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In the previous Chapter

We saw that hierarchical, dominating social organization is a relatively recent phenomenon in history. It does not appear until the first urban civilizations, in Sumer, about 6,000 years ago. As urban civilization developed, societies became more unequal. Until that time all human societies had been highly egalitarian. For tens of thousands of years human societies were organized in foraging bands (aka hunter-gatherers), which were able to coordinate thousands of people for communal works such as monumental temples and villages with workshops and food stores. More recently, beginning about 10,000 years ago, they also organized as egalitarian sedentary agricultural villages and nomadic livestock tribes.

Urban civilizations in the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia developed credit money about 6,000 years ago, as an accounting instrument that the elites of temples used to distribute resources between departments, and for managing labor. Money appears in virtual form, not in the form of cash. That triggers the formation of markets, debt and usury (compound interest). Patriarchy appears shortly after. Writing develops around that time as well, also from accounting practices.

Axial Age start : 800 BCE

The term Axial Age was coined by German philosopher Karl Jaspers in 1949 to designate a short period of time in which the main world religions and philosophical currents appeared, simultaneously, in different regions of the world which had almost no contact with each other.

... If there is an axis in history, we must find it empirically in profane history, as a set of circumstances significant for all men, including Christians. It must carry conviction for Westerner, Asiatics, and all men, without the support of any particular content of faith, and thus provide all men with a common historical frame of reference. The spiritual process which took place between 800 and 200 B.C.E. seems to constitute such an axis. It was then that the man with whom we live today came into being. Let us designate this period as the "axial age." Extraordinary events are crowded into this period. In China lived Confucius and Lao Tse, all the trends in Chinese philosophy arose... In India it was the age of the Upanishads and of Buddha; as in China, all philosophical trends, including skepticism and materialism, sophistry and nihilism, were developed. In Iran Zarathustra put forward his challenging conception of the cosmic process as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine prophets arose: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah; Greece produced Homer, the philosophers Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, the tragic poets, Thucydides and Archimedes. All the vast development of which these names are a mere intimation took place in those few centuries, independently and almost simultaneously in China, India and the West...

Karl Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History*, p. 2

The concept of the Axial Age is controversial, possibly because it seems more subjective than naming ages after technologies that leave a clear archaeological record. The Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age... seem much more objective criteria. When classifying ideas it is difficult to establish a clear criteria of what falls into the category and what is left out.

However, when studying History focusing on the evolution of technologies of oppression and responses to them, the concept of the Axial Age is very useful.

David Graeber observed that "the core period of Jasper's Axial age [...] corresponds almost exactly to the period in which coinage was invented. What's more, the three parts of the world where coins were first invented were also the very parts of the world where those sages lived; in fact, they became the epicenters of Axial Age religious and philosophical creativity." Maybe if Jasper had named it the Coinage Age it would have been less controversial. Graeber also expands the Axial Age until 600 C.E., which would also include Jasper's Spiritual Era. Here we use Graeber's time span from 800 B.C.E to 600 C.E.

We will expand shortly on the impact of coinage in society, philosophy and religion. But first, let's have an overview of how the world looked at the onset of the Age. It begins after some of the great agricultural empires of early urban civilizations collapsed and instead mosaics of city-states appeared in permanent conflict. The same pattern is seen in the Mediterranean, in China and in India. This process is correlated with the Iron Age.

Despite this overall trend, at the onset of the Axial Age, some empires still persist, such as the Persian, the Phoenician and Babylonian. This variability probably also fuels the skepticism of classifying the period as a distinct Age.

Wherever the city-state mosaics appear, societies are governed by warriors, as was customary during the Agricultural Empires at the end of the previous era. In contrast, the Phoenicians were a commercial empire, where the dominant class was the bourgeoisie.

Most of the global territory is still communal, but that is very sparsely populated. The vast majority of the population is rural, but almost all the rural population is concentrated next to the cities and is already linked to urban civilizations. The warring city-states are smaller and much less complex than the agrarian empires that characterized the previous Age. They don't need the complexity of a credit monetary system to organize their population. In many of them the pretense of equality that had been cultivated with a market economy managed by the aristocracy is dropped. Instead, openly hierarchical systems emerge and the aristocracy become nobility. In such cases power relationships are articulated around the warrior leaders: rich families surrounded by courtiers, and all kinds of dependents, serving them in exchange for food, gifts and protection. The relationship with peasants might be part of this voluntary hierarchy, an exchange of food and obedience for protection, or might be outright conquest.

Mediterranean: A mosaic of city-states is spread through the Anatolian peninsula and Greece. There were over 1,000 of them with different government styles. The main ones were Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Thebes, Syracuse, Aegina and Rhodes. Those city-states had a complex history of fighting with each other, building alliances against each other, and even joining forces with neighboring foes against external aggressors like Persia. By 6th century BCE Sparta was the dominant power and Athens was an emerging power. In 479 BCE Athens, Sparta, and their allies successfully joined forces and defeated the Persian Army. Athens

emerged as the Greek leader after that war. However in 404 BCE Sparta defeated Athens and became the hegemonic power. Sparta installed 30 pro-spartan tyrants to rule Athens. They tried to revert all democratic laws and killed 5% of the populations who resisted in the process. However democratic rebels overthrew the tyrants after 8 months, restored democracy and Athens quickly became the dominant power again until it was defeated by Macedon in 338 BCE. The zenith of Athens as a center of literature, philosophy and the arts was during the period between her defeat of Persia and the Macedonian conquest. The physician Hippocrates, the philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, among many others, lived in Athens during this period. The Roman Republic was founded in 509 BCE when kings were replaced by elected magistrates. By 275 BCE it was the dominant power in Greece. The Republic was Replaced with the Roman Empire with the rule of Julius Caesar and lasted until 395 CE, although the Western Roman Empire persisted until 476 CE.

India: Urban civilizations of the Bronze Age collapsed around 1600 BCE and no urban civilization reappeared until about 1000 years later, further east, on the fertile plains of the Ganges River. A multitude of city-states formed around 600 BCE. They also had a wide variety of governments ranging between democratic assemblies, elective monarchies, and centralized empires. Some of the most successful were democracies of free citizens where the State owned the fertile lands and the slaves who worked on it.

China was divided into independent kingdoms, although they were still formally considered an empire until 475 BC. The period between 475 and 221 is known as the "Warring States". From 221 BC it was again unified, briefly under the Qin dynasty, and then the Han dynasty.

Coinage, professional armies and slavery

Social Currencies / Human Economies

We are about to describe how the introduction of coinage caused havoc in the societies where it got introduced. We probably still have in our minds the idea the coinage evolved naturally from barter, which doesn't seem like it would be a cause for negative disruptions. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, people didn't use barter during the Age of Agrarian Empires, they used credit money instead. There were however symbolic tokens that were exchanged for other social purposes, not related to trade. It is useful to know about those because the interaction with them and coinage was a big factor on the social impact of the introduction of commercial currencies.

Graeber uses the term "social currency" to refer to tokens that are ritually exchanged between families as symbols of social arrangements, and calls "human economies" the societies that use them. Social tokens would be used for example to formalize a marriage, or even to apologize for one family member getting drunk at a party and killing a member of another family.

Both examples symbolize a social debt: one family owes one person to another family, which is expected to be balanced in the future, for example, by marrying a woman from the family in debt to the family that is owed. Social currencies were also used for more complex social situations like negotiating treaties or acquiring followers.

Graeber insists that these **social currencies are symbols which express that people have infinite value, incomparable with anything material. They serve as a constant reminder of the fact that each person is unique, and cannot be exchanged for any other.** His main source for this thesis is French economist Philippe Rospabé. The social rituals around an exchange of tokens aren't meant to convey something like "it's not a big deal that you killed my brother, you'll marry your sister to my cousin and that will settle the situation". On the contrary, those rituals are meant to convey something very dramatic like "the loss of my brother caused an irreparable pain, but for the benefit of social stability, I'm willing to give up starting a vendetta if your family recognizes their fault by pledging your sister in marriage to my cousin". Whenever there is no one suitable for an immediate exchange, social currencies are used to symbolize that the debt is on hold until an exchange with an actual person is made. Therefore, **social currencies are never used for the exchange of goods, they operate in a completely different symbolic sphere.** The most common objects used as social currencies are jewels, clothes and cosmetics: the same tools that are used to give a person a social identity, which are the closest symbols they have to humanity.

Lele currencies are, as I say, quintessential social currencies. They are used to mark every visit, every promise, every important moment in a man's or woman's life. It is surely significant, too, what the objects used as currency here actually were. Rafia cloth was used for clothing. In Douglas's day, it was the main thing used to clothe the human body; camwood bars were the source of a red paste that was used as a cosmetic—it was the main substance used as makeup, by both men and women, to beautify themselves each day. These, then, were the materials used to shape people's physical appearance, to make them appear mature, decent, attractive, and dignified to their fellows. They were what turned a mere naked body into a proper social being.

This is no coincidence. In fact, it's extraordinarily common in what I've been calling human economies. Money almost always arises first from objects that are used primarily as adornment of the person. Beads, shells, feathers, dog or whale teeth, gold, and silver are all well-known cases in point. All are useless for any purpose other than making people look more interesting, and hence, more beautiful. The brass rods used by the Tiv might seem an exception, but actually they're not: they were used mainly as raw material for the manufacture of jewelry, or simply twisted into hoops and worn at

dances. There are exceptions (cattle, for instance), but as a general rule, it's only when governments, and then markets, enter the picture that we begin to see currencies like barley, cheese, tobacco, or salt [Graeber, 2001]

David Graeber, *Debt*

Historically, human economies precede commercial economies. Scholars have identified many different ones with a great deal of variations. Some of them have humanistic aspects, others are openly brutal. All of them have one point in common though. Because they are economies, they allow, in some circumstances, equivalences from one person to another. In economist parlance they commoditize people, at least to a certain extent, which of course is very unnatural. People naturally organize themselves according to their emotional relationships with other people. Convincing a young girl to marry the otherwise unmarriageable cousin of the guy killed by her drunk brother requires a great deal of coercion. For coercion to work at a social scale it needs to be backed up with a credible threat of violence.

This is **Graeber's main thesis regarding human economies: for people to be interchangeable with each other violence is required.**

The concept of social currency serves two things: on the one hand to understand the misinterpretations that some anthropologists made in early studies of cultures using social currencies, confusing them with the commercial currencies that we use today. Like misinterpreting that women were sold in marriage. It is key to understand that human economies worked in a different sphere, that women were not objectified in the sense that they were traded interchangeably with objects, even though they were, to some extent, commoditized.

On the other hand, it serves to understand how, in part, the havoc caused to society by the invention and introduction of commercial currency comes from the confusion between the two types of currency. If we consider people to be interchangeable with each other, we already need considerable violence, and if we are to treat people exchangeable with goods, we need even more violence. This trend naturally leads to slavery.

Promissory notes: Distributed credit currency

Before the advent of coinage people in the most commercial cities were already used to abstract forms of payment in the form of promissory notes, also known as IOUs or checks. We already mentioned the bullae in the previous chapter. Many more such technologies were invented. They were used to make promises of payment between individuals, avoiding the usage of the centralized virtual currency, and saving the expenses of scribes and notaries.

A very interesting **emerging behavior from the invention of the IOUs** is that they tend to **end up circulating like currency**. It works like this: Alice writes a check to Bob, a promissory note to pay him a shekel in a future date.

Later Bob passes this check to Carol, adding his own signature to it, endorsing it, making himself responsible for the repayment in the case Alice wouldn't pay. After that Carol uses the same check to pay one scheckel to David, again, adding her signature to it. Eventually the check ends up circulating around town as it was money, because it has the endorsement of all those trustworthy people. Sometimes, it even circulates beyond the original town.

Another interesting emerging feature is that it would stop working as money if Alice ever paid back the scheckel to the carrier of the check. **The social value of the IOU being used as money ends up being higher** than that one scheckel and **often the debt ends up never being paid**. Those re-endorsed promissory notes **end up serving the purpose of a distributed, decentralized, credit currency**.

600 BCE Invention of coinage

The invention of coinage developed almost simultaneously, and apparently independently, in Greece, China and India. In all three cases, first they were minted by individual citizens, jewelers, and shortly after, in the span of a single generation, they were instead issued by the State. Since there were many kingdoms in all three territories, in the archeological record we find hundreds of royal houses minting different coins.

The earliest known currency appears in the Lydian kingdom, in Anatolia (now Turkey) around 600 BC. It quickly spread to the other kingdoms on the Anatolian coast, to Greece and Persia.

Of course the very first coins were of fairly high denominations and quite possibly used for paying taxes and fees, and for buying houses and cattle more than for everyday purchases [...] A real market society in Greece, for instance, could only be said to exist when, as in the fifth century, ordinary citizens went to the market carrying minuscule coins of stamped silver or copper in their cheeks.

In China, the first record we have dates from a monetary reform in 524 BCE, that is, the currency had existed before that date. The first coins appear to have evolved from social coins, as they have the forms that mimic them: shells, knives, discs, ...

In India they also appear in the 5th century BCE, and the earlier ones show marks that indicate that they were used as if they were checks (being endorsed multiple times). This observation adds further weight to the theory that when coinage appeared their users were already used to more abstract forms of money.

Professionalization of war

Unfortunately, even though writing predates the invention of coinage, we do not have a contemporary account of the announcement of its invention. We cannot

claim with total confidence how it was invented.

One theory about the appearance of **the coin in Lydia** is that it **was invented to pay mercenaries**. Although at present this theory is not the most accepted in academic circles, Graeber considers it plausible.

Of course the hegemonic narrative is that coinage in Greece evolved from barter and liberal theorists look at the earliest writings that mention coinage to support that theory. Adam Smith made that claim based on Aristotle's writings speculating on the origin of money around 330 BCE. However as Karl Polanyi pointed out Aristotle used the term *métadosis* which in his day meant "sharing" or "sharing out.". Other authors such as classicist Richard Seaford defend the theory that currency somehow emerged from apportioning goods like war booty, which seems more plausible with what we know about sharing in pre-civilized societies and more consistent with Aristotle than Smith's reading.

In any case, even if the States did not invent the coins, they immediately saw their military utility, and monopolized their production, let's remember, in less than a generation.

The use of currency **allowed the States to delegate to the population much of the military logistics**, such as transport and the provision of food to the troops, weapons and sexual services. Remember that the conquered populations paid tribute, the free ones did not, but in some cases they had to pay permits and fines as well. The delegation of logistics worked as follows: the State took over the gold and silver mines, stamped the image of the king on small pieces of metal, gave these coins to the warriors as payment for their service, and demanded that the population return the coins to them in the form of taxes or tributes. In this way, **everyone who had to make a payment to the State had to find a way to contribute to the war**, either directly, or indirectly. A direct way would be to provide a service to the soldiers in exchange for some tokens. An indirect way would be providing services to someone who provides services to the military, for example, to someone who manufactures weapons. **We see, one more time, how war creates markets.**

Some states were particularly creative in their use of currency and sent civil servants to the camps who pretended to be merchants but charged inflated prices for the goods. In this way they recovered some of the coins given to the soldiers. It was a psychological schema to pretend that the state was paying higher wages to the soldiers, to entice more young men to enroll. Others sent female spies who pretended to be sex workers, and in this way they not only recovered a large part of the soldiers' wages, but also obtained information about what was happening in the camp, and gossip about who was more or less motivated to fight for the State.

The appearance of coinage led to the professionalization of war. Until this moment the war had been an affair of the nobility and the henchmen who accompanied them. They were related through the hierarchical relationships of honor and protection we mentioned earlier. With the appearance of coinage, mer-

cenaries appear in the picture. The commercialization of war led to innovations in military techniques. In Greece for example it coincides with the appearance of the famous phalanx technique. These techniques were complex and required constant training, that is, a professional activity rather than a pastime of the nobility. Professionalization was so successful that Greek mercenaries were hired by all the Mediterranean powers. On top of mercenaries who worked for whoever paid best, the States built permanent armies to patrol their borders and trained their peasantry for military service during conscriptions for war. In particular in the Roman civilization men could be conscripted until well into their forties.

The use of mercenaries had a positive feedback with the use of currency: as the war increased, so did the loot. Enormous amounts of precious metals that had been hoarded for centuries in the treasuries of temples and wealthy families were looted and converted into currency, rapidly increasing the currency in circulation. This phenomenon is known as "dethesaurization".

