

**THE RUTHLESS LAW OF THE JUNGLE?
STRUCTURAL REALISM, SECURITY
COMPULSION, AND THE RISE OF ROME**

David García Domínguez

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (PIF)

david.garciad@uam.es

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Resumo: A obra *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War and the Rise of Rome*, de Arthur Eckstein, abriu novos caminhos para os estudos sobre o imperialismo romano. Desde a sua publicação em 2006, vem sendo referência tanto para classicistas como para cientistas políticos. No entanto, nunca se deve desconsiderar a natureza controversa de sua tese central. Neste artigo, argumenta-se que há razões práticas e éticas para analisar a validade do realismo estrutural das Relações Internacionais, cujos postulados teóricos permeiam toda a obra e fornecem uma interpretação discutível do comportamento humano. Sugere-se que essas ideias foram reforçadas pelas circunstâncias políticas do início dos anos 2000, o que, por sua vez, explica a recepção geralmente positiva que o livro de Eckstein recebeu.

Palavras-chave: República Romana; imperialismo; diplomacia antiga; relações internacionais.

Abstract: Arthur Eckstein's *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War and the Rise of Rome* broke new ground for studies on Roman Imperialism. It was published in 2006, and it has remained an important reference both for classicists and political scientists ever since. By no means, however, should the controversial nature of its central thesis be overlooked. This article argues that there are both practical and ethical reasons to question the validity of IR structural realism, whose theoretical assumptions inform the whole book and provide it with a biased interpretation of human behavior. The suggestion is made that these ideas were enhanced by the political circumstances of the early 2000s, which in turn explains the generally positive reception that Eckstein's book was granted.

Keywords: Roman Republic; Imperialism; Ancient Diplomacy; International Relations.

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‘I have no wish,’ his lordship said, ‘to enter into a quarrel on this our last evening together (...) Let me say this. What you describe as “amateurism”, sir, is what I think most of us here still prefer to call “honour”.

Ishiguro Kazuo, *The Remains of the Day* (1989, 103)

Roman imperialism will never cease to divide scholars. A transformative phenomenon like no other –both at home and abroad–, this process implies a multiplicity of agents and admits a multiplicity of research strategies. However, diversity of approaches is nothing but the consequence of scholarly interest. The cause of this interest lies elsewhere, closer to modernity and contemporary politics: the Roman empire remains the quintessential image of imperial greatness within the so-called Western culture (Morley 2010, 1-12; Erskine 2010, xi; Mills 2013, 336-8). Discussions over the process that led to the exemplar empire are bound to be always in fashion, and always colored– to say the least– by contemporary political debate. No better case could be made for the accuracy of Benedetto Croce’s *dictum*: when it comes to empire, all history is current history.

The comings and goings of historiography add certainty to this impression. Mommsen made his case for an “accidental” Roman empire, the safest means to protect a unified Italy from its powerful neighbors. He did actually believe in balances of power and rejected aggressive expansionism, but his commitment to German unification led him to justify any action undertaken in the best interest of what he perceived as shattered, self-conscious nations –let these be ancient or modern. Mommsen’s view would find extensive critique in the following years, but it never went away. Quite the opposite, in fact: across the Atlantic, the discursive needs of a young republic with imperial aspirations would provide it with fertile grounds to grow. The American scholar Tenney Frank did his best to exonerate the Romans of any suspicion of deliberate expansionism. M. Holleaux subscribed to this view –he would certainly not have put it this way, though: “the facts” as “found” in the sources imposed themselves. Rome never sought for empire nor devised a plan for expansion. One way or another, these images of Roman empire were the fruit of the political and intellectual circumstances in

which they grew.¹ 1979 was bound to become a turning point, no less related to its own political context. W.V. Harris' *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome 327-70 BC* systematically undermined the doctrine of defensive imperialism, asserting the bellicose nature of Roman culture and pointing to long for glory and material profit as the engines of aggressive expansionism. This view had been expressed before and could even be presented as the orthodox one by the time Holleaux published his book,² but *War and Imperialism* connected with the anxieties of its time to reap a tremendous recognition.³ Harris' assessment was received with caution, but certain awareness spread that Harris had hit the wall. In an otherwise critical article that argued for the necessity of multi-layered explanations for Roman imperialism, John Rich said that, in his judgement, "no one ha[d] succeeded in producing a coherent and convincing restatement of that doctrine", and that he did not believe "that such a statement could be produced" (1993, 40; 65). This seems to have been the general feeling at the time. Even the most critical reviewers proclaimed that Harris had closed discussions over the aggressive or defensive nature of Rome's wars for good.⁴

What came afterwards was the all-too-improbable challenge to that impression. The reaction took long to come, but 2006 saw the landing of A. Eckstein's *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the of Rise Rome*, long in the making as the author himself admitted in the prologue to his book.⁵

We are presented here with an attempt to explain Roman expansion over the ancient Mediterranean in the light of modern international rela-

¹ Mommsen 1888 [1854] vol. 1, 781-2; Frank 1914, vii-ix; Holleaux 1921, iii-iv. These "concepts of defensive imperialism" were remarkably dissected by Jerzy Linderski (1984). See also Harris 1979, 163 nt. 1 with further references.

