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## A comment on: arts festivals, urban tourism and cultural policy

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## A comment on: arts festivals, urban tourism and cultural policy

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When I wrote the 2010 article *Arts festivals, urban tourism and cultural policy* for the special issue of JPRTL&E in 2010, the focus on the ‘urban’ in the brief that I was given very much reflected the prominent attention being given to festivals and events in urban contexts at that time (Johansson & Kociatkiewicz, 2011; Stevens & Shin, 2012). I start this brief comment now by noting that this imbalance in the literature is being addressed by a recent rise of research interest in the arts, including festivals, in rural areas (including forthcoming special issues/sections in the *Journal of Rural Studies* and *Sociologica Ruralis*). This is a welcome development because festivals in rural areas, although associated with enhanced human and social capital (Wilks & Quinn, 2016), entrepreneurial activity (Pickernell, O’Sullivan, Senyard, & Keast, 2007), economic development and regeneration (Gibson & Connell, 2011), have been under-researched. Meanwhile, arts festivals also continue to proliferate in cities across and beyond developed economies (Slabbert & Vivier, 2013). They remain a mainstay of urban landscapes, and feature strongly in urban development, urban regeneration and urban tourism policies. While an extensive literature on festivals produced in many different disciplines conceives of festivals as very positive endeavours with a wealth of cultural, social and economic potential, the prevalent instrumental use of arts festivals in both urban and rural contexts continues to generate a range of contested reactions. Fundamentally, underpinning the critical perspectives in this literature are Harvey’s (2001) questions about whose aesthetics, whose collective memory, and whose interests are being served when arts festivals are harnessed, in a ‘creative cities’ paradigm, to further urban regeneration and development. Critical perspectives in festival and event studies addressing these kinds of questions have become more prevalent since 2010 (e.g. Finkel, 2010; McLean, 2018; Stevenson, 2016) and this has to be seen as a healthy development. In Lundberg, Armbrecht, Andersson, and Getz (2017), the question of value (all kinds of value) is placed centre stage and scrutinised with the aid of a framework produced by Andersson, Armbrecht, and Lundberg (2012). This distinguishes between both intrinsic and extrinsic values and individual and societal values, and is helpful in trying to analyse and understand the very important question of who derives benefits from festivals.

In cities, as is now so well recognised, arts festivals are intimately interwoven into urban policy agenda because they are understood to serve a multitude of largely commercial, often tourism-related purposes. When created or supported and developed for commercial purposes, as they are in neoliberal policies, they are being most prized for their extrinsic values. Fortuitously, extrinsic values can be easily measured and reported in the guise of e.g. visitor numbers, bed nights, increased spend, and advertising value equivalency. Accordingly, the task of articulating their value to governments who set policy and funding priorities is relatively straightforward, unlike in the case of intrinsic values which are much more difficult to capture in the normative terms used to talk about the neoliberal cultural economy. Valuing intrinsic values has historically been a notable feature of cultural policy, another theme in the 2010 paper. Of all the literature linking arts festivals to these original themes, the body of work pertaining to festivals and cultural policy is the least well developed. Back in 2010, I construed this as a problem and certainly thought it was eminently reasonable to argue that given the often tense relationship between tourism and festivals (an extrinsic versus intrinsic values kind of dynamic), (Getz, Andersson, Armbrecht, & Lundberg, 2018; Miles, 2017), the latter ought to be supported and buttressed by a comprehensive cultural policy vision. Now I am less sure that this is such a priority. Very recently, Mangset (2018) somewhat provocatively asked whether a single sectoral approach to thinking about cultural policy remains relevant. Like others before him (Hitters, 2007), he points to the purported failure of national cultural policies to achieve the democratisation of culture, a key aim of cultural policy since the mid-20th century. He also reminds us that traditionally, cultural policy typically made reference to hierarchical understandings of arts and cultural forms and their consumption. Today, such hierarchies seem less useful. Several researchers have argued that people from high socio-economic groups tend to be omnivorous in their cultural consumption, although people from lower socio-economic groups tend mainly towards univorous consumption (Barbieri & Mahoney, 2010). Furthermore, researchers have argued that low cultural consumption is not best explained by social exclusion as it is not necessarily confined to less well cohorts in society (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007). Perhaps beyond all of this, as Mangset (2018) also writes, it is difficult to see how a single sectoral, national approach to cultural policy can be effective in these highly globalised times, given the wide-ranging influences associated with the unprecedented, often problematic and frequently contested mobilities of people, ideas, information and capital.

