Bread, Circuses, and the Politics of State-Sponsored Experiences: The Duality of Role

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Uzoma Ugochukwu Nwoke, Ph.D

Abstract

This paper examines state-sponsored experiences through the case study of the Roman Colosseum, interrogating its dual role as both a political instrument and a site of civic engagement. Built to awe, to distract, and to reaffirm imperial control, it was a spectacle that kept the masses fed, thrilled, and, most importantly, obedient. But was it truly one-sided? This paper explores the paradox of state-sponsored experiences, questioning whether the Colosseum was merely a tool of control or if audiences, in their cheers and jeers, found subtle ways to assert agency. Drawing parallels with modern mega-experiences like the Olympics, Super Bowls, national celebrations, the study examines how governments continue to wield experiences as instruments of influence. Yet, no experience remains fully in the hands of its creators. Whether in ancient Rome or today, audiences reshape meaning, proving that even the most calculated performances

1. Department of Intelligence and Security Studies, Afe Babalola University Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria; nwokeuu@abuad.edu.ng; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8660-5603

of power can produce something far less predictable like citizen's authentic engagement or social cohesion.

Keywords: Roman Colosseum, The Experience Economy, Political Control, State, Spectacles

Introduction

The Roman Colosseum, an architectural marvel of antiquity, has long stood as an enduring symbol of imperial power, civic engagement, and the theatricalisation of state-sponsored experiences. This amphitheatre, commissioned under Emperor Vespasian around AD 70-72 and completed under Titus in AD 80, was more than a structure of mere entertainment; it was a stage where the Roman state performed its authority, controlled the collective imagination, and reinforced the ideological foundations of the empire. However, was the Colosseum primarily a tool of political subjugation masquerading as public amusement, or was it a genuine mechanism for citizen engagement and social cohesion? The answer is neither singular nor uncontroversial. The interplay between state-sponsored experiences and the populace is fraught with contradictions, where experiences are simultaneously manufactured to pacify and enthral (Futrell, 2006; Beacham, 1999).

At the heart of this discussion is the question of intention: to what extent were the spectacles of the Colosseum an engineered political instrument rather than an organic civic engagement? Historical and ethnographic studies suggest that Rome's ruling elite wielded the Colosseum as an apparatus of control, carefully curating experiences that reinforced a stratified social order while maintaining a façade of public involvement (Coleman, 1990). The famed *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses) doctrine, popularised by Juvenal in *Satire X*, speaks to the calculated distribution of entertainment and provisions designed to placate the masses, ensuring their political disengagement in exchange for visceral pleasures (Auguet, 1972). Yet, if we take a closer look, can we confidently say that the Roman citizenry was merely a passive recipient of this grand spectacle? Could the Colosseum have been a space where spectators actively negotiated, formed social cohesion or even reclaimed aspects of the performances they witnessed?

Anthropological ideas challenge the notion of a wholly unidirectional state influence. Accounts of public spectacles in modern authoritarian states such as Soviet-era mass parades (Bonnell, 1997) or North Korean stadium performances (Kang, 2009), reveal a complex relationship between state narratives and audience reception. In some instances, populations may internalise the ideological messaging embedded in such events, but in others, they may reimagine or distort the experience to reflect their own interpretations and counter-narratives (Claridge, 2017). Meaning spectators have their own agency. If we extrapolate this understanding to the Roman context, the Colosseum's role may not have been as rigidly propagandistic as some historical accounts suggest.

A case in point is the *venationes*, which elaborates the hunting of exotic beasts in the empire. These spectacles reinforced the narrative of Roman supremacy over nature and foreign lands, an ideological affirmation of imperial dominance (Edmondson, 1996). Yet, there are indications that audiences did not always conform to the intended messaging. The historian Tacitus recounts episodes where unpopular emperors faced public scorn within the arena, illustrating how the Colosseum, rather than being an unassailable tool of state control, occasionally became a forum for resistance (Tacitus, *Annals*, IV.62). Also, gladiatorial games, although intended to embody martial valour and Roman virtues could morph into chaotic scenes where the crowd's sympathies lay not with the emperor but with the individual combatants, particularly those perceived as underdogs or rebels (Kyle, 2007). The controversial figure of Spartacus, a gladiator-turned-revolutionary, exemplifies this tension, showing how Rome's own instruments of control could produce unintended forms of subversion (Shaw, 2001).

