

It's Super Bowl Sunday! Roman Ritual, American Style

The Undercurrents of Fake Patriotism and Imperial Rhetoric

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Region: [USA](#)
Theme: [History](#)

As we prepare to celebrate the true American National Holiday, known as the Super Bowl, there are a few things that it might behoove us to keep in mind as we watch the gods of the gridiron inflict their violence on one another. (For full disclosure, I must admit that I am a sports fan, but a fan who is critical of the sports culture. Dave Zirin has written extensively from this point of view as well. See his book *Bad Sports* for a good example of writing from this point of view.)

1) Nationalism. Inflected with heavy emotion, the war-whooping national anthem is the call to Sunday Super Bowl worship, and the 100-yard American flag stretched out over the field is meant to remind us not only that the “USA is the best nation on earth,” but more importantly that our pastime of national violence and our arrogance at “being the best in the world” is being channeled directly into our politics: “USA! USA!” That is what all this faux patriotism is doing in a football game.

2) Militarism. Notice those military jets flying overhead during the national anthem? Notice the heavy military presence within the general playing arena area during football games? Such militarism is readily taken in by the networks that broadcast the games, and dutifully celebrated by announcers for the game. Camera shots are frequently framed so as to include the man or woman in uniform who “just happens” to be in the end zone or behind the players’ bench when a play is made there.

3) Capitalism. The celebration of football games now includes a mandatory celebration of the capitalist individualist who owns the team, singing his praises. Aside from the Green Bay Packers, which is owned by the citizens of Green Bay, no one group owns any one team: only individuals do, and for their own profit alone. Thus, there is no true community representation in the game at all, except the geographical accident that some people for each team happens to live within the artificial boundaries of the city in which the millionaire’s team plays.

4) Character. How many players actually have a character that parents would want their children to emulate? Richard Sherman, who plays for the Seattle Seahawks? Pete Carroll, his coach? Not likely. The arrogance and bravado they display every week, combined with a lack of respect for their opponents, makes them the unlikeliest of role models. What about Peyton Manning, the all-American quarterback-capitalist, who appears during every time out on commercials with Papa John, who owns Papa John Pizzas? Papa John was one of the first capitalists who, once the Affordable Health Care Act was passed, reduced his fulltime workers to thirty hours a week, so that he didn’t have to pay for their insurance. Yet, he and Manning are all smiles engaging in frivolity on the commercials. And why wouldn’t they be?

They are faring very well in this economy, even if the 99% aren't. So why do we admire them? Second, of the millions Manning makes from these commercials alone, how much of that money does he give to charity? How much does Papa John. From what I have been able to gather, the answer is a very low percentage of their total income.

5) Ethics. First, the obvious ethical issue is that, as the players themselves have frequently said, the aim is to inflict great violence, to the point of injury, on the other players on the field; and oh yes, in the process, win the game. Second, the NFL is in the midst of a massive scandal regarding their cover-up of their knowledge that the players were suffering repeated concussions and that as a result of these repeating violent hits to their head, the cumulative effect was permanent brain damage.

This brain damage got so bad that for a number of ex-players, it reached the point of suicide (perhaps the most prominent example here is Junior Seau, former linebacker for the New England Patriots and the San Diego Chargers, but there have been many more of them as well). Further, the bigotry of the owners is on display regularly, the most prominent example here being the capitalist owner of the "Washington Redskins," Daniel Snyder, who refuses to change the racist "Redskins" name, and who has actually been consulting with Republican Party public relations firms to mount a counter-offensive to the public perception that the team needs a name change. Add to all of this the reduced jail sentences for athletes in trouble with the law, and you have a culture that displays a lack of ethical values. For example, in the latest episode of players receiving reduced sentences, John Brent of the Dallas Cowboys received 180 days of jail time for intoxicated manslaughter of his teammate. He'll be out in a few months. If it was you or me, we'd be in for years, not a few months.

6) Social-political—the economic elite gather at the game in their luxury suites, both in their hotels and at the game itself, for fun and profit, just like the recent economic summit of world elite at Davos, Switzerland. And just like at Davos, so at the Super Bowl, "the people" are not invited, and simply are not represented. In general, the exorbitant ticket cost for attending the Super Bowl alone makes it an event for the wealthy. When combined with the celebration of capitalism during the game, which will be inlaid into numerous announcer comments, camera shots, and commercials, taken all together, it can be summarized not only as a game for only the wealthy to attend and increase their profit. The people have to stay home and watch the capitalists and their splendor displayed on their home TV's.

So by all means, let's enjoy the Super Bowl pomp and pageantry, while the billionaires make more billions by telling us in cutesy ways what we should purchase from them. But let's remember a few things about the event that should bring us pause before participating in this Roman ritual, American style.

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