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The Religious Cult of Ruler in Ancient Rome as the Element of Process of Legitimacy of Political Power in Autocratic Political Systems

Undoubtedly, the question of gaining (and sometimes even losing) legitimacy is of vital importance for every political system. The ruling party (or person, group) can not count on the bare force only, as in notion of the so-called "naked force," introduced by Bertrand Russell. If the ruling party would only fight for its dominant position and try to destroy its enemies (even potential enemies), in result such the government will not present any positive plan of social and political development. The question of legitimacy is important not only in case of democratic political systems, where the winning of next elections (parliamentary or president) depends on such the legitimacy. This problem is perhaps even more important in case of autocratic or totalitarian political systems, because these regimes as a rule do not gain its power in a legitimate way. Already 20 years ago David Beetham pointed out that the problem of legitimacy contains two main questions : how the political power is gained and how it is working in political and social practice. The totalitarian regimes, as a rule, gained its dominant position during (or after) the revolution. On the other hand, the autocratic regimes gained its power rather as a result of social unrest, war or most often military coup.

In ancient Rome Octavianus Augustus gained its highest position in result of a long and bloody civil war, finished with the naval victory near Actium.

Moreover, he successfully initiated the new political regime, the so-called principate (or early Roman Empire) which was based (generally speaking) on the interconnection between autocratic power of *Princeps* himself (based on great army and efficient bureaucracy) and the republican façade (for instance, the senatorial *cursus honorum*). After at about half the century of almost constant civil war the desire of peace (famous *Pax Romana*) was perhaps predominant feeling amongst the population of vast Roman Empire. Certainly, Augustus used such the feelings, as testifies first of all his *Ara Pacis Augustae*. Even such the peaceful and diplomatic act as receiving the Parthian standards was used in Augustan ideology and propaganda, what we can observe on the magnificent statue of Augustus from *Prima Porta* in the Vatican Museum (*Musei Vaticani*). Moreover, the great mausoleum of Augustus testified his dominant position and the position of his successors. Many monuments, triumphal arches, columns (like that of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius) can be analyzed as important elements in process of gaining the legitimacy. Moreover, every public building (as for instance road, aqueduct, bath, gate) had the inscription which served the same purpose—to present the dominant position of an emperor on the top of a Roman political system. Although, the Roman emperor became a god in a very moment of his death, during his life (and especially reign) he was already healed as the "son of god" (*divi filius*).

Undoubtedly, the concept of power is absolutely central to any understanding of society. It was already recognised in times of the classical Antiquity.

> The Ancient Athenians distinguished between legitimate and illegitimate power in terms of a contrast between power that accorded to the dictates of law (*nomos*) and power which exaltet the glorification of a specific individual (*hubris*).[1]

Nevertheless, in contrast with the Athenian democracy, the ancient Rome in no period of its history had been governed by any kind of a democratic political system. In Roman Empire, not only during the Principate (or early Roman Empire) or in the Dominate (or later Roman Empire), but also in time of the Roman Republic the real power rested just in few hands. Certainly, the question of legitimation of the political power is more difficult in case of the

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[1] M. Haugaard, S.R. Clegg, *Introduction: Why Power is the Central Concept of the Social Sciences*, [in:] *The SAGE Handbook of Power*, S.R. Clegg, M. Haugaard (ed.), London 2009, p. 1.

autocratic (or totalitarian) regimes than in case of some kind of democratic systems. Undoubtedly, "autocratic rulers tend to strengthen their regime by legitimizing strategies. Legitimacy is inherently a cultural phenomenon."[2]

The question of legitimacy of the political and social order was perhaps best presented and defined by David Beetham.

