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# Bread and Circuses

Ancient Rome had a long and varied history spanning centuries. The Roman Republic began in 509 BC when the Roman monarchy was overthrown. It lasted until it became destabilized by civil wars in the mid-first century BC. At that time Julius Caesar’s victories marked the beginning of the Roman Empire. The first two centuries of the empire were very stable and Rome prospered, but from about the time of the 3rd century problems began to increase. In order to appease the public, it was given free grain, for which to make bread, and free entertainment in the form of circuses to generate public approval. Previously the populace expressed approval based on government actions and policies, but providing them with bread and circuses was aimed at distracting them from civic interests by pleasing them with free entertainment and food. This also contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. Today “bread and circuses” is used to connote a population’s erosion or ignorance of civic duty.

I am often reminded of this when I look around me. It seems that these days there are many kinds of distractions in the form entertainment; what the Romans would have called “circuses.” While food is not dispersed freely (bread), it is nevertheless a form of diversion in that there are so many kinds now from which to choose. TV programs often feature programs about food designed to encourage the viewer to visit restaurants or try making certain dishes and this can also serve as a distraction: if you become preoccupied with food then you probably become less interested in politics.

Of course it is ultimately up to the individual to decide his or her own interests and priorities. One can chose whether to become concerned and participatory regarding current events or be passive and unconcerned about them preferring instead our modern-day equivalents of bread and circuses. It seems to me, though, that most people prefer being part of a group and doing things with others rather than being completely independent. Accordingly, the individual assumes the attitudes of the group in order to be viewed as a participating member. If a member does not appear to do that, he or she sometimes ends up being ostracized by the group. I’m sure this was true even during the time of the Roman Empire.

Rome was not the only government to experience a rise and fall, though perhaps it is the most famous. There are numerous other examples throughout history. In our own individual lifetimes we can see similarities of countries becoming powerful and strong and then weaker. I think the period of the Bubble in Japan is an example of this. These days the world seems to be going through some radical shifts marked by tensions: trade wars between the US and China, tensions between the USA and its allies, the Brexit issue in England, and the more recent tensions between Japan and Korea. It will be interesting to see how these develop and whether history will repeat itself again.