Alexander was also the man responsible for destroying what remained of the ancient credit systems, since not only the Phoenicians but also the old Mesopotamian heartland had resisted the new coin economy. His armies not only destroyed Tyre; they also dethesaurized the gold and silver reserves of Babylonian and Persian temples, the security on which their credit systems were based, and insisted that all taxes to his new government be paid in his own money. The result was to "release the accumulated specie of century onto the market in a matter of months," something like 180,000 talents, or in contemporary terms, an estimated \$285 billion.

We find this pattern in the three Axial Age regions: the Mediterranean, India and China. Interestingly in China, however, coins were not made with precious metals. Coinage in China was in bronze discs, often with a hole in the middle for a string to pass through. There was only currency for very small amounts. In China, unlike the Mediterranean and India, the armies were not so professional and the soldiers were paid less, but they were much more numerous. Since there were no coins with high denominations when the rich made donations to the temples they had to send the coins in carts pulled by bulls.

A direct result of the invention of coinage is that the Axial Age is the most violent time in human history. We will look at some figures in a few sections.

Myth of the commercial origin of money and currency

Despite the large amount of data showing correlation between the use of coinage and military adventures we might still be inclined to think that their primary use was commercial. Maybe those early coins were merely a service provided by kings which consisted in splitting up bullion in smaller pieces, and marking them with their weight. That would serve the purpose of dispensing with the need of scales (and the distrust that those scales might be cheating). Removing

the technological barrier, as well as the corresponding capital investment for buying the scales, while adding trust to the transaction with the endorsement of the King's supreme authority should incentivize commerce and make everybody better off. Maybe the military use was just a convenient side-effect.

It is important to emphasize, once again, that **the liberal myth of the emergence of money and currency as commercial inventions has nothing to do with historical facts**. In the previous chapter we saw how the States created money, initially as credit, and promoted the emergence of markets to help their war efforts. Now we see how physical currency is also driven by states to satisfy their military needs.

In fact, the great trading empires, such as the Phoenicians, showed no interest in the coin. They ignored this invention for centuries (despite knowing it perfectly since they traded with the kingdoms that used it). When the Phoenicians finally minted money it was not for their own use, they continued to use credit among themselves. It was only to pay mercenaries, as evidenced by the fact that they were not stamped in Phoenician but in the language of the soldiers.

Another clear indicator of the fallacy of this myth is that coinage favored the military powers (Persia, Athens, Rome) to the detriment of the great commercial empires. Continuing with the example of the Phoenicians, they ended up being massacred by Persia, Greece and ultimately Rome.

It is also significant that in the Roman Empire, which was basically a huge machine for extracting precious metals and minting coins, we only find coins at the borders of the Empire, in Italy, and in the big cities. In other words, the currency was used by the State to pay the soldiers in garrisons at the borders as well as urban civil servants needed to maintain a bureaucracy to support the war. Through the rest of the empire, the credit economy continued to be used instead.

In India we see similar phenomena. The more violent and warlike the society, the more currency there is in circulation. The greatest circulation of coins occurred at the zenith of the largest empire, Magadha. Curiously, this State viewed traders with suspicion, saw them as competitors, and preferred to manage the markets directly. In other words, the state itself sold products and services to the population, and in this way (in addition to taxes) recovered the coins with which it paid the soldiers. As the empire abandoned the policy of military expansion and allowed private commerce to flourish, the circulation of the currency was progressively reduced.

In Magaha, we find a rule manual called the Arthashastra written between the third and second century BC. There we find clues as to why the State saw traders as competitors. The handbook suggests creative ways to use the market in favor of the state, such as installing officials posing as merchants in military camps and selling goods to soldiers at twice the market price, thereby offering wages that seem more generous. It also proposes the creation of a ministry of sex workers, and train them as spies, to inform the government of the loyalty of their clients.

In India, as in the Mediterranean, the military-slavery-coinage hypothesis is supported by archeological data: the more war the more coinage was used. **In India we can be quite confident that this was not a spurious correlation because the causal mechanisms are rather compelling in Magaha.** Towards the end of the empire the regime did a full policy reversal and decided to switch from war to commerce as a primary vehicle for expanding the economy. As the investment in war dried up and commerce flourished currency vanished as people preferred credit arrangements for the consumer economy.

Debasing and the fiduciary value of currency

It is also interesting to note that Axial Age coins despite being initially made of precious metals had always a component of credit. They were always labeled at a higher value than their actual weight in precious metal. And as time went on they were further debased, which means that the percentage of the precious metal was reduced.

The reason why coins were always minted above their weight value is because otherwise people would just melt them and use them for other purposes, such as jewelry. Coins were, from the very beginning, a form of IOU, a promise by the State to pay back some gold or silver. In order to make that promise less risky and stimulate the circulation of currency they actually included some silver in the coin. Therefore people had the assurance that even if the State would collapse (a rather common occurrence) they would at least be able to recover some of their money from the silver in the coins.

In this way we can think of the difference between the nominal value and the weight value of the coin as the trust that people had in the institution of the State that minted it. When the trust is high there is very little need to add much silver in the coins in order to convince peasants to use them. **The difference between the actual value of gold or silver in the coin, and its nominal value is known as fiduciary value: the promise by the State to pay in gold or silver the face value of the coin.** The earlier coins were very pure and probably they were used to pay only for large expenses like buying a house. As people got more used to using coins, and trusted more in their fiduciary value, coins of smaller denomination, and more debased, became more popular, and they were more common to use in everyday transactions. Even copper coins became popular. Nowadays we are happy to use dollars that have no precious metals in them, or that are even printed on paper, because we have absolute faith in the USA imperial government (strangely enough, given that they keep devaluing the dollar every year). The value of the dollar currency is purely fiduciary.

When the State loses credibility if the coins are debased it produces inflation because people no longer believe that the State will redeem the coins with pure precious metals and trade them closer to their actual value as scrap metal. For example, towards the end of the Roman Empire the economy suffered from

hyperinflation as the State kept debasing the coins and they ended up with barely any precious metal in them. Therefore we cannot deduce that a State was weak just because it issued debased coins, the actual indication of its strength of weakness is on how much the debasing results in inflation.

Partial substitution of commercial credit money for currency

In the previous chapter we saw how the appearance of credit money at the origin of urban civilization was accompanied by the hierarchization of society, the dehumanization of human relationships and a progressive increase in violence.

The appearance of commercial currency replaces, in part, the credit mechanisms that existed previously (what we would call checks today). It makes business relationships much more impersonal. When a person pays with a check, it is important to have a good relationship with the person and know that they are trustworthy. When a person pays with coins you don't need to know anything about them.

This impersonal aspect is necessary to be able to create a market to supply the mercenaries. What merchant would trust and give credit to an excited young man on his way to war? On the other hand, if he pays in cash, in gold and silver coins that the State imposes as the only valid payment method for taxes and fees, he will find willing sellers for sure. Coins are also very useful for shady businesses. During times of war when it is more cautious to not ask where the goods came from, some of those goods might have been obtained illegally by stealing from fellow citizens, rather than legally through war plunder or piracy. Cash is also good for sex business obviously. We already discussed how sexuality was starting to be demoted during the Age of Agrarian Empires and sexual work evolved from most honorable to unrespectable. We also discussed how novelty-seeking seems to be a biological behavior embedded in the sexual drive of primates. Coinage facilitates more casual sexual work than credit money.

In the previous section we discussed how Axial Age people preferred credit money over currency for legit trade. Still when the states mandated paying taxes and fees in their own currency merchants had an overriding need to favor cash over credit in order to get their hands on some coins and be able to pay the State. That must have helped people get used to the concept of more impersonal trade relationships which must have had a positive feedback to the materialist ethos that was brewing during that time. **The military necessity of imposing currency to the civilian population seeped into the social fabric and allowed human relationships between neighbors to gradually become more impersonal, a trend that continues to this day.**

Substitution of hierarchical and communal relationships for commercial ones

Until the Axial Age Greece had remained outside of civilization. In other words, there were still no commercial relationships between people. Greece is a unique historical source because writing came before the market economy! This gives us a much more detailed view of what happens when the market arrives in a society.

In the oldest Greek texts, the Homeric novels, dated towards the end of the 8th century or at the beginning of the 7th century, the concept that someone could go hungry, or not have a roof to live under, does not appear. People who lived in egalitarian communal societies had their basic needs covered by the community. People who chose a hierarchical relationship, to live in the service of the nobility, had their needs covered by the master they served.

In Greece commercial relationships arrived as soon as currency was invented. Suddenly, the concept of impoverished people who have no food and shelter, who as a result of being poor end up enslaved or forced into sex work becomes a recurring theme in literature. In Greece as well, prostitution and slavery arrived together with the market. The same ravages that had occurred in Mesopotamia a few millennia before occurred immediately afterwards: Debt crisis and popular unrest. However, as we will discuss shortly, Axial Age rebels took different approaches than their Agrarian Empires predecessors.

Communal relationships suffered when, all of a sudden, **gifts of solidarity between neighbors had a quantifiable value in the market**. Before that people would assume that the purpose of excess production was to help unlucky neighbors in need. With the advent of markets there was a competing avenue for the excess of production: one could sell it to save money for later or invest in for their own desires. Also, inevitably, some cunning people, pretending to do a favor to a neighbor, then turned against him and demanded the return of the loan with interest.

Hierarchical relationships were also affected. In a patronage relationship both parties have responsibilities to satisfy the needs of the other, even if these needs are very different for each of them. Ironically, despite the hierarchy, the relationship is built on a framework of honesty and freedom. The person who puts himself in the service of an aristocrat may do so genuinely because he believes in his military greatness and values his ability to protect him. As soon as coinage arrived the aristocracy started loathing the new wealthy bourgeois and the common people who played to their tune participating in the retail markets. The mutual hatred between the two powerful classes has lasted until today and peaked in intensity in Europe centuries later during the French Liberal Revolution.

When the curtain truly goes up on Greece, in the fifth century, we find everybody arguing about money. For the aristocrats, who

wrote most of the surviving texts, money was the embodiment of corruption. Aristocrats disdained the market. Ideally, a man of honor should be able to raise everything he needed on his own estates, and never have to handle cash at all. In practice, they knew this was impossible. Yet at every point they tried to set themselves apart from the values of the ordinary denizens of the marketplace: to contrast the beautiful gold and silver beakers and tripods they gave one another at funerals and weddings with the vulgar hawking of sausages or charcoal; the dignity of the athletic contests for which they endlessly trained with commoners' vulgar gambling; the sophisticated and literate courtesans who attended to them at their drinking clubs, and common prostitutes (porne) — slave-girls housed in brothels near the agora, brothels often sponsored by the democratic polis itself as a service to the sexual needs of its male citizenry. In each case, they placed a world of gifts, generosity, and honor above sordid commercial exchange. [...] The famous Greek obsession with male honor that still informs so much of the texture of daily life in rural communities in Greece hearkens back not so much to Homeric honor but to this aristocratic rebellion against the values of the marketplace, which everyone, eventually, began to make their own.

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With the introduction of coinage a new pattern emerged which has endured until today. Wealthy families start charging their servants for food, shelter, tools, protection, etc. and at the same time extend credit to them so that they can buy what they need to survive. The moment the aristocracy asks for a return with interest for the services it offers to its clients the relationship changes completely. Now it is framed in a fictitious, cruel and violent equality: in theory, the two parties to a contract are equal before the law. **The cynicism of offering credit that the other is obliged to accept and that he will not be able to return in any way, making him dishonorable and a slave, is humiliating and makes relationships much more difficult to bear.** In this way coinage must have contributed to the demise of traditional hierarchical relationships based on honor between warlords and their retainers and led to the polarization of political systems. Social relationships became either democratic among equals or brutal oppression and servitude to the subjugated populations.

Slavery: Substitution of human economies by commercial economies

On top of that, and even more dramatically, the new commercial currency, coinage, replaced ancient social currencies. All of a sudden the same coins that were used to arrange human relationships, marriages, loyalty between families, etc. were also used to buy houses or cattle.

This resulted in the gradual disappearance of the rituals that reinforced the

idea that human lives are unique and precious, of infinite value. Now, if a guy gets too drunk in a tavern and kills another guy, the family of the drunk guy doesn't have to pledge his sister to be married to the victim's unmarriageable cousin. They will instead pay a penalty in money which the cousin can use to buy a slave girl. At first sight this might seem much fairer and a much better deal to sisters of the drunk guys. However if we look at the bigger picture, this leads very quickly to thinking about people as interchangeable goods, among different people, and between people and money or property. Therefore it turns people into commodities, into property. In other words, people become slaves. The net result is that while women would be less likely to be pledged for marriage to settle family feuds, they would be much more likely to become slaves due to the generalized increase of violence in the form of wars, piracy, criminal activity, etc.

Unlike the previous era, where formal slavery (people physically bound with chains and ropes) was marginal, during the Axial Age slaves became the mainstay of the economy. During the Roman Empire in Italy slaves constituted between 30 and 40% of the population.

Obviously, an enormous amount of violence is needed to turn large numbers of people into slaves and indeed, as we have mentioned earlier, the Axial Age is the most violent time in human history.

Military-coinage-slavery complex

These three new phenomena, currency, the professionalization of the military and slavery combine in a pattern that characterizes the economies and societies of the time.

This pattern consists of an economy based on economic growth in the form of military territorial expansion (conquest). Greaber calls it the "Military-Coinage-Slavery Complex" and it works like this:

- Military campaigns are used to obtain loot in the form of precious > metals, jewels, mines and slaves.
- The slaves are either put to work in the conquered mines or put up > for sale
- Precious metals obtained from loot and State mines are minted and > used mostly to support the military.
- Part of the booty also serves to maintain a "welfare state" for > the free, mostly peasant population. It is the famous Roman > "bread and circus".
- The rest of the booty (slaves, jewels, ...) is put up for sale to > finance the State's treasury.
- The free peasant population produces the soldiers for future > campaigns.

- The state promotes a fiscal policy in conquered populations aimed at > encouraging the use of coins in their daily transactions: forcing > them to pay taxes with the official currency. As we saw earlier, > the State wants to create markets because it relieves it from a > big part of the logistics of deploying and maintaining soldiers.

This pattern has evolved, and today we know it as the "Military Industrial Complex".

The rulers were well aware of this pattern. In India, in the Magaha Empire, in the Arthashastra military manual that we mentioned advises that "The treasure is based on mining, the army on the treasure. He who controls the army and the treasure can conquer the whole world".

Despotic-communal democracy

The appearance of hundreds of city-States makes it easy to experiment with different types of governance. It is a favorable scenario for different memes to appear and evolve.

The most interesting innovation in governance is democracy. Particularly among warriors: that is, a group of enterprising warriors band together for a conquest adventure and share the spoils. They organize themselves democratically, each warrior a vote, instead of hierarchically, as kings and emperors, as it had been the usual method among warriors until then.

Warrior democracies appear in both India and Greece. It is also interesting how they keep the means of production in common: the farmland, the mines, and the slaves and serfs who work them. In India this seems to be the most popular pattern, the democracy of the aristocracy. In Greece we find Sparta which was organized like this. On the other hand, in Greece the hybrid Athens model seems to be the most popular: the communal consists of the mines and the slaves who work them, but the lands are family properties, and democracy is extended to the non-aristocratic population, mostly peasants.

It is interesting to note that democracy was not invented as a mechanism for equity and peace, but instead it was a military invention for managing war, conquest and slavery. A tool for the warriors to share the spoils of war. When democracy was extended to peasant citizens sharing the spoils took different forms, from social services, entertainment to direct payments from the State to the citizens. In Athens among the social services provided to the (male) citizens were public sexual workers.

[...] in the ancient world, free citizens didn't usually pay taxes. Generally speaking, tribute was levied only on conquered populations. This was already true in ancient Mesopotamia, where the inhabitants of independent cities did not usually have to pay direct taxes at all. Similarly, as Moses Finley put it, "Classical Greeks looked upon direct taxes as tyrannical and avoided them whenever possible.

Athenian citizens did not pay direct taxes of any sort; though the city did sometimes distribute money to its citizens, a kind of reverse taxation—sometimes directly, as with the proceeds of the Laurium silver mines, and sometimes indirectly, as through generous fees for jury duty or attending the assembly. Subject cities, however, did have to pay tribute. Even within the Persian Empire, Persians did not have to pay tribute to the Great King, but the inhabitants of conquered provinces did. The same was true in Rome, where for a very long time, Roman citizens not only paid no taxes but had a right to a share of the tribute levied on others, in the form of the *dole*—the “bread” part of the famous “bread and circuses.”