> Where power is acquired and exercised according to justifiable rules and with evidence of consent, we call it rightful or legitimate. How far power is legitimate, what makes it so, and why it matters, these are all inherently difficult and contentious questions.[3]

Of course the ruling elite can rule without the consent of the ruled population—this situation had been described as the so-called "naked power" by B. Russell.[4] Nevertheless, the situation in which the ruling elite bases only on using force is not favorable not only for the ruled masses of the society but also for the ruling elite itself. In such the situation all the "energy" of the ruling elite is using for taking and holding power and not for solving the difficult political and social problems. This situation quite easily could lead to the revolution and overthrow the ruling elite. So, the question of legitimacy of political order is very important not only for the order and stability of the given social and political system but for the "health" of the political elite itself.

> For political institutions, legitimacy means that they can assume, in their routine operations, that subjects or citizens will comply with the orders of political authorities on the basis not only of autoreflecting habit or of fear of punishment, but also of a willing disposition to obey, motivated by a sense of obligation and of moral self-respect.[5]

Moreover, there is no absolute legitimacy or absolute lack of legitimacy. We can rather observe the legitimization process, which means the process of constant gaining (or losing) of legitimacy by the political system of the given society. So, we can say that the legitimacy exists only to some extent.

> Power can be said to be legitimate to the extent that: I) it conforms to established rules, II) the rules can be justified by reference to beliefs shared by both dominant

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[2] F. Engelstad, *Culture and Power*, [in:] *The SAGE Handbook of Power*, S.R. Clegg, M. Haugaard (ed.), London 2009, p. 213.

[3] D. Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*, London 1991, p. 3.

[4] B. Russell, *Power. A new social analysis*, London 1960 (2nd ed.).

[5] G. Poggi. *Forms of Power*, Cambridge 2001, p. 82.

and subordinate, and III) there is evidence of consent by the subordinate to the particular power relation.[6]

Most probably the great success of Roman civilization, the most durable civilization in whole European history, was based on two pillars : efficient bureaucracy and well trained and best equipped Roman army. Certainly, the chief role and obligation of the Roman army was to maintain the position of the emperor himself. "Ultimately the Roman army was the occupying force of an imperial power, and a primary function of the army was the control of acquired territory."[7] During the empire all military victories were used also (or even first of all) to strengthen position of the emperor. "Success in warfare had remained essential to legitimate the candidacy of would-be emperors."[8] The question of imperial propaganda by military success became one of the main motives for both the imperial policy and art—architecture in Rome. Undoubtedly "the instances of monumental and symbolic conversion of military victory into political power constituted a huge enterprise in Roman culture and art."[9]

The military victories became one of the important tools of imperial propaganda—and so the title of *imperator* gradually became the monopoly of emperors. Emperors advertised their military success building many triumphal arches and other victory monuments and organizing spectacular triumphal ceremonies. These monuments served both in internal affairs (against possible uprising in Rome itself) and in external affairs—against the possible attack by the barbarians. For instance the Tropaeum Traiani at Adamklissi (built in 109 A.D.) "was to stand as a warning memento for barbarians who had not grasped the new state of affairs."[10]

The other important question in Roman imperial propaganda was that of a succession of imperial power. Unfortunately "the imperial succession at Rome was notoriously uncertain, because of the several possible methods which could be used."[11] So, even during the first two centuries of the

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[6] D. Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*, London 1991, p. 15–16.

[7] N. Pollard, *Soldiers, Cities and Civilians in Roman Syria*, Ann Arbor 2000, p. 85.

[8] C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, Berkeley 2000, p. 277.

[9] J. Hoelscher, *Images of war in Greece and Rome, between military practice, public memory and cultural symbolism*, JRS 93, 2003, p. 16.

[10] N. Hannestad, *Roman art and imperial policy*, Aarchus 1988, p. 172.

[11] J.D. Grainger, *Nerva and the Roman succession crisis of A.D. 96–99*, London 2003, p. XXV.

Principate, the Roman empire was torn apart by two great civil wars (69, 193–197 A.D.).

