

When the West Begins to Resemble Rome

Poverty is not the real danger. It is the progressive separation between work, wealth, ownership, competence, and power. And artificial intelligence could be the technology that resolves this fracture—or the one that makes it irreversible.



Abstract

This article does not argue that the West is simply “becoming Rome.” The thesis is more precise: some of the structural tensions that ran through the Roman world—concentration of surplus, reduction of patrimonial autonomy, demographic and fiscal pressure, strategic dependence, and difficulty in transforming wealth into collective capacity—can be used as a useful stress test for understanding the present. The decisive difference, however, is that the contemporary West possesses productive, energy, technological, and institutional capacity enormously greater than that of the ancient world. The turning point could therefore be artificial intelligence: not merely a new technology capable of increasing productivity, but a possible transformation of the relationship between work, income, ownership, competence, and power. If AI distributes new productive capacity, it could offset demographics and labor scarcity; if instead it concentrates capital, technology, and decision-making capacity, it could accentuate an increasingly clear separation between those who own the means of intelligent production and those who depend on them. The real question, therefore, is not whether the West is destined to collapse like Rome, but whether it will be able to transform its enormous technological surplus into broadly distributed autonomy, cohesion, and the capacity for self-determination.

There are historical comparisons that are best handled with extreme caution. Saying that “the West is like the Roman Empire” is one of them. It is a suggestive phrase, but it risks being so generic as to become unusable: Rome did not collapse in a single day, the Empire was not a uniform society, 476 does not represent the beginning of the end, and above all the contemporary world possesses technologies, institutions, financial systems, productive capacities, and instruments of knowledge that Rome could not even have imagined.

And yet, if for a moment we abandon the temptation to look for simplistic equivalences—the senator equal to the billionaire, the slave equal to the modern worker, the barbarian equal to the immigrant—a much more serious question emerges: are there structural mechanisms that can reappear in completely different societies?

The answer, after putting economic, demographic, fiscal, military, technological, and cognitive data in sequence, is yes. Not because history repeats itself, but because complex societies can once again face functionally similar problems: concentration of surplus, reduction of the autonomy of intermediate classes, demographic pressure, increasing cost of the public apparatus, dependence on external capabilities, transformation of work, and difficulty in distributing the new surplus produced by technology.

The interesting point, however, is that the West still possesses an enormous quantity of tools to prevent these pressures from becoming irreversible. And it is precisely this that makes the current situation much more interesting - and much less reassuring - than a simple prophecy about the “fall of Rome.”

Rome Is Not a Prophecy; It Is a Stress Test

To understand whether the analogy really has value, we must start from what we know about the Roman economic structure.

The reconstruction by Walter Scheidel and Steven Friesen for the second century A.D. estimated an imperial economy with a total output equivalent to approximately 50 million tons of wheat, or nearly 20 billion sesterces, and above all showed an extremely concentrated distribution: approximately 1.5% of the population belonging to the elites would have controlled roughly one-fifth of total income, while another approximately 10%, consisting of the intermediate classes, would have consumed another fifth.

These are reconstructions, not Roman-era versions of the U.S. Census Bureau, and therefore they must be used cautiously. But they tell us something essential: **the Roman Empire was a society in which a very small fraction of the population controlled an enormous share of the surplus, while a large majority lived with very limited economic margins.**

It is not difficult, almost two thousand years later, to recognize a structural form that is once again visible in contemporary capitalism.

According to the OECD, in the countries included in its analysis, the richest 10% on average owns 52% of total household wealth; in the United States, the share reaches 79%.

The figure does not mean that the average American lives like a Roman farmer, of course. It means something more limited and, precisely for that reason, more interesting: even in the richest economies in history, a very small share of the population can concentrate an enormous part of the assets that generate economic autonomy and power.

And this is where the first misconception appears, one that must be avoided. The problem is not inequality in itself, because a dynamic society can tolerate very large differences in income and wealth without collapsing. **The problem arises when the concentration of wealth is accompanied by the loss of autonomy of the intermediate classes.** A person may be classified as belonging to the middle class because they earn a decent salary, own a home, and consume goods and services that a Roman would have considered extraordinary; but if they own little capital, are heavily indebted, depend entirely on their salary, and know that a prolonged loss of employment would quickly make them dependent on transfers or family assistance, their economic autonomy is much more fragile than the simple label of “middle class” suggests.

