

RECONSIDERING THE ROOTS OF EVENT MANAGEMENT: LEISURE IN ANCIENT ROME

MAXIMILLIANO E. KORSTANJE

School of Economics, University of Palermo, Buenos Aires, Argentina

The present research note is aimed at describing scientifically how citizens practiced leisure in Ancient Rome ranging from 100 BC to 100 AD, almost 123 years of history that merit being uncovered. Readers who wish a clear description of how leisure conformed in the High Empire should refer to classical biographers such as Cornelius Tacitus and Caius Suetonius. In different manners, both have contributed to understand further regarding how Romans lived. Like in Greece, Rome mythology encouraged conflicts, confronting sons against their fathers due to the glory, fame, and power, which were values a child learned from the cradle. As a result, in the space of a few decades, Rome transformed into a military and economic Empire that subdued and indexed to known world for more than four centuries. Under such a circumstance, leisure worked as a vehicle towards hegemony and ideology, preventing social fragmentation as well as encouraging a rural migration to urban cities.

Key words: Roman Empire; Leisure; Pleasure; Ideology; Mythology

Introduction

In recent years, researchers in tourism fields have devoted their efforts to studying the tourism history recurring once and once again to the leisure in Ancient Rome (Beltritti, 2005; Cioce Sampaio, 2005; Cordero Ulate, 2006; Fortunato, 2005; Getino, 2002; Jimenez Guzman, 1986; Khatchikian, 2000; McIntosh & Gupta, 1983; Munné, 1999; Norrild, 2005; Norval, 1935; Puddu Loy, 1983; Towner, 1985; Wallingre, 2007). In fact, ancient leisure is considered in many studies as a prerequisite for modern tourism. In what follows, studies of this nature are argumentatively weak or spuri-

ous, because they do not use contemporary bibliographical resources, and neither epigraphic nor archaeological evidences to describe or explain how Romans lived. On the other hand, they often disregard the influence of mythology in social life as well as classic texts authored by biographers such as Horace, Suetonius, Tacitus, or Virgilio. Of course, this is not due to incompetence or laziness by the part of researchers but a limitation that surfaces whenever the analyzed time frame is very large. In addition, Rome has historically captivated many scholars from Europe and beyond—not only from tourism fields but also in other disciplines as well—but each one depicted in Rome a projection

of its own civilization. Even though we have to admit there is so much of Rome in our present world, this does not determine that modern tourism and ancient leisure would be comparable issues.

Under such a context, this article is intended to highlight scientifically the preliminary expressions of leisure in a folk that stood in a moment of history favorable for development and expansion, as well as explaining to what an extent the politic manipulation of pleasure can work as a vehicle toward hegemony. A chronological basis for this study comprises 123 years ranging from 27 BC with the coronation of Octavianus to 96 DC with the death of Titus Flavius Domicianus, a period well known by specialists as *the High Roman Empire*.

Historical Background

Scientifically, we can analyze the history of Rome in three stages: Monarchy, Republic, and Empire. At the first stage, the Monarchy was characterized by a set of regencies of Kings who were generally elected by a council of old wise men (*Senatus*). This epoch commenced in 509 BC and lasted until the fall of “Tarquin the Proud.” From the 1st century AD onwards, it emerges as the Republic, a political form organized by consuls who ruled the destiny of Rome, commanding armies and financial funds. Staunch enemies of the Senate, consuls consolidated and expanded their hegemony no later than the third Punic War wherein Cartago was basically defeated and exterminated (Grimal, 2002). Many decades later, after the defeat of Cleopatra and Mark Anthony in Actium, Octavianus took the throne, proclaiming himself as the first Roman Emperor. With this young aristocrat starts a period that historians know as The Empire, dated precisely in 27 BC. From then on, Emperors will govern the fate of a people who will transform in the greatest political and military organization that history ever knew. Today, many institutions remain from Rome in our modern style of life, even in our manners of managing public events. Of course, this is a surface manifestation of a much more deep-seated issue that we will focus on in this article.