² Aggressive expansionism as the dominant doctrine by the 1920s: Holleaux 1921, iv nt. 1, where G. De Sanctis is quoted as the main proponent of such a view. Same view in Carcopino 1923, 112-3.

³ The overwhelming success of *War and Imperialism* is undoubtedly connected to the new attitude towards empire brought about by the Vietnam War (Rich 1993, 42). This intellectual phenomenon widely exceeds Classics: Vietnam marked an upsurge of academic writing on imperialism (Münkler 2005, vii-ix; Kiely 2010, 1). Interest in this topic suffered a steep downgrade, only reversed by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 and the subsequent reformulation of American foreign policy which culminated in the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

⁴ Sherwin-White appears especially unconvinced, even if he praises *War and Imperialism* as "a remarkable achievement" (1980, 181). However, he insists that fear and pre-emption might have been underestimated as causes of Roman imperialism by Harris. North (1981, 1; 2; 9) gives the book far more credit: to his mind, defensive imperialism would be thereafter "virtually untenable".

⁵ Eckstein 2006, ix. Previous assertions of his thesis can be read in Eckstein 2000, 867-71; 2003, 757-9; Champion and Eckstein, 2004. Certain ideas within the book (particularly the "empire by invitation" concept, seminal for the whole idea of multipolarity) are traceable to E. Gruen (e.g. 1984, 730), to whom the book is dedicated in gratitude for his teachings and kindness.

tions theory. Eckstein does not hide his commitment to a particular school of thought within this field: from the very beginning, he claims to be “most comfortable” with offensive realism (Eckstein 2006, 6 nt. 9).⁶ The outcome resembles former defensive imperialism, inasmuch as it concedes that search for security within a selfish international order was the primary force determining the militarism that drove to Roman empire (Hoyos 2013, 6-7). Together with other variants of realism, the branch to which Eckstein ascribes himself is first and foremost a rationalist-based approach: states involved in any political game are supposed to behave as self-conscious profit maximizers. “Profit” is mechanically identified with security and survival. This is an extremely problematic claim that would deserve in-depth reasoning, especially if we deal with “honour societies” such as those that dominated the Ancient world.⁷ Eckstein’s view on ancient international law is no less controversial: the book opens with the forthright claim that “[ancient] international law was minimal and in any case unenforceable” (2006, 1). The reader is not informed at this point that certain widespread habits existed which morally compelled the victorious agents to act with moderation before the defeated. Hence, non-specialist readers are deceived into perceiving the polemical premise of the book as an unproblematic truth: in the absence of law, all ancient actors were compelled to guarantee their own survival by their own means – that is to say, through the accumulation of force and the use of violence. Is this so? Obviously, this approach contains a measure of truth, but the lapidary statement about the law (which is essential for the acceptance of the rest) would most certainly give rise to bitter polemics during an academic meeting.⁸ However, Eckstein’s standpoint seems to be turning into the standard for those political scientists who operate on the margins of Classics.⁹

⁶ This means that he is committed to the most unforgiving of all realist paradigms, one that presents unending power-maximizing as the only viable interstate strategy (Mearsheimer 2001, 10-2). Both ontologically and epistemologically, this is just a radical offspring of structural realism (most importantly Waltz 1979).

⁷ Even Kenneth Waltz (1979, 88-92), whose *Theory of International Politics* has been seminal for contemporary neorealism, introduces what we may call the “security-seeking-state assumption” just as a radical abstraction, useful for theory construction but unrealistic by itself. This is nevertheless a throwaway line: rational assumptions are the foundation of the Waltz’s theory, and they are consistently treated as realities. In this vein, Eckstein sentences that “[b]ecause states exist as a multiplicity of independent entities and actors (...) in a system lacking a central authority and/or any effective international law, states are compelled to compete with each other in the pursuit of security” (2006, 12). There is no actual questioning of the security-seeking-state assumption. On honour societies, see Lebow 2008, 61-72.

⁸ See Burton 2009 as a salutary check on Eckstein 2009.

⁹ Particularly so Grygiel 2018, who seems unaware of the alternatives and takes Eckstein’s opinions at face value.