This is why the decisive parameter should not be the statistical disappearance of the middle class, which has not occurred, but its **patrimonial, professional, and decision-making autonomy**. The difference is enormous: we are not interested only in knowing how many people are in the middle of the income distribution; we are interested in knowing how many people have enough wealth, skills, and bargaining power not to depend entirely on the system that remunerates them.

The Problem Is No Longer Only Who Works. It Is How Indispensable Work Is

Here the reasoning changes radically. For much of the industrial era, work had an extraordinary characteristic: it was simultaneously a means of production, a source of income, an instrument of social integration, a foundation of taxation, and the main source of political power. Whoever controlled labor controlled a significant part of production; whoever organized millions of workers could negotiate wages, hours, pensions, safety, welfare, and rights.

Western mass democracy also developed within this structure: the worker was a producer, consumer, taxpayer, and citizen, and these four functions reinforced one another.

Globalization, automation, and the transformation of production processes have begun to separate these elements.

A company can sell to millions of consumers in a country without physically producing in that same country; an investor can own a share of production without participating in the work that generates it; a digital platform can create enormous revenues with a relatively small amount of labor; an algorithm can replace part of an activity that, until a few years ago, required a person.

The truly new element, however, is not the machine that replaces the arm. It is the machine that begins to replace part of the brain.

The International Labour Organization estimates that approximately one in four workers worldwide is currently employed in an activity with some degree of exposure to GenAI; in high-income countries, the share reaches 34%. The ILO also specifies, however, that at the present stage, the most likely outcome is the transformation of tasks rather than the complete elimination of jobs.

This qualification is fundamental because it prevents AI from being turned into an apocalyptic fable. But it does not eliminate the problem that interests us. If a person today works eight hours to produce a given amount of value and tomorrow, thanks to AI, can produce the same value in four hours, the question is not only how many people will lose their jobs. **The question is who will control the gain resulting from those four hours saved.** Will it become higher wages? Will it become free time? Will it reduce the price of goods? Will it increase the company's margin? Will it end up in dividends? Will it be taxed and transformed into welfare? **Or will part of the population simply become less necessary to production and therefore weaker in negotiating its share of the surplus?**

This is where the problem of work takes on a political dimension. A worker does not lose power only when they lose their job; they can lose it when they become easily replaceable. The real variable to observe in the coming years will therefore not simply be the unemployment rate, but **the relative scarcity of human labor compared with technological capital.**

If AI increases productivity while maintaining strong demand for skilled workers, the system can produce a new cycle of prosperity. If instead productivity rises while the need for labor declines faster than the system's capacity to redistribute the new surplus, then a completely new fracture emerges: a society in which production grows but the economic need for an increasing share of the population declines. This is where the old relationship between work, income, dignity, and citizenship could begin to break.

The Great Demographic Bet

This transformation is accompanied by a variable that cannot be ignored: demography. In 2024, the total fertility rate of the European Union fell to 1.34 children per woman,

compared with 1.46 in 2004; the average age at first birth reached 29.9 in the EU and 31.9 in Italy.

It is not necessary to attribute a moral or cultural meaning to these numbers to understand their economic consequences: fewer births today mean, one generation later, fewer people of working age. And fewer workers, with productivity held constant, mean a narrower base over which to distribute pensions, healthcare, infrastructure, defense, and public services. Demography does not determine the destiny of a society on its own, but it changes the relationship between those who produce and those who depend on the surplus produced.

And this is where one of the fundamental differences from Rome appears. An agricultural empire had a very limited ability to compensate for a decline in its labor force: it could make better use of land, move populations, change forms of ownership, use more servile labor, or increase the intensity of exploitation, but productivity had physical and technological limits enormously more rigid than ours.

Today a society with fewer workers can theoretically produce more if each worker has much more powerful machines, software, and AI systems at their disposal. The fundamental relationship is therefore no longer simply **population × labor**, but **workers × productivity per worker**. A society that loses 10% of its labor force but increases per-capita productivity by 20% can become richer, not poorer. The problem is that this compensation is not automatic, and above all it is not automatically distributed.