Free military population

During this age we find multiple instances of three basic social organizations. Hierarchical warriors, democratic warriors and merchant guilds. Seeing how History unfolded it becomes quite clear that the military organization that works best are the States with a free peasant population, which produce children who can dedicate themselves professionally to the army.

This organization is generally superior to that of a warrior aristocracy maintained by serfs and slaves. We find some exceptions, the most notable being Sparta, a remarkable military power, which did not issue currency - it did not use professional soldiers - but where the aristocrats adopted a strict military lifestyle, and trained permanently for war.

On the other hand, merchant civilizations, such as Phoenicia, which use their riches to pay mercenary armies to bolster their weak troops, are even less militarily effective than aristocratic warriors. The Phoenician cities ended up being conquered both by warrior aristocracies (Persia) and by professional soldiers, sons of farmers, from Greece and Rome.

We also see that slaves are very useful for maintaining a welfare society: they are effective in the production of both cheap consumer products and coins that the State distributes to the free population so that they can buy them. Slaves also become cheap consumption goods themselves.

Domestic slaves (chattel slavery) and State slaves (work camps)

The welfare state is supported by an enormous amount of slaves. Not just those who work in the state mines. Also slaves that are traded as a consumer product. Constant wars flooded the slave markets, reducing their price and making them available to the middle class. In ancient Rome the purchase of a slave by a middle class family would have been something comparable to the contemporary purchase of a mechanical dishwasher.

In India we find similar patterns of Kingdoms and Republics merging from small

city-States and growing to Empires thanks to the effective use of military-slavery-coinage systems. Magadha, the biggest one, was even bigger than the infamous army of Alexander. In India the States had a tendency to nationalize the slaves and put them in forced labor camps rather than in the consumer market.

The amount of slavery in all three Axial regions reached historical highs during this period.

In conclusion: **the historically winning combination is a free population of peasants and soldiers, sustained by the subsidies of military conquests, particularly subsidies in the form of slaves, and led by the aristocracy.**

Violence in numbers

- 483 BC: The Athenian silver mines of Laurium discover a new vein, > and redistribute the wealth obtained among the citizens. To do > this, they employed a workforce of between 10,000 and 20,000 > slaves.
- 351 BC: 40,000 suicides in Sidon, the richest Phoenician city, when > it is conquered by the Persian emperor Artaxerxes III, rather than > surrendering.
- 120,000 people made up Alexander's army (soldiers, support staff > and relatives) and required ½ ton of silver per day just for > wages.
- The Indian Empire of Magadha had such a large army that Alexander's > soldiers mutinied to avoid engaging them: 200,000 infantry, 20,000 > horses, 4,000 elephants, plus all the support staff.
- 332 BC: 10,000 locals killed in battle and 30,000 sold as slaves > when Alexander conquers the Phoenician city of Tyre.
- 475 BC - 221 BC in China, during the period known as the Warring > States, some of them had military forces of up to a million > soldiers, although not as well trained and professional as those > in the West.
- 146 BC: Hundreds of thousands raped and massacred, and 50,000 sold > as slaves when Rome conquers the Phoenician city of Carthage.
- During the Roman Empire the slave population in Italy peaked at > between 30% and 40% of the population

The Roman institution of slavery

slavery:

an institution according to the law of nations

whereby one person falls under the property

rights of another, contrary to Nature

Private property: domination, conquest and absolute power against nature

It is very useful to learn about the characteristics of the Roman institution of slavery. It was the foundation of society, legality and economy for a millennium. It had profound social effects that continue to this day. In addition, the Roman legal code was reinstated in Europe in the 12th century and today it has become the basis of global law. As we will see in a later chapter, at the origins of capitalism, this inheritance was key in the formulation of liberal ideology. Even though since liberalism restored the Roman law the institution of slavery has been formally abolished, there are still echoes of it in our law and society.

A surprising key aspect of **Roman law** is that it **considers the natural state of people to live in equality and communal property**. The memory of communal societies that preceded urban civilization was probably still preserved, and they were still in contact with communal societies that survived where the power of the city did not reach. It is also curious how, despite this recognition, they considered "barbarians" those who lived beyond the borders.

From this **it follows that property is something unnatural: it is the right of conquest derived from war**. It is absolute power over slaves, that is to say over people who become, by virtue of being conquered, legally and unnaturally, things.

By the second century ad [...] the definitions of freedom and slavery appear back to back: "Freedom is the natural faculty to do whatever one wishes that is not prevented by force or law. Slavery is an institution according to the law of nations whereby one person becomes private property (dominium) of another, contrary to nature."

Medieval commentators immediately noticed the problem here. But wouldn't this mean that everyone is free? After all, even slaves are free to do absolutely anything they're actually permitted to do. [...] In fact, the definition introduces all sorts of complications. If freedom is natural, then surely slavery is unnatural, but if freedom and slavery are just matters of degree, then, logically, would not all restrictions on freedom be to some degree unnatural? Would not that imply that society, social rules, in fact even property rights, are unnatural as well? This is precisely what many Roman jurists did conclude—that is, when they did venture to comment on such abstract matters, which was only rarely. **Originally, human beings lived in a state of nature where all things were held in common; it was war that first divided up the world, and the resultant "law of nations," the common usages of mankind that regulate such matters as conquest, slavery, treaties, and borders, that was first responsible for inequalities of property as well.**

This in turn meant that there was **no intrinsic difference between private property and political power**—at least, insofar as that power was based in violence. As time went on, Roman emperors also began claiming something like dominium, insisting that within their dominions, they had absolute freedom—in fact, that they were not bound by laws.

Roman jurists aimed at creating a single definition for private property that applied to both slaves and non-human objects. And they came up with the concept of private property being the freedom, or the absolute power, to do whatever one wants with that object, including destroying (or killing it), even if that is unnatural. Which out of context might sound a bit weird but it makes total sense when considering that those objects were people.

If you think about it, this really is an odd place to start in developing a theory of property law. It is probably fair to say that, in any part of the world, in any period of history, whether in ancient Japan or Machu Picchu, someone who had a piece of string was free to twist it, knot it, pull it apart, or toss it in the fire more or less as they had a mind to. Nowhere else did legal theorists appear to have found this fact in any way interesting or important. Certainly no other tradition makes it the very basis of property law —since, after all, **doing so made almost all actual law little more than a series of exceptions.**

Unlike other systems of slavery throughout history, where the state restricted what masters could do with slaves, in Roman law they had absolute power: they could maim and kill them at will, in the same way that they could destroy any other object that belonged to them.

It was quite extraordinary, even in the ancient world, for a father to have the right to execute his slaves—let alone his children. No one is quite sure why the early Romans were so extreme in this regard. It's telling, though, that the earliest Roman debt law was equally unusual in its harshness, since it allowed creditors to execute insolvent debtors.

The home was the domain of the head of the family, who was the absolute sovereign. This concept of a relationship of absolute power, of bringing the logic of conquest home, was the basis of Roman society. At times there are some exceptions, such as the possibility of punishing a father of a family if it was determined that he had unjustly killed a child, or the requirement of having to ask permission from the government before executing a slave, but the fundamental idea was absolute power of the fathers and it remained so for a millennium.

In creating a notion of dominium, then, and thus creating the modern principle of absolute private property, what Roman jurists were doing first of all was taking a principle of domestic authority, of absolute

power over people, defining some of those people (slaves) as things, and then extending the logic that originally applied to slaves to geese, chariots, barns, jewelry boxes, and so forth—that is, to every other sort of thing that the law had anything to do with.

We are used to thinking about private property in the realm of economics. While that can be useful in some contexts it is more helpful to frame private property in the realm of sociology and then, from that overall picture, see how it impacts specific areas of society like economics. The most useful way to look at private property is as a social relationship that is derived from the right, the “freedom” or the “liberty”, of conquest. When a group conquers a territory they seize it along with the rest of assets located there and gain the right to prevent anybody else from accessing those assets. Those become private property, which is typically split among the conquering group. Among those assets there might be people, who also become private property of the conquering group. **Private property therefore is best seen as a social arrangement where there is an agreement that nobody except the owner of an asset will benefit from it.**

Arbitrariness, quotidianity, normality

While wars certainly provided many slaves, the economic machinery ensured that there were always more supply chains of slaves to meet the demand. Over time the narrative of conquest became a legal fiction, and most slaves came from other sources: impoverished families who sold their children, unfortunates captured by pirates or bandits, barbarian judicial victims on the Empire’s borders, or children of other slaves.

It’s also worth noting that racism hadn’t been invented yet. There was no ethnic difference between slaves and masters. Slaves could be superior to their masters in skill, strength and intelligence, and it was considered normal. It was common to own educated slaves to raise one’s children. The relationship between master and slave was one of absolute power, it didn’t need the support of any moral narrative, of claims that slavery was justified because the slaves were of an inferior, subhuman, ethnicity.

In Mediterranean civilizations slavery was so abundant and so normalized that everyone assumed that at any moment, by some unfortunate accident, they could become a slave. Famous figures, such as Plato himself, were captured by pirates and put on the auction block. In this particular case, Plato was lucky: in the market where they put him up for sale, a certain Annikeris, a Libyan Epicurean philosopher, was passing by, recognized him, and bought him to set him free.

Similarity / confusion with paid work

We have seen that wherever markets arise, slavery and wage labor also appear. In other words, the possibility to either buy people, or to rent them by the hour.

We saw this in the first urban civilizations and we see it repeated in the three Axial civilizations. It is often difficult to distinguish between the two types of work. Both for the people affected and for society in general, the difference between the two forms of work is often little more than a technicality. In India even a generic word appears to refer to the working mass of wage laborers and slaves (*dasa-karmakara*). Basically, they are simply people who do not have their own land and are at the mercy of their owners for their survival.

Impact on the concept of freedom

Before the Axial Age being free meant having the ability to establish relationships with other people. That is, not being a slave. A slave is something, completely separated from society, without the ability to establish relations of either friendship or enmity. This concept is still reflected in the etymology in Anglo-Saxon languages, where "free" derives from friend. In other words, freedom is the ability to make friends.

The most insidious effect of Roman slavery, however, is that through Roman law, it has come to play havoc with our idea of human freedom. The meaning of the Roman word *libertas* itself changed dramatically over time. As everywhere in the ancient

world, to be "free" meant, first and foremost, not to be a slave.

Since slavery means above all the annihilation of social ties and the ability to form them, freedom meant the capacity to make and maintain moral commitments to others.

The English word "free," for instance, is derived from a German root meaning "friend," since to be free meant to be able to make friends, to keep promises, to live within a community of equals. This is why freed slaves in Rome became citizens: to be free, by definition, meant to be anchored in a civic community, with all the rights and responsibilities that this entailed.

Throughout the Roman Empire, however, jurists were redefining the concept of freedom and transformed it into power. Freedom came to mean the ability to do what one wanted in one's domain. That is, with the things of his property. Especially with things that were also people. It's worth repeating a previous quote:

By the second century ad, however, this had begun to change. The jurists gradually redefined *libertas* until it became almost indistinguishable from the power of the master. It was the right to do absolutely anything, with the exception, again, of all those things one could not do. Actually, in the Digest, the definitions of freedom and slavery appear back to back: Freedom is the natural faculty to do whatever one wishes that is not prevented by force or law. Slavery

is an institution according to the law of nations whereby one person becomes private property (dominium) of another, contrary to nature.

This concept lasted through the Middle Ages, where expressions such as "freedom of the gallows" (the ability of a feudal lord to maintain his private place of execution) were used. The Liberal ideology was forged during the Middle Ages, and it put a great deal of emphasis on the value of freedom, during a time when freedom meant power over serfs.

Impact on our identity

An intriguing factor shaping contemporary individual identity is the concept of being "our own masters", being in charge of our own destiny. It is a very particular vision of identity. A far cry from ancestral collective identities, and also from the individual identities of antiquity, where one was seen as the set of relationships they had with other people and our destiny was believed to be in the hands of fate. It is a vision that allows us to see ourselves as completely separate from society and from nature. The same vision that allows conservative media to frame poverty as a fault of character of the individuals impacted by it.

This concept of identity derives from centuries of slavery, where relationships between people were framed as relationships of property, of conquest. People were defined as things that have a master. Slaves have a master. Free people are masters of themselves. It's a dual schizophrenic vision of humankind where each specimen is at the same time master and slave of themselves. This vision of identity facilitated, as we will see later, centuries after the fall of the Empire, the acceptance of slavery and wage labor.

The difference between seeing ourselves as part of a network of relationships, or as completely separate entities may seem like a simple technicality, but instead, it has profound practical consequences: it marks the difference between societies organized with rules that seek to maximize the collective wellbeing and societies organized with rules that favor individuals profiting at the expense of each other.

Male sexual initiation through conquest

Graeber speculates that for the majority of Roman citizens, their first sexual experiences would have been with slaves, either those of the family, or those of other families who were available to guests when they received visitors. In Athens, in addition, citizens enjoyed public brothels, with slave women provided by the State (only males qualified for citizenship).

In other words, they would have been initiated into sexuality in a relationship of conquest, of absolute dominance. However, he does not offer a reflection on whether this has had an impact on contemporary European sexuality or reference sources that have studied this topic. It is an interesting area for further research. Given the overwhelming evidence discussed in Chapter Two that sexuality in sapiens and related primates evolved mainly as a device to reinforce social

bonds, it seems plausible that mass male sexual initiation through relationships of conquest would have had far reaching social consequences. Given that the Ancient Roman State lasted for over a thousand years it is not far-fetched to suspect that some of those consequences might have endured until today.

Democratic farce

The myth of direct democracy and the communism of the rich

We already noted that the origins of democracy are despotic: democracy was a governance tool for sharing the spoils of war amongst warriors instead of fighting among themselves. We also noted that some of those aristocratic warriors cynically extended democracy to some of their male peasants, rather than keeping them in servitude, for practical reasons. Free citizens fight more vigorously than serfs and they don't tend to run away, saving costs on policing.

Some literary traditions tend to depict ancient Greek democracy as near idyllic. Many authors conclude that since it was a direct democracy it must have represented well the will of the people and served the majority of male citizens. Even the academic consensus is that the ancient Greeks and Romans revolted successfully, and the supposed proof is that they obtained citizenship with voting rights.

Therefore it is crucial to understand that ancient democracies, **despite being direct democracies, and despite the revolutionary narratives, continued to operate for the benefit of wealthy citizens**, aristocrats and moneylenders in the same way that despotic governments had done before. There were several contributing factors. The majority of the population was rural, lived far from the city, and could not afford to leave the farmhouses to participate in the assemblies. They were also easier victims of sophistry. They couldn't afford the time and money to go to oratory sessions. They didn't even have any level of organization, like political parties that would claim to defend the interest of the working population.

David Graeber uses the expression "communism of the rich" to describe the social relations between the elites. They typically help each other to maintain their status and privileges. They lend each other money and do favors to each other, without expecting anything in return. In other words, they relate to each other in a very different way to how they relate to the poor, demanding interest in exchange for support. This is the essence of communism: to act for the benefit of the community with the trust that the community will support you and your loved ones if you ever need it. In practice there was a communal debt among the rich, where they shared the right to collect interest and the poor shared the duty to pay it. Even though the peasants were free citizens in theory, in practice they remained subject to the aristocratic communal debt.

One of the indicators of the precariousness of the democracies of antiquity is that **most States never managed to abolish usury**. Despite the abundance of texts describing the ravages caused by usury, and the situation of constant anxiety in which the population lived, on the verge of ruin and becoming slaves, the supposedly democratic governments continued to favor the interests of the rich.

The myth of Socrates and the disdain for democracy

Even though, for all practical purposes, democracy worked for the benefit of the aristocracy, there was a lingering suspicion that it was too dangerous to let peasants vote as equal citizens. From classical Greece comes Plato's myth of Socrates, "the wisest man to ever live", who dedicated his life to instructing the people of Athens, to teach the love of knowledge, philosophy. As a result he was sentenced to death by a popular assembly. Socrates has been the symbol that there is something eerie about democracy, that **a real, direct democracy is dangerous**. This thinking has led to various solutions throughout history, from overtly authoritarian regimes (benevolent dictators) to "representative" "democracies" where governments, instead of acting according to the will of the people, act according to the will of professional politicians and "experts" in different subjects. The marketing campaign selling representation pushes the story that obviously nobody will be an expert at macroeconomics, geopolitics, urbanism, agriculture, etc. at the same time. If we would let people vote on those issues it would be chaos. Therefore if we want to have a modern society we need experts that interpret the will of the people and translate that to State policies. Normal citizens should be content with voting their representatives who tend to be members of the privileged classes.