> Septimius Severus, who had come to power after civil war, sought to secure his position by emphasizing the return to stability brought about by his regime and the resulting restoration and renewal of the Roman state. [...] The prominence given to the imperial family, and the dynastic intent behind this, was reflected on the coinage and public monuments of the reign.[12]

His family was presented on the triumphal arch in Leptis Magna and on the arch commissioned by the *argentarii* in the capital of Rome (near *Forum Boarium*). Moreover, many emperors ordered or simply commissioned large and expensive funerary monuments. "For the ruling family, the future of the living was depended, in a large degree, upon the honors (or lack thereof) bestowed upon the dead. This dependency is visible in the design of imperial memorials."[13]

The emperor presented himself (in the imperial propaganda) not only as the successful chief commander of the Roman armed forces but also as the benefactor of the Romans. This was in concordance with the *patronus—cliens* relationship, in which all Roman citizens could be labeled as the imperial *clientes*. And so "giving and receiving is central to the establishment and maintenance of social relations, especially relations of unequal power. One manifestation of this linkage is the social institution of patronage."[14] Besides, there was an important "tradition whereby triumphing generals were expected to contribute to the public welfare by devoting a part of the booty from their campaign to building."[15] So, the emperors commissioned not only triumphal arches, but also some aqueducts, baths, amphitheatres, libraries, temples or imperial fora. For instance "Porta Maggiore in Rome (inaugurated A.D. 52). The deliberately unfinished structure carries the conducts of the acqueducts Aqua Claudia and Aqua Nova over two roads, the Via Prenestina and the Via Labicana."[16] On all these public buildings were placed inscriptions which

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[12] C. Gorrie, *Julia Domna's Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation*, "Historia" 53, 2004, p. 61.

[13] P.J.A. Davies, *Death and the Emperor. Roman imperial funerary monuments from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius*, Cambridge 2000, p. 1.

[14] M.B. Roller, *Constructing autocracy. Aristocrats and emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome*, Princeton and Oxford 2001, p. 130.

[15] J.B. Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture*, London 1981, p. 22.

[16] M.W. Jones, *Principles of Roman architecture*, New Haven and London 2000, p. 119.

testified the high position of the emperor himself. "The inscribing of the full imperial titulature combined a visual and verbal language to express concepts of authority, grandeur and unsurpassed achievement."[17] Nevertheless, the emperor embodied not only the imperial power but at the same time the position of Roman state.

> The emperor walked a careful line, however, between the display of his individual power and the power and might of the Empire. Glorification of the emperor as an individual had to be counterbalanced by buildings and acts which glorified the gods and the might of Rome and which advantages the general populace. Buildings could be interpreted as a sign of the greatness of both Rome and the emperor.[18]

Certainly, "At all times, power holders have presented themselves by signs and symbols."[19] The Roman emperor (and his court) had to take care to chose best measures to propagate his achievements. "Roman emperors had no information office or press secretaries to ensure favorable publicity by putting the best interpretation on imperial policy."[20] Besides, the Romans liked everyone to know their success. In the situation when the greatest part of the Roman society (but it is impossible to be more accurate) was illiterate, the imperial propaganda was realized almost exclusively by means of art—especially in coinage. Undoubtedly,

> art during the Roman period may be regarded as more or less direct manifestations of propaganda. Art served primarily to strengthen the power and reputation of the person who paid for or commissioned, since every work of art bears a message.[21]

Nevertheless, an important function of imperial propaganda was not only to show the greatness of Rome and the imperial himself. "The Romans desired to make their public buildings and monuments throughout the Empire

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[17] B. Campbell, *War and Society in Imperial Rome 31 B.C.–A.D.284*, London and New York 2002, p. 145.

[18] V. Hope, *The city of Rome: capital and symbol*, [in:] *Experiencing Rome. Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire*, ed. J.Huskinson, New York 2000, p. 79.