The Real Turning Point Is Productivity

Recent OECD data show clearly why we cannot speak of the West as though it were a single organism. In 2024, labor productivity grew by 2.2% in the United States, while growth in the European Union was just 0.2% and Italy recorded a contraction of 1.4%. The OECD also reports that, although almost all OECD countries are more productive than they were twenty years ago, the pace of improvement has been roughly halved compared with the early 2000s. This figure is probably more important than dozens of discussions about “Western decline.” Because it tells us that the United States today possesses a compensatory capacity that Italy, and to a different extent Europe, do not possess to the same degree.

The truly dangerous combination is therefore not simply low birth rates. **It is low birth rates + low productivity + high mandatory spending + high debt.** And it is precisely this combination that makes the Italian case particularly interesting. The OECD points to moderate growth, a rapidly aging labor force, persistently weak productivity, and high public debt in Italy; in its 2026 report it also highlights growing pressures arising from pensions, healthcare, climate, and defense. This does not mean that Italy is destined for decline. It means that the margin for error is smaller: when a society simultaneously has fewer young people, low productivity, and a lot of debt, every shock requires a greater amount of future surplus to be absorbed.

And this is precisely where AI can become a historic technology. If it succeeds in producing a substantial increase in productivity, it could transform aging from an almost exclusively demographic problem into a problem that is at least partially technological. A society with fewer doctors could use intelligent systems to increase the productivity of doctors; one with fewer engineers could increase the design capacity of each engineer; one with fewer administrative workers could automate an enormous share of procedures; one with fewer industrial workers could use robotics and intelligent systems to maintain or increase production. But there is a downside: if the capital that owns these technologies is highly concentrated, productivity can rise without the economic autonomy of the majority rising proportionally. The same machine can therefore simultaneously be **a prosthesis for an aging society and a machine for concentrating wealth.**

The Problem With Debt Is Not the Number: It Is the Future We Have Already Committed

Here too, the temptation to make a direct parallel with Rome must be rejected. The Roman Empire did not have a modern sovereign debt market, a central bank, globally traded government bonds, or a financial system comparable to ours. Yet there is a functional similarity: the state must transform the surplus produced by society into administrative, military, and redistributive capacity, and when commitments grow faster than the productive base, the room for maneuver narrows. Today the problem is particularly evident. The IMF estimates that global public debt rose to just under 94% of GDP in 2025 and could reach 100% by 2029; at the same time, it identifies growing pressures arising from social needs, defense, strategic autonomy, and interest on debt. This is not a forecast of collapse: it is a description of fiscal space that is becoming progressively more contested.

The point, then, is not to demonize the welfare state. That would be both an economic and a historical mistake. Modern welfare is insurance, redistribution, investment in human capital, and a social stabilizer. It can even increase future productive capacity. The question is more subtle: **how much future surplus has already been implicitly committed to maintaining the commitments of the present?** If a society must simultaneously finance rising pensions, healthcare, the energy transition, infrastructure, defense, interest on debt, and technological investment, the question inevitably becomes how much remains to finance future growth. The problem of debt, therefore, is not moralistic. It is a problem of surplus allocation.

Globalization Did Not Make Us Poorer. It Made Us More Interdependent

Here too it is necessary to abandon a simplification. Globalization has produced enormous benefits: specialization, lower costs, access to larger markets, greater efficiency, and the transfer of technologies. Saying that offshoring “destroyed Western wealth” would be false. But it is equally naive to think that it did not modify the structure of economic power. A society can remain very wealthy even while losing direct control over some fundamental productive capabilities. The issue is not how much it imports, but **what would happen if it**

could no longer import it. Energy, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, critical raw materials, digital infrastructure, satellite systems, computing capacity, and artificial intelligence are examples of goods and infrastructures whose availability can become strategic.

Here the difference with Rome is instructive. The Empire was a gigantic integrated economic network: provinces, agriculture, trade, taxation, and the military apparatus were connected. Its strength derived in part precisely from this interconnectedness. But when the capacities to extract resources, tax them, transfer them, and protect the routes along which they circulated began to deteriorate in some regions, the same complexity that had made the system powerful became a source of vulnerability. Not because trade was a mistake, but because a highly complex network needs a center, or a plurality of centers, capable of keeping it functioning.

