Festivals post Covid-19

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Festivals have become a part of the cultural fabric of global society and a tourism and leisure pursuit that is participated in by many. The COVID-19 crisis has meant that many festivals in 2020 have been cancelled or postponed. But what are the long term impacts for the future of the industry, and accessibility to these events? Will greater restrictions be placed on licencing, with a maximum number of attendees allowed? Will there be a certification scheme for attendees and participants based on current testing methods for COVID-19? Will festivals become more 'exclusive', or will there be more smaller-scale accessible organisations that work within a new 'sharing economy'? This paper explores some of the issues and possibilities for the future of the festivals industry by using an ecological economist's view of the potential shift in economic paradigms as outcomes of the pandemic.

Keywords: Festivals; COVID-19; new economic paradigm; accessibility

Introduction

The rapidly developing global COVID-19 pandemic crisis continues to have a severe effect on the ways in which societies operate, both in terms of economic activity and in relation to how people spend their leisure time. Patterns of working life are changing and many businesses are suffering, prompting the biggest global recession since the Great Depression (Rappeport & Smialek, 2020). An insightful piece written by Mair (2020 [online]), an ecological economist, predicted four possible outcomes of the crisis. Put simply, these are "a descent into barbarism, a robust state capitalism, a radical state socialism, and a transformation into a big society built on mutual aid" (Mair, 2020 [online]). These possible outcomes are used in the following commentary to present some potential effects of COVID-19 on the future of the festivals industry.

The state of the festivals industry

Festivals are a social phenomenon that occur in virtually all human cultures and have been defined as "a sacred or profane time of celebration, marked by special observances" (Falassi (1987), cited by Getz & Page, 2016, p.67). They are staged in a variety of locations, both

indoors and outdoors, as well as in virtual spaces, with a variety of management structures

ranging from public sector provision, not-for-profit and privately run organisations. There are

a wide range of types from food festivals, to theatre, dance, to music or a combination of art

forms, ranging from the smallest community festivals to large-scale music festivals with over

100,000 participants. They can be of global reach, diasporic (for example Chinese New Year

celebrations), or rooted in local and/or religious traditions (Newbold & Jordan, 2016).

Festivals make a huge contribution to the global tourism industry, in a number of ways. In

some instances they become the key motivator and driver for tourism (as in the case of the

Edinburgh festival series). In other cases, festivals are part of the overall cultural offering of a

destination, and in others they are a phenomenon that tourists stumble upon in their travels

(Picard & Robinson, 2006). In the UK alone, music events contribute £17.6 billion to the UK

economy, and attendance at UK music festivals has increased by some 22% in the last two

years with 57% of this number preferring to take part in this tourism activity than to book an

annual European holiday (Mintel, 2019).

Studies on what motivates people to attend festivals include escape from everyday life,

socialisation and family togetherness (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Jepson et al. 2019). In a

similar way to Pearce's (1982) 'tourism travel career trajectory' model which considers the

holiday choices people make concerning their self-concept, many people aim to attend several

different festivals year to year and construct their personal identities via these

transformational experiences (Robinson, 2015; Webster & McKay 2016). These events

reinforce social and communal identities or belongingness, where the human need for

"frequent, affectively pleasant interactions with others" (Jaeger & Myketun, 2013, p. 214) can

be satiated and where cultural and social capital can be developed (Wilks, 2011; Quinn &

Wilks, 2013). Festivals are places where the participants' utopian ideals for society are

explored (Small, 1998), but at the same time 'festivity' as a social phenomenon answers the human need for continuity that reaffirms social structure and order (Newbold and Jordan, 2016).

Undoubtedly festivals now play a pivotal role and are part of the fabric of global society. Taking the modern music festival as an example, this is a phenomenon that originated in the 1960s and 70s as a countercultural movement in the West of Europe and has grown into a global industry (Anderton, 2011 Robinson, 2015) where competition is extremely high. Diversification and market segmentation has naturally occurred and the sector is now engrained into the global economy with fully established supply chains (Ryan & Kelly, 2017). The festivals industry now lies at the sharper capitalist end of the mixed economy of many countries, and its general buoyancy is therefore determined by the market forces of supply and demand, with very limited governmental intervention. The music festival industry in particular has in some ways become the epitome of a capitalist society, with companies such as Live Nation (which controls 25% of UK festivals (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019)) holding the power to book the bigger name acts, whilst the remainder of the sector often struggles to survive. It has been argued that these more corporate festivals are based on a standardised mode of production (Finkel, 2009) and have moved away from their creative and community-oriented roots, with a focus on profit and economies of scale. Some may argue that this is a natural process of free markets providing more choice for everyone, but the opposing view is based in a concern that as the industry grows, suppliers will increase their prices, inevitably pricing out some of the smaller not-for-profit festivals and creating more exclusivity (Szabo, 2016). This can be seen in the example of headline acts, the cost of which has risen by 50 times in the last 50 years, ten times more than the rate of inflation (The Economist, 2019).   Furthermore, in the case of arts festivals that are publicly funded and

where a good percentage of the programme is available for free (for example Edinburgh Fringe Festival), the rising costs of accommodation makes attendance more difficult for people on lower incomes. These issues have recently led to a more critical approach to research on festivals with the likes of Laing and Mair (2015), Finkel et al. (2019) and Bossey (2020) questioning issues of inclusivity, accessibility and marginalisation within the festivals arena.

