

DO ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME?
ANCIENT IMPLICATIONS
AND MODERN TRANSFORMATIONS
IN THE RECENT US DISCOURSE
ON AN AMERICAN EMPIRE

SEBASTIAN HUHNPOLZ

I.

THE following paper has first of all attempted to introduce and explain the primarily American discourse of the last decade regarding an *American Empire* (I), and also, for the purpose of simplification, to structure more recent publications on this topic (II). Based on this premise, functions and particularities of the references made to the Roman Empire shall be demonstrated for the USA (III) and their relevance shall be illustrated by means of three examples (IV). This is followed by a brief upshot (V), providing an explanation for the observation that the present discourse is still mainly led by public intellectuals, academic scholars or value-oriented elites through publications. My assumption is that the current increase in comparisons with *imperial* Rome or with a transformed image of a Rome that never was is needed for analytical and political purposes but endangers the self-image of the American civilization because the traditional anti-imperial self-concept of the USA was overtaken by events due to imperial foreign policy-related performances and challenges during the last decades. Indeed, all empires are anti-imperial – they do not wish for *other* empires. But an anti-imperial self-image is constricting a coherent Grand strategy of a democratic superpower, the more so as this contradiction also breaks with innumerable republican receptions of antiquity of the American founding fathers, which is one reason why adaptations of ancient Rome inevitably return to the arena of the internal debates. Thus new images of empires, in general, and transformed receptions of Rome, in particular, are needed.

Those receptions of antiquity are understood as «a case-by-case, context-related and politically contested appropriation or rejection, adaptation or disputation of possible explanations, which argumentatively refer to ancient political orders, their emergence and decline. Yet, it is in such contexts of explaining modern political orders that a certain image of antiquity is frequently constructed, which, however, seems to promise political added value for specific intentions».¹

¹ H. Vorländer, *Die Gründer und die Klassiker. Zur Rezeption der Antike in der Begründung moderner Demokratie*, in G. Kamecke - B. Klein - J. Müller (Eds.), *Antike als Konzept. Lesarten der Kunst und der Literatur in den Geisteswissenschaften*, Berlin 2009, 112-126, 113 (transl.).

Receptions of antiquity are in this sense instrumental interpretations of antiquity.

For the USA today, however, ancient Rome provides both an inescapable and highly precarious historical mirror. If the American *republican* tradition has resulted in a special reception of antiquity, then it has to be transformed or skilfully denied these days in order to gain imperial-political background knowledge and to master «lessons of empire».² So the term «republican tradition» doesn't mean party or partisan politics. It refers to the analytical opposite of an empire – to the republic as a nation-state political regime and a framework of political thought. Therefore it is an extraordinary and recently unbridged American gap that the term empire is related to both the note of an internal, «bad» and undemocratic empire, on the one hand (a dictatorship lead by an Emperor, so to speak), and a more or less user-defined external empire, on the other.

For such cases, Rome is not only the «mirror of crisis», which it always has been after antiquity;³ it is, like all imperial projects,⁴ an interpretive model of elites which, in fact, is not particularly suitable for the masses. Nevertheless, it can at least influence the public and has to be adapted correspondingly, particularly in a democracy. What is novel about this is not the old American self-reflection «Are we Rome?»,⁵ but as of late the question: Are we becoming an ex- and internal *empire* like Rome? It is important to stress this, because there is a tendency to see the USA as unique and thus incomparable with empires – an exceptionalism which is, by the way, a quite typical characteristic of imperial self-interpretation. Yet, based on its factual differences to other empires, one may classify the USA as non-imperial. So, while on the one hand, «to American eyes» Rome has always been «the eagle in the mirror»,⁶ the USA is, on the other hand, considered to be «unique»⁷ or «an empire unlike any other»⁸ – it therefore is, like Niall Ferguson flouts, «as exceptional as all the other sixty-nine empires».⁹ Such contradiction still has to deal with what Harvard historian Mason Hammond already suggested in 1961 «[D]rawing analogies between the past and the present» means facing «two fundamental weaknesses[.] First, it is unsound to draw materials from various moments of the past to compare with the single moment of the present.

² See C. Calhoun - F. Cooper - K.W. Moore (Eds.), *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*, New York 2006.

³ A. Demandt (Ed.), *Das Ende der Weltreiche. Von den Persern bis zur Sowjetunion*, Hamburg 2007 [1997], 28.

⁴ J. Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 2009, 615.

⁵ See C. Murphy, *Are We Rome?: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*, New York 2007.

⁶ Murphy, *Are we Rome?*, cit., 6.

⁷ B.A. Thayer, *The Case for the American Empire*, in B.A. Thayer - C. Layne, *American Empire: A Debate*, New York (NY)-London 2007, 1-50, 5.

⁸ M. Walker, *An Empire Unlike Any Other*, in A.J. Bacevich (Ed.), *The Imperial Tense. Prospects and Problems of American Empire*, Chicago 2003, 134-145.

⁹ N. Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, London 2005, 15.

And second, the statesman can always reply [...] that «things are different now», as indeed they are». ¹⁰

The *American Empire* discourse has not yet been concluded since such patterns of imperial interpretation are currently still being examined by intellectual elites, ¹¹ while or even because political rhetoric largely avoids the risk of an imperial self-description: ¹² «American leaders [...] almost never use the ‘E word’. It is as if they had never heard the word ‘empire’. They prefer to speak of American ‘leadership’ or ‘direction’, ‘the key role of the United States’ in the Western ‘community’ or ‘civilization’ ». Yet: «Of course, it is not surprising that American leaders suffer a memory lapse when it comes to the word empire. They choose not to use it because it does not help to achieve the grand strategic goals of the United States. To do so would make their lives more difficult because it would aid resistance to the American Empire. For an American president or senior official to state that America is an empire would only help to organize resistance to it. To say it is an empire might cause the American people to question whether or not they want one» ¹³ – and it might cause the American people to question what an empire is or should be.

II.

The period of investigation of this article is roughly limited to the first decade of the 21st century. It was during this time that three significant developments merged.

First of all, according to many observers, American policy has undergone a metamorphosis from an «informal» to a «formal» empire. ¹⁴ With it began «the morphing of the post-Cold War debate about American *primacy* into a debate

¹⁰ M. Hammond, *Ancient Rome and Modern America Reconsidered*, «Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society» 73, 1961, 3-17, 6.

¹¹ The volumes from U. Speck - N. Sznajder (Eds.), *Empire Amerika. Perspektiven einer neuen Weltordnung*, Munich 2003; A.J. Bacevich (Ed.), *The Imperial Tense. Prospects and Problems of American Empire*, Chicago 2003, as well as Volume 71 from *National Interest* provide introductory collections; collective representations are also offered by, inter alia, J.C. Behrends, *Amerika als Imperium. Ein Überblick zur neueren Literatur*, «Zeithistorische Forschungen» 3, 2006, <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Behrends-1-2006> [accessed September 12, 2010]; F. Biskamp, *Die Dramaturgie demokratischer Imperien. Über das Verhältnis von Imperialität und Demokratie in der Debatte um das American Empire*, Frankfurt/M. etc. 2010; J.A. Fuchs, *Das letzte Imperium? Imperiale Erfahrungen im heutigen US-amerikanischen Diskurs*, «Berliner Debatte Initial» 20, 2009, 63-67; M. Hochgeschwender, *Die USA – ein Imperium im Widerspruch*, «Zeithistorische Forschungen» 3, 2006, <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Hochgeschwender-1-2006> [accessed July 19, 2008].

¹² An exemption is the approval of George W. Bush to print one of his speeches as a preamble in the volume *The Imperial Tense* (see *America's Responsibility, America's Mission*, in Bacevich, *The Imperial Tense*, cit., 5-9). For a collection of further exemptions see Ferguson, *Colossus*, cit., 1-31.