Mythology

Even though there is no consensus among scholars about the influence of myths in history, numerous studies in anthropological academy demonstrated that cosmology—a system of mythical beliefs—conditions the social practices (Balandier, 2004; Eliade, 1968; Geertz, 2005; Hocart, 1927; Korstanje, 2009; Leach, 1954; Levi-Strauss, 2002; Malinowski, 1998; Mauss, 2006; Peirano, 2000; Pritchard-Evans, 1977; Turner, 1999; Van Gennep, 1986; Vernant, 2005).

The main problem for researchers who study ancient Rome is trivializing the influence of mythology on daily customs. That way, exegesis, a method usually applied for the interpretation of myths, paved the way for a better understanding of how Romans enjoyed their leisure time. Cosmology of this interesting world (*orbis terrarum*) has been legitimized by the gods’ wishes. In regards to this, unlike Norse or Celtic mythology, Roman ones emphasized the conflict between father and sons. Once upon a time, as J. P. Vernant (2005) argued, the goddess Gea (earth) and Uranus copulated every night and day incessantly. The sons who both engendered were unable to be born, because Uranus never moved away from over Gea. Mythologically, this legend emphasizes that every night and every day Uranus still lies down on Gea, preventing her sons who were trapped in her womb from getting out. One of them, Cronos, castrated the obsessive Uranus using a sickle provided internally by his mother. Once Cronos liberated his brothers, he ruled the earth and sky until one of his youngest sons, Zeus (Jupiter) defied and defeated him in “the battle of Titans.” As a result of this, Zeus was finally enthroned as the supreme authority in Olympus (Vernant, 2005). What appears to be quite clear in this matter is a predisposition of Romans for reaching power and glory even at the expenses of their own family. For instance, these are the cases of Romulo and Remo, Caesar and Pompeyus, Antonius and Octavianus, Caracalla and Geta, Claudio and Nero, and so forth (Duby & Aries, 1985; Grimal, 2002; Hidalgo de la Vega, 2005; Kaerst, 1929; Spivey, 2004; Suetonius, 1985; Tacitus, 1993).

It is noteworthy to analyze a second myth whose importance may not be left behind. This is

the myths of a Titan, well known as Prometheus, who evaded Zeus's orders bringing fire to men. Scholars think that this legend laid the foundations of competition in leisure expressions such as Circus, Races, or Gladiator games (*ludi gladiatorii*). With certain emphasis on the tension between displeasure and pleasure, this fire symbolizes the monopoly of technology to administrate the universe; in other words, the essence of work. Afterwards, being punished by Zeus, Prometheus is condemned to have his liver be eaten by a big eagle, while at nights is regenerated to repeat this cycle eternally. Once again, Heracles (or Hercules for Romans) not only confronts Zeus's will (his own father) but also sets free this Titan. At first instance, Prometheus's liver symbolizes the human's need to work on earth every day of his life to rest during nights and reassume on the next dawn. Secondly, fire seems to have a certain connection to technology advances associated to Roman civilization. In general, a world (not only the Rome but also beyond) comprises productive and unproductive cycles wherein creation is associated to a constant moment of destruction (Eliade, 1968). Heracles once again has broken down such a process, giving to humanity the authority to transform the environment by means of rational and instrumental logic; this instrument would be considered as a criterion of humanity and a form of granting an eternal happiness in the earth. For that reason, many wild animals were assassinated during *ludi gladiatorii* for all members of the audience; people not only celebrated in such bloody events a taken for granted technical supremacy over all nature, but also their rights of territorial possession upon other civilizations; from their cosmology, Romans had been called by Zeus to administrate the surrounding natural resources and take possession of the globe privileging discourses associated to development, humanity, and civilization (Duby & Aries, 1985; Korstanje, 2009; Veyne, 1985; Vernant, 2005). This same discourse has not too much changed nowadays.