The potential future(s) for the festivals industry

There is no certainty as to how the future of society as a whole will look, let alone individual sectors. With conflicting news stories concerning an exit strategy from lockdown, some suggest that the pandemic will last way beyond December 2020 and that we will not be 'back to normal' until a vaccine is produced, which realistically could take up to a year to develop (Eyal et al., 2020). Mair (2020), an ecological economist, uses future planning methods to envision some potential futures for society post COVID-19. The basic premise is that response to the crisis will require some form of radical social change, ideally where we produce less (and therefore cause less damage to the environment) and where we understand the economy as being "the way we take our resources and turn them into the things we need to live" (Mair, 2020 [online]), as opposed to using resources to produce unnecessary items. There are four potential outcomes (or any combination or blending of these outcomes); the first is a robust capitalist state where capitalist production continues as it has done in the past, but where the state steps in to support markets in crisis by extending welfare, giving out business loans and providing more credit. In terms of festivals, often their success relies on the exchange-value of the commodity of entertainment, as well as on the use of gig-workers and zero-hour contracted staff who have no job protection. This is an issue which Mair (2020) suggests is a product of the market and exchange-value economies of the UK and the

USA in the last 40 years. Festivals, especially the smaller not-for-profit ones, are an extremely high-risk industry in economic terms, at the mercy of market forces more than many others due to the high costs and low profit margins. Festivals are also at a high risk in other ways; due to the sheer number of people that attend, they require a huge focus on health and safety regulations and crisis and risk management (Silvers 2013; Getz and Page 2016). Yet, no risk assessment in the world could have prepared the industry for the lock-downs and social distancing measures that we are currently experiencing. Many events companies are not insured against pandemics, many companies in the supply chain are not doing any business and many festivals have been forced to cancel or postpone their 2020 editions (Szatan, 2020). What does this mean for the future of the industry? Unless festival organisations are innovative in developing high-quality online alternatives, have saved for a 'rainy day', or their customers are prepared to roll their ticket purchases over to next year, they are at risk of liquidation without government intervention, as per many of the small-medium enterprises within the tourism and hospitality sectors. In reality, short-term intervention by the government may provide some initial help for the 2020 season, but if the pandemic lasts for any significant length of time, this is not sustainable and a more long-term strategy will be required.

In the second potential scenario – state socialism – the government protects the parts of the economy that are essential to life (for example food, shelter and energy). This idea is far from avant-garde, with ideas of a universal basic income having been mooted as an option to reduce inequalities in society as early as 1516 in Thomas More's book 'Utopia'. The festival environment has often been sociologically analysed as 'utopic' (Gardiner, 1992) and in that sense it could be argued that these environments should be made more available to everyone in society. As intimated earlier, festivals do play a pivotal role in society in many respects,

and are often spaces that are 'ahead of the curve' in terms of highlighting political issues within society, one good example in today's times being our relationship with the planet and the need for a more sustainable way of life (Guttridge-Hewitt, 2020). Whilst festivals will never be considered a 'human need' and therefore will not be fully available for free, if all adults in society were provided an income for securing their basic needs, it is possible that they would have more disposable income to spend on activities such as attendance at festivals. This is turn could reduce the problems relating to accessibility and inclusivity highlighted by the likes of Laing and Mair (2015) and Finkel et al (2019).

Barbarism, the third potential outcome, is the exact opposite of state socialism, a dystopic world where the economies collapse. This is an unlikely outcome, due to the levels of state intervention currently at play. However, in areas where the disadvantaged in society feel unfairly treated, this may bring out anti-social behaviours amongst certain groups. The festival environment is not excluded from these types of issues, and with a long history of drug and crime-related incidences, it is a possibility that these could be exacerbated. It is likely that some form of evidence of having been tested for COVID-19 as a prerequisite for entry will need to be enforced, which could easily lead to a black market and dangerous levels of fraudulent activity. Although the festival organisations are resilient and well-equipped to deal with such issues, some element of state intervention and legal frameworks would need to be introduced which may deter people from attending larger events.

The last potential outcome for society following COVID-19 is the idea of a society based on mutual aid, where individuals and small groups begin to organise support and care within their communities through building networks that protect the vulnerable (Mair, 2020 [online]). There has certainly been a strong, compassionate and healthy response to the

pandemic from communities across the world, where people are offering help and support to each other like never before. With a decrease in air travel, social distancing and more focus on local and virtual communities, there is a potential for a growth in the number and importance of smaller, more affordable community events, as well as virtual or online festivals. These would be based around and run by communities (real or virtual), where 'art for art's sake' are the main motivations to both produce and attend, as opposed to the propping up of celebrities' status and lining the pockets of the intermediaries such as booking agents and ticketing platforms, as is so often the case in the current situation.

Summary

There is some hope for a blend of state socialism and mutual aid where strong, democratic states that mobilise resources to build strong health systems and prioritise the protection of vulnerable people and the environment begin to evolve, and where citizens form mutual aid groups and more equal economies develop. This blend of socialism and mutual aid applied to festivals could be a reality, insofar as smaller community festivals may be a more efficient method of limiting the number of attendees and cutting down costs for the festival hosts and attendees. The fact is, the mixed economies of the world can only be successful in the long term for all members of society with a good blend of 'ethical capitalism' and 'socialist politics', where the state makes good financial decisions on what services to support and where successful companies maintain a sense of responsibility to the wider communities that they serve. The festivals industry could be set to be a leading light in following this path.

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