¹³ Thayer, *The Case for the American Empire*, cit., 4.

¹⁴ A.J. Bacevich, *American Empire. The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy*, Cambridge-London 2002.

about American *empire*». ¹⁵ The question of a «unipolar moment» ¹⁶ evolved into the question about its duration. ¹⁷ This eventually turned into a major discourse about the opportunities and risks of a unipolar world. Of course, only a few people go as far as one particular representative of the «neo-imperial school» of thought, ¹⁸ namely Niall Ferguson, who inexorably calls for «bearing the burden» ¹⁹ to transform the American «empire in denial» into a «liberal empire». ²⁰ Or Jim Garrison, to take another example: He is less known but not less trenchant in the adaptation of the Wilsonian project of a «war to end all wars». As president of the «State of the World Forum» he considers the *American Empire* to be a «transitional empire», destined to make all other empires redundant. ²¹

Secondly, an analytical «imperial turn» ²² of the methods used by the human, social and cultural sciences not only occurred in Europe. It included a continuation of the culturalist geo-politics and geo-strategy made prominent again by Samuel Huntington with some appropriations of Spengler's thoughts. ²³ The most conspicuous indicator for this «turn» is the allusion to the cyclical model of an imperial *rise, decline and fall* ²⁴ in almost *all* publications directly or indirectly relevant to our topic. The subtle part about it is that almost no one still focuses on the question of an imperial rise of the USA – *decline and fall* are at the centre of attention. ²⁵

¹⁵ Layne, *The Case Against the American Empire*, cit., 51-102, 58.

¹⁶ C. Krauthammer, *The Unipolar Moment*, «Foreign Affairs» 70, 1990, 23-34.

¹⁷ E.g. C.A. Kupchan, *The End of the American Era. U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-first Century*, New York 2002.

¹⁸ According to E. Hobsbawm, *On Empire. America, War, and Global Supremacy*, New York 2008, 62.

¹⁹ N. Ferguson, *Empire. The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, New York 2004, 377.

²⁰ Ferguson, *Empire*, cit.; Id., *Colossus*, cit.; Id., *Das verleugnete Imperium*, in Speck - Sznajder, *Empire Amerika*, cit., 38-59; Id., *The Empire Slinks Back*, «New York Times», April 27, 2003, New York Edition, section 6, 52.

²¹ J. Garrison, *America as Empire. Global Leader or Rogue Power?*, San Francisco 2004.

²² J. Osterhammel, *Imperien im 20. Jahrhundert: Eine Einführung*, «Zeithistorische Forschungen» 3, 2006, <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Osterhammel-1-2006> [accessed August 12, 2009].

²³ S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, «Foreign Affairs» 72, 1993, 22-49, and Id., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York 1996; O. Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, Munich 1963 [1923].

²⁴ See H. James, *The Roman Predicament. How the Rules of International Order Create the Politics of Empire*, Princeton 2006.

²⁵ Indeed, it can be agreed to what Josef Joffe said (*The Default Power. The False Prophecy of America's Decline*, «Foreign Affairs» 88, 2009, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65225/josef-joffe/the-default-power> [accessed November 12, 2010]), namely that the debate on an American *decline* is held in almost every decade. Similar things could be said about a thematization of US imperialism and US imperialism (H.-U. Wehler, *Der Aufstieg des amerikanischen Imperialismus. Studien zur Entwicklung des Imperium Americanum 1865-1900*, Göttingen 1987), for example, referring to the *Anti-Imperialist League* active about 1900, or in the 1960s and 1970s concerning the Vietnam War (also cf. R. Aron, *The Imperial Republic. The United States and the World 1945-1973*, Englewood Cliffs [NJ] 1974). These facts, however, can hardly be combined and do not meet the particularities and intensity of the current discourse on empires, as needs to be shown.

Thirdly, this paradigm shift was accompanied by the historiographic rediscovery of «world history». It constantly reveals synchronous or at most only slightly shifted trans- and international issues and begins to view history comparatively as a succession or concurrence of empires, whose historiographic cores can now also be found beyond Europe and North America. A series of research studies have, for instance, been conducted, focusing either on a comparison of empires or on a world history of empires. Both provide insights into a broader range of historical case studies, on the basis of which the significance of Rome is relativized, empirical knowledge of empires is broadened and recurring patterns can be identified. Thus, the comparative analysis of empires seeks to find common characteristics and ways of functioning among empires.²⁶ The analysis of global history, by contrast, describes history itself as a succession of empires.²⁷

Politically and in the context of global society, 9/11 may be assumed to be the beginning of these three parallel transitions.²⁸ At any rate, following this global significant event, the quantity of publications on the topic of empires, imperial politics and unipolar global politics has increased dramatically. Counterintuitively, jihadism²⁹ is not a dominant concern of this current discourse.³⁰ Instead, it seems

²⁶ E.g. T. Ansary, *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes*, New York 2009; A. Chua, *Day of Empire. How Superpowers Rise to Global Dominance – And Why They Fall*, New York 2007; M. Doyle, *Empires*, Ithaca (NY)-London 1986; Ferguson, *Empire*, cit.; P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York 1987; E. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge 2009; T.F. Madden, *Empires of Trust: How Rome Built – and America Is Building – a New World*, New York 2008; C.S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and its Predecessors*, Cambridge (MA) 2006; H. Münkler, *Empires. The Logic of World Domination from Ancient Rome to the United States*, Cambridge 2007; P. Pomper, *The History and Theory of Empires*, H&T 44, 2005, 1-27; in German also Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, cit.

²⁷ E.g. C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914*, Oxford 2004; J. Burbank - F. Cooper, *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton-Oxford 2010; J. Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400-2000*, London 2007; Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, cit.; P. Khanna, *The Second World. Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, New York 2009; Münkler, *Empires*, cit.; S. Talbott, *The Great Experiment. The Story of Ancient Empires, Modern States, and the Quest for a Global Nation*, New York 2008; in German e.g. H.-H. Nolte, *Weltgeschichte. Imperien, Religionen und Systeme 15.-19. Jahrhundert*, Vienna etc. 2005, and Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, cit.

²⁸ Layne, *The Case Against the American Empire*, cit., 58; N. Chomsky, *Imperial Ambitions: Conversations with Noam Chomsky on the Post-9/11 World*, London 2005.

²⁹ See S. Huhnholz, *Dschihadistische Raumpraxis. Raumordnungspolitische Herausforderungen des militanten sunnitischen Fundamentalismus*, Berlin 2010.

³⁰ Besides the diagnosis can be extended to the rarity of semantics and allegations concerning «imperialism». Apart from polemics such as the «imperialism of human rights» (Hobsbawm, *On Empire*, cit., xix) or «the new American imperialism – sorry, humanitarianism» (Ferguson, *The Empire Slinks Back*, cit.), it is hardly the case that an imperialist program is insinuated or that there are any references to the age of imperialism. Madden (*Empires of Trust*, cit., 9 and 63) even highlights the American «abiding and sincere desire to be left alone» and the «building [of] an empire while trying not to» – dialectics which, in turn, Ferguson captured as «imperialism of anti-imperialism» (*Colossus*, cit., 61). Eric Adler (*Post-9/11 Views of Rome and the Nature of «Defensive Imperialism»*, IJCT 15, 2010, 587-610, 587) criticizes the «defensive imperialism» as the «apologist approach» of an «informal school of thought regarding the character of Roman expansion». Consequently, there is a certain kind of consensus that the *American Empire* has no direct political intention. Yet, it has to be underlined that

that jihadism is embedded as just one of many elements in the imperial context, the more so as historically it was mostly at the imperial peripheries and at its centers, where forms of asymmetrically weak warfare were experimented with – forms that are called terrorism today.³¹ However, it is clear that 9/11 and its consequences provided additional incentives to dedicate oneself even more than before to forms of imperial governance.³²

Yet reducing the period of investigation to the beginning of this century (aside from a few preceding exceptions) would in itself be too narrow an approach – rather, it is implied that due to the vast topic of empire, the time span considered is at the same time much wider. The discourse on *empire* draws its creativity and diversity – and often its superficiality and randomness – from these huge realms of experience. It should also be mentioned that the discourse cannot be limited to American authors alone, since it also contains Anglo-American and transatlantic features. Therefore, all types of works and public discussions published or verifiably listed or received in the USA will be considered in this paper.