Further complicating this discussion is the transformation of the Colosseum's legacy across different regimes. During the medieval period, the structure ceased to function as an amphitheatre and took on new roles, including that of a Christian shrine, a fortress, and even a quarry for later architectural projects (Claridge, 2017). The Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini later sought to appropriate the Colosseum as a symbol of Italy's purported continuity with Roman grandeur, staging mass rallies and political events within its ruins (Gentile, 1996). Such repurposing shows the mutability of state-sponsored experiences; their meanings are not fixed but are instead perpetually reinterpreted to serve new political exigencies.

The significance of the Colosseum, therefore, cannot be understood merely through the lens of its original Roman context. Contemporary governments and private entities alike have continued to deploy grand experiences, whether in the form of Olympic ceremonies, military parades, or even large-scale music festivals as a means of shaping collective consciousness. The question remains: are these experiences mere manipulations of mass psychology, or do they contain within them spaces of authentic engagement? This study seeks to untangle these ambiguities, drawing from both historical and ethnographic methodologies to interrogate the enduring role of state-sponsored experiences as both a political tool and a potential medium for civic participation.

By adopting a nuanced, multi-disciplinary approach, this research will examine the Colosseum not simply as an artefact of antiquity but as a case study in the broader politics of spectacle; a phenomenon that, though deeply embedded in ancient Rome, continues to manifest in modern governance and mass culture. In doing so, this paper does not seek to offer a definitive resolution to the contradictions inherent in state-sponsored experiences but rather to expose and interrogate their paradoxical nature.

The Experience Economy

The term "Experience Economy" has emerged as an important concept in contemporary economic literature, positing a shift from traditional goods and services to the commodification of experiences as primary economic offerings. This evolution, while ostensibly straightforward, is imbued with complexities and contradictions that merit a brief examination.

The term was notably promoted by Pine and Gilmore (1998), who delineated a progression from agrarian, industrial, and service economies to one where experiences themselves become the locus of economic value. They identified four realms of experience: entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics; each contributing uniquely to consumer engagement. This framework has been instrumental in understanding how businesses design memorable events to differentiate themselves in a saturated market.

However, antecedent to Pine and Gilmore, German sociologist Gerhard Schulze (1992) introduced the concept of the "Experience Society"

(Erlebnisgesellschaft), observing a societal shift in *Nürnberg* where individuals, having satisfied basic needs, sought enriched living through experiences. Schulze's ethnographic research illuminated a transformation in consumer behaviour from functional necessities to the pursuit of individualised experiences, coining the term "Experience Market" (Erlebnismarkt) to describe this phenomenon.

Things were also not different in the 1920-30's United States of America. The strategic transition from necessity to luxury in American consumerism, designed through government policies, reveals a nuanced interplay between economic engineering, social conditioning, and an attempt to keep a people materialistic in the name of encouraging productivity. Herbert Hoover, as Secretary of Commerce, pioneered data-driven consumer strategies, fostering suburbanisation and homeownership to drive economic growth (Robbins, 1999). This move was institutionalised under Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, where the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and its agencies, like the National Recovery Administration (NRA) and Public Works Administration (PWA), sought to stabilise wages and employment, stimulating consumer spending, including on luxury goods (Miller Centre). However, studies reveal that voluntary compliance and systemic inequities undermined these efforts, leading to the Supreme Court's 1935 rejection of the NRA, exposing the fragility of government-orchestrated economic behaviour (Miller Centre). Some studies even provide insights to further suggest that this shift redefined societal aspirations, embedding consumption as a measure of success and subtly coercing individuals into a cycle of economic dependency, which undermines their ability to pursue spiritual and intellectual endeavours that are essential for community flourishing. Ultimately, while these policies spurred economic recovery, they also entrenched consumerism as a cultural imperative, raising critical ethical and philosophical questions about the authenticity of civil life.