Today there is a certain consensus among the population that "representative" "democracy" is not perfect, but it is "the least bad system we have invented". For most people when discussing political systems direct democracy is not even on the table. They think it is too dangerous or too messy, it would be too complicated to coordinate so many people in current societies, it would be impractical.

The key missing ingredient in this perspective is the lack of collective consciousness. The premise of the argument is that it is possible for a population with an individualistic conscience, in which each thinks only of their own benefit, to find a governance formula that promotes the common good and ecological sustainability. **It's a fanciful premise: collaborate to achieve the opposite of what the people collaborating want.** From this perspective the "representatives" are supposed to be focused on finding ways to enable individual people to compete with each other more effectively.

It is much more reasonable to think in terms of creating a culture that promotes love and awareness, that we all see ourselves as one, and as part of nature. Then it will be easier to find collaborative mechanisms to help us move towards

collective well-being and economic sustainability. The point of governance will shift from finding a compromise between each individual's preferences to nurturing collective ideas and channeling individual's energies towards those ideas.

Women are a threat to democracy

During the Age of Agrarian Empires we saw how, in parallel with the economic progress of society, women went from being at the center of social life to completely disappearing from it. We also saw how the majority of the population, instead of rejecting the market, responded with patriarchy: an attempt to collectivize the privileges of men to protect the women of the family, or the tribe, from the market.

With the advent of coinage society became even more commercial and the economy became much more impersonal than during the previous credit economy. It is remarkable that in Greece, where coinage spread first, **women achieved what is possibly the worst social status in History.**

The effects on women, though, were even more severe than they had been in the Middle East. Already by the age of Socrates, while a man's honor was increasingly tied to disdain for commerce and assertiveness in public life, a woman's honor had come to be defined in almost exclusively sexual terms: as a matter of virginity, modesty, and chastity, to the extent that respectable women were expected to be shut up inside the household and any woman who played a part in public life was considered for that reason a prostitute, or tantamount to one. The Assyrian habit of veiling was not widely adopted in the Middle East, but it was adopted in Greece. As much as it flies in the face of our stereotypes about the origins of "Western" freedoms, women in democratic Athens, unlike those of Persia or Syria, were expected to wear veils when they ventured out in public. [Llewellyn-Jones (2003)]

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It is even more surprising because this is the Age when philosophy was developed. Obviously many people who reflected on the social condition of women were appalled. Many philosophical schools arrived at the conclusion that women were at least equally valuable as men and welcomed them in their communities. None of those schools became very successful. We are not including Plato's famous Philosopher-Kings proposal here because, as we will discuss later, it was meant to be taken sarcastically, including equality for women and men. "[] the Epicureans, the main rival to the Stoics, accepted women students on the same basis as men—but nobody every[sic] thought very highly of Epicurus or his philosophical school." writes in *Historicity* the author that goes with the name of Michele. In general it seems that in the ancient world nobody ever took seriously those who considered women as equals to men.

In the same Historicity article titled "The trouble with women" Michele summarizes how women were perceived in ancient Greece: as a problem to be solved. They were considered dangerous rather than fragile, the source of all the problems that harmed men. Women were not considered good lovers and companions, real love was possible only between men. Women lacked the discipline to do any meaningful work for the State. They weren't considered good for sex either, young boys were better for that. The only thing they were necessary for, and the reason they were tolerated, for lack of other alternatives, was procreation. Responsible men were expected to marry a woman and procreate for the good of the State.

Women are the cause of all evils in the world, as typified by the myth of Pandora. Women are biologically and intellectually inferior to men. Women are frequently compared to animals, and while it's not denied that they are humans, they are certainly more animal-like than men are. Marriage, for men, is to subject oneself to the tyranny of an irrational and demanding entity. Marriage was to be undertaken as a duty to the state, not to be expected to be a source of personal enjoyment or fulfillment. Some, though not all ancient writers, concede that a good wife is indeed a great good for a man, but she is so rare that no man should expect to get one.

Women are good for only one thing, and that thing is not what more modern misogynists think it is—young boys are much better for that. It's not what defenders of complementary gender roles think it is, either—women in general make very poor companions, **and they are very unlikely to be diligent in their work, preferring to gossip with the servants and sneak around with other men whenever they can.** The only thing women are good for is procreation. And they are not so much good for that purpose, since they are liable to try to contracept or abort without the husband's permission (with the husband's permission, there's no problem with either of these things, nor with exposing an infant to die if the husband decrees it). Rather, they are the only option for that purpose. One ancient male writer wonders **why Zeus saw fit to saddle them with women as the only way to produce an heir. Wouldn't it be better, he wonders, to procure an heir by making a donation in a certain amount to the temples?** Despite the gods' undeniable avarice, it seems they didn't respond to this suggestion.

In the ancient view, **women were not fragile and in need of protection**, as in the Victorian or Islamic formulation. Rather, they were cloistered, veiled, denied citizenship or virtually any public role, **because they were dangerous.** A later Roman writer, writing at a time when women had begun to take on more public although not political roles, wonders nervously what is to become of the men if

the women were to get equal rights?

In the pre-Graeco-Roman Ancient Near East, the **female gods are at least as fierce and cunning as the male gods, perhaps even more so**. Inanna of Mesopotamia, Anat of the Canaanites, and Bastet of the Egyptians are like ancient berserkers, losing all capacity for rationality or mercy when exacting revenge on enemies [...]

Of course, the ANE [Ancient Near East] goddesses were also seductive and sexual, whereas the Graeco-Roman goddesses, with the exception of Aphrodite, were much less so [...]

It doesn't seem to be primarily women's sexuality that was a problem for the Greeks, as it was for the ancient Hebrews, Christians, and modern Muslims. Rather, it is the fact that by their very nature they were a threat to men. Not a potential threat, but a very real and immediate threat, both right this minute and for all time, written into the cosmology. Women were the source of all problems that men encounter in life, said the Greeks, in so many words.

Women were a problem for the Greeks. Of course, men were a problem too, and in one sense the solution to both problems were the same: **men were a problem to be solved by men, and so were women. Men solved the problem of themselves through politics and philosophy (note the rise and prevalence of Stoicism, a male pursuit). They solved the problem of women in similar ways. Sumptuary laws limited the public appearances of respectable women to none at all—since wives were a luxury commodity like other forms of conspicuous consumption.**

The trouble with women - Michele (Historicity)

In summary the author concludes that **the Greeks solved the problem of women by converting them into luxury objects of conspicuous consumption: wives**. The same way that a man could gain social status giving generous donations to the temple he could also gain social status by purchasing a wife and using her to give children to the State. This reasoning applied only to women from families of Greek citizens, the respectable women.

On the other hand, even if respectable women were unlikely to be diligent with their work, female slaves were diligent enough to be domestic servants. In fact Graeber notes that the majority of slaves were women, intended for domestic services. It was typical that after a conquest "all men of military age were put to the sword", and women and children were sold as slaves. Typically women would be used for domestic service and children for mining.

The roles of nonrespectable women, slaves and prostitutes, were

clearly delineated from those of respectable ones. Both of these nonrespectable categories had much more varied and interesting lives, and simultaneously much worse ones, for the most part, than respectable wives.

The trouble with women - Michele (Historicity)

We see that the commercial economy continued to be, as at the beginning, a tool to put the productive power of women at the service of the elites. **Women were the commercial economy.** Men on the other hand have no economic value as slaves. During conquest they were discarded just as male chicks are discarded in chicken factories today. Men had value as free citizens to go to the war, either as duty to the state or as mercenaries. They also had value as tax-paying peasants in the cities that had been reduced to tribute, rather than annihilated.

In Greece, as before in ancient Mesopotamia, respectable women lived kidnapped by their fathers or husbands, and only the non-respectable, slaves and sex workers, were allowed in the public space. If respectable women had to go out, they were expected to cover themselves with a veil. It is an interesting historical falsehood worth noticing, the concept that covering women with a veil in Europe is a modern import from the Middle East. Veiling was an Assyrian invention that was initially not very successful in the Middle East. **At the time when in Greece women were covered with veils, in Persia and Syria respectable women were mostly uncovered.**

Clearly **women were considered an imminent threat which was imperative to contain.** Since women's freedom was more constrained in democracies than during the empires that preceded or succeeded the ancient democracies it would seem that they were considered a bigger threat in democracies than in societies with hierarchical rule. **What is the nature of that threat that makes it even more scary under democratic governments?** Unfortunately sources consulted don't elaborate on this point. It could be that women were perceived as better social organizers and more peaceful than men. Maybe the aristocrats feared that if women were allowed to have a voice and a vote they would want to prevent their children from going to war to loot their neighbors and instead would push for redistributing the wealth of the rich among the poor. Maybe those concerns were fueled by contacts with uncivilized societies where women were still at the center of the community, as well as the memory of previous societies preserved in the myths of conflicts between goddesses representing the egalitarian rural communities led by women and male gods representing the urban warring civilizations led by men.

Rich women, on the other hand, didn't represent a threat to democracy, as they had the same interests as rich men and behaved just as they did. They played key roles in palace intrigues. Alexander's mother, for example, ordered Alexander's father's other wife and her daughter to be burned alive in order to ensure that Alexander was the indisputable heir. Also Roxana, one of Alexander's wives,

murdered another his wives when he died.

In Rome, women were also formally dependent on their fathers and husbands. However, when the husband died, the woman received her property rights and managed the family estate. It was a fairly common situation as mortality in military campaigns was quite high. Prado Esteban and Rodrigo Mora document how brutal life was for many male citizens during the Roman Empire. They were forced to participate in military campaigns for much of their adulthood, where, apart from suffering the harshness of military discipline, they stood a good chance of being killed, or seriously injured, during engagements.

Throughout the Axial Age, and in different regions, the status and rights of women varied. Within urban civilizations, however, they didn't get neither the right to vote nor the right to hold public office. At least not as a career. The only women who managed to rule were queens who did so through family inheritance, such as Cleopatra or Zenobia.

During the Hellenistic and the later pre-Christian Roman periods, women had much broader public roles than in the classical Greek or republican Roman periods, but they were still potentially dangerous creatures. The devoted wife and mother finally did get her due, and women were more able to control their own lives rather than to pass from the absolute control of her father to that of her husband. There was also more freedom for women to not be respectable, if they liked, and still lead reasonably pleasant lives. Women had more economic and legal powers.

But there were two things women could never do: hold political power through voting or holding public office, or serving in the military. The reasons for the latter are fairly obvious. What were the reasons for the former? For one, military success was one sure way of garnering political influence, and that was not possible for women. For another, there were still doubts about women's intellectual capacity and ability to control their emotions, although women's intellectual ability was now more recognized.

Finally, women were dangerous. As noted above, Romans feared the consequences of giving women political power—they didn't know what might happen, but they were pretty sure it wouldn't mean anything good for them.

The trouble with women - Michele (Historicity)

We already mentioned in the previous chapter the, apparently puzzling, tendency that **the more humanity progresses the worse the conditions are for women**. Here we can see again the pattern in action, during the most democratic era of the Greek and Roman civilizations, women suffered the worst oppression. The Greek cities were briefly conquered by Alexander and after his death the empire became fragmented into several warring kingdoms in a period known as

Hellenistic Greece. When democracy was gone, women's status improved. Again with the Roman republic women lost privileges, which they recovered only later, when the Republic evolved to a more authoritarian Empire.

Periodic debt crises

Despite the diversity of state governance models used in this era (democracies, republics, kingdoms, empires, etc.), they all have in common that they foster markets to improve their allocation of resources to the war and as a result they create consumption societies. As we saw in the previous chapter, the market and the State are two sides of the same coin, if we find one we can expect to find the other. Whenever we find consumption societies we find retail credit as well: consumers get into debt through loans and mortgages. As usual, governments tend to side with the lenders rather than the borrowers. The lenders by definition are the people who have power, in this Age they were mainly the aristocracy. As we explained earlier even the supposedly democratic governments were devices to strengthen the power of the aristocracy over the peasants. As we would expect governments legalized usury (compound interest) and harsh penalties for the insolvent debtors, like enslaving them. In early Rome creditors were even allowed to kill the debtors. The result is mathematically inescapable: retail credit piles up through compound interest until the point that it threatens the viability of maintaining a free population. The government either intervenes or collapses. The same dynamics of periodic debt crises we saw during the Age of Agricultural Empires continue to occur during the Axial Age. Note that debt crises happen regardless of whether consumers use credit money like during the Age of Agrarian Empires or shift towards cash, like in the Axial Age. What causes the debt crises is the practice of usury backed by State force, not the nature of the currency that is used.

Despite the general trend for usury and debt crises there were variations on how harsh the States were on the debtors. In Greece for example usury laws were leaner than both the Roman and the Mesopotamian ones. Unlike Mesopotamia the use of family members for the payment of interest was not legalized. Only the head of the family who had formally contracted the debt was enslaved if they didn't pay it back.

Liberation mechanisms: Revolts, strikes and coinage subsidies

In the first civilizations in Mesopotamia the common reaction from the population to debt crises was to flee the city and to join the nomadic tribes. Sometimes they would regroup in large numbers and return to plunder the cities. The government solution was to issue periodic consumer debt pardons.

In the Axial Age we find different patterns. According to Graeber in Greece the most common responses were revolts. City-States responded to them using

coinage to distribute part of the war loot to the population. They didn't reinvent debt amnesties. The logical consequence, pointed out by Graeber, is that cities that were not militarily successful didn't have gold and silver to fend off the debt crises. In those cities debt crises and revolts flared more often and eventually turned much of the population into serfs and slaves. He also notes that even the largest and most militarily successful cities such as Rome and Athens didn't manage to abolish usury and all forms of debt servitude. This analysis is his own contribution: the more popular academic narrative maintains that in Greece and Rome the debtor class generally revolted successfully. Historical data though suggests that in reality the success of the rebellion depended on the State having enough economic growth to devote part of the surplus to rescuing the people. Which means that ancient revolts that on the surface seem successful in reality they weren't. They didn't manage to overthrow the elites and institute a real government "by the people and for the people". They were content with accepting modest financial support which came from sharing part of the war pie. Since that wasn't enough to put them out of debt it only helped the population to avoid servitude only as long as the war economy grew.

What I am arguing flies in the face of much of the conventional scholarly wisdom, summed up best perhaps by Moses Finley when he wrote "in Greece and Rome the debtor class rebelled; whereas in the Near East they did not"—and therefore reforms like those of Nehemiah were at least minor, temporary palliatives. Near Eastern rebellion took a different form; moreover, Greek and Roman solutions were both more limited and more temporary than he supposed.

The history of Rome also starts with peasants rebelling against a debt crisis. Here though we find an interesting middle-ground between the Mesopotamian exodus and the Greek revolts. In Rome the plebs' favorite rebellion strategy was the so-called "secessions of the plebs": people left the countryside and the workshops of the city and camped on the outskirts, threatening mass defection. It was a similar strategy to modern strikes: walk out of the job en masse and wait for concessions from the employer to return to work.

As in Greece, the State responded to the problem by throwing coinage at it. As in Greece these rituals of riots and threats of sessions did not solve the problem either. They achieved reforms and concessions that only mitigated it and postponed the inevitable consequences. Since the Roman Empire was very successful the problem got postponed for centuries and therefore, during most people's life spans it must have seemed that it worked wonderfully, as it had apparently been working for several generations already.

Although Axial Age States did not go so far as to abolish usury, some did formally abolish debt servitude, even though in practice it didn't disappear completely. Rome did it in 326 BC, shortly after the circulation of the coin was normalized. In other words, when the economy of the war was going well, it was decided to distribute part of the booty among the population in the form of coins to avoid a social crisis that would have turned the free population into serfs and slaves.