We could therefore consider that *Mediterranean Anarchy* marked a new oscillation in the pendulum-like movement that seems to characterize the study of Roman imperialism. Taking into account the aforementioned precedents of presenteeism, from Mommsen to Harris, we can guess that it was not an unmotivated swinging. This hunch leads to an unavoidable question: how, if at all, was Eckstein affected by the political concerns of the day when he wrote his book? The interdisciplinary nature of the book makes it mandatory to pose that question inversely: did his proposals have any impact on modern politics? Preposterous as this may sound, realism has determined the practice of international politics for a long time. History has been instrumental to strengthen its prestige, providing a seemingly inexhaustible quarry of “precedents” that seemed to confirm the validity of the realist theory. Obviously, this is nothing but “affective discourse”, as Gillett (2017, 2) defined it recently: the use of “a historical phenomenon with no immediate connection to the present” to “suggest that past conditions [w]ould be replicated now”.

This paper is intended to reflect on the relationship between Eckstein’s theses and the political realities of the 1990s and early 2000s. In order to do so, a twofold approach is proposed. I depart from a brief critique of structural realism, the theory that provides Eckstein with his “unexpressed philosophy and assumed terminology” (Linderski 1981, 140). One of the main contentions in this segment is that structural realism has a number of logical flaws that are leaked, in the form of assumptions or controversial readings of the evidence, into *Mediterranean Anarchy*. The fact that these theoretical flaws were not noticed by US-based classicists when the book was published provides the departure point for the second part of the article. This may be an effect of the intellectual anxieties of the Global West in the early 2000s: I suggest that these anxieties reinforced the realist logic and allowed it to appear as an uncontroversial depiction of reality. In order to sustain this point, I offer an analysis of the contemporary circumstances that lie behind the historical narratives about the Classical world that we find in *Mediterranean Anarchy*. Complementarily, a few words will be said about how structural realism –eventually reinforced by its “confirmation” in Graeco-Roman Antiquity– may provide a suitable ideology for contemporary imperialism.

THEORETICAL CRITIQUE OF STRUCTURAL REALISM

Structural realism shows an unmatched capacity to withstand theoretical criticism. It has been able to subsist and even to develop itself under serious intellectual opposition.¹⁰ This endurance has been enhanced by the simplicity of its method: neopositivism can be extremely appealing. According to Waltz –quoted by Eckstein himself as “the leading contemporary Realist theoretician”–, History provides a suitable “lab” to test a theoretical model. The method of falsification runs from the theory to “the facts”, conceived as an uncontroversial and objective entity (1979, 123-5). The possibility is not considered that the theory itself may determine the perception of causality, the only force that pulls “the facts” together. As Linderski (1981, 140) puts it, “facts are like words in a dictionary; they are dead. In the real language, words come to life only in enunciations; in the real world facts come to life only in the flow of history. And the flow of history, as we know it, flows from the ordering mind of the historian”. The endurance of realism in the face of critique is undoubtedly related to the discursive strategies that are attainable from this fallacious epistemology: it presents itself not as an interpretation of the reality, but as the reality itself (Burton 2011b, 18). Discussion should hence focus in how the theory imposes a certain perception of the facts.

No one would deny that structural realism is internally coherent. As has been said once and again about Waltz, the anarchical structure of the international realm is the cornerstone of his project (Wendt 1992, 392; Smith 1999, 92, 95). All states –and states alone, since this is a strongly state-centric theory that considers the sovereign state as the ultimate locus of political decision making– are functionally identical and aimed to materialize the same prize, namely, security and survival. In the absence of any form of ordered structure or common normative principles –enters the anarchy–, this situation will always drift towards conflict. Not only will conflict arise, but rivalry will deepen the competitive nature of the system, since the gaining of the security prize by those states best adapted to the (absence of) rules within the system will encourage others to follow suit. Eckstein provides us with a fast and brilliant summary of this bleak theory, from anarchy (2006,

¹⁰ A useful compilation of the criticisms that have been made about realism can be found in Booth 2007, 1-18. See also Lebow 2008, 12-3 and Burton 2011b, 15-8.

12-4) to self-help situation and its consequences (2006, 14-23). We may reject realism as expressed above in a number of ways. In what follows, I will point to three *petitiones principiorum*.

First: no demonstration is offered for the idea that security is the ultimate goal of *any* polity through space and time (what we have previously called the “security-seeking-state assumption”: see nt. 7). The way in which Eckstein (2006, 31) tries to shield himself of this criticism is entirely circular: the war-prone anarchical interstate structure is invoked both as the premise of the “security-seeking-state assumption” and as its main consequence. The whole idea of an “essential” international practice solely directed towards security rests on modern disregard for other human drives; particularly, honour and social self-esteem. Recently, R.N. Lebow (2008) has argued for the need of a new comprehension of international relations that understands politics holistically, from the individual to the group and beyond. His project resulted in a broadening of the range of objectives that a political community can pursue –security, to be sure, is just one of them.

