



The Evolution of Social Gatherings: Social, Political, and Cultural Functions from Antiquity to Today

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Abstract

In the Ancient Greco-Roman world, most people considered entertainment to be getting together with friends, public spectacles, religious festivals, competitive sports, and social pastimes such as board games or drinking parties. This paper examines how social gatherings in the modern era compared to social gatherings in Ancient Greece and Rome. The focus of this paper is the social, political, religious, and cultural reasons behind these gatherings. By analyzing Ancient Greek and Roman communal events alongside modern gatherings, this study explores how the function and structure of conventions evolved while also preserving foundational elements. Modern gatherings, which we will analyze through the lens of conventions, are deeply rooted in ancient traditions. Research highlights the differing values of Greek and Roman societies, particularly regarding class structure, political participation, and gender roles, while demonstrating how these differences shaped their respective social practices. Additionally, this paper investigates how modern conventions and gatherings have expanded beyond elite social circles into large-scale public and commercialized events influenced by globalization, social media, and consumer culture. Although the forms and audiences of social events have changed significantly, their core purpose as spaces for connection, influence, celebration, and identity-building has remained consistent.

Historical Context

Social gatherings in Ancient Greece and Rome usually arose from a blend of religious piety, agricultural traditions, competitions, rituals, and social structures. Many people believed that to be religiously pious or dedicated, there needed to be a sense of reverence and celebration around their deities, which is where religious social gatherings stemmed from.

Additionally, people would get together to celebrate and pay respects to specific deities for various reasons. As for agricultural traditions, people in ancient civilizations tended to believe that crops were either plentiful or paltry depending on how the owners had treated the gods that year, so when the harvest season was beginning or if crops were not growing properly, the affected would convene to pray, celebrate, and give respect to the gods and goddesses associated with harvest, particularly Ceres (Rome)/Demeter (Greece).

Ancient civilizations, especially the Greeks, heavily valued competition, athletics, and struggle, so many of their gatherings had an element of competition, whether it was athletically, academically, or artistically.

The Romans and Greeks were very ritualistic in nature, promoting tradition and routine.

Because of this, they would hold conventions to fulfill ritualistic order and commands, whether that was through sacrificing animals or days of prayers depended on the scenario.

And finally, one of the last key reasons that many ancient people would host communal events or gatherings was to appease the social structures set into place by their predecessors. The rich and politically-minded had certain expectations of hosting other people at their house and being sociable, which is where events like the Greek symposia came from.

These events grew in popularity when the economy was doing well and in times of peace, but there were even more gatherings during times of war and poverty, the difference is more so the goals the gatherings had. Instead of having lavish celebration-gear events, they were more religious, ritualistic, and prayer-oriented conventions.

Roman Gatherings

A key type of gathering was the Roman *convivium*, a private banquet that was considered to be the primary way for the elites to host in Ancient Rome, and it was socially expected of them to do so during times of prosperity, when they possessed immense wealth. It was considered a sociopolitically advantageous celebration in which the hosts would display their high status through an abundance of food, drink, and entertainment. Since the gatherings were held in private residences, the event mainly centered around the *triclinium*, the formal dining room, where the guests would recline on a *lectus*, furniture used for sleeping and dining, while enjoying the various methods of entertainment provided and having stimulating conversations with people of similar sociopolitical stature. The *cena*, a large mid-afternoon meal, was a part of the convivium, where the guests would have time to socialize, network, and strengthen social and political ties while having a formal, lavish dinner. After the *cena*, the *commissatio* was the drinking portion of a convivium. There was a lot of wine consumption, entertainment, and socialization occurring, often going on well into the night. The word “commissatio” is derived from the Greek word *komos*, revelry, and was run by a drinking master called a *rex bibendi*, who set the rules for drinking and the wine’s water-to-alcohol content ratio. Unlike the *cena*, it was accompanied by music, dancing, and games while guests loosened up and moved further away from political conversations. Many conservative and moderate Romans would actually consider the celebration excessively indulgent and lacking the traditional sobriety of most Roman dinners. On a much larger scale, the *epulum* was a public feast funded by a wealthy magistrate or the emperor to build up their political popularity and gain the support of their subjects. Eventually, there were spending limits imposed, but the social gatherings would feed, entertain, and keep the *populus* appeased, while the political figure would garner a large amount of public support due to their funding and hosting of this event.

Public games and spectacles were extremely large state-sponsored games in public arenas such as the Circus Maximus and amphitheaters. They were usually held during religious holidays to celebrate gods or after winning key battles as a way of commemorating triumphs. Another important aspect of Ancient Roman social event hosting was *hospitium*, a concept of either public or private hospitality. It acted as a formal, inherited alliance between people, groups of people, or communities for protection, which would include hosting the other group in one's home. It was a method of convention hosting and organization that depended on the

sacrosanctity of tradition and respect, and it served as a formal institution applying to specific legal and diplomatic contexts.