As a simplified basic assumption, it may be argued that, *firstly*, the entire discourse on the *American Empire*, including so-called «imperial» American policies, is part of a broader issue regarding the establishment of a functioning world order in the 21st century. *Secondly*, the specific discourse conducted within the United States is related to the question of its internal political system and the potential of the USA to establish and defend a stable global order. *Thirdly*, it can therefore be concluded that it would not be advisable to define the features of imperality, empires and imperial policy in the present study, because the search for an adequate understanding of imperial policy (or the dispute about it) forms part of the present discourse.

A few authors prefer, for example, to narrow the term empire down to such an extent that it is impossible to find a historical example of it.³³ Others expand it to such an extent that each powerful state, union of states and military expansion is regarded as an empire. Competition among empires still seems to more closely reflect our contemporary way of thinking. Since «things were a lot easier before 1990. [...] Pax Americana and Pax Sovietica were able to mutually stabilize each other»³⁴ and correspondingly the dissolution of one empire appears to some peo-

American semantics does not know or cultivate distinct definitions for «imperial» and «imperialist» or «imperialistic» as, for example, Münkler (*Empires*, cit.) argues.

³¹ See Münkler, *Empires*, cit., 108-138. One of the earliest examples may be scenarios described in the *Jewish War* by Flavius Josephus (written ca. 75-79 AD; cf. S. Huhnholz, *Kulturalisierung des Terrors. Das dschihadistische Selbstmordattentat als Stereotyp islamischer Kampfkultur*, «Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften» 7, 2010, 69-80).

³² H. Münkler, *Imperiale Ordnung. Die Governance-Leistung von Imperien in komparativer Perspektive*, in M. Beisheim - G.F. Schuppert (Eds.), *Staatszerfall und Governance*, Baden-Baden 2007, 263-284.

³³ E.g. «Real imperial power is sovereign power». (P. Zelikow, *The Transformation of National Security. Five Redefinitions*, «National Interest» 71, 2003, 17-28, 18 ss.).

³⁴ C. Meier, *Von der «Pax Romana» zur «Pax Americana»?*, in Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft für internationalen Dialog (Ed.), *Pax Americana?*, Munich etc. 1998, 95-122, 116 (transl.).

ple to represent the end of all empires. The imperial peculiarity, in particular, of this «most unique empire» (which simultaneously sees itself as «an anti-imperialist state, a federation of sovereign states, and a voluntary union») ³⁵ promoted the widespread view that the «end of the imperial era» ³⁶ had irrevocably arrived with the collapse of the Soviet Union. ³⁷ Other authors perhaps take an over-pragmatic approach: «When it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it's a duck». ³⁸

I prefer, in turn, to speak of «patterns of imperial interpretation». Irrespective of whether the concept of «imperial» is used to describe a political constellation or whether it is avoided, this does not necessarily mean that one can infer something about a state's imperial structure (whether real or imaginary) from this. Yet, it is certainly possible to deduce something about how this idea is perceived and how it is used for political purposes. It can therefore be assumed that there is an *ambiguity* among patterns of imperial interpretation, which means that such interpretations are not limited to people's perceptions, but can bear imperial significance and have a level of political persuasiveness whose discursive power may develop a momentum of its own. Imperial semantics at least influence, shape, organize and structure political realities to such an extent that policies can be introduced, avoided or contested on the basis of the conceptual power of the term «imperial». Consequently, the Thomas theorem has to be applied in this context: What we think of as real (and what is semantically conceptualized accordingly), is real in its consequences. ³⁹

The interpretation of the discourse on the *American Empire* as a «pattern of imperial interpretation» has a lot more to offer. It competes with other descriptions and evaluations of reality, which may lead to it being substituted, transcended or completely refuted. Since it is unclear how this competition will end, this will not form part of the present article. Of course, it could be conceivable that this interpretative struggle is an imperial feature itself. Even Winston Churchill predicted that the «empires of the future» would be «empires of the mind». ⁴⁰ And indeed some studies indicate that the future concept of empire could become a mere metaphor like «empire lite»: ⁴¹ «The 21st century imperium is a new invention [...], an empire lite, a global hegemony». ⁴² In contrast, there is the possibility that we may only be passing through another «Sattelzeit» or transitional period, ⁴³ in which many of the terms we consider to have been established are once again

³⁵ R.G. Suny, *Ambiguous Categories: States, Empires and Nations*, «Post Soviet Affairs» 11, 1995, 185-196, 190.

³⁶ Demandt, *Das Ende der Weltreiche*, cit., 223.

³⁷ E.g. Hobsbawm, *On Empire*, cit., 62 ss.

³⁸ A.J. Motyl, *Revolutions, Nations, Empires. Conceptual Limits and Theoretical Possibilities*, New York 1999, 1; Ferguson, *Das verleugnete Imperium*, cit., 48.

³⁹ W.I. Thomas - D.S. Thomas, *The Child in America. Behavior Problems and Programs*, New York 1928, 572.

⁴⁰ Cited in Thayer, *The Case for the American Empire*, cit., 7.

⁴¹ M. Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan*, Toronto 2003.

⁴² Ferguson, *The Empire Slinks Back*, cit.

⁴³ R. Koselleck, *Einleitung*, in O. Brunner - W. Conze - R. Koselleck (Eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Bd. 1, Stuttgart 2004 [1979], XIII-XXVII, xv.

modified in and through history. So we should perhaps leave this question to the future or to Hollywood's futuristic reviews.⁴⁴

If, however, a «pattern of imperial interpretation» is just one of many possible interpretive models, then this also means that one should not limit oneself merely to imperial concepts, since they themselves are embedded in a discourse of alternative or associated concepts. The most prevalent historical example for this is the distinction between hegemony and empire which is by no means clear. The different origins of Greek, on the one hand, and Latin, on the other, already make this problematic. At a conceptual level, both terms are often confused, even in large-scale studies attempting to establish some degree of systematization,⁴⁵ or they only serve to make one term clearer at the expense of the other. In the context of the current debate on empires, the hegemony-empire distinction has become questionable. This is due to the fact that this fine distinction practically gives rise to those political, historical and cultural legitimation strategies it is seeking to analyze.⁴⁶

The same also applies, for example, to the issue that is often critically put forward of what the colonies or peripheries of the USA should be. Like many other equally important questions, this one can also be discarded from discourse. One way to achieve this is to make the sophistic remark that «Russia [...] was an empire; Britain had an empire».⁴⁷ So there seems to be no need for colonies in order to act in an imperial manner. As one can see, in such a politicized field of discourse, plausibility in itself does not suffice as a criterion for a definition, neither does truth, historical facts or moral desirability.

The anti-imperial tradition of the USA, in particular, has led to the need to find a large number of equivalent terms for «imperial», «imperialist», «empire», etc. This is illustrated by the use of terms such as hegemony, predominance, superpower, hyperpower, supremacy, ascendancy, full-spectrum dominance, «active foreign policy»,⁴⁸ «only superpower»,⁴⁹ «empire or leader?»⁵⁰ or «indispensable nation»

⁴⁴ For example, the most famous imperial-theoretical adaptation of Shakespeare and the decline of the USSR in *StarTrek VI, The Undiscovered Country* (1991, director Nicholas Meyer; Paramount Pictures). For utopian adaptations of the imperial problem via science fiction see, inter alia, D.L. Bernardi, *StarTrek and History. Race-ing toward a White Future*, New Brunswick (NJ)-London 1998, and J. Weldes (Ed.), *To Seek Out New Worlds. Exploring Links between Science Fiction and World Politics*, New York 2003.