The plebs' thirst for authoritarianism

Let's summarize the democratic debt crises: during the Axial Age successful States maintained a system of subsidies for the population. Without these subsidies the free population would have quickly ended up enslaved, and the states would have been left without free citizens who could pursue a professional military career. Therefore, economic expansion, based on war, would have ended. Those subsidies often were framed as shares on the profits of war. Democracy emerged as a way for warriors to share the spoils and later pretended to treat the peasants as equals, sharing part of the spoils with them. It was a farce as the peasants were indebted to the wealthy warrior leaders and whatever share of the spoils was assigned to the plebs they ended up paying it back to the aristocracy.

Under this framework democracy can last only as long as the economy expands with military conquest. This theory explains why in unsuccessful military States the percentage of free population shrinks dramatically. What **seems unexpected though is that in successful military powers free peasantry preferred to be free under authoritarian regimes rather than under democratic ones**, even if that proposition might seem an oxymoron.

[In Rome], too, the patricians were ultimately faced with a decision: they could use agricultural loans to gradually turn the plebian population into a class of bonded laborers on their estates, or they could accede to popular demands for debt protection, preserve a free peasantry, and employ the younger sons of free farm families as soldiers. As the prolonged history of crises, secessions, and reforms makes clear, the choice was made grudgingly. **The plebs practically had to force the senatorial class to take the imperial option.** Still, they did, and over time they gradually presided over the establishment of a welfare system that recycled at least a share of the spoils to soldiers, veterans, and their families.

It seems significant, in this light, that the traditional date of the first Roman coinage —338 bc— is almost exactly the date when debt bondage was finally outlawed (326 bc). Again, coinage, minted from war spoils, didn't cause the crisis. It was used as a solution.

Note that by "the traditional date of the first Roman coinage" Graeber means according to Roman historians. Contemporary scholars however date the first bronze coins paid to Roman soldiers to an earlier date around 400 B.C.E. Graeber seems to imply that the Roman historians didn't consider those earlier coins as significant, maybe they considered them as something experimental, and that the conscious use of coinage to address social upheaval was part of a package that included outlawing debt bondage and significant distribution of war spoils to the plebs via coinage. It would be interesting to dig deeper in this area and find out if the quantity, quality or denomination of coinage significantly increased at that date.

The most intriguing suggestion in this paragraph is that the free peasantry "practically had to force the senatorial class to take the imperial option". Why would they want to do so? Maybe it was because the peasants realized that democracy was a farce, that senators only cared for the patricians and not the plebs, and that the patricians only worried about their short term interests, to squeeze as much money as fast as possible from their debtors. Presumably the peasants expected an emperor to have a more long term view of the empire and would care to protect the debtors for the sake of the empire's longevity.

Philosophy and religion

Cultural shock and moral confusion

In Greece we have the privilege to have a written record of what happened when the market economy arrived. In Greece the shock was even stronger than what we saw during the Age of Agrarian Empires because soon after the credit money arrived also cash appeared which, as discussed earlier, has potential for even stronger disruptions. In the other two Axial regions, a similar shock occurred when moving from credit economies or hierarchical governance to coinage economies. We have less detailed records there but the shock could have been somewhat smoothed by earlier exposure to credit economies.

Greece was one of the warring kingdoms regions where society was organized hierarchically around the warrior nobility class. Debts based on honor were a main social glue: the warriors would owe protection to the peasants, and would owe loyalty to each other. The peasants would owe obedience to their masters in exchange for their protection.

According to Graeber, the triggering factor of the philosophical effervescence in Greece was the extreme moral confusion that occurred when, all of a sudden, the notion of debt that had previously been linked to honor turned into an impersonal, mathematical affair. Once it was quantified debt became usury, destroyed social relationships, and ultimately created slaves. Graeber notes that one of the defining characteristic of slavery, which is required to turn a person into a commodity, is that slaves are socially decontextualized. It was very difficult to grasp that debt, which had been the glue of social fabric, suddenly became a destabilizing force.

From this situation people were prone to **adopt two simultaneous and contradictory beliefs. On one hand it is a moral imperative to pay one's debts. It is a matter of honor and integrity. On the other hand, those who are in the habit of lending money are evil.** Similarly money is both a blessing that allows one to satisfy their desires and a curse that can lead to having all of one's possessions taken away.

Graeber draws on the work of literary theorist Marc Shell to illustrate the generalized moral confusion. He gives the example of Plato's Republic, written

in the 4th century BCE. According to this interpretation, Plato wrote the text sarcastically to show that the morality of our society, which is based on paying debts, is contradictory. If we would want to avoid inconsistencies and create a world that makes logical sense that world would be abhorrent.

[...] offering some political proposals of his own, involving philosopher kings; the abolition of marriage, the family, and private property; selective human breeding boards. (Clearly, the book was meant to annoy its readers, and for more than two thousand years, it has succeeded brilliantly.) What I want to emphasize, though, is the degree to which what we consider our core tradition of moral and political theory today springs from this question: What does it mean to pay our debts? Plato presents us first with the simple, literal businessman's view. When this proves inadequate, he allows it to be reframed in heroic terms. Perhaps all debts are really debts of honor after all. But heroic honor no longer works in a world where (as Apollodorus sadly discovered) commerce, class, and profit have so confused everything that peoples' true motives are never clear. How do we even know who our enemies are? Finally, Plato presents us with cynical realpolitik. Maybe nobody really owes anything to anybody. Maybe those who pursue profit for its own sake have it right after all. But even that does not hold up. We are left with a certainty that existing standards are incoherent and self-contradictory, and that some sort of radical break would be required in order to create a world that makes any logical sense. **But most of those who seriously consider a radical break along the lines that Plato suggested have come to the conclusion that there might be far worse things than moral incoherence. And there we have stood, ever since, in the midst of an insoluble dilemma.**

Materialism brings philosophical abstractions and sensuality

Usually the Axial Age is considered a transcendental era. Graeber finds more interesting the point of view of authors such as Marc Shell and Richard Seaford who consider it a materialist era. This perspective starts from the observation that in all three regions philosophical debates begin with discussions about the origin of matter.

It is quite a remarkable coincidence that in Miletus, the first Greek city where coinage arrived, we find three philosophers, contemporary with the arrival of coinage, who start the debate on the origin of matter: Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes.

The connection is that the everydayness of the currency exposed the population to a new abstraction tool, a social convention, an object that could be transformed into anything else. This is where the debates on the nature of matter come from, first, on whether there are primordial matters from which the rest of matter

derives, and to which they return. Then there are debates about the nature of ideas, about whether they exist by themselves or are simple social conventions, or if, as Plato suggests, they exist in a separate world. And hence the body-spirit duality, the revolutionary idea that they are two separate things, and that the body is the prison of the spirit.

This interest in the nature of matter leads to a preference to understand the world as an interaction of material rather than divine or spiritual forces: in all three regions we find philosophers who deny the existence of the spirit and defend that human nature is purely material. According to Graeber this position was common. He notes that the religions that appeared at this time had much less supernatural aspects than those of earlier times. Buddhism is the clearest case, since it rejects the notion of a supreme being, which generates debates about whether or not it is a religion. Another example is that when Confucius talks about venerating ancestors, it is not clear that he is referring to the existence of spirits.

One more author who claims the materialism of Axial Greece is Michel Onfray. He claims that the history of western philosophy has been written from the point of view of the more popular current, the idealist one, which goes from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel. He denounces historical falsifications and manipulations that have minimized the importance of more materialistic authors. For example some authors contemporary or even posterior to Socrates have been cataloged as "pre-Socratics", with the intention that we perceive them as becoming obsolete with the arrival of the idealist current. Onfray vindicates the philosophical tradition that focuses on the body and enjoying it. He analyzes Cynics like Aristippus of Cyrene or Diogenes of Sinope, materialists like Democritus and hedonists like Epicurus. He rejects the clichés that have been made of some of these philosophers, which present them as defenders of all kinds of excesses. Onfray shows them instead as masters of moderation. He points out that they founded traditions that persisted for centuries, and that, unlike the widespread misogyny in Greece, they defended the intellectual equality of men and women. While Onfray covers only mediterranean authors, the most well-known Axial Age text on the subject of sensuality is Vatsyayana Mallanaga's Kama Sutra (Principles of Love), written a bit later, around the 2nd or 3rd century CE. Similarly to what has happened with the Mediterranean authors the text's content is usually misrepresented. Contrary to common beliefs the Kama Sutra is not about promoting sexual excesses. It is a philosophical text about the art of living well, the nature of love, finding a life partner and other pleasure-oriented aspects of human life. It also contains ethical reflections such as contrasting the pleasures of adultery for one partner with the damage that can inflict on the other partner, and consequently advising against its practice.

Meet your *homo economicus* neighbor

Until the Axial Age human relationships between neighbors, even commercial ones, had some component of human emotional complexity

in them. Foraging communities had explicit relationships of mutual support that balanced the collective wellbeing with individual agency. Hierarchical relationships between warriors and retainers were based on mutual support, on the mutual desire to nourish the relationship. Even though those were unequal relationships they might have been somehow equitable, with one party preferring taking the risk of fighting in the pursuit of honors and the other preferring a safer position that still benefited from the sharing of the spoils. Sometimes gifts between neighbors would be motivated by an even more complex mix of emotions and social arrangements such as the desire to secretly indirectly benefit a friend or harm an enemy. Even when credit economies appeared and impersonal market relationships were made possible between loan sharks and their customers / victims who would often end up dispossessed, that kind of transaction was not the most common. Only bankers had reliable access to State force. The rest of people and business had to rely on trust instead. In everyday life one would commercially exchange goods and services with people who they would know as a human with all their layers of complexity. The patron of an Ale-woman would know her and be able to assess the likelihood that she would provide quality products or put the patron's health at risk with stale food. Conversely she would be able to assess the likelihood that that patron's promise of payment would materialize. Similarly a relationship between a patron and a sex worker couldn't have been as cold as a cash transaction for the same reason that they should have known each other to be able to at least assess the credit of the patron.

With the advent of coinage it became possible for the first time that neighbors treat each other as complete strangers, to interact with each other with cold cash transactions, to care only for their own interest, to base their exchange decisions purely on "rational" calculations: rational comes from "ratio": computing the quantity and quality of the goods and the proportional value that they have. **For the first time in history it became possible to imagine that the essence of humanity could be pure greed, the cynic (liberal) view that sapiens are in reality *homo economicus*.**

To understand what had changed, we have to look, again, at the particular kind of markets that were emerging at the beginning of the Axial Age: impersonal markets, born of war, in which it was possible to treat even neighbors as if they were strangers. Within human economies, motives are assumed to be complex. When a lord gives a gift to a retainer, there is no reason to doubt that it is inspired by a genuine desire to benefit that retainer, even if it is also a strategic move designed to ensure loyalty, and an act of magnificence meant to remind everyone else that he is great and the retainer small. There is no sense of contradiction here.

Similarly, gifts between equals are usually fraught with many layers of love, envy, pride, spite, communal solidarity, or any of a dozen other things. Speculating on such matters is a major form of daily entertainment. What's missing, though, is any sense that the most

selfish (“self-interested”) motive is necessarily the real one: those speculating on hidden motives are just as likely to assume that someone is secretly trying to help a friend or harm an enemy as to acquire some advantage for him- or herself. Neither is any of this likely to have changed much in the rise of early credit markets, where the value of an IOU was as much dependent on assessments of its issuer’s character as on his disposable income, and motives of love, envy, pride, etc. could never be completely set aside. Cash transactions between strangers were different, and all the more so when trading is set against a background of war and emerges from disposing of loot and provisioning soldiers; when one often had best not ask where the objects traded came from, and where no one is much interested in forming ongoing personal relationships anyway. Here, transactions really do become simply a figuring-out of how many of X will go for how many of Y, of calculating proportions, estimating quality, and trying to get the best deal for oneself. The result, during the Axial Age, was a new way of thinking about human motivation, a radical simplification of motives that made it possible to begin speaking of concepts like “profit” and “advantage”—and imagining that this is what people are really pursuing, in every aspect of existence, as if the violence of war or the impersonality of the marketplace has simply allowed them to drop the pretense that they ever cared about anything else. It was this, in turn, that allowed human life to seem like it could be reduced to a matter of means-to-end calculation, and hence something that could be examined using the same means that one used to study the attraction and repulsion of celestial bodies. If the underlying assumption very much resembles those of contemporary economists, it’s no coincidence—but with the difference that, in an age when money, markets, states, and military affairs were all intrinsically connected, money was needed to pay armies to capture slaves to mine gold to produce money; **when “cutthroat competition” often did involve the literal cutting of throats, it never occurred to anyone to imagine that selfish ends could be pursued by peaceful means.** Certainly, this picture of humanity does begin to appear, with startling consistency, across Eurasia, wherever we also see coinage and philosophy appear.

Meet your cynical government representative

We already discussed that the Axial Age was the most violent period of human history. Violence and materialism must have fed each other in a positive feedback loop. It must have been obvious at that time that selfishness led to violence. For example it was acceptable as a fact of life that piracy was a rational occupation, that there would always be people in the business of arming ships with the purpose of attacking trading vessels, stealing their cargo and enslaving their passengers. Intellectuals were advising politicians to aim at being Kings of

their own States and command armies to take over the neighboring States until becoming Emperor of the Known World. We don't have any indication from that time of the kind of delusional thinking, or cognitive dissonance, that characterizes contemporary Liberalism, which asserts that it is possible to have a peaceful and egalitarian world where everybody acts selfishly. For the ancients it was clear that whoever could assemble the greatest force would violently unleash it to enslave others. The logic of the market extended to the military. Military campaigns were seen as purely commercial affairs: calculations of cost and benefit. And by extension, it was seen that the goal of the government was the same: to conquer to achieve the maximum benefit at the minimum cost. The concepts of honor, glory and loyalty that until then had defined the aristocracy disappeared, they were seen as weaknesses to be exploited for one's benefit. The same happened with the devotion to the Gods.

As a general principle, when an enemy's army comes, it seeks some profit. Now if they come and find the prospect of death instead, they will consider running away the most profitable thing to do. When all one's enemies consider running to be the most profitable thing to do, no blades will cross. This is the most essential point in military matters.

Annals of Lü Buwei, 8/5.4, as quoted by Graeber in Debt

When the ancients talked about peace it clearly meant the ability to have such an overwhelming military force that no one would dare to challenge it. One illustration of this concept is the advice that a Chinese thinker named Lü Buwei gave to emperor Qin Shi Huang. A more famous one is the Pax Romana. When Romans talked about "pacifying the provinces" they meant exactly the same as imperial powers like the USA, China or Russia mean today: to send the army to crush dissenters. However, back then, they didn't find it necessary to hide their brutality under "terrorism" pretexts.

Augustus faced a problem making peace an acceptable mode of life for the Romans, who had been at war with one power or another continuously for 200 years.[Stern 2006] Romans regarded peace not as an absence of war, but as a rare situation which existed when all opponents had been beaten down and lost the ability to resist.[Momigliano] Augustus' challenge was to persuade Romans that the prosperity they could achieve in the absence of warfare was better for the Empire than the potential wealth and honor acquired when fighting a risky war. Augustus succeeded by means of skillful propaganda. Subsequent emperors followed his lead, sometimes producing lavish ceremonies to close the Gates of Janus, issuing coins with Pax on the reverse, and patronizing literature extolling the benefits of the Pax Romana.[Stern 2006]

Wikipedia entry on Pax Romana, retrieved Sept 14th 2022

A logical conclusion from materialism is that morality and justice

are simply tools to distract the masses. Rulers didn't limit themselves to exploiting conquered populations. They were so cynical that they found it natural to extract as much benefit as possible from their own subjects, using whatever means necessary, including deceit and violence. In both India and China governance manuals appeared, in a style similar to what would appear much later in Europe as Machiavelli's Prince. In these manuals, kings and emperors were openly advised to **pretend to the people that the purpose of government is to provide morality, law, and justice for all, while secretly pursuing an agenda of personal enrichment.** A Chinese manual explained that "the people can be easily manipulated because everyone pursues their own benefit and therefore their actions are as predictable as water that flows down a mountain". The same manual warned that the prosperity of the people makes it difficult to mobilize them for war, and advised, as an antidote, to secretly apply a regime of terror.

