

Of Bread And Circuses

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A twentieth-century repetition of the mistakes of ancient Rome would be inexcusable. Rome was eight and a half centuries old when the poet, Juvenal, penned his famous tirade against his degenerate countrymen. About 100 A.D. he wrote: *“Now that no one buys our votes, the public has long since cast off its cares; the people that once bestowed commands, consulships, legions and all else, now meddles no more and longs eagerly for just two things, bread and circuses.”* (Carcopino, *Daily Life in Roman Times* [New Haven, Yale University Press, 1940], p. 202.) *Forty years later, the Roman historian, Fronto, echoed the charge in more prosaic language: “The Roman people is absorbed by two things above all others, its food supplies and its shows.”* (Ibid.)

Here was a once-proud people, whose government had been their servant, who had finally succumbed to the blandishments of clever political adventurers. They had gradually relinquished their sovereignty to government administrators to whom they had granted absolute powers, in return for food and entertainment. And the surprising thing about this insidious progression is that, at the time, few realized that they were witnessing the slow destruction of a people by a corruption that would eventually transmute a nation of self-reliant, courageous, sovereign individuals into a mob, dependent upon their government for the means of sustaining life.

There are no precise records that describe the feelings of those for whom the poet, Juvenal, felt such scorn. But using the clues we have, and judging by our own experience, we can make a good guess as to what the prevailing sentiments of the Roman populace were. If we were able to take a poll of public opinion of first and second century Rome, the overwhelming response would probably have been—“We never had it so good.” Those who lived on “public assistance” and in subsidized rent-free or low-rent dwellings would certainly have assured us that now, at last, they had “security.” Those in the rapidly expanding bureaucracy—one of the most efficient civil services the world has ever seen—would have told us that now government had a “conscience” and was using its vast resources to guarantee the “welfare” of all of its citizens; that the civil service gave them job security and retirement benefits; and that the best job was a government job! Progressive members of the business community would have said that business had never been so good, that the government was their largest customer, which assured them a dependable market, and that the government was inflating currency at about 2 per cent a year, which instilled confidence and gave everyone a sense of well-being and prosperity.

And no doubt the farmers were well pleased too. They supplied the grain, the pork and the olive oil, at or above parity prices, for the government’s doles.

The government had a continuous program of large-scale public works which were said to stimulate the economy, provide jobs and promote the general welfare, and which appealed to the national pride.

The high tax rates required by the subsidies discouraged the entrepreneur with risk capital which, in turn, favored the well-established, complacently prosperous businessman. It appears that there was no serious objection to this by any of the groups affected. An economic historian, writing of business conditions at this period, says, “The chief object of economic activity was to assure the individual, or his family, a placid and inactive life on a safe, if moderate, income There were no technical improvements in industry after the early part of the second century.” There was no incentive to venture. Inventions began to dry up because no one could reasonably expect to make a profit out of them.

Rome was sacked by Alaric and his Goths in 410 A.D. But long before the barbarian invasions, Rome was a hollow shell of the once noble Republic. Its real grandeur was gone and its people were demoralized. Most of the old forms and institutions remained. But a people whose horizons were limited by bread and circuses had destroyed the spirit

while paying lip service to the letter of their once hallowed traditions.

The fall of Rome affords a pertinent illustration of the observation by the late President Lowell of Harvard University that **“no society is ever murdered—it commits suicide.”**

I do not imply that bread and circuses are evil things in themselves. Man needs material sustenance and he needs recreation. These needs are so basic that they come within the purview of every religion. In every religion there is a harvest festival of thanksgiving for good crops. And as for recreation, we need only recall that our word “holiday” was originally “holy day,” a day of religious observance. In fact, the circuses and games of old Rome were religious in origin. The evil was not in bread and circuses, per se, but in the willingness of the people to sell their rights as free men for full bellies and the excitement of the games which would serve to distract them from the other human hungers which bread and circuses can never appease. The moral decay of the people was not caused by the doles and the games. These merely provided a measure of their degradation. Things that were originally good had become perverted and, as Shakespeare reminds us, “Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.”

More than fifty years ago, the great historian of Rome, Theodore Mommsen, came to our country on a visit. At a reception in his honor, someone asked him, ***“Mr. Mommsen, what do you think of our country?”*** ***The great scholar replied, “With two thousand years of European experience before your eyes, you have repeated every one of Europe’s mistakes. I have no further interest in you.”***

One wonders what Mommsen would say today in the light of the increasingly rapid destruction of our traditional values during the past 25 years.

Many of our people have been converted to the idea that liberty has been tried and found wanting, just as many believe that Christianity has been tried and found wanting. They do not know that what has been found wanting is not the true values of liberty and religion but only perversions, worthless counterfeits. So when we urge upon them those true values, they shy away. They have been fooled before, so they want to try something which they think is “new.”

How far have we departed from our traditional values? There is no mystery here. It is well known that the basic policies of the two major political parties with respect to the intrusion of the State into the economic and social lives of the people differ only in degree and method. There is no discernible difference in fundamental principle. Prominent political figures of both parties pay lip service to the letter of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution, while they violate the spirit.

The proponents of an all-powerful centralized government have erected a bureaucratic colossus which imposes upon our people controls, regimentation, punitive taxation and subsidies to pressure groups, thus paralleling the “organized mendicancy, subvention, bureaucracy and centralization” which played so great a part in the downfall of Rome!

We are demoralized by an indecent competition. Each one denounces government handouts and privileges *for the other fellow*—but maintains that *his* special privilege is for the “general welfare.” The slogan of many of us seems to be, “Beat the other fellow to the draw”—i.e., “draw out of the public treasury more than you put in, before someone else gets it.”

I am no prophet of inevitable doom. On the contrary, I am sounding an alarm that disaster lies ahead unless present danger signals are heeded.

What specific steps should we take? I believe that neither I nor anyone else, no matter how exalted his position, can determine for 165 million people their day-to-day economic and social decisions concerning such matters as wages, prices, production, associations and others. So I propose that these decisions, and the problems connected therewith, be returned to the people themselves. This could be done in four steps, as follows:

First—Let us stop this headlong rush toward collectivism. Let there be no more special privileges for employers, employees, farmers, businessmen or any other groups. This is the easiest step of all. We need only refrain from passing more socialistic laws.

Second— Let us undertake at once an orderly demobilization of many of the existing powers of government by the progressive repeal of those socialistic laws which we already have. This will be a very difficult step because every pressure group in the nation will fight to retain its subsidies, monopoly privileges and protection. But if freedom is to live, all special privileges must go.

Third—Of the powers that remain in government, let us return as many as possible to the states. For on the local level, the people will be able to apply more critical scrutiny to the acts of their government agents.

Fourth—Above all, let us resolve that never again will we yield to the seduction of the government panderer who comes among us offering “bread and circuses,” paid for with our own money, in return for our sovereign rights!

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Admiral Ben Moreell (1892 – 1978) was the chief of the U.S. Navy’s Bureau of Yards and Docks and of the Civil Engineer Corps. Best known to the American public as the Father of the Navy’s Seabees, Moreell’s life spanned eight decades, two world wars, a great depression and the evolution of the United States as a superpower. He was a distinguished Naval Officer, a brilliant engineer, an industrial giant and articulate national spokesman.