

promise that '*A Miscarriage of Justice* is a feminist history of reproduction that centers the lives and deaths of women (...) in its understanding of the past' (p. 4), while trying to shed some light on the present as well.

Sara Serrano Martínez, Utrecht University

Walter Scheidel, *Escape from Rome. The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity* (Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 2019). 670 p. ISBN 9780691172187.

DOI: 10.18352/tseg.1185

This book is so rich and complex, and ambitious and broad in scope, that it took me quite some time to digest it and write this review. It is without doubt one of the best examples of big history published in recent years, and a major contribution to the Great Divergence debate. Walter Scheidel is one of the most prominent ancient (economic) historians, a specialist of the Roman Empire, who has successfully branched out to other regions, empires, and time periods. This is one of the reasons to admire the book: his expertise hardly knows boundaries, and he manages to write with authority not only about the economic, political and institutional history of Rome and Western Europe, but he is equally knowledgeable about China, India and the Islamic world. The book ventures into the discoveries by the Polynesians, discusses the geography of Europe compared with China (and India and Southeast Asia), and all this is written in an elegant, highly accessible way. Chapeau!

Moving to contents: the big story is that the difference between China and Western Europe – the 'ultimate' cause of the Great Divergence – is that empire in China returned (after a crisis in the fifth-sixth centuries) and was alive and kicking throughout the entire 2000plus years covered by the book. However, after the collapse of Roman Empire, nothing comparable was re-established in Western Europe, resulting in a radically different, polycentral socio-political system there, which was the 'true' cause of its dynamic development in the Middle Ages and the early modern Period. States, small and large, competed intensely in Western Europe, which created, or allowed space for, the vibrant intellectual, technological, institutional and economic development of the subcontinent. Not only competition between states mattered, it also led to a different balance of power within states, with a far greater role played by civil society and organized interest groups in the West. This made possible the emergence of public debt and of dynamic capital markets – but this is one example

out of many. Empire, a monopolistic supply of state power, did not support the same incentives for innovation in these fields. He points out that almost all relevant explanations of the Great Divergence identify causes that are directly or indirectly related to this fragmentation of state power in the West and centralization in the East. Scheidel, for example, convincingly shows that the overseas expansion of Western European powers was driven by interstate competition, and that the Chinese experiment with overseas exploration – the voyages of the fleet of admiral Zheng He – were driven by short-term interests and preferences of the imperial court (and could therefore be terminated easily).

This is all rather well known, although his systematic treatment of the disadvantages of empire and the advantages of polycentrism do contribute a lot to the debate. What is really new is the analysis of the rise and decline of Rome, and the systematic discussion of the reasons why the Roman Empire did not return after 500. For an outsider in the field of ancient history, the chapters on Rome were particularly illuminating. In a way, Rome was exceptional. Most ancient empires developed their hierarchical structures in interaction with the threat from the steppe – to keep out invaders from the north (as Scheidel argues convincingly in the footsteps of Peter Turchin). For its position far to the west of the ‘band of oppression’ from the Levant to China, Rome developed an extremely coercive system of mobilizing for war, resulting in an incredibly effective army. Rome was literally an ‘outlier’ in the ancient world, and some of the ‘democratic’ features of the Republic bear testimony of this. It is significant that once decline sets in, the Eastern, Greek parts of the empire (the most developed and urbanized, and close to or part of the parts influenced by the interaction with the steppe) continue as the Eastern empire, whereas in the West the state and the economy collapsed.

What is also new is his frequent use of counterfactual history. Scheidel discusses the various points in time when a return of empire was possible – such as in 732, at the battle of Tours, when Arabs almost overran the weak states of Western Europe, or in 800, when Charlemagne established a new Roman Empire, which soon disintegrated. How likely was the return of an enduring, stable empire in those (and other) years? Often these alternative scenarios are highly speculative, but they sometimes also lead to interesting insights, for example when the role of geography is discussed. But Scheidel invariably concludes that a counterfactual history ending in empire is highly unlikely – favorable conditions for the unification of Europe were simply not there, and a ‘Roman-scale empire stood next to no chance of returning to Europe’.