Greek Gatherings

Many sources suggest that the symposium was the dominant elite gathering in Ancient Greece, although other civic events and religious festivals played important social roles. Their main gathering system was the symposium, and it was extremely prominent among aristocratic men, hosted in the *andron*, a room where only men were allowed in a private residence. Citizen women were generally excluded in this gathering method, or many of them for that matter, since it was not considered proper for women to indulge in excessive alcohol consumption or be a part of public life. The *symposiasts*, symposium attendees, would recline on couches called *klinai*, sharing food and wine while conversing and enjoying the entertainment. The host was almost always an aristocratic male; they oversaw the entire evening with help from their slaves and acted as the Greek Symposiarch, the Greek equivalent to the Roman *rex bibendi*, deciding what the water-to-wine ratio would be for the night. The entertainment at the symposia would center around musicians, dancers, philosophers, poets, *hetairai*, which were educated female courtesans, acrobats, and debaters. Romans would have a much more limited array of entertainment, but their parties had various stages which would maintain the attendees entertained. In symposia, attendees would engage in philosophical discussions, the ancient equivalent of modern-day poetry slams, drinking games like *kottabos*, and intellectual debates over relevant key subjects.

The *komos* was a continuation of the symposium in which the guests would move from the private residence of the host into the streets and continue the party by singing, dancing, and drinking, acting as a noisy, drunk mob. A key difference between the Greek and Roman gatherings is that the Greeks often tended to be more liberal in their drinking, and it was seemingly less frowned upon.

The Greeks would also host religious, public banquets in sanctuaries or public areas to host the community or specific civil groups after a sacrifice took place in the names of the gods and goddesses.

One of the biggest and most important types of public works or conventions was the Olympic Games, created in Ancient Greece in 776 BCE, dedicated to Zeus. They were held every four years as a part of a religious festival featuring athletic contests such as running, wrestling, and chariot racing. It was always hosted in Olympia, which was a sanctuary site found in the Peloponnese Peninsula. Originally, it began as a one-day sprint race called the *stadion*. Eventually, the Olympic Games became a unifying event for the Greek city-states, often leading to conflicts being paused through the *ekecheiria*, an Olympic truce, so that the athletes could compete. The winners were awarded olive wreaths, and in 393 AD, Emperor Theodosius I banned the games to suppress paganism. They were not reinstated until Baron Pierre de Coubertin founded the International Olympic Committee in 1894, leading to the first modern games in Athens in 1896. This tradition ties back to the idea that the Greeks tended to be



hyperfocused on athleticism and competition, even using it as a unifying factor during times of war.

Finally, the Greeks have a common social event and gathering hosting framework that emphasizes Homeric Hospitality and *xenia*. Like the Roman hospitium, it was a formal, nearly sacred friendship that involved reciprocal hosting duties between households or even city-states. However, the Greeks valued *xenia* on a much, much more extreme level than the Romans. The Ancient Romans would rarely rely on hospitium and would treat it more of a suggestion, although they believed that breaking it ruined the intent of a predetermined social contract. The Ancient Greeks on the other hand saw *xenia* as a religious law enforced by Zeus and believed that breaking it risked the wrath of gods who might visit in disguise or even total war. *Xenia* obligated the Greeks to feed, bathe, and shelter strangers even before asking for their name.

Modern Perspective

Dinner parties in the modern world are still frequent and important, but now that there are so many different ways to keep in touch and communicate with other people, it is seen as less crucial in maintaining friendships and relationships. While some people who are seeking to build their influence might continue to take this approach, there are now more effective ways to get followers or convince voters to root for the host in a political sense.

Similarly, although people get together for social events surrounding prayer, religion, and tradition, it is not as widespread as it used to be. Perhaps it is because of the growing amount of young adults that choose to opt out of religious events, but another key aspect to consider is the amount of religious freedom present in the modern world. In Ancient Greece and Rome, there was typically a religion forced upon the residents, which made the religious conferences and events much more important to daily life. Now that people are free to choose their religion and how they would like to practice it, these religious gatherings tend to be based on a specific group of people, perhaps all the church-goers, mosque attendees, etc. in a particular part of town.