It is against this backdrop that the experience economy was born. Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) study, within the tourism sector, examined Pine and Gilmore's four experiential dimensions; they hold that the impact of these dimensions mentioned above on visitor satisfaction is context-dependent. Specifically, at the Ice Music Festival, the escapism dimension significantly influenced overall satisfaction, whereas at the Maihaugen Museum, the educational aspect was more pertinent. This is to suggest that

the efficacy of experiences varies across different contexts, thus challenging the universality of the Experience Economy model. No doubt, the Experience Economy ostensibly offers avenues for economic revitalisation and consumer enrichment, but critical analyses reveal underlying tensions. The escalating costs associated with experiential offerings, such as music festivals and fine dining, raise questions about accessibility and the commodification of leisure. For instance, ticket prices for events like the Glastonbury Festival have surged from £65 in 1995 to £360 in recent years, prompting debates about the democratisation of experiences (The Times, 2024).

Moreover, this economic model may reflect deeper societal shifts towards individualism and the erosion of traditional communal bonds, even though experiences seek to promote the latter. As conventional markers of community and significance wane, individuals increasingly seek meaning through curated experiences. However, such pursuits may offer ephemeral satisfaction, lacking the enduring fulfilment derived from genuine human connections and community involvement. This critique aligns with observations that the commercialisation of emotions, as posited by Jensen (1996), may lead to a superficial engagement with experiences, prioritising momentary exhilaration over substantive social bonds.

There are some positives nonetheless. The cultural sector provides good example. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, serves as an example of how cultural institutions can revitalise regional economies. Since its inauguration, the museum has substantially boosted the Basque region's economy, with an economic impact of €762 million reported in 2023. This case exemplifies how the strategic integration of architectural innovation and curated cultural experiences can stimulate economic growth, a phenomenon often referred to as the "Bilbao effect" (Le Monde, 2024).

The allure of the experience economy lies in its capacity to amplify emotions through shared consumption. Studies have demonstrated that individuals partaking in experiences collectively, such as attending concerts or engaging in group activities, report heightened emotional responses compared to solitary participation. This phenomenon, termed "social amplification," demonstrates that the presence of others intensifies one's emotional engagement with the experience (Boothby, Clark, & Bargh, 2014). Also, shared experiences can lead to accelerated emotional satiation, where

the initial excitement diminishes more rapidly, prompting consumers to seek novel experiences to recapture the heightened emotional state (Bhargave, Montgomery, & Redden, 2018). This cyclical pursuit perpetuates the demand within the experience economy, as individuals continuously seek communal activities that offer emotional intensity.

The construct of time affluence, defined as the subjective sense of having ample time, intersects significantly with experiential consumption. Individuals who perceive themselves as time-affluent are more likely to engage in activities that promote well-being, such as leisure and cultural experiences (Kasser & Sheldon, 2009). Contrarily, time poverty, characterised by a chronic feeling of being rushed, impedes one's ability to partake in enriching experiences, thereby detracting from overall life satisfaction (Giurge, Whillans, & West, 2020). The experience economy capitalises on this dynamic by offering curated experiences that promise efficient yet profound engagement, appealing to those seeking to optimise their limited leisure time for maximum emotional benefit.

Engagement with arts and culture, quintessential components of the experience economy, has been empirically linked to improved health and well-being. A comprehensive study by the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport revealed that participation in cultural activities contributes to better mental and physical health outcomes, including reduced depression and enhanced cognitive function (The Guardian, 2024). Therefore, these findings, once again, demonstrate that the consumption of cultural experiences serves not merely as entertainment but as a conduit for holistic health, reinforcing the intrinsic value of the experience economy in fostering societal well-being.

It is precisely on these psychological, sociocultural, and economic foundations that both governments and the private sector have strategically capitalised on the vast potential of the experience economy. Recognising the deeply entrenched human desire for emotional enrichment, social belonging, and perceived well-being, policymakers and corporate entities have deliberately engineered environments that commodify experiences, often under the guise of fostering national economic growth, social cohesion, and individual fulfilment (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Governments, particularly in the West, have long understood that consumerist participation in

experiences, whether through cultural festivals, sports events, or leisure tourism can serve as a mechanism for stimulating the economy, as seen in state-sponsored mega-events like the Olympics, which are framed as national unifiers but function as large-scale economic engines (Whitson & Horne, 2006).