⁴⁵ E.g. U. Menzel, *Imperium oder Hegemonie? Die USA als hegemoniale Ordnungsmacht. Über Herfried Münklers 'Imperien'*, «Kommune» 23, 2005, 64-72, see also for Menzel's large-scale project <http://www-public.tu-bs.de:8080/~umenzel/inhalt/index.html> [accessed September 12, 2010].

⁴⁶ Thus, Münkler, *Empires*, cit., 46 says, for instance: «The hegemon will [...] appear as *primus inter pares* [...] while the term empire will apply when the gap between the central power and other members of the political order is so great that it cannot be bridged even with legal fictions concerning equality».

⁴⁷ Hosking, cited in Maier, *Among Empires*, cit., 5.

⁴⁸ R. Kagan, *Dangerous Nation. America's Foreign Policy from its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century*, New York 2004.

⁴⁹ Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York 1997.

⁵⁰ H. Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, New York 2002.

(Madeleine Albright), etc. In this sense, these are patterns of imperial interpretation and, in this respect, their use is not merely about «splitting semantic hairs».⁵¹

The struggle for the appropriation and interpretation of political concepts is being waged by means of arguments and other forms of power. This is why when Barack Obama emphasized that «America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire» in his «Speech to the Islamic World» in 2009, this can only be viewed as an argument and a political statement but not as a definition. He goes on to say: «The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against an empire».⁵² The US president reacted strongly to an already established imperial interpretation. He normatively dissociated himself from it and used a historical argument to make his case even more rhetorically convincing. However, if we look at what Obama stresses in his speech this does not appear to be that easy. The content of his speech is perfectly structured, rhetorically brilliant and also adorned with the words «e pluribus unum». Yet, he highlighted that the USA is «not the crude stereotype» of an empire. If Obama had said that the USA was no empire, this would have introduced or touched upon another discourse than the intercultural and diplomatic one. However, it becomes evident that patterns of imperial interpretation comprise imperial, anti-imperial and de-imperialized semantics alike.

The conceptual potency of the term empire and related terms therefore provides both an instrument of scientific analysis and also opens up new political evaluation categories. They take their place among political combat terms such as democracy, justice, peace, public welfare, terrorism, war, etc. They can be substituted, transcended, de-thematized or appropriated for use in conventional or confrontational arguments to support political interests. My core hypothesis is that the entire arsenal of imperial concepts is *currently* undergoing a transformation within and as a result of the American debate on empires, in general, and the debate on the *American Empire*, in particular. The purpose of this transformation is to develop adequate analytical templates for self-description and for political descriptions of the world, since the concepts established so far seem to be no longer adequate for various reasons. The «conventional debate over US foreign policy has reached a dead end»;⁵³ «the Roman predicament» accordingly results from the asymmetric reality of international disorder,⁵⁴ and so there allegedly is no «process of becoming a nation with a normal foreign policy» yet.⁵⁵ Hence, in

⁵¹ A.J. Bacevich, *Neues Rom, Neues Jerusalem*, in Speck - Sznajder, *Empire Amerika*, cit., 71-82, 71 (transl.).

⁵² *The President's Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning*, minute 9:20, held on June 4, 2009 at Cairo University, available as download on: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/NewBeginning/> [accessed November 15, 2010]. Niall Ferguson (*The Empire Slinks Back*, cit.) wrote something quite similar in a remarkable twisting of terms; that American Empire «is the imperialism of a people who remember that their country secured its independence by revolt».

⁵³ Bacevich, *The Imperial Tense*, cit., xiii.

⁵⁴ James, *The Roman Predicament*, cit.

⁵⁵ D. Bandow, *Bankrupt Empire (commentary)*, «The National Interest» April 19, 2010, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/bankrupt-empire-3454?page=1> [accessed November 10, 2010]; also cf. D.

this context, it follows that *imperial* semantics is also a language of crisis (and not necessarily due to any risk of domestic crisis).

It remains to be seen *whether* concepts of empire will be able to assert themselves for analytical and political purposes. Yet, it is evident *that* attempts are being made to adapt such concepts in a relatively new and creative manner. *How* this is done, what kind of problems could arise and what opposition this model of interpretation could face will be the subject of the following considerations. The crucial question which will be addressed is what role ancient Rome plays for the USA, in particular, and why a creative reception of antiquity is necessary for both opponents and proponents of an empire debate.

III.

In general, recent adaptations of empire-analytical approaches in the USA do not primarily occur by means of the question «Do all roads lead to the new (American) Rome?»⁵⁶ Although some remarkable comparisons have been made,⁵⁷ a large number of publications merely toys with allusions to Rome, but does not adopt or transcend them⁵⁸ – sometimes for marketing or entertainment purposes: such a strategy «sells books [or is made] for good talk-show fodder, but is historically absurd».⁵⁹

The conspicuous aspect about the re-adaptation of Roman examples is therefore the changing reception of Roman antiquity towards imperial dilemma. To put it plainly: the question of what caused the Roman republic to fall is raised less frequently. Instead, the question is posed of why the *Imperium Romanum* was able to exist successfully for such a long time. In general, the objective is rarely to exclusively praise the Roman imperial example, nor is it to condemn the ancient Rome as an imperialist project. What is much more fascinating is the underlying assumption of such writings that Rome, on the whole, is, as a historical mirror, useful to analyze current American and global challenges of a possible world order and the threats it faces in the 21st century. At the least in this sense Rome persists to the USA as a mirror not for «imitation but inspiration».⁶⁰

This transition is even more apparent since the patterns of imperial interpretation and their Roman examples, particularly in the USA, bear great risks: When

Bandow, *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire*, Longwood (FL) 2006. In this context, however, as far as I can see, it is often neglected that the traditional assumptions of the political-science discipline of International Relations stem from the era of imperialism. There is therefore an imperial bias which makes it questionable whether these assumptions can be applied in an objective manner beyond the USA. Examples of this include, for instance, comparisons between *realism* and *idealism*, *Jacksonianism* and *Wilsonism*, *isolationism* and *universalism*, *unilateralism* and *multilateralism* (also cf. F. Gadinger - A. Heck - H. Dittgen, *Amerikanische Außenpolitik im Zeichen des Krieges gegen den Terror*, «Politische Vierteljahresschrift» 49, 2004, 726-755).

⁵⁶ J. Kurth, *Migration and the Politics of Empire*, «The National Interest» 71, 2003, 2 and 5-15, 2.

⁵⁷ E.g. Madden, *Empires of Trust*, cit., in German, in particular, P. Bender, *Weltmacht Amerika – Das Neue Rom*, Stuttgart 2003.

⁵⁸ E.g. Maier, *Among Empires*, cit.

⁵⁹ Madden, *Empires of Trust*, cit., 295.

⁶⁰ Hammond, *Ancient Rome and Modern America Reconsidered*, cit., 17.

topics relevant to empire are put on the agenda one also has to go back to the Roman Empire. And if they are addressed, they can also be manipulated argumentatively for current debates by putting Rome's political relevance into perspective (e.g. by increasing the number of empires for comparison). Furthermore, the long tradition of American self-comparisons with Rome is now more likely than ever to take a stand on imperial Rome, because the traditional anti-imperial (or originally anti-British, later anti-Hitlerian or anti-Soviet) demeanour no longer fits. The «empires of evil» have been defeated and, as a consequence, the USA became a global power. As a political reflection in the *American Empire* discourse, Roman antiquity now seems to have a stronger momentum than ever: interested players are forced to take a stand on imperial Rome if they do not want to give their opponents an argumentative edge.