Intellectual liberation mechanisms: philosophy, religion and utopian communities

For the first time in history during the Axial Age the knowledge of reading and writing became common, initially among the privileged urban populations, and later to the wider population as well. Positive feedback helped promote literacy among the peasant population: the more the ideas traveled in written form the more interest there was for the wider population to learn how to read. This made possible, for the first time in history, the emergence of popular movements that were also intellectual movements. Rebels didn't just revolt as a reaction to a circumstantial debt crisis, they reacted to the structural selfish cynicism of the elites, they manufactured theories about the nature of reality, about how the world should be, presumably for the greater good, and demanded that their governments conform to it. Such theories often included elements that were clearly opposites to the hegemonic thought: traits of anarchism, of communism or considering women equal to men. **The Axial Age invented introspection, the ability to critically analyze one's thoughts, as well as projection, the ability to imagine a world in which people inhabited different kinds of thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and the desire to will those words into existence.** Earlier rebels hadn't had such tools. During the Age of Agrarian Empires rebels thought there was something wrong with the cities and ran away from them. They didn't question the urban beliefs and carried with them the memes of hierarchy and patriarchy. Instead Axial Age rebels realized there was something wrong with the way people thought, and aimed at changing their beliefs instead. While some of them did run away from the metropolis to build their own communities, they did so with the consciousness of curating a different ethos, rather than replicating the same patterns of the society they were escaping from.

Radical revolutionary philosophies appeared from among these currents. In India and the Mediterranean it was an evolutionary process. At the beginning

philosophy reached only the urban elite and eventually morphed into popular religious movements. On the other hand, in China new movements were revolutionary from the beginning, like the School of the Tillers, an anarchist group of farmers who influenced Taoism. Or the Mohist who were egalitarian rationalists. They were also pacifist urbanites who, in order to discourage conflict, organized battalions of military engineers to defend against aggressors.

Both Graeber and Onfray explain that some of these movements, whether Greek philosophical currents, Jewish sects, or Chinese schools, built communities, far away from the centers of power, where they lived without private property or slavery, some of which survived for centuries. They also tended to accept both women and men as equals.

The great religions of history, which have lasted until today, also appeared during this period. Like philosophy they were a reaction to these extraordinary doses of materialism, cynicism and brutality: Zoroastrianism (or Mazdeism), Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity and Islam. Christianity is a very clear case. It was an anarcho-communist movement that was diametrically opposed to everything that the Roman State represented. Against the bellicose, materialistic and competitive culture of the time, they preached universal love. They opposed all State institutions. They opposed war and its practitioners refused to enlist in the army. They opposed the law and justice, which were perceived as instruments to support the rich in their struggles against the poor. They opposed property and trade, and organized themselves into communities with collective property. They opposed hierarchy, misogyny, and patriarchy. They were organized in assemblies, without hierarchies, where women were considered equal to men.

When thinking about ancient religions it is important to realize that their main characteristics are their revolutionary proposals, not their mystical or magical elements, which are often the focus of contemporary descriptions. But those analyses are anachronistic and derive from the contemporary understanding of science. When discussing Axial Age religions and philosophies it is worth having the perspective that philosophy wouldn't come up with the scientific method until about two thousand years later. We have seen that this Age was more materialistic and had less magic thinking than previous times. Still, from a contemporary perspective, magical beliefs were very common at that time, even in the Pythagorean school the teaching of math was built upon magical thinking. The main difference schools of thought like the Pythagorean and religious movements like Christianity or Buddhism is that Pythagoreans were a secretive cabal who worked for the benefit of their own members whereas Christians and Buddhist were revolutionary anti-systemic activists who pledged to give up their own private interest, not only for the benefit to their own extended communities, but also at the service of cosmic love and justice. We don't remember the pythagoreans for their mystical beliefs, nor should we remember the ancient religions' founders for them: they all had more significant historical contributions.

Pacifism is such a core element of Buddhism that monks are even prohibited from seeing an army if they can avoid it. On the other hand, Buddhism didn't oppose the State like Christianity did. People who wanted to become monks had to swear that were not runaway slaves nor in debt. Conversely early Christianity was an underground society devoted to hide and protect those who were running away from the law, including slaves, debtors and conscript defectors.

Of the great religions, Buddhism is possibly the one with the least mystical elements. Buddhist don't even believe in a magical all-powerful being which prompts many people to question if they are even a "proper" religion. Their mystical beliefs are basically limited to reincarnation and karma.

Early Buddhism had a similar disgust for gold and silver than early Christianity had for usury and trade. However Buddhism embraced trade rather than opposing it. This difference is coherent with ancient Asian society having a more clear separation between the state markets based on coinage to support war and commercial markets using credit. Buddhism opposed the former and embraced the later.

Early Buddhist economic attitudes have long been considered a bit mysterious. On the one hand, monks could not own property as individuals; they were expected to live an austere communistic life with little more than a robe and begging bowl as personal possessions, and they were strictly forbidden to so much as touch anything made of gold or silver. On the other hand, however suspicious of precious metals, Buddhism had always had a liberal attitude toward credit arrangements. It is one of the few of the great world religions that has never formally condemned usury. Taken in the context of the times, however, there's nothing particularly mysterious about any of this. It makes perfect sense for a religious movement that rejected violence and militarism, but that was in no way opposed to commerce.

Another interesting case is Islam. It appears 600 years after Christianity and we can also consider it quite radical for the time. It does not propose a paradigm shift like Christianity though, instead it is a rather reformist movement. It proposes the separation of the State and the market which is quite extreme since it means that bankers shouldn't have access to organized violence or be allowed to steal ("repossess") the properties of their customers. We will see how this axiom turned out quite well during the Medieval Ages in the next chapter. Slavery was frowned upon, and limited, but was not completely prohibited. Islam considers women to be people, not objects, and attributes to them 50% of the value of men. Not as equals like some previous philosophical and religious movements but quite a radical departure from the generalized condition of women as consumption goods.

The Empire strikes back and then collapses

From Democracies and Republics to Empires

Despite the initial effervescence of governance models, some more democratic than others, and the initial strength of democracies and republics, especially in the Mediterranean region, all three regions ended up being ruled by empires.

We have already discussed the combination of factors that led Democracies and Republics to become Empires. In Greece, even if some cities like Athens loved their democracy, the only known social stabilization mechanism for those governments was coinage subsidies drawn from war profits which created a governance imperative for economic growth based on conquest. Only a few cities could be successful, the rest were forced to turn into authoritarianism to put down social unrest. In Rome peasants saw Republican governance as a show for the rich to benefit themselves exploiting the poor. They hoped that Emperors would be fatherly figures strong enough to keep the aristocrat's greed in check and favored them over republican rule. Probably similar preferences helped tip the balance from democracies and republics towards authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the Mediterranean, as well as in India and China. Once that happened savvy rulers managed to stay in power with the advice of governance treaties written by cynic intellectuals. They mastered the art of combining propaganda that depicted them as protectors of the poor while smashing dissent through a regime of terror. That combined with the rulers' desire to conquer the world.

This combination of unbridled cynicism and imperative economic growth was successful and led to the building of great empires that unified each of the three regions.

Growth crisis, religion, austerity and collapse

Throughout this chapter we have been describing how the Axial Age States solved the social tensions among classes by subsidizing the peasants with coinage and cheap slaves, both of which were obtained through military expansion. Eventually all three Empires reached the limits of their military logistical capacity and they stopped growing. Communications and governance technologies didn't allow yet for any of them to keep growing until becoming a global Empire. When the economies stopped growing they didn't have any mechanism to solve those tensions, they didn't come up with Mesopotamian-style debt cancellations.

In Greece as in Rome, attempts to solve the debt crisis through military expansion were always, ultimately, just ways of fending off the problem—and they only worked for a limited period of time. When expansion stopped, everything returned to as it had been before. Actually, it's not clear that all forms of debt bondage were ever entirely eliminated even in cities like Athens and Rome. In cities that were not successful military powers, without any source

of income to set up welfare policies, debt crises continued to flare up every century or so—and they often became far more acute than they ever had in the Middle East, because there was no mechanism, short of outright revolution, to declare a Mesopotamian-style clean slate. Large populations, even in the Greek world, did, in fact, sink to the rank of serfs and clients.

Eventually though the three Axial Age Empires came up with a novel mechanisms for dealing with the lack of growth: they turned to the major religions that had been criticizing them:

[...] as warring cities and principalities were replaced by great empires, and especially, as those empires began to reach the limits of their expansion, sending the military-coinage-slavery complex into crisis, all this suddenly changed. In India, Aśoka tried to re-found his kingdom on Buddhism; in Rome, Constantine turned to the Christians; in China, the Han emperor Wu-Ti (157–87 BC), faced with a similar military and financial crisis, adopted Confucianism as the philosophy of state. Of the three, only Wu Ti was ultimately successful: the Chinese empire endured, in one form or another, for two thousand years, almost always with Confucianism as its official ideology. In Constantine's case the Western empire fell apart, but the Roman church endured. Aśoka's project could be said to be the least successful. Not only did his empire fall apart, replaced by an endless series of weaker, usually fragmentary kingdoms, but Buddhism itself was largely driven out of his one-time territories, though it did establish itself much more firmly in China, Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Korea, Japan, and much of Southeast Asia.

It is not clear what were the goals that those regimes had when pivoting from military expansion to religion as a main tool for social stabilization. They had been very cynical before that, and in the case of the Roman empire their work to co-opt and subvert the religion from an anti-systemic movement to one that supported the Roman Empire is well documented. They replaced horizontal organization with hierarchical one and redacted the canon to make it as harmless as possible. This led to centuries of confrontations between Roman Christians and grass-root Christians. In India Aśoka claimed that repented from war but his reforms went half-way.

Aśoka, famously, began his reign in conquest: in 265 bc, destroying the Kalingas, one of the last remaining Indian republics, in a war in which hundreds of thousands of human beings were, according to his own account, killed or carried o into slavery. Aśoka later claimed to have been so disturbed and haunted by the carnage that he renounced war altogether, embraced Buddhism, and declared that from that time on, his kingdom would be governed by principles of ahimsa, or nonviolence. "Here in my kingdom," he declared in an edict inscribed on one of the great granite pillars in his capital of Patna, which so

dazzled the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, “no living being must be killed and sacrificed.” Such a statement obviously can’t be taken literally: Aśoka might have replaced sacrificial ritual with vegetarian feasts, but he didn’t abolish the army, abandon capital punishment, or even outlaw slavery. But his rule marked a revolutionary shift in ethos. Aggressive war was abandoned, and much of the army does seem to have been demobilized, along with the network of spies and state bureaucrats, with the new, proliferating mendicant orders (Buddhists, Jains, and also world-renouncing Hindus) given official state support to preach to the villages on questions of social morality. Aśoka and his successors diverted substantial resources to these religious orders, with the result that, over the next centuries, thousands of stupas and monasteries were built across the subcontinent.

It is a topic that deserves further research but most probably there wasn’t a clear goal and strategy. Most likely the reforms were due to a combination of factors, the pressing need to do something to avoid peasant revolts, the availability of the religious narratives, some officials and aristocrats being genuinely concerned and wanting to help the poor, and finding middle ground with others who just wanted to manipulate the religion’s escapist narratives for their own benefit. Regardless of the motivation for the reforms, the data is quite clear that, even if they failed to create the peaceful egalitarian societies that the rebels who founded the religions had originally envisioned, they did contribute to significant and lasting improvements for the peasants.

At the very least, otherworldly religions provided glimpses of radical alternatives. Often they allowed people to create other worlds within this one, liberated spaces of one sort or another. It is surely significant that the only people who succeeded in abolishing slavery in the ancient world were religious sects, such as the Essenes—who did so, effectively, by defecting from the larger social order and forming their own utopian communities. Or, in a smaller but more enduring example: the democratic city-states of northern India were all eventually stamped out by the great empires (Kautilya provides extensive advice on how to subvert and destroy democratic constitutions), but the Buddha admired the democratic organization of their public assemblies and adopted it as the model for his followers. Buddhist monasteries are still called *sangha*, the ancient name for such republics, and continue to operate by the same consensus-finding process to this day, preserving a certain egalitarian democratic ideal that would otherwise have been entirely forgotten. Finally, the larger historical achievements of these movements are not, in fact, insignificant. As they took hold, things began to change. Wars became less brutal and less frequent. Slavery faded as an institution, to the point at which, by the Middle Ages, it had become insignificant or even nonexistent across most of Eurasia. Everywhere too, the new religious authorities began to seriously address the social dislocations

introduced by debt.

In the short term though, embracing religion didn't turn out so well for the Empires. China was the only of the three empires who managed to last. Both the Indian and Roman empires fell. In a way one could say that while those empires thought that they were co-opting religion in effect it was the rebels who managed to co-opt the State until the point of bringing it down. The best documented case is Rome. The shift to christianity wasn't accompanied by a cancellation of debt. Without the flow of treasury from war plunder the State chose to reduce the subsidies to the peasants. **They applied austerity** to the celebrated and successful "bread and circus" program. Coins and cheap slaves stopped flowing to the masses. The result was that **larger parts of the peasant population became bonded to their lands as debt peons**. Roman free citizens were obliged to do a long military service to maintain the Empire. As the portion of the free population shrunk the State increased the use of mercenaries to protect the borders. In order to be able to pay them it increased taxes on the free population. This created a vicious cycle in which citizens became poorer and lost their liberties faster.

As we have seen before a State organized into an idle aristocratic elite maintained by serfs and slaves is a militarily weak pattern. When the Roman Empire adopted this form it collapsed quickly, due to the invasions by Germanic and other "barbarian" peoples.

Summary and conclusions

Coinage, slavery, military professionalization and confusion are the central features of the Axial Age

There are three technologies which took central stage during the Axial age and left a hard record in the archeological registry: Coinage, slavery and the professionalization of the military. Their emergency resulted in profound social changes and a generalized confusion which resulted in an effervescence of philosophical and religious creativity. All these phenomena had deep historical impacts that remain key elements in the dynamics of contemporary society, as well as on contemporary concepts for individual and collective identities.

The stories we usually hear about coinage and slavery are not useful to understand History. It is not useful to think about coinage as a tool for retail trade. For hundreds of years the more retail trade the less coinage was used. It is not useful to think about slavery as a moral failure from a distant past either. Slavery has come and gone a couple of times in the

West and nowadays there are still millions of slaves mostly in the East. While coinage and slavery might have served different functions at different times in History, during the Axial Age they mainly served the same two purposes. First, to distribute part of the booty from war among the peasants in order to put off

social unrest. Of course most of the wealth from war plundering ended up pretty quickly in the hands of the Aristocracy, to whom the peasants were eternally in debt, but for the peasants it created the illusion that they received a fair share of the pie. Second, slaves were also used in silver mines and coins were used to pay soldiers. This created markets for the provisioning of soldier's military needs (food, transport, lodging,...) which freed the governments from organizing a significant part of the logistics of war, which made them more efficient. Graeber refers to this arrangement as the Military-Coinage-Slavery complex which is a precursor of the contemporary military-industrial complex.

The distribution of war spoils to the peasants via coinage created consumer cash markets and led to a more materialistic society as well as to the destruction of ancient social bonds based on debts of honor between neighbors and between the aristocracy and their retainers. Debts became quantified and people could be enslaved or killed for falling into the trap of compound interest. This resulted in a profound moral confusion where people believed simultaneously that it is a moral obligation to pay one's debts and that those who lend money are evil. This confusion resulted in numerous philosophical and religious attempts to reconcile both views, which ultimately failed, or alternatively to recognize that such attempts were futile. Cynicism, nihilism, materialism, idealism, sensuality,... all of them flourished in response to coinage, and so did the biggest religions in history. The moral confusion extended to the sphere of sexuality. Coinage exacerbated patriarchy and misogyny to the point that women were seen as inferior lovers compared to men, at the same time that homosexuality was considered immoral.

When the curtain truly goes up on Greece, in the fifth century, [...] we see an almost schizophrenic reaction on the part of the ordinary citizens themselves, who simultaneously tried to limit or even ban aspects of aristocratic culture and to imitate aristocratic sensibilities. Pederasty is an excellent case in point here. On the one hand, man-boy love was seen as the quintessential aristocratic practice—it was the way, in fact, that young aristocrats would ordinarily become initiated into the privileges of high society. As a result, the democratic polis saw it as politically subversive and made sexual relations between male citizens illegal. At the same time, almost everyone began to practice it.

