

Of Churros and Bullfights

One of the most important contributions of Ancient Rome to the art of political manipulation was the invention of “Panem et Circences” (i.e., bread and circuses). This phrase originated in a satire written by the Roman poet Juvenal, circa 100 A.D. As to what kind of flour was used to bake this bread, or what its nutritional content could have been, little is known. Most likely it was the kind of coarse brown bread the Roman lower classes ate, made from emmer or barley.

As to circuses, we don’t mean the modern kind of politically-correct spectacle such as the ones the Cirque du Soleil puts on. Everybody knows that the “circuses” at the Roman Colosseum were gruesome, bloody affairs where both humans and beasts were killed by the hundreds. What digestive problems were induced by the combination of such a diet and such stressful entertainment is not recorded.

Throughout the ages, many kings and queens have used this strategy as a means of placating the anger of the populace. Witness Queen Marie-Antoinette on the eve of the French revolution addressing the hunger of the poor of Paris by the infamous phrase “Let them eat cake.” What she actually said was “Qu’ils mangent de la brioche” –assuming that brioche (an aristocratic delicacy enriched with butter and eggs) was a more nutritious alternative to the kind of bread the peasants were clamoring for. Most likely she didn’t know the difference, raised from birth on such a cholesterol-rich diet. We’ll give her the benefit of the doubt.

Revisiting my Hispanic heritage, one wonders if Generalissimo Franco used a similar strategy during his reign in Spain. I guess one would have to call it “Churros and Corridas” –a close approximation to *panem et circenses*. Did the Guardia Rural distribute free churros to all the poor spectators at the bullfights? And what stratum of the population got to eat the poor bulls’ meat after the matadors did their business?

Closer to home, what fast-food do they eat at Mexican wrestling matches? ...Is it tacos?... carnitas? No: ... too much protein. So, a better Mexican version of *panem et circences* would be “Tortillas and Lucha Libre” (i.e., freestyle pseudo-wrestling).

As a Canadian, I should perhaps take the time to inquire as to the equivalent “Cheap bread + Spectacle” for my country. As to the Canadian *panem*, I would have to say the closest equivalent is bear-claws –with a nod to our First Nations. Now, for the spectacle component of the dyad: No contest...: It’s professional hockey. Remember, we’re looking for what ordinary Joes and Jacques eat and enjoy watching.

On the other hand, we also have a “circus” which is closer to the bullfights prototype. I’m speaking of the Calgary Stampede, where each year a few horses are trampled to death. What would be the *panem* in this case? Probably greasy French fries. As to who gets to eat the horsemeat afterwards, I have no idea.

We could go on and on, as in today’s world many countries have learned the Roman art of feeding the masses fast foods while entrancing them with bombastic

spectacles. The most exemplary, of course, being the Super Bowl: a time when tens of millions of enthusiasts sit glued to their LCD TV's while consuming the American version of *panem* (Cheetos or Doritos) or –if they can afford meat– have some second-rate pizza delivered, composed mainly of over-leavened dough plus a few slivers of synthetic pepperoni.

And with today's information and communication technology, one doesn't even need to fill a stadium and build fast food concessions: the spectators will watch the *circenses* on their TV's, and they'll even buy their own *panem*! Meanwhile, the real gladiators can continue their bloody geopolitical games on faraway theaters of war.

The point I'm trying to make is that nothing much has changed since ancient times when it comes to manipulating the rabble while undermining their potential for democratic reforms. It cost a heck of a lot less for Putin to fund the Sochi Olympics than to allow the 99% of disenfranchised Russians to democratize the Neo-Tsarist regime.

The future is ripe with possibilities: Will President Trump use the Trump Taj Mahal Stadium to stage Nuremberg-style GOP rallies? And will he, like Nero, also fiddle while Washington burns?

Crack open a bag of taco chips, turn on your LCD TV and enjoy the show.

© Pascual Delgado, March 4th 2016.