IMPERIAL INTERPRETATIONS:
THE *IMPERIUM ROMANUM* AS A CATEGORY
OF POLITICAL REFLECTION[1]

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THE Roman idea of Empire is one of political theory's most prominent and politically most efficient sources of legitimacy. The Roman Empire has to be understood as a highly persistent category for the self-reflection of empires and for their perception by others. Imperial self-reflection has, in this context, two dimensions: on the one hand, imperial politics shape interpretive patterns; on the other hand, these patterns themselves carry imperial relevance and persuasiveness within the respective discourses. Reference to ancient Roman policies provides both imperial and anti-imperial actors with significant resources of political power. Reflecting these references forms the main perspective of the following three articles: How do political actors and intellectual elites view themselves and their upcoming challenges, in the mirror of ancient Roman history?

We accordingly understand political receptions of antiquity as empire-related appropriations, and thus transformations. This is, of course, not a new phenomenon. The non- or even anti-theological rediscovery of antiquity and ancient knowledge in the city-states of Northern Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has been, for good reasons, termed Renaissance; and maybe the very era of antiquity itself is an early modern invention or, at least, innovation. Both, European and American writers, scholars, and politicians, have in the past created ancient role models for particular and often times even conflicting purposes.[2] Friedrich Schlegel was thus right when he remarked as early as 1798 that in antiquity everyone found what they were wishing for – oneself included.[3] It is possible nonetheless to identify regularities, cycles, and innovations concerning the transformative receptions of antiqui*ties*. These historical transformations of Roman and post-Roman patterns of imperial (self-)interpretation range from the late an-

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[1] The project A11, *Imperial Interpretations: The* Imperium Romanum *as a Category of Political Reflection*, is part of the Collaborative Research Center 644, *Transformations of Antiquity,* which is based in Berlin, Germany, and involves scholars from various disciplines of the Humboldt-Universität, the Freie Universität and the Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte Ludwig-Maximilians Universität München.

[2] See for example Z. Yavetz, *Why Rome? Zeitgeist and Ancient Historians in Early 19th Century Germany*, AJPh 97, 1976, 276-296; E. Shalev, *Ancient Masks, American Fathers: Classical Pseudonyms during the American Revolution and Early Republic*, «Journal of the Early Republic» 23, 2003, 151-172.

[3] A.W. Schlegel - F. Schlegel (Hrsg.), *Die Sprachen. Ein Gespräch über Klopstocks grammatische Gespräche*, «Athenaeum» 1, 1798, 3-69, part. 39.

cient and medieval theory of the *translatio imperii* and Edward Gibbon's model of the decline and fall of empires to more recent and widespread interpretations of 'defensive imperialism' or imperial 'overstretch', or imperial waves within 'concentric' empires.[4] If one understands, as J.G.A. Pocock did, the *translatio imperii* as an antithesis to the pattern of decline and fall,[5] it is remarkable that a third major pattern, the traditional American antithesis of exceptionalism, which meant not to be bound by preceding or ordinary patterns of history, is currently losing both its former legitimizing plausibility and its anti-imperial notion. Hence, Roman examples return to today's US discourses on an *Imperium Americanum* in the form of a transformation of the traditional American framework of *The Founders and the Classics*[6] into a specifically neo-imperial and less old-fashioned republican school of thought. Whichever new forms they take over the course of history: the *topoi* of ancient Rome seem inescapable and highly attractive.

When the *topos* Rome regains its discursive currency in numerous political contexts, analytical differentiations are needed in order to shed light onto the different configurations and interests behind references to Rome. In her influential volume *Roman Presences*, Catherine Edwards has noted «Rome's seemingly boundless capacity for multiple, indeed conflicting, signification».[7] An analytical map may not only help to navigate the dense and entangled web of receptions of Rome, but it also takes into account the different ways in which Roman knowledge and narratives are related to, re-constructed, and thus transformed.

Political appropriations of Rome operate on at least three different levels of comparison.

Some comparisons of modern political orders with Rome are based on alleged *institutional* similarities and differences. Structural comparisons with imperial institutions such as arrangements of citizenship, despotic constitutional configurations, or the export of political laws and norms to an imperial periphery are pervasive in a variety of contexts. Sometimes alleged institutional commonalities and differences are also played out by evoking the grand men of the Roman Republic and Empire, and are thus personified: Cicero, Julius Caesar and Augustus Octavian enter the stage in British debates on institutional arrangements from the 18th century onwards, with fluctuating attributions of the roles of villains and heroes, each time according to the authors' stance regarding what would be a desirable

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[4] See, for instance, E. Adler, *Post-9/11 Views of Rome and the Nature of "Defensive Imperialism"*, IJCT 15, 2008, 587-610; P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York 1987; H. Münkler, *Legitimationen des Weltregierens*. **Konstanten und Veränderungen von der Antike bis heute**, in V. Rittberger (Hrsg.), *Wer regiert die Welt mit welchem Recht? Beiträge zur Global Governance Forschung*, Baden-Baden 2009, 219-232.

[5] J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, III: *The First Decline and Fall*, Cambridge 2003, 127.

[6] C. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics. Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment*, Cambridge 1985.

[7] C. Edwards (Ed.), *Roman Presences. Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945*, Cambridge 1999, 9.

political order.[8] References of the United States' Founding Fathers to Polybian descriptions of a mixed constitution[9] meanwhile suggest that self-comparisons on an institutional level can equally be republican, and not only imperial. However, the case of the early U.S. republic also demonstrates that – due to Rome's status as an icon for republican decline – allusions to the Roman republic often imply a warning of the emergence of imperial institutions.

