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Empire as Organization: The Romans in *Life* Magazine

Throughout the spring of 1966 (March 4–June 17), *Life* magazine ran a series of seven richly illustrated articles collectively entitled "The Romans" that, in the words of the managing editor, "set out to re-conquer the Roman Empire" with the help of a staff of reporters, photographers, illustrators, and noted authors, including Luigi Barzini and W. H. Auden (whose contribution was rejected). This quasi-imperial ambition, coupled with *Life*'s unique role as mirror of mid-century American confidence, might have been expected to linger on the comparable burdens, glories, and sacrifices of the Roman and American world hegemonies. Yet, even as the series avoided this obvious analogy, it was suggesting another, less triumphalist parallel between, one the one hand, the (supposed) traditionalism and rigidity of the Roman mind and, on the other, the epidemic of conformity that many feared was sapping the creativity of the American individual. Beneath the togas of *Life*'s Romans, one can make out the dark suits and white shirts of the stereotypical American "organization man" made famous by William H. Whyte's 1956 bestseller of the same title.

Although written by several hands, the articles of the series return again and again to the notion that the Romans' want of imagination doomed their empire to its 'decline and fall.' Due to their peasant origins and "bone-deep conservatism," the Romans were "never notably sensitive or imaginative." To such men, "[w]hatever perpetuated the existing order of things was good; whatever changed things was bad." Hence the response of the emperors to the challenges of the third century could only be an "iron totalitarianism" that sought to freeze a hierarchical social order into eternity, notwithstanding Rome's laudable tolerance of ethnic and religious difference within the Empire. Barzini's piece on Julius Caesar sketches the portrait of the representative man of Roman history, who, although possessed of a ruthless genius for the acquisition of power, lacked the vision to transform Rome and, vaguely aware of his inadequacy, offered himself as a kind of sacrifice to Rome's future. In a subsequent article, Hadrian's bearded face proves him an exception among his countrymen, "a determined non-conformist," whose "sensitive, intuitive and inventive" nature midwifed a renaissance that was received with ingratitude by his subjects. The indictment of Roman conformity is sharpest in the series' final installment, "Crucible of Christendom." Here, Diocletian is "a Roman in the old tradition," who oversaw the growth of an imperial bureaucracy that "continued to swell, sucking dry the life-blood and vitality of the shrinking world." In the face of this "regimented world," only Christians "refused to conform"—before they too eventually reverted to the national type.

As historical interpretation, such judgments were hardly original; they are remarkable primarily because they retroject into the ancient past the "mass society" critique of post-war America. The surrogacy of Romans for Americans is implicit in the layouts of *The Romans* series, through which the reader is often invited to share the point of view of the Roman ruling class surveying a world at its command and available for its pleasure. Like the gaze turned on the world by *Life* for its middle-class readership, this view takes in war on distant frontiers, colorful spectacles and personalities of popular entertainment, and a cornucopia of consumer goods. In the spring of 1967, *Life* confronted conformity and depersonalization as specifically American problems in another special series, "The Crisis of the Individual" (April 21–May 12). A year earlier, however, it was *Life*'s Romans who were being called to account for America's own imperial complacency.