[...] [In Rome] the relation of dominus and slave thus brought a relation of conquest, of absolute political power into the household (in fact, made it the essence of the household). It's important to emphasize that this was not a moral relation on either side. A well-known legal formula, attributed to a Republican lawyer named Quintus Haterius, brings this home with particular clarity. With the Romans as with the Athenians, for a male to be the object of sexual penetration was considered unbecoming to a citizen. In defending a freedman accused of continuing to provide sexual favors to his

former master, Haterius coined an aphorism that was later to become something of a popular dirty joke: *impudicitia in ingenuo crimen est, in servo necessitas, in liberto officium* (“to be the object of anal penetration is a crime in the freeborn, a necessity for a slave, a duty for a freedman”). What is significant here is that sexual subservience is considered the “duty” only of the freedman. It is not considered the “duty” of a slave. This is because, again, slavery was not a moral relation. The master could do what he liked, and there was nothing the slave could do about it.

Graeber - Debt - chapter 7

Democracy is a war technology not an enabler of peace

Direct Democracy among aristocrats was a military invention to distribute the spoils of war among the warrior class. It was an intellectual substitute for tribal fighting. Decisions made by majority vote are used as a predictor of who would win if they had an armed confrontation. Instead of fighting with each other they could make decisions peacefully and focus their violence towards conquering more territories and enslaving their peoples. It was the rational thing to do to maximize their profit.

When those democracies grew they invented Fake Direct Democracy for some of the male peasants. It was used to motivate them to go to the war to fight for their freedom, rather than thinking of themselves as mercenaries, as employees. Despite all citizens having formally the same right to vote, in practice, the aristocracy kept ruling for their own benefit. Rome further improved the arrangement with the invention of the Republic which means a political organization where the different social classes and tribes send their representatives instead of having direct or rotatory membership. Roman troops famously carried a banner with the initials SPQR for *Senātus Populusque Rōmānus* (The Senate and People of Rome) and of course it was inscribed in the coinage that they earned as well. It was a constant reminder that they were theoretically fighting on their own behalf. The technique has evolved to today’s Fake Representative Democracies, which technically should be called republics since they have no direct governance mechanisms. They serve the same purpose, to make poor people believe that they are fighting for their own sake, and they carry flags and other national symbols that supposedly represent them to war.

This hypothesis is supported by data that shows that the more democracy/republic the more war, slavery and coinage there was.

Women are dangerous war spoils

Since war was invented about 6000 years ago women have always been part of the war spoils. Raping women and children upon conquering lands and getting to keep at least one that would camp with the soldier during the rest of the

campaign has always been considered part of soldier's pay. The excess women surviving from plunder were sent back home, the state might have kept some for public brothels, and the rest sold as slaves for private consumption.

It is no wonder that the most violent Age of History was also the one with the worst conditions for women. The States still needed free women to produce free peasantry that would become the next generation of soldiers. However they could not conceive of giving women citizenship with voting rights because it was clear to them that would be very dangerous. Presumably women could intervene in politics to oppose the wars that killed their children and turned many women into slaves, which would have ended the democracies/republics whose economy depended on expanding the economy through war. Therefore "free" women were given very limited rights and often their only acceptable social role was to be wives who were expected to remain mostly captive in their homes.

Revolts and strikes don't work quite as well as it seems

Revolts, and in Rome a precursor to strikes known as "secession of the plebs" were invented during the Axial Age. On paper, and at the time, in the short term, they might seem to work. In some places they failed completely but in others they attained concessions from the Kingdoms or the Aristocratic democracies. The peasants got more participation in the government or more subsidies in the form of coinage.

In reality those actions didn't change the balance of power between classes nor the memes that supported them. In practice the peasants stayed in permanent debt with the aristocracy and all the subsidies that they earned ended up flowing back to the Aristocracy. Critically, the places where the revolts failed were in the States that were not military successful. Those didn't have access to a reliable flow of precious metals from war plunder and therefore chose to squash the rebellions rather than pretend to give them concessions.

In the places where revolts and strikes apparently worked the wealthy families kept the control, formal or de-facto, of the government. People kept believing that it is ok or natural that there are some people that are richer and others that are poorer, that it is normal to enslave each other, to fight in wars and to need money to pay for life's necessities.

With such power structures and dominating beliefs in place it would have been very difficult for the common people to keep improving their living conditions beyond the initial concessions. On the contrary it would have made it quite likely for them to lose their privileges if economic troubles arose.

Those dynamics are similar to contemporary dynamics with worker's strikes: they often manage to get some concessions which end up being taken away pretty soon, when the next economic crises serves as a justification to remove their rights or inflation takes away their purchasing power.

Oppression Mechanism: the Welfare State

It is common to think of the Welfare State as a great historical milestone achieved with great collective efforts, often in the form of revolts, and with bloodshed. This pattern of thinking started during the Axial Age and in the Mediterranean with the revolts and strikes we have just described. The concessions and "bread and circus" subsidies they obtained are equivalent to the Welfare State concessions obtained in Western States around the middle of the XX century. The result was the same as the one during the Axial Age. The working class obtained some concessions and subsidies but the power dynamics didn't change. After the initial concessions the rich kept getting richer and the poor poorer, which means that the richer keep getting more powerful towards the poor. A Welfare State also promotes the dismantling of people's horizontal mechanisms for mutual support. Therefore it is more useful to think of the Welfare State as a mechanism of oppression, a tool for the rich to achieve power and control over the poor. A trap from the Greco-Roman era. Like in antiquity **"bread and circus" means that the elites feed the people so that they don't revolt because of their empty bellies and keep them entertained so that they don't think too much.** The Bread and Circus program resulted in the plebs tolerating the patricians monopolizing power. **When this arrangement didn't suit the patricians anymore they stopped providing "bread and circus" and the people became slaves, unable to do anything about it, because they had given up power. Similarly we are currently at risk of having the Welfare State taken away from the working class which has given away their power to the system. There is no reason to think that the freedoms and privileges we enjoy will not be withdrawn when they no longer suit them, and it even seems that is already slowly happening since the 1980s.**

In a speech given by the de-facto EU foreign minister, Josep Borrel, on October 10 2022, for the opening of the Ambassadors Conference in Brussels, he seemed to concede that "democracies" are a farce which don't improve citizen's living conditions. He seemed to be urging politicians to actually invest into citizen's wellbeing for the risk of democracies losing appeal to authoritarian regimes like China which actually improve people's lives. However he was framing that in a way that implied that only in developing countries democracy don't improve people's lives, and negating that a similar trend is happening in the rich countries as well:

When we say that China is our rival, systemic rival, systemic rival means that our systems are in rivalry. And the Chinese are trying to explain to the world that their system is much better.

Because, well, maybe you are not going to choose your head of government, but you will have food, and heat, and social services, you will improve your living conditions.

Many people in the world, yes, they go and vote and choose their

government, but their material conditions are not being improved. And in the end, people want to live a better life.

We have to explain what are the links between political freedom and a better life. We, Europeans, we have this extraordinary chance. We live in the world, in this part of the world, where political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion are the best, the best combination of all of that. But the rest of the world is not like this.

Our fight is to try to explain that democracy, freedom, political freedom is not something that can be exchanged by economic prosperity or social cohesion. Both things have to go together. Otherwise, our model will perish, will not be able to survive in this world.

We are too much Kantians and not enough Hobbesians, as the philosopher says. Let's try to understand the world the way it is and bring the voice of Europe.

Josep Borrell quoted at Multipolarista

on October 27th 2022 in the article

EU admits new cold war is not

'democracy vs. autocracy'

Another parallel between the modern Welfare State and the Axial Age "bread and circus" is that both arrangements applied to only a small part of the population. In the Roman Civilization a large part of the population was enslaved. And among the population that was formally free, the majority, women, had no political participation rights. David Graeber makes this reflection:

Most of the scandalous stories that exploded the revolts against debt servitude centered on dramatic cases of physical or sexual abuse. Obviously, as soon as debt servitude was abolished and domestic labor was provided by slaves, the abuses themselves became considered normal and acceptable.

Today we live in a similar situation where a minority of the global population, perhaps less than 10%, enjoy the privileges of a welfare state and a consumer economy. However, the products we consume are manufactured in a significant portion by slaves in mines and factories, in more or less remote locations. They are also routinely subject to sexual and physical abuse which is largely ignored and certainly doesn't prompt consumer revolts.

Philosophy's and religion's failures and betrayals

Failure to change society split life in two spheres

Both philosophy and religion were invented during the Axial Age as a response to the social upheavals that resulted with the introduction of coinage. Both of them helped to popularize personal introspection, social reflection and literacy. Both kinds of movements were concerned with what constitutes a life worth living, how should individuals live their lives ethically and how should societies be organized to promote the good lives of their members. From this functional perspective there is no distinction between philosophy and religion, the fact that religions also believed in some magic phenomena doesn't seem to be a determining factor in their impact. **Religions, as well as the idealist philosophical current, responded to the general confusion by building complementary narratives, mirrors of the materialist society. Pure greed is complementary to pure generosity. The world of ideas is complementary to the material world.** Absolute good is complementary to absolute evil. These dualistic memes have colonized our thinking to this day, to the point where we are unable to imagine a world holistically or comprehensively. Also both philosophers and religious movements employed two complementary strategies to change society, one was building alternative societies, and the other was influencing the larger societies. Both of them had limited impact, if they had been fully successful we would be living in a much more utopian society by now.

For the first strategy rebel philosophers created far away isolated communities where people could live according to their beliefs, which often meant treating each other as equals, including women and men, and sharing collective property. Similarly religious movements tended to create temples where monks could enjoy a communal life. However, while philosophers tended to seek for a balance and to create easy-to-adopt lifestyles, religious movements tended to build communities that were extreme opposites to the society at large. Monks tended to adopt very strict lifestyles in an attempt to compensate for the rest of society and improve the cosmic equilibrium. It was a delusional way of dealing with their failure to convince society to adopt a healthier lifestyle. Instead of adjusting their strategy to find ways to help people change, they changed their goal and pretended that the few that were most convinced could compensate for the rest.

As for the second strategy, to change existing societies, philosophers didn't have much success but religious movements got a very significant boost when empires ran out of coinage to quell social unrest and decided to adopt, or rather co-opt, religions as a desperate attempts to save their regimes. Despite the co-option religions did have significant mid-term impact in the society at large when they managed to become part of most cultures. Religions helped reduce the amount of war and violence, eliminate slavery and improve conditions for women. This last point contradicts most of our popular wisdom about religion and will be expanded on in the next chapter. For now suffice to say that as we

have emphasized women's condition tends to deteriorate the more the market is unrestrained. Religions did manage to tame markets which historically has been correlated with better lives for women. On the other hand, structurally, society didn't change that much. Still people spent a great deal of their time and energy working for their own benefit, class divisions persisted and the rich ruled the poor. Instead, life was compartmentalized. People started to live rather schizophrenically, spending a small part of their lives in the temples, engaged in charity and mutual support activities with their congregation, and most of their life embedded in an individualistic and competitive society. This schizophrenia has persisted until today. Graeber describes it as the division of life into two differentiated spheres.

The ultimate effect was a kind of ideal division of spheres of human activity that endures to this day: on the one hand the market, on the other, religion. To put the matter crudely: if one relegates a certain social space simply to the selfish acquisition of material things, it is almost inevitable that soon someone else will come to set aside another domain in which to preach that, from the perspective of ultimate values, material things are unimportant; that selfishness—or even the self—are illusory, and that to give is better than to receive. If nothing else, it is surely significant that all the Axial Age religions emphasized the importance of charity, a concept that had barely existed before. **Pure greed and pure generosity are complementary concepts; neither could really be imagined without the other; both could only arise in institutional contexts that insisted on such pure and single-minded behavior;** and both seem to have appeared together wherever impersonal, physical, cash money also appeared on the scene.

Graeber - Debt - Chapter nine

Intellectual tools of oppression

At the beginning of the Axial Age oppression was based on sheer force. Sparta ruled over a captive population that was 7 times the size of its own citizens. In India there were similar patterns. In Athens debtors were enslaved because the lenders had access to the force of the State. However as philosophy and religion popularized reading, introspection and reflection, some intellectuals devoted their efforts to help authoritarian regimes by creating narratives that made people believe that the State-market was benefiting the peasants while in fact it was using them for purposes that benefited the elite. In India and China there were popular works written about state craftsmanship along those lines. A mixture of organic evolution of ideas and intellectual intentionality led to the appearance and refinement of democracies and republics, which we have already discussed, and which are in themselves intellectual tools of oppression in the sense that

they use legitimacy to enhance the power of State force. On top of that those State-markets adopted techniques such as pretending that the law is impartial, instituting a welfare system that was actually dispossessing the peasants and co-opting the narratives of the most popular rebel movements, pretending to adopt them while actually undermining them. We will expand on them in next sections.

Strategic considerations for contemporary communities and spirituality

Ancient religions created extreme single-minded lifestyles for their temple communities, giving up all kinds of material comfort, material and human attachments, and obsession against the ego and against sexuality. We know that humans evolved in communities that cultivated both individual autonomy and collective identity. We know from contemporary science that human adults need to cultivate human attachment to be healthy and that also physical comfort and practicing sexuality contribute to happiness, and happiness to overall health. We also know from modern science that spirituality, the perspective that we are an insignificant and inconsequential part of the infinity of space-time, is a significant contributor to wellbeing. Ancient religious movements got the latter right but completely missed the former. It is not surprising that such extreme and single-minded monastic communities never managed to appeal to the majority of the population. Despite the good intentions of those spiritual leaders that so much influenced society during the last couple of millenia one must at least acknowledge that they embedded themselves in communities that were suboptimal for mental health and wonder if they were in a position to actually see what was best for society.

If we want to experience rich human lives in all their dimensions we will want to overcome these simplifying dualities and inhabit constructions similar to those of our foraging ancestors. They embraced at the same time their collective identity as well as fiercely defended their individual autonomy, and their right to choose which collective they wanted to belong to. The Axial Age philosophers of the non-idealist currents got this concept much better than their religious contemporaries.

Unfortunately **most contemporary alternatives to the hegemonic culture reproduce some of those undesirable characteristics invented by Axial Age religious communities.** Most items in the contemporary spiritual menu derive from New Age practices that wage war against the ego. Mainstream environmentalist narratives emphasize frugality and a tension between the environment and comfort, sometimes they also confront spirituality. Consequently most ecovillages reproduce the same single-mindedness of Axial Age religions monasteries. They often aim for an autartic self-reliance that leaves almost no resources to their members for anything else other than caring for the veggie garden and basic maintenance of the infrastructure. Often not even time for self-care and building collective bonds. That might lead to burnout of their

members and makes ecovillages unattractive for the general population that rightfully aspire to live in a mentally healthier environment and with more comfort. Like religious monasteries, many contemporary activist communities, rather than being optimized to maximize social impact, are instead optimized to maximize the sacrifice of their members to elevate them to martyrdom.

Nowadays we face an extra challenge which is that virtually all land has been claimed by the State-market system, and therefore it is not viable to just travel far away to an unclaimed land to establish alternative communities. Therefore if we want to be successful at building communities as an strategy to shift society away from the self-destructive course that is currently set on we should:

1. Avoid being escapist by appealing to the majority of the population, > not just a few fundamentalists.
2. Build comfort rather than austerity in the communities.
3. Construct healthy cultures that incorporate both individual autonomy > as collective identity and normalize scientific thinking, > non-magic spirituality and sexuality.
4. Avoid being exclusive to the well-off by building robust communal > economies that aim at generating as much excess wealth as possible > to invest it in helping the less privileged who also want to > transition to the alternative society.