Second: the absence of formal law has nothing to do with the absence of morality, mutual obligations and principles; and these can become much more compelling than structural realism is ready to accept. In other words, unenforceable rules exert a real influence over those who are socialized into them –even when it is certainly possible to transgress these rules. Rome, precisely, offers some good examples of counterproductive decisions made in the name of moral arguments (Rich 1993, 61-62). Eckstein is aware of them (2006, 226-229), but he oddly argues that this self-restraint was “missing from Rome’s contemporary rivals” (2006, 229), a situation that in the long term exerted a determining structural pressure over Roman society. There is good reason to think otherwise: at least the ethical-religious habitus of *fides/ πίστις* was known to a significant amount of Mediterranean polities (Gruen 1984, 68 nt. 20); and it would be paradoxical that, under the same environmental pressures, only Rome among all ancient Mediterranean states had developed effective structures to contain the potential effects of war. That kind of exceptionalism is fiercely denounced by Eckstein himself, and Roman exceptionalism was indeed the fundamental flaw in Harris’ “offensive imperialism”.

Third and last: even if the premises concerning the “security-seeking-state” and the contempt for unwritten laws were accepted, there would be no reason to believe that states were *forced* to play competitive power-based strategies. As pointed by Alexander Wendt (1992; 1999), a situation of formal anarchy can evolve towards attitudes of commitment and collabo-

ration. It is true, and we would not be so blind to propound otherwise, that the opposite may happen, unleashing a violence spiral from which some kind of balance of power may emerge. Recent international experience suggests precisely that. But we should not fail to realize that our political environment, one of self-help out of doubt, is the fruit of a long and devious process.¹¹ Its operation is by no means “natural”, if that word makes any sense when we speak of human interaction; and we would better remember that we are *not* the measure of all things. This was the whole point when Wendt argued that structural realism is inherently attached to the bipolar US-Soviet world within which it grew (Wendt 1992, 394-5).

These assumptions are untenable by themselves. They might be defensible, though, as abstractions aimed at characterizing and studying optimal interstate behavior under certain conditions. As long as the study makes it explicit that a biased parameter is being introduced for the sake of theorization, security could be assumed to function as the primary motivation for all states. The removal of ethics, habits and principles from the equation may be similarly justified: they are just further instrumental biases that enable the realist “simulation”. The outcome would be an ideal depiction of ultra-rational humans acting in a deregulated, timeless environment. It would predict optimal behavior in a perpetual worst-case-scenario. In order to claim for historical validity, the premises discussed above should receive individual demonstration –which would demand a lot of intensive sub-state level research. How these units interacted with each other would depend directly on their motives and honour codes. Their actual interaction would create patterns of behavior that would further condition their future acting: those patterns I would call “interstate structure”, and it would be of the units’ making.

Back to the ancient world, this means that *Mediterranean Anarchy* provided not a glimpse of the “reality” of the ancient world, but a simulation of it where the causative force of interstate structure was artificially overestimated. The specificities of each state and the normative principles that may have restrained international warfare were programmatically backgrounded –both of them are occasionally mentioned, but the discussion is always *based* on neorealist assumptions, occasionally sustained by “intelligent con)

¹¹ Hoffman 1959, 360-1. Curiously, the same critic has been cast on Eckstein even when, again, he tries desperately to shield himself from it by using what he names “a multi-layered approach” (Eckstein 2006, 55; 77; 257-8; see the criticisms in Hölkeskamp 2009, 213; more recently, this point has been criticized in Burton 2019, 63-4).

temporaries” (Eckstein’s words: 2006, 80) of the facts such as Thucydides and Polybius.¹²

This amounts to a situation where the whole credibility of the book relies on the credit that we are willing to give to structural realism as a theoretical model. This is essentially true of the chapters on Classical and Hellenistic Greece and of Rome’s rise within Italy; but reaches a fever pitch when Roman involvement in the eastern Mediterranean is scrutinized. The key factor is the crisis of Ptolemaic Egypt from 207 onwards, which broke the balance in the Greek East and put several medium-to-little size states at risk. Their security, so it is argued, was threatened by major actors in that environment, namely, Macedon and the Seleucid kingdom. These minor states dragged Rome into the East in order to counterbalance their predators: a conspicuous case of “empire by invitation”, so we learn (Eckstein 2006, 113-4; 259-62). This might be a satisfactory explanation of the Greek side of the issue, but the Roman choice to play power politics remains an aggressive one to me.¹³ This kind of *choices* –like the one that was made by Macedon and the Seleucid kingdom to assault Egypt– had carved the system from the very beginning of Antiquity, and kept on doing so: in a nutshell, security was occasionally turned into a pressing concern for some polities within the ancient Mediterranean *because* of the aggressive choices made by certain states. Were they eventually affected by the structure? Sure. But it was a structure of their own making and it had to be sustained by periodical acts of aggression, which claim for an independent explanation.

MEDITERRANEAN ANARCHY AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

The arrival of realism to the realm of Classics was received with mixed feelings. US-based reviewers considered it an overwhelming success (Culham 2008; Scheidel 2008; Straus 2008). Reviews written in Europe were far less obsequious: M. Sartre (2007, 623) wrote that “l’essai d’Arthur Eckstein

¹² e.g. Eckstein 2006, shortcomings of Greek “international law” 37-42; honour as a “nonstructural variable”, 61-3; impact of Greek culture in their international practice, 67-9; insufficiency of Hellenistic diplomatic mechanisms, 79-80.