In the modern world, most conventions or formal gatherings are for professional or business purposes. In the ancient world, merchant conventions or business gatherings were not particularly common; they had small group conversations to strike deals instead. As the modern world becomes increasingly interconnected through the growth of the internet and social media, the types of conventions that are popular have changed and grown in popularity, acting as a way for people to get more business experience, skills, and training. Business conferences are typically large events with guest speakers, breakout sessions, and networking activities. Trade shows and expositions have grown to show off products or services to clients and investors. Leadership summits, networking events, product launches, and workshops are used to heighten and refine skills while building up clientele and business. Like Roman *convivia*, modern networking conferences create opportunities to create professional relationships, although they focus more on emphasizing commercial success rather than aristocratic lineage.



One of the other biggest types of gatherings revolves around fan culture. In the ancient world, the closest thing to celebrities they had were the famous poets, orators, gladiators, and musicians. Now, there are a lot of fan conventions such as anime cons, gaming festivals, musical festivals, film festivals, celebrity meet-and-greets, and culinary fests. Additionally, fundraising galas, awareness runs, seasonal festivals, and talent shows are used to encourage community participation, similar to the way that ancient civilizations would encourage civilian participation in politics through public speaking conferences and public gifts used to gain sociopolitical popularity. Finally, one of the biggest deviations from traditional conferences that still have traces from the ancient world is pop-ups. They have recently started rapidly growing in size and popularity. They are temporary, limited edition, high-impact events that are meant to generate quick interest. Both large and small businesses have begun to use them as a way of gaining traction, building up their business profile, and gaining more clientele.

Class & Wealth Differences

In ancient civilizations, the poorer classes would get together for less formal types of gatherings in which they would be drinking and playing games, more so than having politically-minded debates or conversations meant to advance their social status. Contrastingly, the rich would try to use their gatherings and social events for political and networking reasons among their elite peers or to keep their clients happy. Among the rich, the gatherings would be much more lavish, often held in a large home with many slaves, entertainers, excessive food and drink, and all of the luxuries that one could offer. The poorer and less socially elite classes would have gatherings for more casual reasons, such as catching up with friends or unwinding from a long day of laboring. They would mainly have their gatherings in pubs or in their simple private residences.

The biggest difference between the Greeks' and the Romans' class-based gatherings can be attributed to the different social hierarchies.

The Romans generally based their hierarchy on very rigid social stratification, differentiating the Patrician upper class, the Plebian lower class, the freedmen, and the slaves. In early Rome, the Patricians would exclusively dominate politics, so the political gatherings of the time would be only for the wealthy, but as time passed and the republic introduced things such as the Plebeian council, some social events began extending to lower socioeconomic classes. Slavery was highly ingrained in Roman life, but slaves could be freed, attain citizenship, and their children could even become senators, which meant that they could attend political gatherings or even get to the point of hosting small-scale ones. Wealth was the main determinant of social class in Ancient Rome.

The Greeks would split up their social classes by status. There were the free citizens at the top of the social hierarchy, descending as wealth descended, but regardless of wealth, all free citizens were regarded similarly when it came to social status. The next level below were the *metics* or foreigners, followed by the slaves. In democracies like Athens, free citizens had high



political participation, but metics and women did not have any vote. Additionally, social roles in Greece were much more fixed. Helots in Sparta were a unique, state-owned servile population, distinct from private slaves. Regardless, it was much more difficult, nearly impossible, for these groups and their successors to attain the wealth and social status needed to vote, much less run for office and host these conventions.

Gender Differences

As for gender, the biggest difference between the Greeks and the Romans that affected the gatherings and conventions was the different gender hierarchy structure. Both Roman and Greek women were included in some types of conventions, Roman women more than Greek ones due to the Greek disdain for women in public life.

The main reason boils down to the fact that in Rome, women had more freedom. While they could not vote, they could still own property, were recognized as citizens, and were considered able to manage households and servants, holding more responsibility, power, and influence in daily life, which is why they could attend and help host such conventions, although not every banquet and not equally.

Greek women, however, faced more discrimination and limitations. They, Athenian women specifically, were confined to the home, segregated entirely from public life, and had no political influence. They could attend religious festivals, but they were excluded from other types of social events like the symposia.

Conclusion

Although the forms of social gatherings have changed dramatically between the Ancient Greco-Roman world and today, the fundamental purposes have remained consistent. Previously, gatherings served as spaces for religion, political influence, networking, and entertainment. The way the social events were hosted reflected the priorities and structures of their societies. Modern gatherings tend to fulfill many of these same ideas, however, they occur in different settings and are shaped by the advancements of technology and cultural trends. Globalization, social media, and accessibility have transformed gatherings from exclusive events into large-scale experiences that bring in more diverse audiences, whether that is socially, economically, politically, or culturally. Analyzing the evolution of these gatherings indicates that while traditions, attendees, and goals have adapted, the ultimate motivations and reasonings have prevailed. Understanding historical roots reveals how the social practices of Greece and Rome influence modern culture and social events.

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