

# Book Review: Why America Is Not a New Rome

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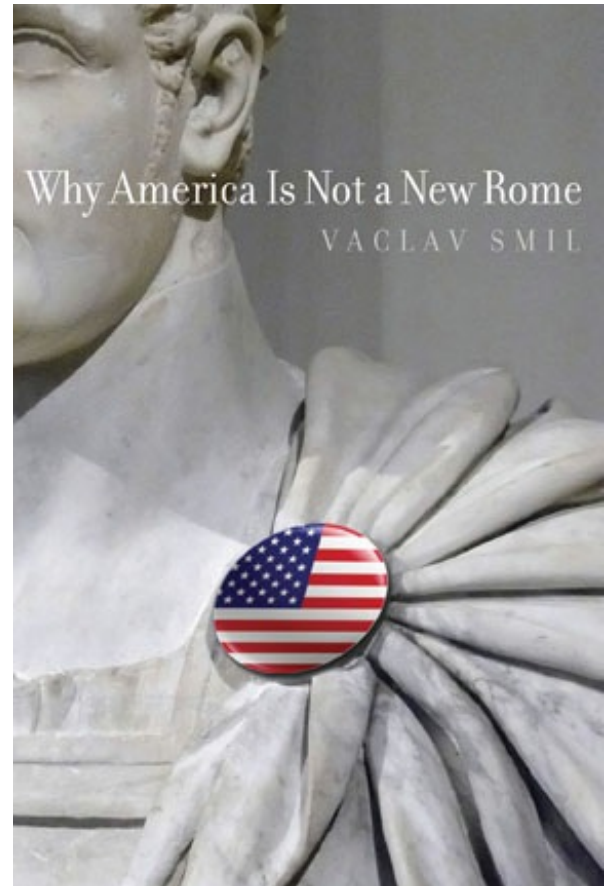
*America's post-Cold War strategic dominance and its pre-recession affluence inspired pundits to make celebratory comparisons to ancient Rome at its most powerful. Now, with America no longer perceived as invulnerable, comparisons are to the bloated, decadent, ineffectual later Empire. In *Why America Is Not a New Rome*, Vaclav Smil looks at these comparisons in detail, going deeper than the facile analogy-making of talk shows and glossy magazine articles. He finds profound differences. **Joel Krupa** reviews.*

**Why America Is Not a New Rome. Vaclav Smil. MIT Press. 2014.**

Great societies all leave their indelible mark on history and, no matter what you think of their leaders, foundational philosophies, or economic policies, the modern United States and the ancient Romans surely meet this standard of enduring impact. The Romans gave us the astonishingly insightful work of the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius, a panoply of architectural wonders, and remarkable models of large-scale organization and mobilization. Twentieth and twenty-first century America, meanwhile, has provided the global village with mass information organisers like Google, innumerable gadgets that enhance (and, at least in some cases, worsen) our daily lives, and [incredible manufacturing accomplishments](#) that have profitably commercialised hard work and creativity.

Given such achievements, it is unsurprising that Romans and Americans loom large in any objective assessment of the history of civilizations. With an ever-expanding variety of outlets for a cacophony of perspectives to be heard, it is equally unsurprising that analogy-obsessed pundits have found considerable room for comparison, for both cultures share numerous similarities. These links are seen to begin with a period of ascent to supremacy, wherein a nebulous “empire” was established. Notably, this rise to greatness is believed (or known, in the case of the Romans) to be accompanied by stagnation and an irreversible decline. Such observations lead to an important debate; namely, whether or not the debt-riddled U.S. “empire” is on a fast track to a Roman-like unraveling that will restore a multi-polar world and catalyze a revamping of the world order.

Not so fast, says the inimitable scientist/jack-of-all-trades Vaclav Smil. *Why America is Not a New Rome*, a short book originally published a few years ago and recently re-released in paperback by the MIT Press, helps to problematise – and ultimately dismantle – the seemingly immovable theoretical edifice of Washington, DC as contemporary Rome. Yes, certain parallels can be found (Smil points out that “basic human qualities, failures, and propensities have not undergone any cosmic shift in the last two millennia of human evolution”), but comparative analysis remains somewhat facile, starting with the fact that an enormous gap exists in the time periods which saw the flourishing of the two societies. This chasm has huge implications, as it means that Romans had no access to indispensable modern conveniences like computer-based technical innovations, cutting-edge medicines, hydrocarbon-powered transport, enhanced agriculture, or globe-spanning information technology. The duration of their “reign” is also troublesome; more specially, America can trace Independence Day back to 1776, while even a



conservative parameterisation of the Romans would show a much longer civilisational lifespan.



