CROWD POLITICS:
The Myth of the Populus Romanus

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An iconic moment in the history of film representations of the Roman crowd provides a useful visual analogue for my exploration of representations of crowd politics in ancient Rome. Picture the following cinematic scene, based on the popular novel published in 1880 by the Union General Lew Wallace. Among a turbulent mass of horses and men, Charlton Heston stands in a chariot drawn by four white horses: he wears a metallic Star of David in his brown leather tunic, complemented by an over-the-shoulder swath of fabric the color of the blue on the Israeli flag. Heston plays the Jewish noble Judah Ben-Hur, whose rival Stephen Boyd (Messala), along with his ebony team, is draped in Roman purple and gold. The two men exchange burning glances, and on cue, we see the masses cheering for Heston. Frank Thring, an urbane, world-weary Pontius Pilate, drops his handkerchief to start the race; the horses leap from the gate; and the camera pans the shouting, jostling, sweaty, robed, bearded and veiled crowd gone wild.

The classic chariot-race that is the climax of William Wyler’s 1959 *Ben Hur*—a piece of “glorious trash,” as its cowriter Gore Vidal justly calls it—is a crowd scene. As such it is typical of major twentieth century American films with a Roman theme: among the best known, D.W. Griffiths’s silent *Intolerance* (1916), Henry Koster’s *The Robe* (1953), Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960), Rouben...
Mamoulian’s *Cleopatra* (1963), Anthony Mann’s *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), and Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000). Roman crowds in American movies are especially apt surrogates of the modern film audience. Mirroring the viewers sitting in the cinema, they gape at the games, parades, and other spectacles that signify the pagan decadence or imperial majesty of the Roman Empire—and by extension, of course, the consumerist decadence and capitalist majesty of American spectatorial culture.

The surge in the production of Roman themed films in the late 1950s and early 1960s can be attributed to a number of factors. Among them are Technicolor and other advances in film technology; the quest for grand narratives that would enact the epic conflict of the Cold War; Hollywood’s appeal to Christian religiosity, in an effort to rub out its long-standing prejudicial associations with Judaism and Communism; and the crumbling of legal and social constraints on the baring of erotically appealing bodies in film. Add to this the tendency throughout the twentieth century for works of social theory and their popular counterparts in the press to compare the rise of American mass culture in the welfare state with Rome’s fall into mob politics and moral decay: a theme ripe for cultural imaginings of crowds, in all their heterogeneous, chaotic poverty.

Movies like *Ben Hur* speak the language of Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Apologia*, which condemns the beautiful statues and rich ornaments in Catholic churches in language that titillates the imagination as much as it frightens the soul. Their Roman crowds embody the appeal of the forbidden—miscegenation, heterodox religious practices, sexual freedom, and outrageous levels of material consumption. But if these things are “forbidden,” they are also dynamic forces at the heart of stories of American exceptionalism and success: its minimal class structure, its politics of race and gender reform, its capitalist energy. By virtue of their otherness in time, space, and culture, the Roman crowds of Hollywood exorcise American viewers’ fearful glimpses of the consequences of democracy, from mob rule to the contagions of multiculturalism, while enabling them simultaneously to exult in identification with a triumphant imperial populism.

Politically speaking, the cinematic Roman crowd serves a second, and more insidious, function. Since its founding, the United States has named itself part of the legacy of Rome, and particularly Roman republican political thought and practice. Hollywood’s Roman crowd is a symptom of the American fantasy of popular republican will—a fantasy in which obedience to the law is enacted in the muddled spontaneity and unpredictability of the mass experience. Visibly “foreign” in many ways—berobed, bearded, swarthy, and culturally heterogeneous—the crowd is an ideally universalized, sensuous, embodied mass; but it is a mass inscribed and contained within a subtly oppressive order. Through
an abstract and a physical concept, but it is the voice of the people, “the vox populi,” that has the potential to signify either civil enfranchisement or the subversiveness of the rabble. This tension between these two poles is clear if we compare numerous contractual uses of “people” with the invocation of the “vox populi.”

