

Bread and Circuses- How "Jersey Shore" portends the fall of the American Empire

Imagine, for a moment, that you are a citizen of Rome at the height of the Holy Roman Empire. You live in the centre of civilization, and at the beginning of the age of enlightened thought and philosophy. And your days are full of the spectacle of the Gladiator games, where men compete for the love of the crowd, fuelling the populace's bloodlust.

But all is not well.

The nature of empires is that they all must fall. They collapse under the weight of size and scope, under the weight of inevitable corruption, and under the weight of maintaining a burgeoning populace. To hide the common man from these ills, you give them daily entertainment, and feed them cheap bread, as a distracted and well-fed populace is a populace ignorant of their plight. Decadence and excess may cover a different set of ills, but they also portend the downward spiral of an empire's enlightened spirit. Nero (allegedly) fiddled while Rome burned; the fires, however, had been smouldering for years.

Attacked from without and from within, the Holy Roman Empire ultimately fell. It had to, as all empires must. It has been said that the sun never set on the British Empire; sunset came when the small island nation could no longer patrol the world. The Soviet Union dissolved because communism always fails long term, and because people love blue jeans. And so must the American Empire must fall; it's inevitable.

My wife and I have friends- in reality, it's my wife's high school classmate who I met this past year- who live in the city of Stockton, California. They moved down there some years ago, chasing the "American Dream". In some ways they captured it: they have a nice house in a quiet community; they have two kids, a boy and a girl, who are happy and well adjusted; and they live in an area of perpetual sunshine, far removed from the dreary Vancouver weather. But all is not sunny. Like many Americans, they are upside-down in their mortgage. For the uninitiated, this means they owe more on their house than they could sell it for. The way real estate is meant to work is that you buy a home, and it appreciates in value. If you wish to move to a bigger, better, or simply different place, you sell your house, pay off your mortgage, and

use the difference as a down payment on your new home. Except that early in the 2000's, American banks extended unsecured credit to many people who had no business getting a loan. People were able to buy homes without making a down payment, and thus were unable to create equity in their homes.

Part of the danger in all this is obvious; giving unsecured credit at sub-prime rates is good for banks when the economy is high. But when the economy goes into the crapper, and people lose their jobs, the banks are left holding the metaphoric bag. Don't get me wrong- I have no sympathy for the banks, who preyed on people desperate for home ownership, signing them into deals for which Satan would be proud. Since many of the home buyers hadn't put any of their own money into the purchase, they were able to simply walk away, leaving the banks with an inventory of worthless houses. With a glut of inventory, and nobody able to buy, the broken economy ground to a halt, and the bank crisis became front-page news.

Meanwhile, eight plucky kids from Jersey got a show on MTV.

The bank crisis dominated the news cycle for close to a year, leading to trillion-dollar bail out packages for some banks, death for others. The American government was once again forced to mortgage the future to survive the present. As the economic entropy took hold, and tent cities began to pop-up across the nation, the government threatened bankruptcy, and only a last-minute agreement to raise the debt ceiling allowed the government to avoid insolvency.

This event should have invaded the national discourse. And for the most part it did. But for a portion of the populace, a bigger question was on their mind:

Why did "The Situation" run into the wall?

I don't hate reality television *per se*- many a Wednesday night has been spent watching *Master Chef*, for example- but I worry that as the level of dysfunction in America has grown, the level of discourse on many of these shows has fallen into the muck of the worst society has to offer. Gone are the halcyon days of *Survivor*, when it still had its fastball, or *The Amazing Race*; now we are faced with eight shows about the Kardashians, and we succumb to hate-watching various iterations of *Housewives*, wallowing in the day-to-day existence of pseudo-celebrities.

You might wonder why it matters, and you may feel that it is merely entertainment, mind candy to help us forget. And that is precisely the problem, for at the nadir of the Roman Empire, the populace was distracted by lions being fed Christians. It was the worst form of entertainment, a live snuff film. I fear we might be heading there in our society.

America (actually, most of the world) has issues that are virtually unfixable. They also have an abundance of cheap, filling, psychologically-addictive food, a 24-hour entertainment cycle to feed an ever-salivating populace, and a broken political system. The American Empire is on its knees, and I fear its leaders are tuning their fiddles. It's telling, I believe, that the outrage expressed by Americans over Treyvon Martin's murder, and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, paled in comparison to the vitriol spewed at Mylie Cyrus for her twerk-fest on the MTV video awards. Somehow, our priorities are out of whack.

So who do you have for *Dancing with the Stars*?