¹³ Eckstein (2006, 269-76) argues that the “main catalyst of the Roman decision” was the arrival of Greek embassies to the Roman senate, supposedly warning the senate about the dangers posed to Rome by the situation in the East.

a autant à voir avec l'Histoire Ancienne qu'avec l'idéologie des néo-conservateurs américains au début du XXI^e siècle"; while K.-J. Hölkesskamp considered the book to be "deeply conservative" in terms of approach and empirical analyses" and expressed his uneasiness about "the very American hidden agenda of this book", revolving around the supposedly meta-historical truth that war is the state of nature among states (Hölkesskamp 2009, 213-4; reference to Eckstein 2006, 13). A. Erskine commented more restrainedly on the book, suggesting that it might be "a response to an increasingly anarchic post-Soviet world" (2010, 38; same view in Erskine 2008, 187; 188). All things considered, however, the book proved itself influential: in a recent *Companion to Roman imperialism* it is commended as an "excellent and conceptually provocative" analysis (Hoyos 2013, 37), and it is indeed a key reference for any contemporary study that deals with Roman warfare and imperialism.

While I fully endorse Erskine's idea that *Mediterranean Anarchy* was the product of its time, I do not consider it to be a direct response to the post-Cold War scenario –although that time left its mark on the book, particularly on the praise of Roman excellence at "alliance management". The 1990s were a time of security and confidence, the apparent prelude to an age of stability and liberal expansionism under the aegis of the US. Washington had led Post-War cooperation in the West through an internationalist discourse, which seemed destined to become the foundation of a new global order after the disappearance of the Soviet Union (Kiely 2010, 91-129; Testi 2010, 271-4). This was not the proper intellectual background for a concept such as "anarchy" to become the focus of any research; nor for realism to find extensive acceptance in Classical studies. On the contrary, this was the peaceful and optimistic decade of IR neoliberalism and Wendt's constructivism (1992; 1999).¹⁴ This optimistic view of a new global order based on the expansion of democratic discourse, liberties and markets came to an abrupt end in September 11, 2001. Suddenly, international security became a pressing concern for the Americans: *terrores multi* lurked in the dark. Multilateralism was rejected as a suitable principle foreign policy. President George W. Bush decided to bypass the United Na-

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that this doctrine would eventually reach Classics by 2011. Political circumstances had been radically altered in that interval: by the time P.J. Burton published *Friendship and Empire*, the chance for a global order based on American hegemony was gone, destroyed by years of unilateral decision-making in Washington. As Burton himself admits in his prologue, his worldview was transformed by "the horrors that followed the initial horror of 9/11" (2011b ix). When applying constructivism to Roman imperialism, he decided not to limit himself to the rise of Rome but to deal with the establishment *and* dissolution of the ideology that he related to the whole process.

tions to launch a pre-emptive campaign against Iraq in 2003.¹⁵ It is nothing but natural that realism gained momentum, as optimistic liberal theories lost their ground. Eckstein's view about Roman imperialism had already been conceived before this time (see nt. 5), but I contend that early 2000s' events were instrumental for him to reassert his opinions, for the book to acquire its overconfident tone and for the theses within it to become popular. His depiction of the anxiety that was born with the terrorist attacks of September 11 is telling: here we find a strong security-consciousness that identifies liberal/constructivist beliefs with the naïveté of the 1990s, and accepts the "need" for the state to enforce by itself its own security.¹⁶ This strong concern about security is, I argue, the first and most important trace of modern American experience that filtered into *Mediterranean Anarchy*. This is not to deny that security was an actual concern for ancient polities. As expressed above, they were out of doubt concerned with endurance and safety. But the anxieties of the post-9/11 world affected Eckstein's book and were instrumental to make it more palatable to his audience.

The credibility of other neorealist claims were also reinforced by the events that followed 9/11. This is the case with contempt for "unwritten law". During the 1990s, the US had employed its considerable military force by the UN's side, therefore enforcing the will of the international community. Cooperation demanded a degree of compliance before the representational institution of this "common will": for a short period of time, the principles of the UN appeared to muster a strong normative value. Alas, the rejection of internationalism that the Bush Administration embraced in the rush to Iraq war came as the apparent confirmation of neorealist grim tenet that no law existed in the realm of states other than force. The difference between the UN-authorized Gulf War in 1990 and the unilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003 speaks by itself: the US proved its will and its capability to do whatever they –and they alone– saw fit to guarantee their Republic's integrity. Keeping one's faith in the normative force of well-meaning international principles under these circumstances was a daunting task for everybody: Burton's *Friendship and Empire* preface is a precious hint of the devastating

¹⁵ On March 11, the president addressed the nation on a televised speech. Pre-emption and critique of international passivity occupied a key place in the official narrative about the incoming military operations: see a transcript of the speech in <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/18/politics/text-bushs-speech-on-iraq.html>.