Europe and the Security Problem

This is where the comparison with the Roman army inevitably becomes delicate. Europe is not a territory incapable of producing weapons, nor is the United States simply the army defending a disarmed continent. SIPRI data tell a more interesting story. Between 2016–20 and 2021–25, European imports of major arms increased by 210%; for the 29 European NATO members, the increase was 143%, and the United States supplied 58% of these countries' imports. At the same time, European industries have increased production, and some European countries remain important arms exporters.

The correct description, therefore, is not "Europe incapable of defending itself." It is **Europe possessing significant industrial capacity but still dependent on the United States for an important share of strategic capabilities and procurement.** This distinction is fundamental. In the final phase of the Roman West, the issue was not simply that the army "disappeared." It was that the imperial center encountered growing difficulties in transforming fiscal resources into military control of territory, maintaining recruitment capacity, and managing relations with external military forces. Our contemporary analogy, if one exists, is therefore one of strategic dependence, not barbarian invasion.

And the "Barbarians"?

Here we must be even more rigorous. Contemporary immigrants are not the barbarians of antiquity, and using the equation would be historically meaningless. Late Roman society integrated external populations through the army, citizenship, settlements, federations, patronage relationships, and other institutional forms. The historical problem was not the existence of external populations in itself, but the capacity of the imperial apparatus to incorporate, control, and transform them into functional components of the system. For the contemporary world, the equivalent question is therefore a different one: **how effectively can a society transform immigration into human capital, labor, taxpayers, and integrated citizens?** The answer cannot be deduced from the number of immigrants. It depends on

education, qualifications, employment, social mobility, language, citizenship, taxation, and integration.

The same distinction applies to the idea of “modern barbarians” on the strategic level. If we want to preserve the concept, we must completely strip it of its ethnic dimension. An external actor can cross a border today without crossing it physically: it can do so through digital infrastructure, financial markets, energy, cyberattacks, disinformation, or information influence. But here too we must avoid the opposite mistake: not every political conflict, every absurd opinion, or every collective behavior we do not understand is cognitive warfare. A polarized society can independently produce irrational behavior without there necessarily being a foreign operation behind it. To speak of a deliberate cognitive attack, evidence is required.

The Most Important Frontier May Be Inside the Mind

And this is where our reasoning reaches its most original point. A complex society requires an increasing level of skills in order to function autonomously. It is not enough to know how to read: one must know how to interpret. It is not enough to find information: one must evaluate it. It is not enough to use an algorithm: one must understand at least its limitations. It is not enough to obtain an answer from AI: one must be capable of understanding when that answer is plausible but false.

The Italian data from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills in 2023 are striking. Thirty-five percent of Italian adults are at Level 1 or below in literacy, 35% in numeracy, and 46% in adaptive problem solving; Italy’s average score is below the OECD average in all three domains. This does not mean that 35% of Italians are “functionally illiterate,” and it would be incorrect to say so. It means that a significant share of the population displays low levels in the skills measured by the OECD, precisely those that become valuable when decisions are complex, information is abundant, and variables are changing.

The problem could be aggravated by an AI paradox: **the easier it becomes to obtain an answer, the more important it becomes to know how to judge the answer.** In a pre-AI society, a person could be limited by their inability to access information. In an AI society, they can access an almost unlimited amount of information and still be limited by their inability to distinguish truth from falsehood. The risk is therefore not simply ignorance. It is **cognitive dependence**: the individual progressively delegates research, interpretation, comparison, and finally judgment to systems that they are no longer capable of independently controlling. At that point inequality is no longer merely economic. It becomes inequality in the capacity to understand the system itself.

The New Elite Could Be the One That Owns Three Forms of Capital

For centuries we have thought of inequality above all as a difference in the ownership of capital. Today this definition risks becoming incomplete. There may be at least three forms

of capital destined to converge: **economic capital, technological capital, and cognitive capital.** The first buys assets and influence; the second controls the tools that multiply productivity; the third makes it possible to understand, govern, and verify those systems. If these three forms of capital become concentrated in the same hands, something qualitatively different from simple wealth inequality is produced. A minority could own a significant share of economic resources, control a significant share of technological infrastructure, and possess the cognitive capacity necessary to govern it.