**The Roman Forum on Capitoline Hill, Rome, Italy. Photo Credit:David Ohmer. CC-BY.**

The previous paragraph alone would seem like enough to quiet any further discussion on the matter, even if we assume that we can universally define in an agreeable manner all of the terms – hegemony, empire, soft and hard power – that supposedly link the two (Smil goes to great pains to show that this is actually a rather impossible task). Gathering steam in his sophisticated debunking, further proofs of dissimilarity are offered, with the energy expert Smil including (what else?) energy consumption. He quite understandably italicises the mind-boggling following statement:

*An average American is now served by machines whose capacity is about 1 million greater than that of inanimately energised machines serving an average Roman.*

This stunning ubiquity of contraptions leads Smil to remind us that:

*An extraterrestrial observer who knows nothing of the history of technical advances on Earth...could easily conclude-judging simply by the magnitude of carbon metabolism (carbon oxidation through digestion by humans, carbon oxidation through high-temperature combustion by fuel-powered machines) — that machines are the planet's dominant creatures, with humans as their servants.*

Yet another incredible disparity is encountered in hygiene awareness, epidemiological overviews, population density (especially crowding) figures, and per-capita wealth distributions. Citing just one example from the aforementioned list, it would be inaccurate to say that public health standards during the Pax Romana were atrocious, as such a statement would imply that the terrible living standards encountered by the vast majority had some present-day analogue. Indeed, these Romans endured even worse fates, and it is not an exaggeration to note that the bulk of Roman *plebs* living in the great city stomached conditions – in “washrooms”, while sleeping in ultra-cramped low-quality housing, when meandering city streets – that were generally lower than those found in even the absolute poorest African countries of 2015. Not that they struggled along alone; even the hyper-wealthy Emperor was not

exempt from unfortunate incidents, evidenced in stories like that of an animal bringing an unannounced and rotting human hand into the Emperor's eating area. Indeed, to read this book is to be reminded about the magic of waste management, vaccination, clean water delivery, and sanitation engineering, as "the differences [between America and Rome] are not just two- or threefold (and hence easily imaginable and intuitively understandable) but span at least 1 order of magnitude, reaching levels with which our normal experience cannot easily cope."

Amusingly, the book provides a glimpse into a little-known aspect of Smil's character – a surprisingly well-rounded dry sense of humour. Indeed, several sections had this reviewer bursting out loud with laughter (an admittedly rare occurrence in past engagements with intellectually engaging texts). In one case, Smil uses a disturbing story involving an alarming choice of suicide method for a gladiator about to enter an exhibition (hint: it involves a very unclean bathroom cleansing tool) to calmly point out that "the hygienic implications of such sponges need no elaboration." Elsewhere, he marvels at an "inexplicable [American] fondness for baseball (a boring, sluggish game fueled by steroid-infused muscles)" and takes jabs at the world of "fake wrestling." This was a nice touch, and will hopefully be repeated in future Smil releases.

A couple minor flaws are worth mentioning in passing. For one, the book could likely have made the same case in fewer words. Brevity is a virtue, and careful editorial review might have enabled a number of sections to be markedly reduced (all while still comprehensively demolishing the general usefulness of the Roman-American relationship). Editorial review would also have mitigated this reviewer's second complaint; namely, annoying recurring issues with spelling mistakes that can be [found in other Smil releases](#).

To call this book a gripping page-turner may be a stretch (Twilight or John Grisham, it is not), but by Smil standards it is eminently readable and engrossing – even for the layperson. There are countless reasons to love Smil's rigorous work, but none supersedes his dispassionate application of facts and reason to contentious debates. In this regard, this treatise definitely does not disappoint. Highly recommended, especially for non-experts (like your correspondent).

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