

# Bread and circuses

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"**Bread and circuses**" (or **Bread and games**) (from Latin: *panem et circenses*) is a metaphor for handouts and petty amusements that politicians use to gain popular support, instead of gaining it through sound policy. The phrase is invoked not only to criticize politicians, but also to criticize their supporters for giving up their civic duty.

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## History

This phrase originates in *Satire X* of the Roman poet Juvenal (*c* 200). In context, the Latin phrase *panis et circenses* (bread and circuses) is given as the only remaining cares of a Roman populace which has given up its birthright of political involvement. Here Juvenal displays his contempt for the declining heroism of his contemporary Romans.<sup>[1]</sup>:

... Already long ago, from when we sold our vote to no man, the People have abdicated our duties; for the People who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil office, legions — everything, now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things:

**bread and circuses**

*... iam pridem, ex quo suffragia nulli uendimus, effudit curas; nam qui dabat olim imperium, fasces, legiones, omnia, nunc se continet atque duas tantum res anxius optat, panem et circenses.*

(Juvenal, Satire 10.77–81)

Juvenal here makes reference to the Roman practice of providing free wheat to Roman citizens as well as costly circus games and other forms of entertainment as a means of gaining political power through populism. The *Annona* (grain dole) was begun under the instigation of the *popularis* politician Gaius Sempronius Gracchus in 123 BC; it remained an object of political contention until it was taken under the control of the Roman emperors.

Spanish intellectuals between the 19th and 20th centuries complained about the similar *pan y toros* ("bread and bullfights"). It appears similarly in Russian as *хлеба и зрелищ* ("bread and spectacle").

Aldous Huxley used the phrase in *Brave New World Revisited* as an example of one of the ideas he used as a theme in *Brave New World*.

The song "Panis et Circenses," written by Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso and performed by Os Mutantes, is considered a manifesto of the Tropicalia music and art movement, as is the compilation album that shares its name.

## See also

- List of Latin phrases
- Prolefeed
- Roman circus
- Colosseum
- Plebeian

## Sources and notes

- <sup>^</sup> Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil (1993). *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. Houghton Mifflin.
  - Potter, D. and D. Mattingly, *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire*. Ann Arbor (1999).
  - Rickman, G., *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome* Oxford (1980).

## Further reading

- Juvenal's 16 "Satires" in Latin (<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/juvenal.html>) , at The Latin Library
- Juvenal's first 3 "Satires" in English (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/juvenalpersius-intro.html>)

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