This pressure is also accompanied by a potential to transform antiquity. Yet, if one merely focuses on the model «The Founders and the Classics»,⁶¹ which has received so much attention, this is difficult to discover. From the very beginning, ancient Rome was an «iconic empire» for the USA, as for «the West» in general.⁶² Despite all «resistance to the traditions of Europe, America today offers a richer and more varied legacy of neo-classicism than anywhere else in the world».⁶³ Evidently not every Latin quote should be mistaken for an affirmation of the empire, yet even the founding fathers presented themselves as being more classical than the classics.⁶⁴ Each dollar bill depicts a Roman motif, such as the Senate, the Capitol, the American national emblem, various names of cities, the apparently timeless classicist magnificent buildings and, last but not least, political monuments such as the *Jefferson Memorial* which was purposefully designed to be reminiscent of Hadrian's Pantheon in Rome. Some *cavaliers*, aristocratic Southerners of the 19th century, even tried to trace their ancestral lineage back to antiquity.⁶⁵

⁶¹ C.J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics. Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment*, Cambridge (MA) 1994.

⁶² Chua, *Day of Empire*, cit., 29; cf. A. Demandt, *Die klassische Antike in Amerika*, in P. Gassert - D. Junker - W. Mausbach - M. Thunert (Eds.), *Was Amerika ausmacht. Multidisziplinäre Perspektiven*, Stuttgart 2009, 33-45; G. Ferrero, *Ancient Rome and Modern America. A Comparative Study of Morals and Manners*, New York (NY)-London 1914; D. Hannemann, *Klassische Antike und amerikanische Identitätskonstruktion: Untersuchungen zu Festreden der Revolutionszeit und der frühen Republik 1770-1815*, Paderborn 2008; R. Hingley (Ed.), *Images of Rome. Perceptions of ancient Rome in Europe and the United States in the Modern Age*, Ann Arbor (MI) 2001; C.W. Kallendorf, *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*, Malden (MA) 2007; M. Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America*, Oxford 2008; J. Urzidil, *Amerika und die Antike*, Zürich 1964; W.L. Vance, *America's Rome*, 2 Vol., New Haven (CT) 1989/90; C. Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910*, Baltimore (MD) 2004; G.S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787*, Chapel Hill (NC) 1969.

⁶³ S.L. Dyson, *Rome in America*, in R. Hingley (Ed.), *Images of Rome. Perceptions of ancient Rome in Europe and the United States in the Modern Age*, Ann Arbor (MI) 2001, 57-69, 59.

⁶⁴ E. Shalev, *Ancient Masks, American Fathers: Classical Pseudonyms During the American Revolution and Early Republic*, «Journal of the Early Republic» 23, 2003, 151-172; M. Sellers, *American Republicanism. Roman Ideology in the United States Constitution*, Basingstoke 1994.

⁶⁵ Cf. W. Schivelbusch, *Die Kultur der Niederlage. Der amerikanische Süden 1865, Frankreich 1871, Deutschland 1918*, Frankfurt/M. 2003, 63.

These days, however, it is difficult to derive clear path dependencies from this American traditions. There is too little socio-political familiarity with the antiquity to be able to draw clear, cohesive conclusions about the transforming discourse on the reception of antiquity, which supposedly started with the founding fathers and continues until today. Even the education of political and intellectual elites does not occur in an aristocratic manner in (post)modern mass democracies, but, at least ideally, in a meritocratic fashion. This has replaced Old-Europe's aristocratic and humanistic education traditions of the generation of the founding fathers which were influenced by the classical period.⁶⁶ These days, even knowledge of the antiquity that has already been adapted and derived directly from historical sources cannot be regarded as completely self-evident. Yet, this is indispensable if one seeks rhetorically to refer to examples from classical antiquity and to present them to a modern-day audience. As a consequence, references to the antiquity have continuously decreased in political rhetoric.⁶⁷ The few prominent Americans, such as Gore Vidal or West Virginia's late former senator Robert C. Byrd, who have presented themselves as being completely «classical» are seen as absolute exceptions.⁶⁸

This may lead to the usual criticism of an apparent or real cultural decline. However, it bears a huge potential for the *American Empire* discourse to see Rome in a new light – quite similar to the view of the founding fathers, though emancipated from them. Hannah Arendt already pointed out that the founding fathers did not wish for a «new Rome», but for an interpretation «in a new light».⁶⁹ Precisely because of the current arbitrary interpretation of ancient Rome as merely the «iconic empire» of the USA, it is possible to forget that the American Revolution and the founding fathers «transcend[ed] antiquity in the demeanour of ancient founders, thus affirming the global historical relevance of the American renewed foundation» since they «received – and dismissed antiquity».⁷⁰

The question «*Why Rome?*» is therefore a lot more complex than the mere reference to empires suggests. This particular interpretation of Rome as being instrumental in transforming antiquity obviously has a double function within the contemporary imperial discourse or can ideally adopt two possible forms. To be more precise: The reference to Rome can either point to the republican tradition of the antiquity-versed American founding fathers or it can be reinvented as an

⁶⁶ M. Meckler (Ed.), *Classical Antiquity and the Politics of America: From George Washington to George W. Bush*, Waco (TX) 2006.

⁶⁷ J. Riecker, «*Das Geheimnis der Freiheit ist der Mut*». *Antike Vorbilder in der amerikanischen Außenpolitik von Theodore Roosevelt bis Bill Clinton*, Paderborn 2006.

⁶⁸ Cf. Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America*, cit., 1, 258.

⁶⁹ Cited in Riecker, «*Das Geheimnis der Freiheit ist der Mut*», cit., 82 (transl.).

⁷⁰ Vorländer, *Die Gründer und die Klassiker*, cit., 125; also cf. W. Nippel, *Antike oder moderne Freiheit? Die Begründung der Demokratie in Athen und in der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt/M. 2008; W.P. Adams, *Republikanische Verfassung und bürgerliche Freiheit. Die Verfassungen und politischen Ideen der amerikanischen Revolution*, Darmstadt-Neuwied 1973; R. Meyert, *Die Klassiker und die Gründer. Die Rezeption politischen Ordnungsdenkens im Streit zwischen Federalists und Anti-Federalists*, «Dresdner Beiträge zur Politischen Theorie und Ideengeschichte» 2, Dresden 1999.

independent category of imperial thought, which then overtly or covertly breaks with the internal lines of reception of the founding fathers.

Hence, in the reference to Rome there is an aporia inherent in the question: Is it ancient Roman logic which, in the face of current «imperial» challenges, leads to the comparison between Rome and America? Or is it the American founding fathers' republican-style reception of antiquity which calls for a historical self-comparison with a virtuous or deterrent Rome, virtually path-dependent, as soon as there is the risk of any internal or external threat to the nation? In the former case, the reference to Rome would have an analytical function aimed at tapping into and exploiting the historically imperial knowledge of power. If necessary, this could subsequently be used as a form of (self-)criticism. In terms of the second possibility, the reference to Rome would have a revitalising function for the democracy with the already intrinsic critical objective to address the threats to the American republic. So in the first case, Rome would itself constitute a category of thought, whereas in the second case the traditional American reception of Rome would be a category of thought.

A break with American traditions, whatever shape this may take, can – by referring to the reception of antiquity of the founding fathers – be discussed and criticized, ignored, contextualized, relativized or covered up without automatically losing its legitimizing impact. Nothing has yet been said about the legitimizing quality of these different receptions. This is because with both forms of interpretation, a re-appropriation or transforming adaptation of the ancient repertoire is taking place, without leaving the patterns of imperial interpretation. Protagonists of both sides are therefore able to present themselves through their line of argumentation as the better and more authentic Americans who are more loyal to tradition. In other words: the references made to Rome in the discourse on an *American Empire* use the persuasive power of historical comparisons. Yet, this still begs the question of which interpretation of ancient Rome characterizes the reception of antiquity: the original one or that of the founding fathers. In attempting to answer this, both lines of thought move away from historical truth or traditionalist path dependence. This also distinguishes the current imperial discourse as a project of elites. Of course, the crux of the matter is that those who, on closer examination, do not (like the founding fathers) consider Rome to be a role model, still require background knowledge about empires.