Forms of Leisure in Ancient Rome

For one moment, if we imagine, Rome would be a magnificent center wherein coexisted people from all part of the known world. The religious

calendar represented a combination of happiness, fun, and hospitality. At the beginning, even if few, there were religious celebrations, inasmuch as the Empire grew, further were the days of feasts and laziness. Prospectively, for the 1st century BC, 45 religious celebrations comprised more than 45 working days. That way, Saturnalia was held from December 17 until December 23 in winter solstice. During this celebration, slaves were temporarily freed from their duties and an atmosphere of cooperation emerged characterized by the gifts that were circulated. The Lupercalia feasts (in honor to Luperco) took place on February 15 and took just a few days emulating the founding myth of Romulus and Remo. On February 27, uttermost Roman citizenship celebrated the Equivias, a feast in honor of military triumph of Empire and Mars (Sola, 2004). To put this more clearly, Romans were pioneers in the organizing of festivals and events. By understanding contributions of ancient history there should be an alternative pathway to reckon social functions of events in our modern world.

Metaphorically speaking, technological advances in combination with a much greater metropolis to feed prompted Rome to expand their limits, incorporating new lands and economies. As a result of this, Rome was a world plagued by contradictions and social tension; a slave would have a better position than a citizen depending upon the owner he or she belonged to. Other negative effects were associated to fragmentation, veterans of wars abroad, and a rapid social mobility upward. These, like many other imbalances, were offset in the political articulation of leisure. Leisure not only was utilized as a method to prevent social fragmentation and conflict, but also as a way to warrant an appropriate military expansion. For instance, legions positioned in lands where ores such as silver or gold could be extracted and expatriated to their splendid cities. Once transformed by elaborated goods, peripheral communities received cloths, jewels, baths, instruments for plowing, and other merchandise that characterized the Roman style of life (Carcopino, 1956; Chamley, 2006; Cristóbal, 2006; Friedlander, 1982; Mehesz, 2003; Paoli, 2007; Robert, 1992; Veyne, 1985).

The term given to *shkóle*, in Rome was *otium* and its negation *nec-otium* (Munné, 1999), but Ro-

mans did not dedicate so much time to soul emancipation, inclining their practices to hedonism and corporal pleasure. Unlike Greece, this Mediterranean society was founded around certain values such as negotiation and adulation; a standard roman citizen without the wealth to survive had to have a solid network of relationships and alliances (Mehesz, 2003). Originally, spaces dedicated to leisure practice were inside the towns, but gradually citizens sought new sites farther away. The novelty of riches was the Villas built in Tivoli, Tusculum, and Praeneste wherein they spent their holidays in private. Emperors like Hadrian or Trajan (from Antoninus Era) had their own villas in the outskirts of Italy's peninsula. Promptly, this fashion was extended to most parts of Roman society and thus appeared *Baias*, *Cumae*, *Ostia*, *Antium*, *Misenum*, and *Pompeia* as popular destinations (Jiménez Guzmán, 1986).

Hitherto, a major step forward on this front was accomplished by Paul Veyne, who in 1985 publishes his book *Histoire de la Vie Privée*. This scholar argues that one of the most demanded pleasures in this civilization was the banquet; initially, dinner was considered a reward because of daily hard work; in such a ritual, status and duties were left behind symbolized by the position of guests. However, on many occasions these kinds of events were accomplished between citizens of a same status. That way, reclined in armchairs, aristocrats tasted a diversity of dishes elaborated in basis with fish, pig meat, and fruits of all nature. Under this circumstance, the table as we know it today was considered a symbol of low status and honor (Veyne, 1985). On the other hand, by respecting their gastronomy, Veyne explains that bittersweet flavor was widespread in all dishes and foods. Whereas Romans were not accustomed to talk during the first dish, they did talk during a second one as well as drinking an abundance of wine in honor of Baco, who was a divinity in charge of these kinds of events. Basically, wine would be present at almost all stages of these feasts as a form of hospitality and prestige. An anecdote mentioned by biographer Caius Suetonius reflects how important the wine was for Romans; of course, after being punished by her father, Emperor Augustus, Julia had been exiled

abroad with a hard restriction over her because of adultery: the lack of wine (Suetonius, 1985).