Oppression Mechanism: Co-opting of rebel movements

We have seen how in the three Axial Age regions the policy of economic growth led to empires that unified the entire region. When these empires reached the limits of growth via military expansion, they were unable to maintain the subsidies to the people, they lost their freedoms and fell into the service of the aristocracy. We don't have many records of how the peasants felt about their loss of freedom. Probably many of them realized that the narrative about the State and the Law that was supposed to protect them was a farce and became sympathetic to the rebel's narratives instead. What is clear is that the three empires chose to adopt one of the rebel religions as their official religion. Rome opted for Christianity, China for Confucianism and India for Buddhism. The co-option of the rebel's religions had mixed results. On one hand it helped the States reduce the tensions between social classes and, in the case of China, it even allowed the Empire to persist until today. On the other hand **there were tangible benefits that improved the lives of peasants, most notably the virtual disappearance of slavery, the reduction of war, and violence in general.**

We can draw parallels between that and the way in which **contemporary rebel movements like environmentalism, feminism or social justice** relate with States. After some decades of tensions between the States and the rebels, as the **majority of the population becomes sympathetic to the**

rebel narratives, virtually all the States in the world have adopted them as part of the official narratives and policies. All governments have programs that allegedly care for the environment, women and provide some social services. And indeed it is true that most citizens in the wealthier countries benefit from the States having co-opted part of the rebel's narratives. There is significantly less pollution in the cities, which is a boost for the health of the working people. In most places there are programs to help women access the labor market, some measures to support maternity like paid leave and care. Also some sort of women's access to State-market violence like safe residencies or police enforcement of orders to keep away romantic ex-partners suspected of being prone to violence. Even in the USA, where socialism is still a dirty word in the media, the State provides social services like free or subsidized education, food, housing and health services. On the other hand we are still destroying the environment at an increasing pace, increasing the number of people who are suffering extreme hunger. In the year 2022 that number is close to a quarter of a billion people, and one person is dying of hunger at about every 5 seconds. Women have gained access mostly to the less paid jobs and still have much less visible leadership roles than men. Even in rich countries people are finding it increasingly difficult to have their basic needs met. The most striking case is the USA, the richest State in the world, where in 2022 a mind-boggling 40% of the households resorted to food banks [Daisy Luther, 2022]. In general, when the States adopt the rebels' narratives, society achieves some short term relief but exacerbates the problems in the long run.

Strategic considerations for rebels relating with States

If we agree with the analysis that the State-market is at the root of all the problems that rebel movements like environmentalist, feminists and socialists are trying to solve, **from a purely data driven perspective it would seem madness to attempt to participate in the State** in order to build a society without State-Market. It is clear that historically all apparently successful attempts to tackle the rebel's concerns have ended up making the problem worse, globally, and in the long run, and giving the State-market more legitimacy by creating the appearance that the problem is being successfully addressed and significant improvements are being made. Even more famously when Marxist rebels have managed to take over the State the results have been disastrous. In this regard the anarchist currents that criticize any movement that cozies up with the State are right. There have been some attempts influenced by anarchist theory to propose ways to mitigate the danger of co-option. Most of them are based on the idea of municipalism: taking over the city council by winning elections, with the hope that even though it is part of the State, it is a small enough institution that can be safely tamed by the local people. The most notable proposals are Takis Fotopoulos' Inclusive Democracy and Murray Bookchin's Social Ecology and Libertarian Municipalism.

And yet, in these lines **we have been proposing something that seems**

pure folly: to engage with the State-market system in order to build an alternative and hasten its demise. We believe that it is indeed possible to co-opt the State rather than the other way around. That we can achieve that by **having a systemic understanding** of what feeds the system and what undermines it and avoiding the former while promoting the later. For example, as we discussed in an earlier book in this series, increasing energy efficiency helps increase overall fossil fuel consumption rather than reduce it. Energy efficiency is an example of the system co-opting environmentalism. We can engage with the system by denouncing State efforts to promote energy efficiency and push to replace them with efforts to reduce the extraction of fossil fuels and logging of forests instead. Similarly, promoting minimum wages and worker unions are ways to strengthen memes asserting that the common people must work to please the rich who own the economy in exchange for breadcrumbs. It is another example of the system co-opting the rebels. We can instead push for measures that empower the common people, that give them the option to pass on work offers that pay poorly or endanger their health. Examples of such measures that would mean co-opting the State are free housing, utilities, food, health and money for everybody. Assigning some police to keep romantic ex-partners away might seem a very feminist intervention, but is actually an example of the system co-opting feminism to promote the notion that human relationships must be mediated with violence. It might save a few lives but in the end persistent aggressors end up finding a way to dodge the police and kill their victims. It would be much more feminist, and save many more lives, to implement the aforementioned policies of free access to life's necessities and free money plus child and elderly care. That would prevent all the toxic relationships that form due to the economic needs of both partners who are unable to make ends meet separately and give freedom of movement to the partners that feel threatened so that they can move to a community where they feel protected. On top of that we could co-opt the State by promoting legislative measures that encourage collective property, or that incrementally chip away the State's sovereignty and transfer it to local communities.

Oppression Mechanism: sexual regulation

At the start of the Axial Ages the State-market already concerned itself with the sexual regulation of females but had a more pragmatic attitude towards the sexual needs of males. Remember the Ministry of Sex Workers on Maghda, which were used to spy and collect hidden fees from soldiers, and the Sex Workers in Athens sponsored by the Polis. It is true that homosexuality among men was formally penalized in the Mediterranean, but that seems to be a cultural collateral effect of the class war of the peasants against the aristocracy, and wasn't really enforced.

Later, when the State-market coopted religions it **added to the Age's already characteristic sensual and sexual confusion**. The mechanism by which State-markets tend to evolve narratives that vilify sex and pleasure is unclear.

Probably is a mixture of wanting the peasants to focus on productive work for the State-market instead of "wasting time" having fun, and an intuition that sexuality strengthens bonds between people and therefore reduces their dependency to the State-market. Some States were already using terror as a people-management tool, perhaps they saw vilifying sexuality as synergic with terrorism. In general, the more individualized and miserable people are, the more the State-market has power over them. In any case, entrepreneurs who add to the demotion of sexuality are often celebrated and, as more time passes with the ethical narratives in the hands of the State-market, the worse sexuality fares.

An illustrative example of this process is the invention by Saint Augustine of the concept of the Original Sin by Adam and Eve, which has become a cornerstone of the vilification of sexuality in the Christian West. This innovation didn't happen until the very last years of the Western Roman Empire [Greenblatt,2017]. In parallel the State-markets have had a tendency to favor idealists philosophical currents over other currents that are centered in the human body, probably because of similar reasons, that philosophies that crusade against the human body promote purely intellectual pursuits as paths for a good life, and those seem more useful to the State-markets.

Authoritarian regimes help women, and people crave for them

From a social innovation perspective, republics and democracies are clearly more desirable than authoritarian regimes because they allow for the possibility of people getting organized in order to promote more useful memes, and to change the policies and even the institutions accordingly. Even though democracies and republics tend to censor narratives that challenge power and repress those who promote such narratives, the operational space for promoting change usually is orders of magnitude higher than authoritarian regimes.

However, **historically, data shows that under authoritarian regimes women have fared better than under democratic and republican ones.** Athens was one of the most democratic powers of antiquity and also the society where the condition of women was worse. Of course this observation refers only to the women from families of citizens. Slave women have fared equally worse under democracies than under Kingdoms and Empires. On the other hand, since democracies and republics have had a tendency to invest more resources in war than authoritarian regimes we could argue that they have been better for the non-citizen women as well, since they had a lower chance that their territories would be conquered and they would be killed or enslaved.

From a purely data-driven approach one should conclude that promoting authoritarian regimes is the way to go for improving the condition of women in society. This is exactly what uncountable numbers of women have deduced through history and probably explains why women have tended to be stronger supporters

of authoritarian regimes than men. It may also help explain why Athenian democrats and Roman republicans were so scared of women. If our analysis would stop at the Roman Empire one could suspect that the improvement of women's social status under the Empire compared to the earlier Republic was just an accident of history. That as we move forward throughout history we become collectively more sensitive to injustices and, among other social improvements, women are treated better. Unfortunately history is not that linear. As we have seen women were at the center of society before the advent of civilization and later they will suffer again under other regimes. Most notably during the French Liberal Revolution, where fervor to re-introduce classical forms of Democracy and Republicanism was accompanied with the reintroduction of misogyny and patriarchy. Also at about the same time racism was invented to help the reintroduction of slavery.

Going back to the Axial Age, there are also indications that it was not only women who craved for a more authoritarian regime during Rome's Republic. Apparently many men also supported the Imperial route as a desperate hope to be relieved from the crushing debts that the Aristocrats inflicted on them. In a sense it would seem that Democracies and Republics awaken a thirst for authoritarianism in the population. Since both direct and representative governance ends up being manipulated and cynically used against the peasants, those eventually crave for a "strong hand" that will "put some order". This observation should not lead to despair or nihilism: as we have seen, there are governance mechanisms that are not only better than authoritarianism but also better than Republics and Democracies. Indeed Democracies are about people fighting with each other, in civilized ways. We can instead build societies that are based on loving and caring for each other. Strategically, therefore, it is desirable to promote shifting from authoritarianism to republicanism or democracy since those regimes necessarily allow for a wider degree of dissenting voices and make it easier to build alternative societies from within. However **the defense of republics and democracies can only be done from a long-termist perspective, since in the short run several collectives, including women, are likely to fare worse.** Hopefully, though, being aware of this tendency will allow us to organize civil society, in parallel to pushing from the transition away from authoritarianism, in a way that prevents such negative collateral effects.

Oppression mechanism: Fallacy of the Rule of Law

The historical summary of the Axial Age ended with the description of the radical socioeconomic transformation towards the end of the Roman Empire which resulted in much of the formerly free peasant population becoming serfs bonded to the land of their lord.

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that what happened in the Roman empire was technically illegal, since debt servitude had been abolished centuries before. It is a pattern that repeats itself throughout history: laws are written down

to appease the less privileged but they are ignored if they harm the elites. Of course the law is usually harshly enforced when it benefits the ruling class. To give a current and recent example, the Spanish Constitution guarantees the right to housing. It has become clear, however, especially since the real estate crisis of 2007 and the consequent increase in evictions, that the constitution is a dead letter when it comes to defending the common people. This should help us to reconsider the efforts we collectively devote to changing the laws, and calibrate them accordingly, devoting more efforts to more productive mechanisms.

Choice of greed over wealth redistribution collapsed the Roman Empire

We could describe the collapse of the Roman empire simply as the evolution of socioeconomic trends: The Roman civilization evolved to achieve social stability through subsidies which were financed by economic growth driven by military expansion. When the Empire stopped expanding and the economy stopped growing the State decided to stop subsidizing the free peasantry which transformed the Empire into a serfdom. The State lost access to free citizens to draft for the war which led to the collapse of the Empire. However this mechanical description obscures that there were political choices to be made that could have led to different outcomes. Before considering those, let's look at the contemporary imperial picture.

We can easily see parallels between the fall of the Roman Empire and the current situation of the USA Empire which sustains the Western World. The USA Empire is sustained by military expansion to secure fossil fuels and industrial materials as well as slave and cheap manufacturing labor abroad. Western citizens live largely on debt and depend on subsidies from the government for food, energy, housing, education and health. Social stability depends on growth to fulfill the promise of upward social mobility to the migrants from the Global South who flow to the western countries, and to offer "good jobs" to the citizens. Every time economic growth stops or recedes there is a crisis that pushes more people to poverty. **There is a risk that the Western World enters into a permanent crisis** due to the lack of growth as it struggles to advance against the pushback from emerging powers China and Russia, and that, like the Roman Empire did, **the Western States devolve into authoritarian regimes to address social unrest**. A large reduction of the percentage of free citizens in the West could mean the inability to maintain borders and being taken over by the Emerging Powers.

This is just one possible scenario. Another that seems probable is that the West finds a way to keep growing the economy without expanding, and even while shrinking, their military dominance. Improvements in renewable energies, especially the increasing viability to use liquified hydrogen to replace natural gas and petroleum, makes the West less dependent on plundering fuels abroad. Also the accelerated progress with nuclear fusion could be a game changer in a few decades. At the same time advances in recycling and synthetic materials makes

the economy less dependent on mining for rare or scarce industrial materials. During recent decades a growing portion of economic growth has already been due to technological advances that generated improvements in productivity rather than increase on war booty.

However, even if it turned out that the economy would stop growing or even shrink for a prolonged period of time, it is **critical to empathize that the outcome of such Historical Arcs is not deterministic. People can get organized and change the course of history.** Governments can make different choices. The Roman Empire could have made a different choice. It could have chosen to maintain the subsidies to the plebs and finance them from taxes on the Patricians when war growth slowed down. Obviously that must have been very difficult to sell politically because the patricians ran the show. They were used to centuries of family wealth growth at every generation, which they were able to split generously between their heirs. Now that their wealth was no longer growing from war plunder, the prospect that, on top of that, it would be diminished by taxes to subsidize the plebs must have been untenable.

Most probably the rulers of the time had no idea what they were doing. The equilibrium that enabled the smooth operation of the Roman Empire had been reached by trial and error of agreements between the plebeians and the patricians that were acceptable for both sides and at the same time kept the economy running. By the time the external conditions changed those agreements had turned to customs. Probably nobody calculated what percentage of the population needed to remain free citizens to have enough soldiers to protect the borders and what would be the cost of subsidies from the plebeians to keep the arrangement going. Things just deteriorated organically from lack of conscious understanding of how the Roman Empire actually worked.

The argument can be made that the same pattern is unfolding right now. **There doesn't seem to be any politician in any of the Western Countries that has a clue of how things actually work.** Like in Axial Age Rome, when the economy slows down they tend to try giving tax cuts to the rich so that at least their wealth can keep growing from transfers from the poor. Also one can interpret the cuts in social services and the increasing poverty in Western Countries that started towards the end of the XX Century and the recent push for censorship that started with the Covid Pandemic and is extending to other topics like environmentalism as a sign that the West is devolving into authoritarianism already. On the other hand there is increasing support for wealth distribution from the rich to the rest by extending social services and implementing an Unconditional Basic Income. **Seems that we are still at a crossroads where we can go either way:** keep the current wealth distribution from the poor to the wealthy until the West devolves into authoritarianism or reverse the flow of wealth to preserve the freedoms that citizens have enjoyed during the last few decades. **At the end the choice that governments will make will depend on the collective consciousness of the situation as well as the balance of power between classes. This is one more argument to influence in**

State politics: to extend the window of opportunity that freedom of speech and organization gives us to build an alternative society in the West. From a data-driven perspective it is clear that it is much safer to influence from within the institutions than from the streets. We have plenty of data from the Axial Age all the way to current events that shows that street revolts tend to be crushed very violently. How does this fit with the reflection in the previous section that the law tends to be ignored when it goes against the interest of the elite? It means that the basis of the influence in State politics should be organizing popular power which can be used as leverage to enforce the laws that favor the people.

Falsification of history: the Roman origin of feudalism

The most pervasive historical falsehood that comes from the Axial Age is the concept that feudalism was a Medieval invention. This is not true, feudalism was implemented during the last centuries of the Roman Empire. We have already discussed how the debt crisis led to the end of free peasantry and people became tied to the land through debt peonage. When the "barbarian hordes" invaded and overthrew the empire they just took over an already existing arrangement.

In the next chapter...

We will see how the Middle Ages, instead of being the age of darkness as they are usually presented, were a time where slavery was abolished, violence decreased significantly, and in many places free towns appeared, governed by assemblies. Specially in Europe, the actual power of the nobility during the middle ages have been greatly exaggerated.

References

Recommended readings

David Graeber - "Debt: the first 5000 years"

On social currencies and human economies as ancient rituals which were meant to convey that people are never equivalent to objects, nor to other people: Chapter 6 "Games with Sex and Death"

About the Axial Age - Chapter 7 "Honor and Degradation or, on the foundations of contemporary civilization" and Chapter 9 "Axial Age"

Readings for digging deeper

Maria del Prado Esteban and Felix Rodrigo Mora (in Castilian language)

"Femicidio o auto-construcción de la mujer" - About the Roman Empire and the roles that men and women had there. Also on the revolutionary nature of Christianity in antiquity.

Michel Onfay (in French language)

Les Sagesses antiques (Contre-histoire de la philosophie I), Grasset, 2006 - About the falsification of history with the aim of promoting idealist philosophical currents and hide or minimize the importance, popularity and contributions from currents centered on the human body.

Reza Aslan

On Christianity as a radical revolutionary movement

Video - Reza Aslan presentation of the book "Zealot" at the "Politics and Prose" bookstore

Michele (contributor at Historicity)

On how women in ancient Greece and Rome were perceived as a danger posing an imminent threat - Article: The trouble with women (december 13th, 2006)

Other sources

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respectable women “were veiled daily and routinely, at least in public or in front of non-related men”) Aphrodite’s Tortoise: the veiled woman of ancient Greece. Swansea: Classical Press of Wales.

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Shell, Marc 1992 (as referenced by Graeber in Debt) - "Accounting for the Grail".

Stern, Gaius 2006 (referenced by Graeber in Debt) *Women, children, and senators on the Ara Pacis Augustae: A study of Augustus' vision of a new world order in 13 BCE*. ISBN 978-0-549-83411-3.