It is in this field of tension that the potential for theoretical transformation and practical innovation of the current American imperial discourse lies. Yet, it is precisely this openness to interpretation which makes the imperial discourse within the USA and its often ambivalent language suitable for description as a discourse of crisis. Evidently, a common language and the corresponding political stakeholders are missing which could help to make political reality more tangible and to legitimize it. Yet the political challenge contained in this question of identity would be completely underestimated if the imperial discourse was only concerned with trying to interpret or find the true reception of antiquity by means of discussion, rather than regarding this as an issue of examining a conflict of iden-

tity. This has to do with the fact that it cannot be exploited any longer in the context of the traditional, non-imperial republican up to clear anti-imperial national discourse, which is why these issues could shake the cornerstones of American self-understanding. And this crisis is even made both clearer and more confusing by the fact that, for example, some famous neo-conservatives are united in the «*Project for the New American Century*», while some left-wing liberals and critical republicans are members of the «*American Empire Project*». ⁷¹ In conclusion, three examples for these empire-specific transformative receptions of antiquity, which are generally supported, will be examined.

IV.

Numerous themes can be used for the purpose of Roman-imperial self-portrayals. These range from every empire's belief in its own to issues regarding internal political-republican stability and imperial peace, to the problem of decadence. Applied to the USA, such themes would correspondingly relate to democratic exceptionalism or the latest «*redux*» version ⁷² of an «*imperial presidency*», ⁷³ to the «*Pax Americana*» ⁷⁴ or to an imperial decline through the loss of republican virtues. ⁷⁵ These and other *topoi* referred to in all receptions of ancient Rome, are constructed in such a way that they are mutually dependent: The question of the virtuousness of domestic politics, for instance, depends on the credibility of the «*imperial mission*» ⁷⁶ and thus on the ability of an empire to be governed centrally in a responsible and stable manner. Should virtue turn into hubris, peace will fail, it will be impossible to keep the periphery pacified without too much effort and the empire will become overstretched. Consequently, anti-imperial resistance arises and the imperial elite becomes reluctant to cover the rising costs of the imperial project. It therefore increasingly engages «*barbaric*» mercenaries in its army, thus shifting the imperial leadership competence towards the estranged periphery whose power-hungry and disparate «*proconsuls*» ultimately drive the empire into political, military, economic and cultural ruin.

These imperial patterns reveal tipping points, which – at least as far as the current publications discussing the main themes of the discourse on the *American Empire* go – see ancient Rome less as an unchanged *role model* and much more as a warning sign. Three of these tipping points are democracy (*res publica*), peace

⁷¹ <http://www.newamericancentury.org/> and <http://www.americanempireproject.com/> [accessed October 19, 2010].

⁷² S. Schreyer, *Imperial Presidency Redux? Die institutionelle Machtbalance zwischen Terrorbekämpfung und Präventivkrieg*, in J. Hills - J. Wilzewski (Eds.), *Defekte Demokratie – Crusader State? Die Weltpolitik in der Ära Bush*, Trier 2008, 111-140.

⁷³ A.M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Imperial Presidency. With a New Introduction*, New York 2004; A. Rudalevige, *The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing Presidential Power after Watergate*, Ann Arbor (MI) 2005.

⁷⁴ A. Parchami, *Hegemonic Peace and Empire. The Pax Romana, Britannica and Americana*, London 2009.

⁷⁵ K. Fischer, *Political Momentum and Long-Range Effects of the Pattern of Decadence* (forthcoming 2011).

⁷⁶ See Münkler, *Empires*, cit.

(*pax*) and expansion (imperialist extension). Referring back to the inadequacies and risks of these, an argumentative course is often set, particularly in connection with the discourse on the *American Empire*, which practically takes a single interpretation of the empire, thus making it nearly impossible to detect any contradiction with regard to the Roman-imperial antiquity or the reception of the antiquity by the founding fathers.

The most well-known topos of such an «improving» adaptation of the antiquity is the abandonment of the supposedly inevitable juxtaposition of the republic and the *imperium*. Both with regard to ancient Rome and the USA, this antagonism was traditionally seen as a balance between presenting oneself internally as a republic and externally as an empire.⁷⁷ Harvard historian Eric Robertson pointed out that «what seems like an obvious contradiction to us, to celebrate equality and freedom at home while engaging in despotic rule over others abroad, was simply the way things worked to the Athenians».⁷⁸ Even though that may be true the Athenian formation didn't face itself as a contradiction. The USA, in contrast, faces such a challenge since the time of its foundation, so that part of the discourse on empires is to understand as a mere Roman predicament. And meanwhile, the most recent discussions on empires reveal a significant transformation from the traditional view that empires have to become and to act «undemocratic by definition».⁷⁹ What is most remarkable about this move away from the original view, in terms of a transformative understanding of antiquity, is that the deeply entrenched and yet critical tendency, especially among the neo-conservatives, to exaggerate and over-emphasize military power,⁸⁰ is only complemented by serious warnings of various kinds voiced by leftist liberals against so-called *hubris*.⁸¹ Military power is often immanently interpreted to be an «imperial burden» by representatives of both the conservative and the liberal traditions,⁸² which carries the risk of both a «blowback» from the peripheries against the mother country and the appearance of an American Caesar or proconsuls.⁸³ The self-confidence which comes with being a superpower of unimaginable strength is reinforced, in particular, by emphasizing the fact that this power needs to be handled responsibly in order to secure it. In this case, the imperial burden is evidently not that of

⁷⁷ Cf. J. Petras - M. Morley, *Empire or Republic? American Global Power and Domestic Decay*, New York 1995.

⁷⁸ E.W. Robinson, *American Empire? Ancient Reflections on Modern American Power*, CW 99, 2005, 35-50, 50.

⁷⁹ C. Tilly, *How Empires End*, in K. Barkey - M. von Hagen (Eds.), *After Empire. Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building. The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires*, Boulder (CO) 1997, 1-11; see also Biskamp, *Die Dramaturgie demokratischer Imperien*, cit.

⁸⁰ E.g. J.J. Hentz (Ed.), *The Obligation of Empire. United States' Grand Strategy for a New Century*, Lexington (KY) 2004; Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, cit.

⁸¹ E.g. N. Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival*, New York 2003; M. Ignatieff, *Empire Amerika?*, in Speck - Sznajder, *Empire Amerika*, cit., 2003a, 15-37.

⁸² E.g. E.W. Lefever, *America's Imperial Burden. Is the Past Prologue?*, Oxford 1999.