Similarly, the private sector has intensified its strategic use of experience-based marketing, leveraging neuroscience and behavioural economics to design immersive environments that maximise emotional engagement and perceived value (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Tech giants, for instance, have transformed digital experiences into highly addictive consumption patterns, where the line between participation and economic extraction becomes increasingly blurred (Zuboff, 2019). Even within the wellness industry, where experiences are marketed as pathways to self-actualisation, a paradox emerges: while consumers seek fulfilment, they are simultaneously integrated into a cycle of perpetual experiential consumption (Schor, 2010). The experience economy, therefore, though promising profound emotional and psychological benefits, is also a sophisticated mechanism of economic governance, where states manipulate human aspirations to sustain market participation, or serve a dual purpose for citizens' engagement and as a political tool to pacify the citizens. The succeeding section reveals this fact with the Rome Colosseum as a case study.

The Rome Colosseum: The Dual Role of State-Sponsored Experiences

The construction of the Colosseum (originally known as the Flavian Amphitheatre) must be understood within the volatile political landscape of the late first century CE, a period marked by imperial transition, economic instability, and the delicate balance of power between the emperor and the Roman populace. Emerging from the ashes of the tumultuous Year of the Four Emperors (69 CE), Vespasian, the founder of the Flavian dynasty, sought to consolidate his rule by deploying a series of calculated political initiatives, of which the Colosseum was paramount (Welch, 2007). Far from being an altruistic gift to the people, as Suetonius (c. 121 CE) later noted in The Lives of the Twelve Caesars, the amphitheatre was a deeply strategic undertaking designed to legitimise Flavian rule, redirect public discontent,

and assert imperial authority over both the city and its citizenry (Suetonius, Vespasian, 9).

As expected, the political climate preceding its construction was rife with disillusionment. Nero's reign (54-68 CE) had been defined by a combination of populist excesses and elite alienation, culminating in his notorious Domus Aurea, an opulent palace that, according to Tacitus (Annals, 15.42), symbolised Nero's detachment from the common people: "It was not the city of Rome that burned, but the desires of a single man." Following Nero's suicide, Rome spiralled into civil war, as rival generals like Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and ultimately Vespasian vied for control of the empire (Toner, 2013). When Vespasian emerged victorious in 69 CE, his immediate challenge was to assert legitimacy over a fractured empire and a cynical population that had grown weary of instability (Levick, 1999).

The Colosseum was, therefore, a symbolic act of political rehabilitation. It was deliberately constructed on the site of Nero's Domus Aurea, a move that, as historian Mary Beard (2008) argues, "served as a public erasure of imperial decadence, replacing Nero's private kingdom with a monument of civic inclusion." Dio Cassius (c. 230 CE) similarly notes that "where Nero had once dined alone beneath a gilded ceiling, now the people feasted their eyes upon the slaughter of beasts and men" (Roman History, 66.15). However, one must approach such narratives with caution. The Flavian appropriation of space was not merely an act of magnanimity, as contemporary sources suggest, but a calculated reclamation of authority through spectacle; a form of "spatial propaganda" that restructured the urban landscape in favour of the ruling power (Hölscher, 2018).

The social domains are not spared. Rome at the time of the Colosseum's construction was deeply stratified, with economic pressures exacerbated by the cost of recent military campaigns (Wiedemann, 1992). Vespasian had risen to power largely on the strength of his military success in Judea, culminating in the defeat of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The spoils from this military campaign, particularly the Second Temple looted treasures, were instrumental in funding the Colosseum (Coarelli, 2001). This reality, however, is largely absent from Roman sources, which preferred to frame the amphitheatre as an imperial benefaction rather than an artefact of conquest. Josephus (The Jewish War, 7.5.7) offers a rare dissenting voice, describing how "Judean

captives, paraded through the streets of Rome as trophies, laboured under the weight of their own defeat," as they were forced into the construction of the very edifice that would later entertain their captors.

