



Bread and Circuses
The Politics of Distraction

Introduction	
<p>The Roman poet Juvenal in his poem <i>Satire X</i> coined the phrase “bread and circuses” (Latin: panem et circusensus) to describe how politicians maintained public approval through distraction. The phrase expressed a formula that kept the Roman public distracted through a variety of pleasures such as the distribution of food, public bath houses, gladiator spectacles, and theater. This political strategy was an effort to placate the masses who were underserved by the Roman government. In this lesson, students will examine the politics of “bread and circuses” and virtually visit some of the locations where Roman politicians attempted to pacify the people.</p>	
<p>Standards Connections:</p> <p>Assess ways in which imperial rule over a vast area transformed Roman society, economy, and culture</p> <p>Evaluate the major legal, artistic, architectural, technological, and literary achievements of the Romans and the influence of Hellenistic cultural traditions on Roman Europe.</p>	<p>Compelling Question:</p> <p>How do governments distract the public?</p>
<p>Lesson Objectives:</p> <p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in a class discussion about the proper role of entertainment in a society. • Determine their own definition of the political strategy of bread and circuses utilized in Ancient Rome. • Describe the negative civic consequences of a citizenry that becomes dependent on government for basic needs and entertainment. 	
Materials	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roman Forum, Rome Reborn Virtual Reality Application • Oculus Go Headset • Access to www.padlet.com (visible to whole class) or Post-It Notes • Two Sources (Source A: Excerpt, Herodian; Source B: Reconstruction of Relief) 	
Learning Plan	
<p>Activities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As an introduction to the idea of “bread and circuses” begin the lesson by projecting the quote below from Amy Scanlon (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bread-and-circuses-in-rom_b_3414248) about Ancient Rome. Have students consider that quote in light of the following clip from the movie <i>Gladiator</i> (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LiZLr0tOLw) which depicts a battle scene in The Roman Amphitheater. <p><i>“Basically ancient Rome was a society that completely revolved around war, and where compassion was considered a vice rather than a virtue... [The] Romans saw gladiatorial contests not as a form of decadence but as a cure for decadence. And decadence to the Romans had little to do with sexual behavior or lack of a decent work ethic, but a lack of military-style honor and soldierly virtues. To a Roman compassion was a detestable vice, which was considered both decadent and feminine. Watching people and animals slaughtered brutally [in the arena] was seen as a way to keep the civilian population from this ‘weakness’ because they didn’t see combat... “</i></p>	

2. Engage the class in a whole group discussion of the ways that the video clip illustrated Scanlon’s argument about how gladiatorial contests were decadent, revolved around a conception of war, and framed compassion as societal vice, not a societal virtue. Ask students to consider contemporary cultural parallels that entertain the public through violence (e.g., NFL concussion controversy; NASCAR, etc...) and have them consider if Americans are engaged in the similar relationship where empathy is seen as “weakness.”
3. Next, introduce students to the political term “bread and circuses.” Explain to students that the gladiators were used as a form of entertainment to placate the public, and keep the people from rioting (see Capitulum, Panem et Circenses, <http://www.capitulum.org/eng/imperatori/circenses.htm>). In addition to gladiators, emperors also used free grain, controlled food prices, and free entertainment, such as gladiators and chariot races. Provide students with Source A, which has four definitions of “bread and circuses” and an excerpt from *Satire X*, by Juvenal. In dyads, have students engage in a Concept Formation Activity (<https://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/teaching-guides/25184>) where pairs of students identify the differences and similarities among the definitions and poem, craft a definition of “bread and circuses” themselves, and identify instances or examples of that definition in their own lives. Have students share out their definition and examples of their definition.
4. After this discussion, inform students that they will be virtually visiting ancient Rome to examine some of the most famous structures that were built to support the system of state bribery known as bread and circuses.
5. Direct students to the **Rome Reborn: Flight Over Ancient Rome** application and have them visit the six locations under the “Recreation” tab, and listen to Professor Bernard Frischer describe the uses of these recreation venues by the public. Students can also use the Time Warp function within the application to compare and contrast past and present architectural features. Based on their virtual experience, have students write down the different ways that recreation was used by the Roman state as a political strategy.
6. As a final activity, have students engage in the “Bread and Circuses” Connect Four activity, designed by Susan Hart and Scott Hall (<http://www.collaborativelearning.org/breadandcircuses.pdf>), where students take on the roles of either the emperor or commoners to stage or pacify protest.

Assessment Suggestions

Project the quote below by Ben Moreel and ask students to write a short response using evidence from their discussions and activities that describes the negative civic consequences for a citizenry that becomes increasingly dependent on its leaders for basic needs and entertainment.

“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.”

Extensions

Provide students with a copy of the *Huffington Post* article referenced in the warm up activity, “Bread and Circuses in Rome and America” (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bread-and-circuses-in-rom_b_3414248). With the knowledge gained in this activity, have students brainstorm other ways in which American society is pacified and entertained through the spectacles of entertainment, war, and consumerism.

Source A: Bread and Circuses

BREAD AND CIRCUSES:

1. To generate public approval, not by excellence in public service or public policy, but by diversion, distraction or by satisfying the most immediate or base requirements of a populace — by offering a palliative: for example food (bread) or entertainment (circuses). ([Wikipedia](#))
2. Something, as extravagant entertainment, offered as an expedient means of pacifying discontent or diverting from a source of grievance ([Dictionary.com](#))
3. Coined by the Roman poet Juvenal in reference to the way the ruling class pacified the commoners by diverting them from contemplating their subjugation. ([Encyclopaedia Britannica](#))
4. A term referring to the potential of spectator sports and mass spectacle to divert populations or factions of a population from the weightier business of politics and society. (The Oxford Reference).

Excerpt from Juvenal, a Roman satirical Poet's (120 CE) *Satire X*

But what of the Roman mob?

They follow Fortune, as always, and hate whoever she condemns.

If Nortia, as the Etruscans called her, had favoured Etruscan Sejanus;

if the old Emperor had been surreptitiously smothered;

that same crowd in a moment would have hailed their new Augustus.

They shed their sense of responsibility long ago,

when they lost their votes, and took the bribes;

the mob that used to grant power, high office, the legions, everything,

curtails its desires, and anxiously hopes for two things only:

Bread and circuses.