⁸³ C. Johnson, *Blowback, Second Edition: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, New York 2003.

the «white man's» *mission civilisatrice*, which the British author Rudyard Kipling sought to assign to the USA in his famous poem. In today's empire discourse, the imperial burden has instead become much more of a domestic issue: Outwardly, by contrast, a veritable charm offensive is launched, spanning all political positions, which is sugar-coated with euphemistic qualifiers: «empire by invitation»,⁸⁴ «liberal empire»,⁸⁵ «consensual empire»,⁸⁶ «empire of trust»,⁸⁷ «benevolent empire». ⁸⁸ Or the guidebook *What would the Founders do?*, a variation on the concept *What would Jesus do?*, with no ironic undertone intended, points out – when it comes to the question whether «the Founders would fear an American empire?»: «[N]one [of them] doubted that America could be an empire and a republic at the same time». ⁸⁹

This peculiarity cannot be merely ascribed to the differences between the Roman republic and a modern democracy.⁹⁰ What is more decisive is the association that is established in both periods to various models of peace. It is therefore important to stress that the perceptions of domestic political rule in the antiquity were elitist and exclusive, whereas in modern, democratic and peace-oriented thinking, they tend to be more universal and expansive.⁹¹ This distinction was even applied to the British Empire: «[W]hereas the Victorian/Edwardian *Pax Britannica* was to be lauded as the peace of the British Empire, the *Pax Americana* was to be global in scale; whereas the *Pax Britannica* had been identified with British rule and with the task of civilizing 'backward' races, *Pax Americana* is striking in both its ambition and in its universalism». ⁹² The idea of achieving a *Pax Americana* by means of democratization is therefore as necessarily paradox as is the theory of «Democratic Peace» itself: the concept of a peaceful world order may include belligerent components, whenever the purpose is to make the world «safe for democracy» (Woodrow Wilson). Yet, in terms of a transformed understanding of antiquity, this enables those pursuing the American mission of democratizing the world to compare themselves with the «Golden Age» of imperial Rome⁹³ and to use and adapt this in the traditional «*empire of liberty*» and «*empire of freedom*» language accordingly, which is frequently found in politically missionary and expansionist references, such as with the Federalists or with Thomas Jefferson. ⁹⁴

⁸⁴ Initially coined by G. Lundestad, *Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952*, «Journal of Peace Research» 23, 1986, 263-277.

⁸⁶ Maier, *Among Empires*, cit.

⁸⁵ Ferguson, *Colossus*, cit.

⁸⁷ Madden, *Empires of Trust*, cit.

⁸⁸ R. Kagan, *Benevolent Empire*, «Foreign Policy» 111, 1998, 24-35.

⁸⁹ R. Brookhiser, *What Would the Founders Do? Our Questions, Their Answers*, New York 2006, 126.

⁹⁰ Remarkd on by Nippel, *Antike oder moderne Freiheit*, cit.; cf. R. Balot, *Polybius' Advice to the Imperial Republic*, «Political Theory» 38, 2010, 483-509.

⁹¹ S. Huhnholz - K. Fischer, *Amnesie und Antizipation. Ein politiktheoretischer Versuch zum Problem von Nachkriegsordnungen*, «Behemoth» 3, 2010, 49-74, <http://www.oldenbourg-link.com/doi/pdf/10.1524/behe.2010.0004> [accessed September 13, 2010], 54-59.

⁹² Parchami, *Hegemonic Peace and Empire*, cit., 170.

⁹³ Madden, *Empires of Trust*, cit.

⁹⁴ More on this in P.S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire. The Language of American Nationhood*, Charlottesville (VA) 2000; R.A. van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire*, New York 1974; Wehler, *Der Aufstieg des amerikanischen Imperialismus*, cit.

The idea of expansionism provides a third and final example. The issue of political expansion, military conquest and the imperial stabilization of regions goes back all the way to antiquity.⁹⁵ Yet a new argument has arisen in the *American Empire* discourse, particularly among opponents of the *empire* debate: namely that empires of the antiquity and later periods define themselves through the direct and even sovereign control of colonies, provinces and foreign territories.⁹⁶ One need only to look at the Creole administration in the former «New World» of Latin America, or refer to the United Kingdom's system of «indirect rule», or to the more recent use of the terms «satellite states» or «puppet regimes» to find evidence that this statement is false. Both the majority of continental empires and most of the sea, overseas and trading empires have always made use of a *variety* of domination policies, of which direct rule was only ever one option.⁹⁷ Though this opposing theory of land occupation provides a thrilling argument, it plainly ignores the possibility of learning from the history of empires by explicitly referring to it.

In 1779, at a ripe old age, Benjamin Franklin presented his remarkable «Political, Miscellaneous, and Philosophical Pieces». Dating back to 1774, his «Rules for reducing a Great Empire to a small one» (sequence number 28) provide a rather mocking view of the British.⁹⁸ Franklin recommends not incorporating the distant «provinces» of an empire too heavily into the system of the «mother country». This, he says with biting sarcasm, would make it easier to rid oneself of it, reduce the risk of separation, and avoid competition at eye level. Franklin uses the rather abstruse image of a large cake to illustrate this, which would fall apart if one didn't, as a clever baker, cut off the protruding edges.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Franklin obviously had a political sense for the dialectics of «imperial overstretch» on the one hand, and the «Augustan threshold», on the other.⁹⁹ However, Franklin was influenced by Ciceronian, heav-

⁹⁵ K. Raaflaub, *City-State, Territory and Empire in Classical Antiquity*, in J. Emlen - A. Molho - K. Raaflaub (Eds.), *Athens and Rome, Florence and Venice: City-States in Classical Antiquity and Medieval Italy*, Ann Arbor (MI) 1991, 565-588.

⁹⁶ Cf. e.g. E. Todd, *After Empire. The Breakdown of the American Order*, New York 2003, and Zelikow, *The Transformation of National Security*, cit., 18 ss. This ultimately reflects a limitation, which is particularly regarded by political imperial critics as being quite unique, perhaps even abstruse. In general, empires are inherently *weak states* (H.-H. Nolte [Ed.], *Imperien. Eine vergleichende Studie*, Schwalbach [Ts.] 2008, 13; Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, cit.; Madden, *Empires of Trust*, cit., xiv), although the term «weak» does not imply «falling apart» here, nor does it refer to the idea of a «failing» or «failed state». Rather, it entails the idea of incoherence, instability or «vulnerability» (C.A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire*, Ithaca [NY] 1994): «Of all political power structures, the empire is simultaneously the most potent and the most unstable» (Garrison, *America as Empire*, cit., 100).

⁹⁷ One could also simply argue in a radical, decisionist way, as Carl Schmitt did, for instance, that *de facto* sovereignty depends on a power that has the ability to create and influence exceptional circumstances (C. Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre der Souveränität*, Berlin 1993). Then the constitutional form of formally independent and sovereign states says little about the actually constitutional reality of a satellite state, which was merely tolerated by the empire.

⁹⁸ B. Franklin, *Political, miscellaneous, and philosophical pieces*, London 1779, 343 ss.

⁹⁹ The so-called «Augustan threshold», as Doyle coined it (*Empires*, cit., 93), refers to the fact

ily expansionist components of the ancient concept of mandate, *imperium*.¹⁰⁰ The latter cannot unreservedly be applied to all empires, since the sea empires or the «post-territorial empire», as Charles S. Maier calls the USA,¹⁰¹ generally operate via military bases and trading points or their control of them.

These polemic and critical views of land occupation and loss have clearly been internalized in contemporary American thinking, compared with the times of Benjamin Franklin. This is apparent from the fact that the harshest critics of imperial thinking today do not criticize the lure of territorial conquest, so much as today's reborn Roman ideology of «defensive imperialism»¹⁰² and the irresponsible «incoherence» of the undertakings: «[T]he new imperialists do not want to rule permanently over foreign lands. They want only an indirect and informal Empire, though one that threatens, coerces and even sometimes invades foreign states, improves them and then leaves».¹⁰³ Meanwhile, the opponents have recognized what Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde remarked about the EU: «Uninhibited expansion leads to a weakening rather than a strengthening of the ability to take political action by causing an excessive amount of pressure from problems and involvement – weakening through overstretch».¹⁰⁴

So if, among many others, George W. Bush provides the supposedly logical argument that «America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish. [...] It has] no territorial ambitions. We don't seek an empire», then this is a political statement that is by no means in opposition to the theoretical assumptions on empires but knows very well how to take advantage of them.¹⁰⁵ Yet, as in the case of Obama

that, at its core, an empire relies on the appeal of taking a varied approach in its management of the peripheries, i.e. from the rejection of apparent foreign rule and exploitation to the stronger participation of the peripheries in central decisions, privileges and mutually binding obligations, to the partial delegation of administrative and organizational concerns. An imperial «overstretch», according to Kennedy (*The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, cit.), describes the affliction of an empire caused by overstretching its imperial capacity over too large a number of locations and activity posts, and overtaxing its personnel and military and economic resources, so that it is ultimately not able to or appears not to be able to meet its obligations. (For a combined analysis of both concepts Münkler, *Empires*, cit.)