The rest of the population could even live materially better than a Roman farmer. It could have smartphones, automobiles, advanced medicines, streaming, travel, healthcare, abundant food, and immediate access to an amount of knowledge unimaginable until a few decades ago. And yet it could own an ever-smaller share of the system that produces that wealth and have an ever-smaller capacity to independently understand how that system works. This is why our comparison with Rome must not be measured in terms of “poverty.” A poor Roman and a Western citizen dependent on a technological system they do not understand are two radically different conditions. But they can share a structural element: **reduced autonomy with respect to the system that produces and distributes the surplus.**

The Real Breaking Point: When Work, Income, Ownership, and Citizenship Separate

Western industrial society had built an extraordinarily powerful connection. People worked to produce; by working they earned; by earning they consumed and accumulated; by accumulating they bought a home; by paying taxes and contributions they financed the state; by participating in production they also acquired social and political weight. It was not a perfect structure, but it was an integrated structure. The worker was economically necessary and precisely for that reason could claim a share of the surplus.

AI could break this chain. **Production may no longer mean work. Income may no longer mean wages. Ownership may no longer mean participation in work. Competence may no longer mean the ability to understand the system. And political citizenship may no longer coincide with economic autonomy.** It is a potentially enormous transformation. And it can move in two opposite directions.

In the first, automation frees time, reduces the work required, raises wages, broadens ownership of capital, finances a more generous welfare state, and allows an aging society to produce more with fewer people.

In the second scenario, this same technology reduces the bargaining power of labor—and thus its leverage—concentrates capital, increases property income, makes a portion of the population dependent on government transfers, and transforms the welfare system from a tool of emancipation into a tool necessary for maintaining social stability.

It is this second trajectory that presents the greatest functional similarity with the problem we are studying in Rome: **not absolute poverty, but the concentration of the ability to generate and control economic surplus.**

But Rome Had a Problem We Do Not Have: It Could Not Reinvent Itself Technologically

This is the aspect that prevents our reasoning from turning into a doomsday prophecy. Yet strong individualism, growing social polarization, the increasingly pervasive psychologization of Western society, and the erosion of politics as a mediating force between corporate and class interests give us little reason to assume that the future will be defined by social solidarity.

That principle has never consistently emerged as the guiding force of political governance.

Nevertheless, we cannot fail to consider that the contemporary West possesses a capacity for self-correction that Rome did not have. It possesses statistical systems capable of measuring fertility, productivity, poverty, skills, and debt; universities and research centers capable of producing new knowledge; financial markets capable of mobilizing capital; central banks capable of intervening in the monetary system; vastly more sophisticated tax systems; democracies that can modify their policies; technologies that can increase productivity; and an energy and industrial capacity incomparably superior to that of the ancient world.

The very fact that we can know that European fertility is 1.34, that Italian productivity fell by 1.4%, that a significant share of adults has low skills, and that global debt is approaching 100% of GDP is already a gigantic difference compared with Rome: **we can see the problem as it forms.**

But recognizing a problem doesn't mean knowing how to solve it—assuming, of course, that you even want to solve it. Between diagnosis and correction there are at least four other steps: understanding the causes, building consensus, possessing the tools to intervene, and having enough time for the intervention to produce results.

A society can know perfectly well that its demographic decline is occurring and still fail to reverse birth rates. It can know its productivity problem and still fail to reform the system. It can know that debt is too high and still fail to reduce it without causing a social or political crisis. It can know that AI will concentrate enormous amounts of power and still fail to distribute ownership of its benefits.

The capacity for self-correction, therefore, is not binary. It is a capacity that can be strong in one phase and weaken in the next.