Other more exciting events in the daily life of the Roman Empire had been attending the public baths. These sites not only were affordable for all citizens without distinction of status or class, but there had not been any physical demarcation between richness and poverty. In these splendid sites, people may play some sport, enjoy the thermal springs, or talk about news and gossip. Professor Veyne addresses a study that demonstrates these baths were not aimed at promoting hygiene but for the encountering of friends, a similar role played by modern beaches today (Veyne, 1985). On the other hand, one of the practices of this civilization that the modern mind finds hard to imagine have been the gladiator fights. It is a notably widespread belief that Romans were keen on watching bloody festivals wherein people were obliged to kill their enemies. In fact, Romans were loath to accept bloodsheds in their colonies. Not only was killing a person, no matter their nationality, a practice unaccepted but also often punished by banishment. Even foreigners were protected from crimes during their stay in Rome by "Peregrinus Praetor." Notwithstanding, this appears not to be the case for the circle in where many people and wild animals were annually sacrificed to provide citizens diversion. How can we understand this today?

The passion for the circle and traces increased insofar as the empire was being extended. Although riots and public dispute were discouraged by political power, in some instances streets were stained in blood whenever certain gladiators came across others of opposing sides (Veyne, 1985). Etymologically, gladiator comes from the term *gladius*, the name assigned initially to a sword that Etruscans gave to their prisoners for fighting each other. There is archeological evidence that the date of first gladiator game was in 490 BC hosted by Valerius Maximus and known as *munus gladiatorium*. Promptly, gladiators gained acceptance and fame, as well as high prestige and honor in all Rome. In spite of their disposition, gladiators were considered slaves but lacking of rights and inheritance. Most surely, gladiators were trained and commercialized in sites where many ladies and tourists visited by nights. However, in some instance and

depending on the emperor's wishes, circle worked as a mechanism of social control where not only criminals or prisoners but also enemies of Rome were executed (Suetonius, 1985). As an exemplary punishment, these kinds of fights were a form of convince to audience regarding the fate of all who decide to defy the authority of Emperor or Senate. To be exact, circle as an institution has been witness of how many minorities—like Christians during the regime of Nero—were assassinated. Everyone who was pointed out as a staunch enemy of Empire had been obliged to combat in this spectacle. Like boxing in sporting events and public execution in the US, in Ancient Rome the circle woke up support and devotion. Of course, the passion of spectacle with moral indoctrination has converged in circle.

By respecting their journeys, as mentioned in the introductory section, it is premature to compare modern tourism with the miles of citizens who traveled from one site to other site in the Empire. As Friedlander (1982) argued, communication between Rome and its provinces was fluid as well as their ways were in very good condition. A system of roads from Foro—split in five ways—crossed all Italy outbound Spain, Gaul, Africa, and Germany. In accordance with this, A. J. Norval (1935) reminds us that a trip from Antioquia to Constantinople (almost 747 miles) took only 6 days. The fastest recorded trip was achieved by Tiberius going 320 from Tichinum located in Germany to Italy in only 6 hours. The vital infrastructure and road conditions were indeed one of best. As a result of this, many citizens departed in summer in search of sophisticated seaside resorts in the coasts such as Baiae, Aedepus, and Canobus. Alongside Canobus towards Alexandria there were numerous hostels for trippers to be lodged. Anyway, the attention was principally given to historical ruins and divination destinations wherein aristocrats asked for their fortune; these sites were Alexandria, Efeso, Esmira, Tebas, Menfis, and Rodas (Norval, 1935).

