a range of modern political concerns.⁶

Heather’s *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was a restatement of a catastrophist narrative of the late Roman empire, in which classical civilisation is terminated by the hostility of foreign, uncivilised, “barbarian” forces, an “exogenous shock” in Heather’s repeated, biological phrase. Heather’s book was quickly championed, by British academics in particular, as a new, definitive narrative of the Fall of Rome, despite being originally published for a popular, not academic, audience, and written in a style ranging from the jocular to melodramatic; this was part of a publishing trend in the 2000s of popular histories of the Fall of Rome by professional academics (e.g. O’Donnell, 2008; Wickham, 2009; Goldsworthy, 2010). Heather’s narrative provided a restatement of pre-1970s versions of Rome’s Fall, complementing Ward-Perkin’s more analytical and thematic rejection of newer approaches. It too achieved a wide popular appeal, constantly in print and prompting two sequels.

4. Ferguson, neomedievalism, and Rome's Fall

The critiques of Late Antiquity coincided with the “retreat of multiculturalism”, the growing dysfunction of UK and European multiculturalism policies in the 1990s and early 2000s and consequential social unrest; 2005, for example, saw the outbreak of major inter-racial rioting in Birmingham (Malik, 2015). Some academic critics drew explicit connections between their theme, the reinstatement of Rome's Fall as a determining catastrophist event, and contemporary concerns over multiculturalism (Liebeschuetz, 2001b). Ferguson goes further in imposing such a connection on the academics he cites. In fact, these academics' views concerns arose from long-standing academic issues rather than contemporary political trends; where presentist issues were raised in their discussions, they were treated as examples of parallel symptoms, not motivators of their historiographic critiques. But in reflexively conceiving Rome's Fall as a cautionary trope at that particular point in time, they and their readers were susceptible to identifying European multiculturalism as a ready if rough analogy of ancient demographic movements and cultural shifts. The statements by these scholars are not political tracts, but their view of remote period of history seen as the precursor of the modern West—a Roman empire undone by insufficient defence of its values and territory in the face of foreign migration—has had a Classicising appeal to contemporary proponents of anti-immigration and anti-migration policies, which is deployed by Ferguson and approved by conservative commentators.

Ferguson's use of the trope of Rome's Fall and eighteenth- and twenty-first-century academics is not causal or probative. The analogy he draws between historians' depictions of Rome's Fall in the fifth century does not provide factual support for any of his contentions about multicultural policy or migration in the twenty-first century, nor is it meant to. The function of the trope is not to demonstrate causation but the ongoing valence of “Rome's Fall” as a set of catastrophist imageries which are effective because of a popular if loose consciousness of its freighted cautionary purpose and of its venerable scholarly connections. What gives Ferguson's post on the Paris attacks particular effect is not only his use of the cultural shibboleth of Gibbon but also his citation of contemporary scholars whose critical views on their academic discipline a decade earlier had secured a wide popular readership and which, in part because of the time at which they were written, lent their works to being interpreted as morals of decline through cultural and demographic permeability. The academic restatement of a statist and military model of imperial decline against the cultural-constructivist model of societal evolution in late twentieth century “Late Antiquity” studies provided Ferguson with historical authority to wield Rome's Fall against contemporary issues of migration and multiculturalism. Ferguson exploits a feedback between the contemporary context within which academics operated and the deployment of their work for current debate. In doing so, he perpetuates the conservative rhetoric of neo-medievalism which derails rather than advances political analysis: by casting discussion of immediate issues in pseudo-historical terms, this discourse displaces debate from confronting the immediate present.

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Notes

1. Ferguson (2015a, 2015b): “I do not know enough about the fifth century to be able to quote Romans who described each new act of barbarism as unprecedented, even when it had happened multiple times before;

or who issued pious calls for solidarity after the fall of Rome, even when standing together in fact meant falling together; or who issued empty threats of pitiless revenge, even when all they intended to do was to strike a melodramatic pose”.

2. The passage cited by Ferguson concerns the three-day sack of the city, 24 to 26 September 410, by an auxiliary “barbarian” army force, resulting from the refusal of Roman authorities to remunerate arrears in pay for the auxiliaries' part in an imperial civil war; Gibbon (1994, vol. 2, pp. 202–203). The description comes largely from accounts of two contemporary Christian apologists, Augustine of Hippo and Orosius, writing less than a decade later. Like other contemporaries, they were at pains to emphasise that the events, while shocking, were of no long-term significance to either the city of Rome or the empire. Gibbon (1994, vol. 3 p. 1069) concurred: “[the barbarians'] hasty assault would have made a slight impression on the solid piles of antiquity”.
3. Ferguson (2015a, 2015b): “When I went up to Oxford more than 30 years ago, it was taken for granted that

- in the first term of my first year I would study Gibbon. It did no good. We learned nothing that mattered. Indeed, we learned a lot of nonsense to the effect that nationalism was a bad thing, nation-states worse, and empires the worst things of all”.
4. Historians who work in this period of history are fond of showing students the final page of a study by the German historian Demandt (1984), a study of how the Fall of Rome has been presented by 1,500 years of European thought; it lists, in alphabetical order, two hundred and ten causes that have been proposed for Rome’s collapse.
 5. E.g. press: Peter Jones in *The Telegraph*, 19 June 2005; Ian Garrick Mason in *The Spectator*, 27 August 2005; Kate Cooper in *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 December 2005. Academic: reviews by James J. O’Donnell in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2005.07.69 (<http://bmc.brynmawr.edu>); Jeanne Rutenburg and Arthur M. Eckstein in *The International History Review*, 29 (2007), pp. 109–122; Andrew Gillett in *The Medieval Review*, 2007, 07.10.12 (<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/baj9928.0710.012>).
 6. E.g. Dunkin (2012), a review on the right-wing US website *Renew America*, using Ward-Perkins to support anti-taxation, small-government views: “Ward-Perkins’ book ... contains within it some warnings for us today. Not all barbarians are those who come in from the outside. The present [Obama] administration is rife with those who, socially and fiscally, are ripping this nation apart at its seams. As I read it, I could not help but see the parallels between then and now. Obama and his crew are in our vicarage – and they don’t seem to have much interest in joining the cricket team [an image used by Ward-Perkins]. Now may be the last chance to turn them out and avoid furthering the mistakes made both by Rome and the West today”.
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