Contractual language using “people” emerges during the establishment of the United States in the eighteenth century, particularly in the first lines of the constitution “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility…” (1787). The same usage obtains in the words of U.S. statesman and lawyer Daniel Webster in a speech made in 1830 before the U.S. Senate: “The people’s government, made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people.” The contract of the nation is between the people and its representative government, as Thomas Jefferson makes clear in 1820: “I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves.” Today in the U.S. legal context this contract is also apparent in the language of State prosecution formalized in the early nineteenth century: “The PEOPLE versus…”

From its earliest usage, the “vox populi” represents a potential danger that needs to be controlled. Alcuin writes in a letter to Emperor Charlemagne in ad 800 that he should not listen to those who say “The voice of the people is the voice of God” (“Vox populi, vox Dei”), “for the turbulence of the mob is always close to insanity” (“cum tumultuositas vulgi semper insaniae proxima sit”). From the fifteenth century onward the phrase “vox populi, vox Dei” is often cited in English, sometimes in an ironic sense, such as when General W. T. Sherman writes in an 1863 letter to his wife: “Vox populi, vox humbug.” In this case “vox populi” means general opinion, common talk or rumor. In the twentieth century, the colloquial use of this term, abbreviated to “vox pop,” usually has derogatory connotations of uninformed opinion. In the 1950s and 1960s in particular, there was British broadcasting of “vox pops”—street interviews with passers-by “presenting views on issues of the day which, with luck, were amusingly expressed and—for reasons of balance—cancelled each other out” (Nigel Rees, “Dictionary of Phrase and Allusion” [1991], 331).

In the twentieth century, the word appears in political rhetoric to describe the proletarian-devices of plot and camera work, the multiplicity and diversity that characterizes the crowd at first glance yields to an impression of unity, manifested in costuming and the extras’ close attention to the Romans’ charismatic authority. The camera dwells on their mass expression of emotion: cries and sighs are emitted together. The crush of earth and jewel-toned robes, tunics, beards, and veils resemble uniforms; everyone appears to speak the same language; and most importantly, and very prominently in several scenes in *Ben Hur*, the crowd swiftly obeys the smallest gesture of authority from governor or emperor. "Fans of Messala the Roman and the Jewish prince of Hur bow together under the supercilious gaze of the Roman governor.

Part of this is cinematic self-advertisement: the crowds of extras are signs of the massive and successful organization of the film industry. Until the advent of computer-generated backgrounds, part of the notoriety of the Roman film was the statistics it generated, the “cast of thousands.” Working in tandem is a political script that writes the crowd as a unity, responsive to, even eager for rule, whether because of the compulsive appeal of Christianity (as attested by the awed crowds in *Ben Hur, Quo Vadis?*, *The Robe* and others), by majestic displays of wealth and power (*Ben Hur, Cleopatra*), by the pseudorepublican oligarchic authority of Maximus in *Gladiator*, or some mixture of the three. In its visible readiness to be ruled, the crowd enacts Cicero’s claim in his late dialogue *On Law*, that the well-lived life is one in which one learns to obey the law *sua sponte*, of one’s own will. Its uniformity is enthusiastic and spontaneous: its obedience is absolute.

I described *Ben Hur* as a useful analogue to the representation of crowds in Roman texts, and I should admit from the start that my contribution to a book on the crowd phenomenon is rather anomalous. For the most part, I will explore the ways Roman crowds are represented in Roman texts as not-crowds: as homogeneous, unified, and obedient to their leaders; and when they are violent, this too serves elite interests. But this too is part of the history of crowds in western culture: and it is a crucial part, I think, of the availability of the notion of “the People” for theorists of popular sovereignty who seek inspiration in the Roman republic.
ian masses (and proletarian dictatorship) as a people’s democracy: “The people and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history” (Mao Zedong, 1893–1976, “On Coalition Government”). “There are enormous numbers of people . . . discontented people who desire to protest, who are ready to render all the assistance they can in the fight against absolutism, the intolerableness of which is not yet recognized by all, but is nevertheless more and more acutely sensed by increasing masses of the people” (Lenin, “What is to be Done?” 1901–02). In the U.S. civil rights movements of the 1960s, “people” is often invoked in political slogans, such as the Black panther slogan, “Power to the People,” accompanied by raised clenched fist and publicized by leader Bobby Seale. The presence of “people” in such political protests demonstrates the versatility of this word in a diversity of modern mass movements.