But, what are the differences between tourism today and roman leisure? To respond to this question we are obliged to address issues related with religion. A banquet or a feast of other nature was celebrated in honor of the protection of certain divinity. People invited to dinner but who declined

to take part in such an event would be punished by the grace of involving gods. As a result of this, unlike modern tourism or event management, the assistance and practice of leisure had an obligatory character. Unlike as it occurred in Rome, in our secularized world, tourism is deemed a voluntarily activity that people choose to practice regardless of the influence of churches. Secondly, it is very hard to transcend the boundaries of ancient morals and ethics. Broadly speaking, some customs that today we may judge abominable not only were allowed in Rome but also encouraged. Slavery as one of the main forms of economic production considered people as part of patrimony. For example, like goods in our modern times, people could be very well consumed sexually without any kind of restrictions pertaining to age or another condition (Veyne, 1985).

Conclusion

Like in Greece, Roman mythology encouraged the conflict confronting sons against their fathers. Glory, fame, and power were values that a child learned from the cradle. In the space of a few decades, Rome transformed into a military and economic power. The abundance of resources in combination with a mass of slaves provided a solid basis for expansion. It is estimated that for the 2nd century BC Rome had 53 provinces or colonies under its authority. The boundaries of the Empire not only marked the limits of approach, but also of the civilization. Under such a context, the term imperium has been applied in an ambivalent meaning. On the one hand, it referred to the economical bondage between two towns with their own sovereignty. On the other hand, imperium worked as a formula applied in case of domination with regards to specific territory subordination. In recognition of this, legitimacy was a notion constructed with two different component: trade and civilization (Grimal, 2002; Kaerst, 1929).

From this point of view, practices of leisure had shaped a broader commercial structure whose ends not only were linked to popular entertainment but also the maintenance of domination and Romanization. The gladiator's fight symbolized the superiority of a folk which boasted the monopoly of all technology advances. Sometimes, public games

turned intentionally in a bloody political locale wherein demagoguery and resistance converged. Among things that Romans enjoyed, we find the baths, races, military parade, the circles, and banquets (Veyne, 1985).

Enrooted in the belief of considering symbolically their own civilization, not only at the head of an administrative capitol, but also as the most popular attraction for the uncivilized world, Romans contributed to the inception of modern event management and entertainment. In consequence, recent public events such as Olympic Games, for example, follow a similar pattern of old leisure. Both share similar characteristics, which are enumerated as follows: a) old leisure and event management are manipulated by politicians who need to gain acceptance and legitimacy; b) political discourse in games or modern events emphasizes in a supposed superiority that is demonstrated in competency with other collectives; c) sporting triumphs are emulated as a dissuasion instrument in case of military conflagration—for example, countries often invest much money in training their sportsmen; a good performance in Olympic Games will dissuade to other countries of top ranked nation's strength; d) public events and triumphs allow a citizenship to forget existing social imbalances such as poverty or injustice; and e) making theater out of public events recalls a mythical archetype related to the values or facts that deeply marked the spirit of involved nation. Metaphorically speaking, as a mirror, ancient history plays a pivotal role in depicting social modern institutions and detaching complex realities embedded in the day-to-day practices. Whatever the case may be, after further examination, it is important to mention that these findings are only circumscribed to a specific time and place and any extrapolation should be carefully reconsidered.