The United States, Europe, and Italy Are Not on the Same Trajectory

This is perhaps the most important result of the entire test. Speaking of “the West” as though it were a single organism hides enormous differences. The United States has extremely high wealth concentration and significant debt, but at the same time possesses relatively strong productivity, an enormous capital market, technological capacity, energy, a defense industry, the ability to attract human capital, and a central position in the global financial and technological system. Europe possesses human capital, industry, welfare, and robust institutions, but faces a more difficult combination of demography, relative productivity, strategic dependencies, and decision-making fragmentation. Italy, by contrast, concentrates many of the pressures identified by our model: an aging population, very low fertility, weak productivity, high public debt, adult skills below the OECD average, and the simultaneous need to finance pensions, healthcare, defense, and investment. The OECD therefore considers aging, weak productivity, and debt among Italy’s main structural challenges.

This does not mean that Italy is “the new Roman Empire.” It means something more interesting: **Italy is a particularly severe laboratory for understanding whether technology can simultaneously compensate for demography, weak productivity, and fiscal pressure.** If AI and automation succeed in significantly raising Italian productivity, reducing the need for administrative labor, and increasing the return on human capital, demography may be partially neutralized. If instead AI is adopted slowly, remains concentrated in large companies, and fails to spread throughout the productive fabric, the demographic problem will become heavier, because there will be fewer people producing the same amount of value.

So let's go back to Rome

After moving through all these indicators, we can finally return to the initial question. Is the West becoming Rome? The answer, if we want to be serious, is: **no, not in the simple sense in which the question is normally formulated.** We are not a slave society; our economy is not agricultural; we do not depend on land as the main source of wealth; we do not have an imperial army that must patrol a border thousands of miles long; the monetary system is completely different; technological productivity is not remotely comparable; institutions have incomparably greater adaptive capacity.

But if the question becomes: are **we recreating some of the structural conditions that can make a complex society fragile?**, then the answer becomes much less reassuring. Wealth concentration exists. The patrimonial autonomy of the middle class is under pressure. European demography is unfavorable. The welfare state faces an increasingly elderly population. Debt limits fiscal room. Europe still depends on the United States for a significant part of its security. Production chains are globalized and therefore vulnerable to geopolitical shocks. The population’s skills are distributed very unevenly. And AI is introducing, for the

first time in history, a technology capable of automating not only part of physical work, but part of cognitive work.

The problem, therefore, is not that history is repeating itself. It is that **some forms of dependence can reappear even when technologies and institutions change completely.**

The Decisive Question Is Not Whether AI Will Destroy Work

The decisive question is who will own the productivity that AI creates.

If a society with fewer children, fewer workers, and more elderly people manages to produce enormously more through automation, it will have found a technological response to a demographic difficulty. If that greater productivity is distributed through wages, broadly distributed capital, shorter working hours, efficient public services, and participation in ownership, AI could even rebuild a new form of middle class. Not necessarily the industrial middle class of the twentieth century, but something new: a population that is individually less necessary to production and yet collectively richer.

If instead AI increases productivity while further concentrating ownership of capital, then the result could be the opposite. A minority will control an increasing amount of productive capacity; part of the population will live from work that is increasingly easy to replace; another part will depend on public transfers; and the state will have to redistribute an increasing share of a surplus that, paradoxically, it directly controls less and less. In that case technology will not have eliminated the distributional problem. It will have brought it to a higher level.

And this is where our initial question about work returns. For two centuries the Western compromise worked because the citizen was indispensable to production. **AI is challenging this premise for the first time.** If a society manages to produce everything it needs with an ever-smaller amount of human labor, it will have to find a new economic reason to distribute income, ownership, status, and power. It will no longer be enough to tell people: “study, work, save, and build your future.” We will have to decide what ownership means when technological capital produces more and more compared with labor; what merit means when a machine enormously multiplies the capacity of a few; what dignity means when work is no longer necessary to the extent that it was for two centuries.

The Real Analogy With Rome Is Therefore Something Else

Rome does not teach us that empires fall because they become poor. It teaches us something subtler: **a complex society can become fragile when its capacity to transform its surplus into order, security, cohesion, and power decreases relative to the complexity it has to sustain.** There is no single cause of the transformation of the Roman West. There are pressures that interact: taxation, the army, demography, transformation of economic structures, relations with the peripheries, political changes, and the progressive loss of the

center's capacity to hold all the components of the system together. Contemporary historiography is much more cautious than the old narrative of the "sudden fall": it speaks of transformation, regional differentiation, continuity, and progressive disintegration. And it is precisely this more complex version of Roman history that makes the comparison useful.