¹⁶ "Only intellectuals ensconced in the safety of that American world of the 1990s, of expected—or rather, unconsciously assumed—complete security before Sept. 11, 2001, could have doubted that a state's need to establish security against a rivalrous and hostile world was a real need, and not merely a matter of 'destructive discourse'" (Eckstein 2006, 32).

effects of this course of events over the American intelligentsia (2011b ix-x). Again, I think that this context exerted a strong pressure over Eckstein during the redaction of *Mediterranean Anarchy*. Sure, he already thought of Antiquity as a lawless world before (Eckstein 2000, 869-70), but this pessimistic idea was all the more believable in the aftermath of the Iraq war.

Therefore, American experience through the early 2000's reinforced the idea that security was scarce and international law lacking. Within this scenario, states were bound to be boundlessly warlike in order to achieve survival. The concepts of aggression and self-defense, the ideas of action and reaction, become blurred in this scenario: warfare was just a function of the system, and nobody could refrain from it.¹⁷ Eckstein's image of Roman imperialism is directly related to this approach. It is just the effect of war success, a necessary effect of the structural anarchy. It would make no sense to speak of "aggressive" or "defensive" imperialism, as unending conflict and expansion of some states at the expense of others are the preconditions of human existence (Eckstein 2006, 119). Obviously, this is an eminently defensive concept of Roman imperialism. But the neorealist build-up of the argument allows for the concept of imperialism to fade. Terminology is telling on this behalf: there is a systematical avoidance of the syntagma "Roman imperialism", which appears as such just three times throughout the whole book –and two of them are meant to prove the shortcomings of this concept (Eckstein 2006, 5; 164; 255). It is substituted by the more neutral "rise of Rome" that features even in the programmatic title. It led not to empire, by the way, but to "hegemony".¹⁸ Whenever Roman expansion is actually considered, the core idea is invariably that all Hellenistic states advocated for a potentially imperialistic policy –they were just less successful than Rome (Eckstein 2006, 143; 164; 176; 261; 268). As for the word "imperialism" alone, it is most times used within paragraphs which argue that greedy expansion was an exceptional phenomenon throughout Antiquity, and that territorial acquisitions were mostly owed to fear and/or environmental pressure (Eckstein 2006, 52; 56; 78; 93; 149; 162; 168; 192).

One last topic that deserves attention is the place of "unipolarity" within the whole picture of *Mediterranean Anarchy*. This is the last stage of

¹⁷ "If everyone's strategy depends upon everyone else's, then the Hitlers determine in part the action, or better, reaction, of those whose ends are worthy and whose means are fastidious (...) A foreign policy based on this image of international relations is neither moral nor immoral, but embodies merely a reasoned response to the world about us" (Waltz 1954, 238; see also 207).

¹⁸ See Morley 2010, 18-20 on the historical accuracy of the term "imperialism". Both its abuse and its absence might be indicative of contemporary political concerns.

the process previously known as Roman imperialism: the point where one state acquired power enough to effectively manage any international issue by itself and according only to its own lights. According to Eckstein (2006, 1-2), the Mediterranean basin had reached this situation by the 180s BC. The multiplicity of anarchic systems that existed across the Mediterranean from 750 BC had merged into one single unipolar hierarchy where no superpower subsisted other than Rome. Playing by neorealist rules, we would expect for such a radical modification of the interstate structure to have crucial effects over the members of the system. The actual consequences of this change are not developed within the book.

However, even when an empirical analysis is lacking, the theoretical effects of unipolarity are indeed explored in Chapter 2. There we learn that “[i]n a world where the ordering principle is anarchy, states seek survival through competitive self-help strategies (...) [T]he severity of competition is inherent in anarchy. By contrast, where the ordering principle is hierarchy (tending toward unipolarity or universal empire) (...) competition decreases” (Eckstein 2006, 16). A few pages later, we can read that “[u]nipolarity is –obviously– more peaceful than bipolarity or multipolarity. Empirical evidence suggests that bipolarity is somewhat less war-prone than multipolarity –which is itself very war-prone” (Eckstein 2006, 23). There is just one possible outcome of this theoretical approach: in terms of peace, balances of power are good. Unipolarity (ideally, universal empire), of course, is even better.¹⁹ This is a template where justifications of empire suddenly become defensible. Take, for instance, Niall Ferguson’s (2004, xxviii) notorious opinion on American imperialism: “The best case for empire is always the case for order. Liberty is, of course, a loftier goal. But only those who have never known disorder fail to grasp that it is the necessary precondition for liberty. In that sense, the case for American empire is simultaneously a case against international anarchy – or, to be precise, of a proliferation of regional vacuums of power.” Both Eckstein and Ferguson depart from a common view about what international anarchy implies (a view that, as we saw before, is the apex of a polemical chain of assumptions). Ferguson, however, takes things