Among the factors that hindered empire building were geography and Christianity. Western Europe’s geography was fragmented, with mountain ranges in the central parts (Alps, Pyrenees), many peninsulas and islands with

a very long coastline, which stood in sharp contrast with the compact geography of China. Christianity is the most significant part of 'culture' that had an impact on political fragmentation. The Medieval Church developed its own power basis, and by claiming not only religious and moral power, but also a not insignificant share of political power, contributed a lot to the weakening of the medieval state and limited a potential drive to empire. At some point he adds that the independence of the Church in the Middle Ages is also caused by the weakness of the state – the history of Byzantium shows what happens to the same church when it is part of a much stronger state which has a much higher degree of continuity than in the West. Yet, in the final analysis in the epilogue, the Church does return as one of the three factors causing the specific development path of Western Europe.

The ultimate paradox that Scheidel sketches is that Rome's contribution to Europe's development was that it terminated its existence and that it did not return, paving the way for the fragmented state system that was the breeding ground for modernity. The author excels in incorporating the vast literature about the Great Divergence in his analytical framework. The explanations by Bob Allen, Joel Mokyr and many others of the causes of the Industrial Revolution are shown to be linked to the hypothesis that the fragmented state system was the fundamental driving force. He however acknowledges that one hypothesis, which stresses the demographic factor and the role played by the European Marriage Pattern (EMP), cannot easily be linked to his ideas, and has the potential of offering an alternative story. The discussion about the EMP is however extremely brief and sketchy, and in view of the fact that this is the rival hypothesis, this is a bit disappointing.

As remarked by Scheidel, Rome was an outlier, it was not situated in a region with extremely patriarchal family systems, which were compatible with the hierarchical state structure of empire. In fact, the position of women in Roman society was relatively strong, and this has according to Stark played a role in the spread of Christianity, as in the new religion women could also attain a relatively strong position (the explanation of the spontaneous spread of Christianity is another loose end, perhaps, in Scheidel's story). Due to a number of institutional innovations, Rome did create a highly effective army, but once decline set in, and these institutions had lost their impact, the empire – at least the western part – collapsed, as it was still not embedded in an institutional environment which 'naturally' favored strong forms of hierarchy. For the same reason, the Romans had never succeeded in conquering the Germanic 'tribes' to the north of Rhine and Danube (whereas it had been relatively easy to integrate for example Egypt which its much longer history of hierarchy and patriarchy into the empire). When these Germans migrated to settle in the empire

itself, this further undermined grassroots 'support' for hierarchy. Europe north of the Alps, and after the invasion of the Lombards also south of the Alps, had institutions at the micro level of family and household that were incompatible with the high level of hierarchy of ancient empires. The most telling example is that rules about heritage – equal division between sons – contributed a lot to the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire. The Church codified this. When during the high Middle Ages the church doctrine of marriage had to be defined, the southern (Bologna) and the northern (Paris) interpretations of this institution clashed, the first one stressing sex as the definition of marriage (and thus including the possibility that women were forced to marry against their will), whereas according to the northern interpretation free will, consensus, was essential for marriage. The Church eventually chose the northern view.

Scheidel gives a long list of ad hoc reasons why empire did not return. This alternative view is perhaps that ultimately the Roman Empire did not return because in western Europe power structures at the micro level were not conducive to empire. The imposition of hierarchy during the Roman empire had not been long and intense enough to create the kind of micro institutions that were compatible with a stable empire, and the invasions of Germanic tribes made matters even 'worse'. And with the progress of time, these often informal institutions at the micro level hardened into formal institutions such as communes and guilds.

Rome as outlier meant that in the long run empire was the exception, that the normal state of affairs was political fragmentation. In that sense it was not the collapse of Rome, the escape from its empire, that paved the road to modernity, but the experiment of an 'one-off' empire in an environment that was – the further one moved to the west and to the north – a poor breeding ground for hierarchy and patriarchy.

Jan Luiten van Zanden, Utrecht University

Arthur van Riel, *Trials of Convergence. Prices, Markets and Industrialization in the Netherlands, 1800-1913*, two volumes, PhD Dissertation, Utrecht University, 2018. 809 p.

Available at: <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/370748>

DOI: 10.18352/tseg.1186

Dutch economic historians have long debated the supposed economic 'retardation' of the Netherlands in the nineteenth century. Scholars have focused es-