[19] F. Engelstad, *Culture and Power*, [in:] *The SAGE Handbook of Power*, S.R. Clegg, M. Haugaard (ed.), London 2009, p. 220.

[20] B. Campbell, *War and Society in Imperial Rome 31 B.C.–A.D.284*, London and New York 2002, p. 146.

[21] N. Hannestad, *Roman art and imperial policy*, Aarchus 1988, p. 9.

an impressive manifestation of the enduring supremacy of the state"[22]. It was especially important for the emperor, who practically embodied the Roman state. "For the emperor, the representation of his power was as important in the maintenance of his rule as passing laws and commanding armies"[23]. As the propaganda showed also (or perhaps first of all) peace, order and stability introduced by the Roman rule into the whole Mediterranean—propaganda also built a kind of bonds between the emperor (and a tiny ruling elite) and the vast ruled masses. At the same time "as the propaganda finds expression in the monuments, it serves primarily to create goodwill towards the emperor among important groups of subjects"[24].

Undoubtedly, the Roman social and political system (including the dominant position of the emperor) did not rely exclusively on using a "naked power" or simply on constant threat of war. "Force, authority and patronage cannot complete the reconstruction of imperial power. There are still aspects that need explaining: the working of honor and pride, the underpinnings of loyalty and gratitude for benefactions"[25]. Besides, it is interesting that the imperial propaganda was quite well understood and perceived by perhaps an overwhelming majority of ancient Roman society (and not only by modern historians !). "Literary sources suggest that contemporaries consciously identified coins and monuments as carriers of ideological meaning and as symbols of Rome and the legitimacy of her rule"[26]. Undoubtedly, such the situation strengthened the Roman domination over the conquered nations, tribes and territories. The study of Roman interaction with provincials at the local level suggests that the internal stability of the empire relied not on Roman power alone, but on a slowly realized consensus regarding Rome's right to maintain social order and to establish a normative political culture. Undoubtedly the official discourse of the imperial government, and the principles of legitimation to which it gave voice, found a ready audience in the polyglot population of the Roman provinces. And so the power, legitimization and propaganda

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[22] B. Smith, *Architectural Symbolism of Imperial Rome and the Middle Ages*, Princeton 1956, p. 74.

[23] R. Miles, *Communicating culture, identity and power*, [in:] *Experiencing Rome. Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire*, ed. J.Huskinson, New York 2000, p. 37.

[24] N. Hannestad, *Roman art and imperial policy*, Aarchus 1988, p. 343.

[25] J.E. London, *Empire of Honour. The Art of Government in the Roman World*, Oxford 1997, p. 13.

[26] C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, Berkeley 2000, p. 212.

were strictly interconnected in the political and social system of the imperial Rome—as they are in the title of this article.

> The stability of the Roman empire requires substantial and specific explanation. What induced the quietude and then the obedience of her subject ? Roman military power might explain the lack of protests and revolts among provincials, but it cannot account for their gradual Romanization.[27]

Undoubtedly, the overwhelming position of a ruler in Roman imperial political system had many advantages (first of all the famous *Pax Romana*), but at the same time had some disadvantages. Especially, the lack of formal procedures connected with the succession process (already mentioned in this article) caused sometimes succession crises or even civil wars. On the other hand, the dominant position of a ruler had been strengthened by religion and some religious practices. At first, Roman emperor became a god only after his death (*divi filius*) but later on Diocletianus, who reorganized Roman Empire, took the position of "master and god" (*dominus ac deus*). It is interesting that when Constantine (after his victory in civil war) recognised Christianity as the state's religion, he did not diminished his imperial power. The Emperor Constantine simply treated himself as the representative of Jesus Christ on the Earth ! Such the close relation between the secular and religious power (or between the throne and the altar) continued later on in the political system of Byzantian Empire and of imperial Russia (as the so-called "Third Rome"). Undoubtedly, the close relation between these two powers strengthens the legitimacy of political system.

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[27] Ibidem.