Thus, this background helped shape the socio-economic landscape of Rome in the late first century CE, as witnessed by the expanding role of state-sponsored entertainment in pacifying an increasingly urbanised and politically volatile population. As Juvenal later noted, "the people who once bestowed commands, consulships, legions, and all else, now restrains itself and craves but two things; bread and circuses" (Satires, 10.81). The Colosseum, with its mass spectacles of violence and grandeur, was a crucial element in this broader strategy of diversion (Millar, 2002). Yet, some scholars argue that such spectacles were not merely passive distractions but active tools of political socialisation. Kyle (2001) opines that gladiatorial games were "rituals of state control," designed to reinforce Roman martial values and desensitise the population to the violence inherent in the empire. Others, however, see in these spectacles a form of negotiated power. Wiedemann (1992) notes that while the games were instruments of elite control, the crowd's reaction, applause, boos, demands for clemency allowed for a measure of performative resistance within the prescribed limits of imperial rule.

The Flavian era was also characterised by both fiscal pragmatism and conspicuous expenditure. Vespasian, unlike his predecessor, did not shy away from taxation. His infamous tax on urine collection (used in tanning and textile industries) led to the phrase *pecunia non olet* ("money does not stink"), a testament to his practical, if unpopular, approach to state revenue (Suetonius, Vespasian, 23). The Colosseum, despite its grandeur, was thus part of a broader economic strategy that blended state-sponsored spectacle or experiences with financial necessity. The vast labour force required to construct the amphitheatre, comprising skilled artisans, enslaved captives, and contracted builders, reflected Rome's ability to mobilise its imperial resources, but also its reliance on systems of coercion and hierarchy as noted by Hopkins and Beard (2005).

Yet, if one looks beyond the grand narratives of imperial largesse, a more cynical pattern emerges. The Colosseum, while ostensibly a gift to the people, was also a mechanism of control, a means by which the emperor

could assert his dominance not through brute force but through the staging of public experiences. Foucault (1975) might describe this as a form of "disciplinary spectacle," where power is exercised not just through the sword, but through the gaze; the emperor's ability to direct, regulate, and frame the experience of the populace. The amphitheatre, in this sense, was not merely an arena of entertainment but a space of surveillance and subjugation, where the citizenry, though enthralled, remained structurally subservient.

This dual role of state-sponsored experiences as a means of both political consolidation and citizen engagement persists even in contemporary global contexts. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, for example, prioritises cultural megaprojects like NEOM and the Diriyah Gate as tools for economic diversification and national identity formation (Krane, 2019). Similarly, Dubai's Expo 2020 showcased the UAE's ambitions on the world stage, intertwining national branding with economic diplomacy (Davidson, 2018). The U.S. leverages large-scale sporting events such as the Super Bowl and presidential inaugurations as arenas of civic unity and soft power projection (Giglio, 2021). Meanwhile, Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup served a dual function: fostering national pride and deflecting international scrutiny on labour rights (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). These cases have one thing in common: Much like the Colosseum, they serve as instruments of power while simultaneously uniting, pacifying, and legitimising regimes in the eyes of their citizens and the world.

Experiences stand, therefore, as a testament to their potency as state power; how architecture, entertainment, and ideology could be fused into a singular expression of imperial authority. Whether the people of Rome saw it as a gift or a gilded cage remains, as with all spectacles of power, a matter of perspective (Flower, 2017).

Conclusion

The Colosseum was far more than an amphitheatre; it was a masterful exercise in political power and citizens' engagement. Constructed within the upheaval of imperial transition, it served as both an assertion of Flavian legitimacy and an instrument of mass pacification. Its very foundations were built upon conquest, with Judean spoils financing its construction and

enslaved captives labouring to bring it to life. The spectacle it housed, like the gladiatorial combat, public executions, and theatrical re-enactments, was a calculated tool to reinforce Rome's martial identity while channelling public discontent into orchestrated displays of violence and grandeur. In this sense, the Colosseum was neither mere entertainment nor simple largesse; it was a structure of power, shaping civic identity through shared experiences of spectacle. The same mechanisms endure today, as states from Saudi Arabia to the U.S. deploy monumental experiences to consolidate control, shape national narratives, and project influence. Like the Colosseum, modern state-sponsored experiences, whether world expos, sporting mega-events, or national celebrations, function as instruments of civil engagement and governance, blurring the lines between community engagement and political strategy.

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