¹⁹ Pax Romana is not morally evaluated in *Mediterranean Anarchy*. However, Eckstein avowed an opinion in a previous article (2000, 873) and, more recently, in a discussion on the last book published by Josiah Osgood, *Rome and the Making of a World State* (Osgood 2018; the discussion can be found online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ToAN-YnkVA>). The book tries to re-evaluate what the transition from Roman Republic to Principate implies and to which extent it can be called properly a “crisis”. Both Osgood and Eckstein coincide to label Pax Romana “a big success” (Osgood: 8:39; Eckstein: 15:53 and especially 16:31).

one step further: the purported dangers of that situation are big enough as to defend the building of a global empire able to enforce, not only for America's but for other's sake, a *Pax Americana* that will replace "the old, post-1945 system of sovereign states", unable to impose itself simply through the international law and apparently crying out for a savior "capable of intervening in the affairs of such states to contain epidemics, overthrow tyrants, end local wars and eradicate terrorist organizations" (Ferguson 2004, 24-5). Liberty is an expendable if noble goal within this venture.

This rhetoric had its forerunners in Antiquity –and it has found spokespeople each time an empire has risen in the West (Mills 2013, 341-2). The long-term idea that Roman dominion benefitted mankind with its ability to suspend the otherwise unstoppable violence will be expressed most notoriously in imperial times, perhaps because it implies a "consciousness of empire" that is generally absent from the Republican sources (an early glimpse of it, though in a polemical context, in Cic. *Rep.* 3.15; imperial formulations in Tac. *Hist.* 4.73-74; Aristid. *Or.* 18.59-63; August. *De civ. D.*1.8). Not that everybody shared enthusiasm for Rome's international success, neither the naïveté that their empire came without suffering or private benefits (Sal. *Jug.*81; *Hist.*4.69). Particularly dramatic is the moan attributed by Tacitus to a Caledonian leader (*inter plures duces (...) praestans*) named Calgacus: at least in his eyes, *Pax Romana* was nothing to be praised (Tac. *Agr.* 30).

EPILOGUE: AUTHORITY, STRUCTURAL REALISM AND THE CLAIM TO UNIVERSALITY

These ideas about war, international law, security and empire were common in the 2000s. Their influence was felt across the Global West. They belong in Eckstein's time and it is just natural that they emerge in his book; even more so when the author had already shown his preference for realist approaches before. The primary goal of this article has been to acquire a better understanding of the theses contained in *Mediterranean Anarchy* and of its posterior popularity: an eminently practical end. But I think there may be a complementary, ethical angle to all of this. This idea has been inspired both by the interdisciplinary nature of the book and by the justifications of empire that, as we have seen, are attainable from realist readings of historical evidence.

It must be said that Eckstein's book was conceived with an eye on Political Science research community, aiming to "test the validity of Realist paradigms (...) in an arena of study that previously has not come under detailed analysis" and to "test the validity of one of contemporary Realism's fundamental claim, the claim to universalism" (Eckstein 2006, 9-10). He goes on to quote Waltz for assertion of what that claim entails: "The enduring anarchic character of international politics accounts for the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia" (Waltz 1979, 66).

Furthermore, Eckstein's view has found its way into non-scholar knowledge through some recent publications dealing with the "perils" that modern USA faces and the purported lessons to be learned –or not– about Roman experience (most notably Kagan 2010).²⁰ This book is particularly meaningful, since the political relevance of the editor give it an outstanding reach and has the potentiality to turn its scientific contribution into a prospective suggestion, encouraging courses of action which will shape to the world of tomorrow. Similarly, *Mediterranean Anarchy* has been quoted by J. Grygiel (2018, 4, 18, 75, 78, 82) within a book that argued for the futility of diplomacy or finite war against "small, highly mobile, and stateless groups".²¹

As a historian and notwithstanding my theoretical cautions, I find *Mediterranean Anarchy* attractive and thought-provoking. It has given rise to a dialogue between classics and political science that continues to bear good fruit (e.g. Fronda 2010; Burton 2011b). But the fact that Eckstein conceived of his own book as "proof" to be adduced in contemporary debate about theories of international relations is clearly disturbing. In doing so, he lent his authority as a leading classicist to a fatalistic worldview about the present, that some opinion makers with explicit interest in contemporary politics

²⁰ Kimberly Kagan is a historian, member by marriage of the notorious (ly) neoconservative Kagan saga (López Barja 2015, 189, nt.1). She was particularly active in the political arena between 2005 and 2010. Kagan has frequently published in *The Weekly Standard*, Bill Kristol's "Neocon Bible", as has sometimes been called (López Barja 2015, 189); and is strongly tied to U.S. Army, specially to Gen. David Petraeus and Gen. Stanley McChrystal, in whose strategic staff served as a civilian counselor. Finally, she has taught at West Point as assistant professor (2000-2005). All of this information is at hand in the website of the *Institute for the Study of War*, a think tank presided by Kagan that claims to be "a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization" committed to "improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve U.S. strategic objectives" (<http://www.understanding-war.org/mission-statement>).