Other analogies focus not on imperial political structures, but on *challenges* recognized as genuinely imperial: When political expansion is criticized for potentially leading to an overstretch, or when the capacity of a political commonwealth to rule diverse native populations is probed, observers have in a number of political contexts identified their situation as imperial – and therefore structurally Roman. Whereas institutional self-comparison focuses on imperial features in, and the imperial character of the political order, these analogies are based on an attention to political constellations – ranging from concrete 'barbarian' external threats to considerations of the nature of international predominance, i.e. to reflections on what it means to be an imperial superpower in a way only Rome could be.

A third and fundamentally different strategy of reference to Rome postulates an ongoing Roman imperial *tradition,* stretching to modern empires through mechanisms of inheritance and, ultimately, continuity. Whereas comparisons focusing on institutions or challenges base their arguments on similarities and differences between ancient Rome and modern polities, the argument of imperial tradition essentially asserts the identity of ancient and modern empires. Notwithstanding institutional and political differences and aberrations, the emphasis within these accounts lies on identity as Rome's imperial revenant, claiming Roman imperial grandeur and authority. Besides the influential theological figure of the *translatio imperii*,[10] secular claims to being Rome's direct heir are a recurring feature among modern imperial elites.

This threefold distinction needs to be complemented by yet another level of analysis, which takes into account the motivations for imperial references to Rome. It is obvious that numerous imperial comparisons, particularly when consciously directed at specific audiences such as a wider public or an influential elite, aim to justify or, conversely, criticize imperial policies. To examine imperial discourses on Rome *only* looking at how references legitimize imperial or anti-imperial goals, however, would be too narrow an approach as well. For it would suggest that every political analysis ultimately rests on more or less conscious agendas. While this might be considered a legitimate approach, and while it is

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[8] F. Turner, *British Politics and the Demise of the Roman Republic: 1700-1939*, «The Historical Journal» 29, 1986, 577-600; A. Ward, *The Tory View of Roman History*, «Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900» 4, 1964, 413–456. For the Roman personifications in American politics, see: M. Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America*, Oxford-West Sussex 2009.

[9] Richard, *The Founders and the Classics,* cit. For a recent discussion of Polybius in the American context: R. Balot, *Polybius' Advice to the Imperial Republic*, «Political Theory» 38, 2010, 483-509.

[10] W. Goez, Translatio imperii. *Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Geschichtsdenkens und der politischen Theorien im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit*, Tübingen 1958.

essential to reveal such biases and hidden agendas within statements claiming accuracy or objectivity, we would like to suggest that a second motivation comes into play in many modern imperial references to Rome. The attempt to *draw lessons* from what is understood and constructed as Roman history, and to derive political insights from self-comparisons with Rome, seems to play an important role in such endeavors. Political actors and analysts, particularly in politically challenging situations, resort to historical analogies and comparisons not merely to impress, or to underpin their arguments, but also to reduce the complexity and seeming exceptionality of political conundrums. Attempts to learn from Rome's decline and fall, and to thus prevent another imperial collapse, can for example be attributed to such a search for political precedents and historical lessons.[11] The richness in terms of topics and the structure of arguments of many texts from the Victorian and Edwardian discourses, as well as the confinement of contemporary American analogies to an academic elite both seem to suggest that reflections on Rome's meaning for modern empires might be motivated – among other interests – by the aim to derive political lessons from history.

A fundamental theoretical concept for the analysis of these various kinds of references to antiquity is formulated in a theory of transformation that represents the core of the Collaborative Research Center 644 *Transformations of Antiquity*.[12] According to its interdisciplinary approach, this theory presents an attempt to contribute to an understanding of cultural change in any field, not only that of politics. Its central hypothesis is that the relationship between antiquity and later periods is not unidirectional, in the sense of the former exerting influence on the latter. Instead, it is assumed that the point of reference is itself shaped through the very process of referring to it.

For the sake of clarity, a more formal account shall be offered: A scientific observer (*wissenschaftliche(r) BeobachterIn*) of a transformation first needs to establish a domain of reference (*Referenzbereich*) – for example the Roman Republic – and a domain of reception (*Aufnahmebereich*) – for example the British politics in the 18th and 19th century. It will then be found that agents (*Agenten*) of this second realm invoke different aspects of the Roman Republic and, by doing so, will offer varying and even conflicting interpretations of the same objects. For example, as has already been mentioned, the image of one and the same person of the late Roman Republic can oscillate between villain and hero.[13] Thus, it becomes obvious that the object of reference is never fixed, but instead remains malleable and dependent on the actors' access and on the media (*Medien*) that transport the knowledge about this object, and that are available at each historical moment. Like any other historical epoch, antiquity is not something that simply has been; it constantly develops throughout the process of historical appropriation and transformation.

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[11] N. Vance, *Decadence and the Subversion of Empire*, in Edwards, *Roman Presences*, cit., 110-124.

[12] Sonderforschungsbereich 644, *Transformation. Ein Konzept zur Erforschung kulturell Wandels*, forthcoming in 2011.   [13] Turner, *British Politics*, cit.

The relationship of reciprocity outlined above is captured by the term *allelopoiesis* (*Allelopoiese*), deriving from the Greek *allelon* (reciprocal) and *poiesis* (making/ creating). It entails that, on the one hand, the constitution of a domain of reception occurs with regard to a domain of reference, and that this latter is, on the other hand, shaped and constructed through the former. Such a concept of mutual influence obliges the following three studies not to investigate the accuracy and adequateness of references to Rome by actors of the British Empire or the United States. Instead, the essays seek to detect and interpret – across the levels of analysis introduced above – modern discourses transforming Rome.