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Festivals, Conformity and Socialisation

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In the 1970s and 1980s festivals in Eastern Europe were rare but important meeting places for young people and the youth culture movement. However, following the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, cultural festivals in 'countries in transition' began to play a more visible role in social and economic affairs. Although the largest summer festivals (e.g. *Exit* in Serbia, *Sziget* in Hungary) are for-profit festivals driven by economic/commercial factors and attract several hundred thousand people, the majority of festivals are not-for-profit events which fulfil important societal functions.

The main aim of this chapter is to present a social science perspective on festivals. The research methodology employed in this research was developed during international meetings of the European Festival Research Project and the monitoring practice (registration and audit – a joint project of five festival unions) of festivals in Hungary¹. The principal sources were i) a literature review and ii) field research based on a survey of festival organisers² and interviews. The interviews were completed with 16 directors of cultural festivals in Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia during 2010-2012.

This chapter reports on two aspects of the research project. One part examined the socialisation processes that audiences can experience at cultural festivals, where the features selected for examination were: cultural conformism, community and social networks and learning. The other part focused on the social functions of cultural festivals and their economic efficiency.

Why festivals? – Aspects of festival history

In history, festivals have often been described as part of social play and/or a celebration culture. Every society celebrates, and the way it does so reflects something of that society's world view and group identity. Describing festivals in this way is not a criticism because festivals have been thought of as the highest play-form for many years (Huizinga, 1955:13):

Summing up the formal characteristic of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means.

Play character assumes greatest value when linked to freedom of action for individuals but because of the political context and climate, freedom of action has not always been the norm in different societies, at different times.

Local celebrations became nationwide and well-structured in the ancient Roman and Greek cultures. Festivals in the early Middle Ages were integrated into the Christian liturgical calendar and in many cases subverted the established social order often through mockery, play and laughter.³ By the end of the Middle Ages, celebration culture had become established as a fundamental feature of society. In the 16th century, the way and the forms of celebration began to change again; festivals began to lose their religious focus and the audience became separated into two social groups: the 'common man' and the 'elite'. This dichotomy was also reflected in the forms of art and play that each experienced and the 'cultural canon' subsequently became different for each group.

Over and above their ceremonial function as part of religious and other observances, festivals, in a general sense, have always been important in Europe and especially for those people who lived and worked on the land. Festivals associated with the seasons provided an important opportunity for the communities to meet, do business and enjoy time away from the rigours of daily life. The arts, especially theatre and music, formed part of that experience but none of these largely social celebrations or festivals were dedicated to the arts. This in part reflected the lowly status of artists but from the Renaissance and especially after the Enlightenment, the social status of artists began to change. That said it was still not until 1876, when Wagner himself set up the *Bayreuther Festspiele* to present his own music and operas, that Europe had its first arts festival. However, this festival was very much a celebration for the elite in society and was not open to the general public (and access is not much easier today as most people have to wait years to obtain tickets). Such was the social prestige now associated with these events that it was a long time before arts festivals were routinely accessible to the general public.

This largely remained the case until the 20th century and the emergence of a mass media – news and entertainment – allied with a ‘democratisation of culture’ policy to arts funding and promotion. Examples of this can be found in the development of international film festivals. *Festival International du Film* (since 2001 *Festival de Cannes*) opened in 1939, predominantly targeted at professionals and journalists, but this was followed by the *Festival del Film Locarno* (1946) which was targeted at the general public. The celebrity star system and the mass media helped to fuel this and introduced a new concept for the arts world, the arts audience. Sometimes festivals played a specific political role as with Venice and Cannes between the two world wars and later during the reconstruction of Germany (*Berlinale* 1951) or the strengthening of the ‘raison d’être’ of East-Central European Culture (*Karlovy Vary*, 1946).

By the end of the 1950s increasing ideological and central control meant that the festival calendar of state organised celebrations of Eastern European countries incorporated dates from Soviet history and the international socialist movement (e.g. April 4, November 7). Others replaced events from the Christian calendar (e.g. in Hungary, the *Feast of New Bread and Constitution* replaced the *Feast of St Steven’s Day* on August 20). In the early period of the Eastern Block the only international event organised for young people was the *World Youth Festival*. At the national level, public television organised dance song festivals⁴ (big bands playing new songs for emerging stars) and provided a platform for new talent but both were strongly controlled by official bodies; for example all lyrics had to be authorised by the Schanson Committee in advance.

Festivals open to the wider public became more common in Western Europe after the Second World War but for political reasons not in Eastern Europe. The hippy or counter culture movement that emerged in the 1960s in the West developed much more slowly in the East, however for both East and West the music festival became the symbol of a younger generation in the manner of *Woodstock* (1969). However, freedom of play, action and assembly of the kind associated with such festivals were unthinkable in the East. Central and Eastern European governments tried to control or postpone all bottom up movements, including festival initiatives.

In the East, rock, hippy and other youth movements only gained momentum in the 1970s with a few autonomous festivals. At that time, a decade or more after the West, alternative culture was emerging as a conscious challenge to politically controlled, official state institutions with their predictable programmes. This alternative culture was characterised by increasing popularity of music groups like the Cure, Pearl Jam, R.E.M. or Nirvana with their national followers including artists and audiences.