Entry by Mary-Louise Kragh

imperial military force. “President Clinton announced news of the bill’s passage to awaiting throngs from his purple-draped balcony at the White House . . . [A] procession, attended by thousands of onlookers, featured a display of Exocet missiles; several Stealth bombers flying in formation; a phalanx of prominent military leaders, senators and bureaucrats; dancers, fire-eaters and contortionists . . . At the back of the procession were four dozen captured criminals and Serbian prisoners of war, who were repeatedly beaten by a prison guard as they slowly trudged under the weight of their chains and manacles. Following the massive parade, a state-sponsored feast was held on the Capitol Mall, and great quantities of such beloved American delicacies as hamburgers, hot dogs, bratwurst, potato salad, Lite beer, orange pop and sheet cake were served free of charge to vast and ecstatic crowds, who gorged themselves to excess (The Onion, 19 August 1999). The phrase “bread and circuses” is originally the first century CE satirist Juvenal’s: “the people that once bestowed commands, consulships, legions and everything else, now contains itself and worriedly hopes for only two things: bread and circuses” (nam qui dabat olim imperium fasces legiones omnia, nunc se continet atque duas tantum res anxius optat, panem et circenses, Sat. 10.77-80).

iv The chariot scene provides a number of examples: also note the cycle of roar and hush in a massive crowd responding to barely visible gestures from Tiberius at a Roman triumph.
My first experience of the crowd was in a sports stadium in New York City. It was a game of American football that the home team won, unleashing a euphoria among the spectators that I did not share psychically but was forced to share physically, as the tide of fans streamed down to the field and stormed the goalposts to unhinge them and carry them off.

Mine was not the abstract, metaphysical fear of submersion of the individual or loss of autonomy. It was a simple, visceral awareness: Run with the crowd or be trampled. This apparently innocuous event, culturally coded as entertainment, frightened me beyond any comparable experience. The ocean waves that in the child’s eye rise menacingly before crashing on the seashore harbor a secret calm. You have only to dive under the threatening curl of their crest to enter their sanctuary, as the foam churns past overhead.

Not nature in its sublimity, but mechanical inexorability is the analogy for my experience of the crowd: the tight and uniform event that is set in motion by human intention, but runs out of human control. The crowd can be used as an instrument of terror because its unpredictability is precisely predictable. Walter Benjamin compared this “compact” mass with the “relaxed” (locker) crowd form of the revolutionary class, an observation that Theodor W. Adorno described in a letter to Benjamin as the most insightful words he had read on the subject since Lenin’s “State and Revolution.” Benjamin wrote:

The class-conscious proletariat forms a compact mass only from the outside, in the minds of its oppressors. At the moment when it takes up its struggle for liberation, this apparently compact mass has actually already begun to loosen. It ceases to be governed by mere reactions; it makes the transition to action. The loosening of the proletarian masses is the work of solidarity. In the solidarity of the proletarian class struggle, the dead, undialectical opposition between individual and mass is abolished; for the comrade, it does not exist. …The mass as an impenetrable, compact entity, which le Bon and others have made the subject of their “mass psychology,” is that of the petty bourgeoisie. The petty bourgeoisie is not a class; it is in fact only a mass… Demonstrations by the compact mass thus always have a panicked quality—whether they give vent to war fever, hatred of Jews, or the instinct of self-preservation.”
The difference between the reactionary crowd and the progressive one can be physically sensed: The feeling of panic is replaced by the feeling of solidarity. I learned this during the anti-war demonstrations in Washington D.C. in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the crowd of hundreds of thousands, even millions was present with a common purpose, a “collective ratio,” as Benjamin describes it. Strangers share food and protection. Even as the marching crowd presses forward, its center remains calm, as safe as a seabed. Leaders merge with the crowd rather than manipulating them. Interaction takes the place of reaction. The experience of solidarity outlasts such events, giving confidence to future actions of individuals in the name of the society to come, “a society in which neither the objective nor the subjective conditions for the formation of masses will exist any longer.”¹

Demonstrations that are productive of solidarity remain a part of our time. The millions of Spanish citizens who came out on March 14, 1004, in the wake of the Madrid bombings and on the eve of the national elections were a “relaxed crowd,” as were the million women who marched for women’s rights in Washington D.C. later that spring. The astounding global demonstration for peace on February 15, 1003 to protest against George W. Bush’s immanent invasion of Iraq, preserved in photographic record at http://www.punchdown.org/rvjF15, is a harbinger of the tremendous possibilities of political solidarity in this new century.

Positioned against these progressive crowds we again see the compact masses, this time as riot police—paramilitary special forces wearing black armor and pressed tightly together, their faces immobile or masked to hide an inner panic, ready to react with a violence motivated at best by the instinct of self-preservation. The terms “proletarian” and “petty bourgeois” are not in use today. With regard to the crowd, however, the social reality that they describe has not disappeared. ■


² Ibid., 149–30.