¹⁰⁰ J. Fisch - D. Groh - R. Walther, *Imperialismus*, in O. Brunner - W. Conze - R. Koselleck (Eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, IV, Stuttgart 2004 (1982), 171-236, 172.

¹⁰¹ Maier, *Among Empires*, cit., 277.

¹⁰² Adler, *Post-9/11 Views of Rome*, cit.

¹⁰³ M. Mann, *The Incoherent Empire*, London 2003, 27.

¹⁰⁴ E.-W. Böckenförde, *Nein zum Beitritt der Türkei*, «Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung» 289 (December 10), 2004, 35 and 37 (transl.).

¹⁰⁵ If *this* standard had really been set, then the USA would have already been one of the fastest expanding empires in the world history in its early beginnings (cf. Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, cit., 607 ss.; D. Junker, *Power and Mission. Was Amerika antreibt*, Freiburg i.Br. 2003; H.-H. Nolte [Ed.], *Geschichte der USA I. Von der Entstehung bis zum Ausgang des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Schwalbach [Ts.] 2006; M. Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace. Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*, New York [NY] 2002; graphically adapted and more sharply defined for an «internal empire» in H. Zinn - M. Konopacki - P. Buhle, *A People's History of American Empire. A Graphic Adaptation*, New York 2008), although Hobsbawm (*On Empire*, cit., 73) did insist that the *American Empire* was only «the logical by-product of this [American] form of expansion across a continent».

mentioned above, this makes everything more complicated when Bush continues with implicitly empire-missionary arguments of not seeking to establish an empire because «[o]ur nation is committed to freedom for ourselves *and for others*». ¹⁰⁶

The imperial topoi of democracy, peace and expansion individually undergo a transformation of their understanding of antiquity, as for instance in the examples mentioned above, and only have argumentative clout because they are merged into a single pattern of imperial interpretation where they mutually support each other. Especially the traditional topos of fearing an internal empire, a dictatorship lead by an American Caesar or Emperor, seems to perfectly undermine a widespread self-description as a full spectrum empire, which expands its influence not only for freedom, justice, liberation, and peace. That is why exceptionalism and selected receptions of antiquity constitute a feasible pattern of imperial interpretation.

v.

Even the phrase of having an empire in which the sun never sets, which dates back to Karl V, has long been used by the United States Department of Defence. ¹⁰⁷ So the idea of an *American Empire* is not really new to anyone anymore. In fact, it sometimes disappears altogether behind the matter-of-fact way in which conventional, imperial topoi and traditional American *master narratives* are interwoven with one another. This «double-edged sword» of exceptionalism ¹⁰⁸ – i.e. the conviction popularized by the Puritan John Winthrop of being a New Jerusalem, «a city upon a hill» invoked in the *Sermon on the Mount*, which was to shine upon the world ¹⁰⁹ – has constantly been expanded to include perfectly matching myths such as the *frontier*, *manifest destiny* and the *individual pursuit of happiness*. These have meanwhile merged into the cultural amalgamation of the *American Dream*, ¹¹⁰ into *Americanism* ¹¹¹ and into the values-based civilization conglomerate of the *Free World*. ¹¹² Also the «Wilsonian syndrome» that is a famous characteristic of American foreign policy, and which Raymond Aron called the «swing between crusading and withdrawal into isolation», ¹¹³ has always been a feature of

¹⁰⁶ Excerpts of speeches held in June and November 2002, quoted in M. Ignatieff, *The American Empire; The Burden*, «New York Times», Jan. 5, 2003, New York Edition, part 6, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, cit., 29.

¹⁰⁸ S.M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism. A double-edged sword*, New York-London 1996.

¹⁰⁹ Mt. 5, 14; cf. also Bacevich, *Neues Rom, Neues Jerusalem*, cit., 71-82.

¹¹⁰ W. Fluck, *Kultur*, in P. Lösche (Ed.), *Länderbericht USA*, Bonn 2008, 712-814; H. Paul, *The Myth That Made America. An Introduction to American Studies*, Bielefeld 2011 (forthcoming).

¹¹¹ M. Kazin - J.A. McCartin (Eds.), *Americanism. New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*, Chapel Hill (NC) 2006.

¹¹² T.G. Ash, *Free World: America, Europe, and the Surprising Future of the West*, New York 2004.

¹¹³ Aron, *The Imperial Republic*, cit., xvii; K. Schwabe, *Weltmacht und Weltordnung. Amerikanische Außenpolitik von 1898 bis zur Gegenwart*, Paderborn 2006; Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, cit.

imperial thinking. Alan Posener even speaks of a «periodically returning collective ADHD syndrome». ¹¹⁴

None of this is new. What is new is the discernibly fast disappearing fear of the intellectual elites to refer to the *American Empire* as *Imperium Americanum* or as a conceivable *New Rome* and thus to depart from conventional partisan politics. Obviously one expects this to offer greater legitimization or analytical added value. Public political rhetoric may avoid making affirmative comparisons with ancient Rome, and with empires in general, but nevertheless clearly takes a position on them. Furthermore, by strictly denying any resemblance, American politicians are unwittingly confirming the disputed patterns of imperial interpretation.

Even though imperial Rome may not be politically useful, as a category of political reflection it is analytically necessary. In itself, ancient Rome is not automatically more useful than subsequent empires in history (the possible function of political legitimization of comparable analytical references to other empires needs to be further investigated in more detail). At least at present, ancient Rome is obviously not suitable as a legitimizing model of interpretation that is compatible with democratic thinking. The intellectual engagement with and adaptation or Americanization of tipping points and examples of the Romans' ability to master crises, and sometimes to relativize this in relation to other empires, is therefore all the more conspicuous. What is also remarkable is the matter-of-fact attitude with which one has recently begun to turn the traditional mirror discourse surrounding the downfall of the Roman Republic into a comparison of oneself with the imperial Rome and its imperial decline. However, there is obviously still a lack of appropriate adaptations of the completely different reception of antiquity by the founding fathers. It could therefore well be that the recent extension of the discourse on the *American Empire* to other empires than the Roman one were implicitly intended to bypass the analytically and legitimately risky comparison with traditional American receptions of antiquity.

This confirms the assumption that we have become historical witnesses of an internal American discourse that is *only starting to take shape*, in which the expertise on empires is being adapted and systemized, and shaping the political opinion of American politicians and the American political public. It remains to be seen whether this process will be successful and this cannot be gauged simply on the basis of a «change» heralded by a new president or from the clear rejection of the Manichean, foreign policy style of the last Bush administration.

On the basis of the observations, classifications and contemplations presented, we can conclude that the issue of the *American Empire* does indeed follow in the footsteps of the Roman logic, and thus the imperial challenge. It is not primarily to be understood as the familiar reflex, which in view of any risks dresses the American republic in a traditional, quasi-discursive toga in order to assure itself

¹¹⁴ A. Posener, *Imperium der Zukunft. Warum Europa Weltmacht werden muss*, Bonn 2007, 197 (transl.).

of the reception of antiquity established by the founding fathers. On the contrary, this bears the potential for considerable political tension. One might gain the impression that the recently emphasized, uninterrupted neoclassical line of tradition in the USA emphasizes ancient Rome as *the* «iconic empire» in order to symbolically hide the political divide between the early republican reception of antiquity and today's imperial interest in antiquity.

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
sebastian.huhnholz@gsi.uni-muenchen.de