References

- Balandier, G. (2004). *Political anthropology*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Sol.
- Beltritti, E. (2005). Tourism and history: The transit from leisure to business. In A. Lettieri, Ed., *Discussing the present; imagining the future*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo.
- Carcopino, J. (1956). *Daily life in ancient Rome*. Canada: Penguin Books.
- Chamley, C. (2006). *The Roman empire*. People Group: Boston University. Retrieved from <http://people.bu.edu/chamley/95141/Roma1.pdf>
- Cioce Sampaio, C. A. (2005). El turismo como fenómeno histórico. *Studies and Perspective in Tourism*, 13(3 and 4), 290–302
- Cordero Ulate, A. (2006). *New axis of accumulation and nature*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO.
- Cristóbal, V. (2006). La Eneida de Virgilio, un viaje entre Troya y Roma. *Roman Filology Journal, Anejo IV*, 85–100.
- Duby, G., & Aries, P. (1985). *Histoire de la vie privée. Tome 1. de L'empire Roman à l'an Mil (Poche)*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Eliade, M. (1968). *Myth and reality*. Madrid: Guadarrama.
- Fortunato, N. (2005) El territorio y sus representaciones como fuente de recursos turísticos: valores fundacionales del concepto de parque nacional. *Studies and Perspective in Tourism*, 14(5), 314–348.
- Friedlander, L. (1982). *The Roman society*. Madrid: FCE.
- Geertz, C. (2005). *The interpretation of cultures*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Getino, O. (2002). *Turismo: Entre el ocio y el neg-ocio*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Ciccus.
- Grimal, P. (2002). *Hellenism and the inception of Rome: Mediterranean world in ancient age*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Siglo XXI.
- Hidalgo de la Vega, M. J. (2005) Algunas Reflexiones sobre los límites del *olkoumene* en el Imperio Romano. *Gerion*, 1(1), 271–285
- Hobbes, T. (2004). *Leviatán*. Buenos Aires: Libertador.
- Hocart, A M. (1927). *Kingship*. Londres: Oxford University Press.
- Jimenez Guzman, L. F. (1986). *Tourist theory: An integrated approach about social fact*. Bogota: University of Externado in Colombia.
- Kaerst, J. (1929). Scipio Aemillianus, die Stoa und der Prinzipat. *Neue Jahrbucher fur Wiss Und Jugendbild*, 11), 653–675.
- Khatchikian, M. (2000). *Historia del turismo*. Lima: Editorial de la Universidad San Martín de Porres.
- Korstanje, M. (2009). Interpreting the logic of resting. *Pasos: Journal of Tourism and Cultural Patrimony*, 7(1), 99–113.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (2002). *Mito y significado*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Mauss, M. (2006). *Manual de etnografía*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Malinowski, B. (1998). *Studies in primitive psychology*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Altaya.
- McIntosh, R., & Gupta, S. (1983). *Tourism, planification, administration and perspectives*. México: Limusa.
- Mehesz, K. (2003). *Corrupted and perverted Rome*. México: Ediciones Plaza.
- Munné, F. (1999). *Psychosociology of the free time: A critical approach*. México: Trillas.
- Norrild, J. (2005). Turismo. Entre el ocio y el neg-ocio: identidad cultural y desarrollo económico en América

- Latina y MERCOSUR. *Studies and Perspective in Tourism*, 144), 369–372
- Norval, A. J. (1935). *La Industria Turística. Traducción y presentación de Francisco Muñoz de Escalona (2007)*. Universidad de Málaga, Spain. Retrieved from www.eumed.net/cursecon/libreria
- Paoli, U. E. (2007). *The daily life in ancient Rome*. Buenos Aires: Terramar Ediciones.
- Peirano, M. G. (2000). A Análise Antropológica de Rituais. *Serie de Antropología 270*. Universidad de Brasilia, Brasil.
- Pritchard-Evans, E. E. (1977). *The Nuer*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Puddu Loy, G. (1983). *Geographie touristique*. Denges: Edition Delta and Spes.
- Robert, J. N. (1992). *The pleasures in Rome*. Madrid: Editorial Edaf.
- Solá, M. D. (2004). *Roman mythology*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Gradifico.
- Spivey, N. (2004). *The ancient Olympics: A history*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Suetonius, C. (1985). *Los doce césares*. Madrid: Editorial Sarpe.
- Tacitus, C. (1993). *Anales*. Madrid: Editorial Alianza.
- Towner, J. (1985). The grand Tour: a key phase in the history of tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 12(3), 297–333.
- Turner, V. (1999). *La selva de los símbolos*. Madrid: Siglo XXI.
- Van Gennep, A. (1986). *The Rites of Passage*. Madrid: Editorial Taurus.
- Veyne, P. (1985). *Histoire de la Vie Privée*. París: Editions Du Seuil.
- Vernant, J. P. (2005). *Once upon a time . . . The universe, gods and men*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Wallingre, N. (2007). *History of Argentinean tourism*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Turísticas.