²¹ Yet another example of scholar that has gained political relevance, Grygiel served in 2017-2018 on the Office of Policy Planning at the US Department of State.

have been able to use to their own advantage. Reinforcing radical realism's authority through specious re-orderings of the historical evidence might lend support to those who believe that war is an unavoidable fact of human existence and that empire is the proper answer. At the very least, it would be desirable to keep alternative views alive in order to prevent realism to become a self-fulfilled prophecy (Wendt 1992, 410; Booth 2007, 32; Lebow 2008, 14; see nt. 54 with further bibliography). If the historian has any role to play in the contemporary debate on International Relations, it is not to ensure compliance with abstract –and therefore, empirically inaccurate– theoretical models. On the opposite, it would be desirable to emphasize the variability of human behavior through time and space in order to question the validity of all-encompassing, determinist, metahistorical models.

As Thomas W. Smith puts it, students of international politics should remain aware of “the limits that history suggests for social science research”, avoiding “disregard for the problems of historical discourse” that are frequently embedded in “‘rigorous’, often grand, historical models” (Smith 1999, 1-2).

CONCLUSION

Mediterranean Anarchy appears today as a towering landmark in the studies about Roman imperialism. Back in 2006, it offered a suitable counterbalance to aggressive interpretations of the phenomenon. Just as those views owed part of their success to post-Vietnam attitudes towards empire, Eckstein's was influenced and favored by a new tide of scholarly opinion on warfare and security. His previously avowed positions on interstate anarchy and the prevalence of war across human History were back at their strongest in the security-anxious post-9/11 world. This intellectual climate allowed for some tolerance towards the logical inconsistencies of structural realism to spread across –some– classicists. It simply appeared “natural” to think of security as a universal good; and of unwritten, unenforceable “law” (conventions, habits, international norms) as a non-significant variable for interstate relationships. If these two points were conceded, further assumptions about the effects of an international anarchy became much more acceptable –though not uncontroversial, as A. Wendt has argued: the pervasiveness of conflict would appear almost banal, since the states would be faced with a zero-sum game where the gain of one would be the immediate loss of another.

Imperialism is seen in a peculiar way from these lights. If war is natural, apologies are just as pointless as condemnations. An unsurmountable force exists that forces the states one against other in the benefit of the strongest. Eventually, power will become concentrated in the hands of one single international agent: this is nothing but the working of the “structure”. Empire exists, imperialism does not. Seasoned as we classicists are in concepts of defensive imperialism, this should have been criticized as a reposition of Mommsen’s *Notwendigkeit* –though this time, the historical necessity is just for the strong to beat the weak. It is a teleological history which tends towards unipolarity; and just like Mommsen did, Eckstein denies of any Roman scheme to grow bigger. The birth of hierarchies out of anarchies is just the History at play. Yet anarchy is only the material cause of conflict: it further needs of an active *choice* to fight, kill and conquer.

There are both practical and ethical issues with this view. Regarding the first, realist assumptions make the historian blind to variability and change. Historical agents have their own circumstances, identities and honour codes. These have an impact on their interstate practice. Traditional neorealism bestows minimal importance to these “unit-level attributes”. Any attempt to propound otherwise is plainly incompatible with the “claim to universalism” as defended by Eckstein: the idea that any interstate anarchical system drifts towards war independently of the peculiarities of the states that compose it. The ethical issue is directly related to this ideology. If war is the state of nature among states, then there are no moral grounds for defending peace. War does just exist, like the air we breathe. *Mediterranean anarchy* contains an authorized narrative about the classics that has the potential to reinforce this worldview. Furthermore, this narrative –which is not by itself an apology of empire– creates a template where imperial ideologies become defensible: the pervasiveness of war makes empire desirable as the most peaceful interstate balance.²²

²² Research project “La expresión diplomática en el Mediterráneo occidental bajo la expansión romana: el regalo en su contexto ideológico y cultural” (PGC2018-096415-B-C21), National R&D&I Plan, Ministry of Science and Innovation, Government of Spain/ FEDER. A preliminary version of this paper was delivered at the International Conference “Authority and Contemporary Narratives about the Classics” (Newcastle upon Tyne, 21-22 Feb. 2019). I would like to thank F. Santangelo and J. Bastos Marqués for the opportunity to speak at that meeting and to publish in this special issue. E. Sánchez Moreno and M. Esteban Payno offered precious advice on preliminary versions of this paper. Opinions and remaining errors are entirely mine.

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