The contemporary West finds itself in a paradoxical situation. It has more wealth, more technology, more knowledge, more energy, and more administrative capacity than any previous society. But precisely because it has become immensely more complex, it requires equally higher levels of competence, coordination, and institutional capacity. An extremely wealthy society can therefore be vulnerable not because it does not possess enough resources, but because **it can no longer coordinate the resources it possesses**. And an extremely technologically advanced society can be cognitively fragile if an increasing share of its citizens is no longer able to verify information, understand systems, and judge the tools on which it depends.

This is the point at which our metaphor of the "barbarians" must be completely rewritten. The barbarian of the twenty-first century is not necessarily the one who crosses the border with a weapon. It may be the external actor who manages to exploit an existing fracture: economic, energy-related, technological, informational, or cognitive. But, once again, the external threat matters only if it encounters an internal vulnerability. A cohesive system can absorb a shock; a fragmented system can transform a relatively small shock into a much larger crisis.

The Final Question Is the Capacity for Self-Correction

And here, after this entire journey, we arrive at what I consider the most important conclusion. We should not ask whether debt is too high, whether birth rates are too low, whether wealth is too concentrated, or whether AI will eliminate too many jobs. None of these variables, taken alone, is sufficient. **The question is whether compensatory capacities are growing faster than structural pressures.**

A society with few young people can be extremely wealthy if it is highly productive. A highly unequal society can be stable if there is social mobility and broad patrimonial autonomy. A heavily indebted society can be sustainable if it grows fast enough. A society that is militarily dependent can remain secure if the alliance supporting it is solid. A society exposed to AI can prosper if it distributes productivity gains and increases citizens' skills. Even a highly polarized society can correct itself if it retains institutions capable of building consensus and changing its policies.

The real danger arises when **multiple pressures begin reinforcing one another while compensatory capacities slow down**: negative demography reducing the labor force; weak productivity reducing the surplus; debt absorbing resources; welfare spending increasing with aging; concentration of capital reducing patrimonial autonomy; AI increasing productivity but potentially concentrating capital even further; insufficient skills increasing

dependence on artificial cognitive systems; polarization making reforms more difficult to adopt; strategic dependence limiting autonomy. At that point we no longer have a sum of problems. We have a **feedback system**.

And this is exactly where Rome becomes useful again.

Not as a prophecy.

Not as a slogan.

Not as “the West has already fallen.”

Rome is useful as a **stress model** for a much more contemporary question: what happens when a society becomes increasingly complex, while the distribution of wealth, demographic structure, relationship with work, and the state’s ability to transform surplus into cohesion begin to diverge?

The answer has not yet been written.

And perhaps this is the most important difference from Rome.

We know that we are inside this transformation while it is happening.

We can measure fertility. We can measure productivity. We can measure debt. We can measure wealth concentration. We can measure skills. We can observe the adoption of artificial intelligence. We can decide how to distribute the productivity it generates.

We can even study Rome to understand what happens when a society can no longer transform its complexity into organized power.

The real question, then, is not whether the West will become Rome.

It’s much more disturbing:

Will we be able to use technology to reduce the need for labor without reducing the need for citizens?

Because if AI succeeds in achieving the former without producing the latter, we will have solved the problem of productive scarcity while simultaneously creating a problem of social autonomy.

If, on the other hand, we manage to transform increased productivity into more widely distributed capital, more skills, more free time, greater economic security, and a greater individual capacity to understand and control technology, then the AI revolution could produce exactly the opposite of decline.

It could be the greatest demographic compensation mechanism ever invented.

And this is where the game is played.

Not between man and machine.

Not between the West and the East.

Not between the elite and the people—at least not only that.

The decisive battle will be between the concentration and distribution of the capacity to produce, possess, understand, and decide.

It is this—more than absolute wealth—that will determine whether the West will simply enter a new phase of its history or truly begin to reproduce, in entirely new forms, some of the weaknesses that once made Rome vulnerable.

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