Patterns of cultural consumption are changing and festivals now constitute 'one of the main players on the stage of modern cultural consumption (McGillivray & Frew, 2015, p. 2650). This is the case at a time when the consumers that cities are targeting are not just local or regional citizens but highly mobile citizens of the world. Writing about arts festivals, Négrier (2015) has claimed that festivals are experiencing a change from 'cultural permanence', an approach that focused on cultural policies and public support for cultural activities, to 'ephemeral presentism' that focuses more on the liveliness of the festivity. Certainly, the festival marketplace is crowded with offerings that include artistic and cultural elements appealing to popular, commercial tastes and capable of being supported in the marketplace where the spectacle of festivities is a core tourism offering. The spectacle created by the 'instant' liveliness can mean that festivals become much more dependent for resources on tourism institutions and on municipalities than on cultural institutions, although it remains true to say that many urban-based arts festivals would struggle to

survive without the support of cultural institutions and cultural policies (Giorgi, 2011). However, the urgency to think about arts festivals not simply in relation to tourism or to the cultural sphere per se seems much less pressing now than the need to further understandings of the roles they play in the broader context of the city more generally.

The problematic of the urban seems to have grown in recent times or perhaps it is just that it has come more clearly into view. Cities foster growth, generate and cluster wealth, spur innovation and creativity, and are central in shaping global sustainability (Acuto, Parnell, & Seto, 2018). However, increasing urbanisation brings large-scale challenges for city governments to ensure liveability, access to infrastructure and services, political security, the accommodation of cultural diversity and the inclusion of vulnerable groups including immigrants. In tackling these challenges urban policy makers are increasingly investing in strategies to transform their urban agglomerations into cutting edge, future oriented, smart cities, thereby challenging creative humans to reimagine the digitally mediated cities of the future (Rose, 2017). In this context, a very real question worthy of being posed relates to the extent that festival and indeed artistic activities more generally, are implicated in producing, negotiating or contesting the dominant forces shaping contemporary cities.

Recent research in festival studies and elsewhere is showing that arts festivals and urban artistic activities more generally play key roles in producing and transforming cities in multiple ways. As they become increasingly central to the cultural vibrancy of cities, irrespective of how they are strategically conceived and whether they are construed as cultural activities for particular cohorts of local citizens or tourism activities for temporary visitors, they can be seen to reveal a blurring of distinctions between locals and tourists (Quinn & Wilks, 2017). Furthermore, although they may often be supported by highly critiqued neo-liberal 'creative city' urban policies, festivals can almost always live up to their subversive reputation for disruption (Bakhtin 1968) and at the very least are full of potentialities (Pløger, 2010) to influence, reinterpret, challenge and contest prevailing agenda. Similar arguments have been made for community-engaged arts practice (McLean, 2018), with Olsen (2018a, p. 1) understanding artistic performance as a 'crucial creative means of empowerment in the midst of urban transformation'.

Recent work investigating festivals from a variety of perspectives reveals diverse examples of what agency looks like in festival settings. Research on social capital has been unpicking the generally positive narratives surrounding social capital, arguing that in festival contexts, cultural heterogeneity and the historically embedded particularities of place can complicate the potential for social capital to develop (González-Reverté & Miralbell-Izard, 2009; Stevenson, 2016). The emphasis on technology and the role that it can play in creating and recreating new spaces for cultural consumption is another research avenue that has recently opened up. Miles (2017) urges us to think not only about social media as a tool of information dissemination and marketing but also as a new means of producing and staging festivals. Producing 'digital stagings' allows festivals 'to stake out meaningful and individual offerings in cultural arts' (p. 4). This opens up a whole raft of possibilities for the audiences that festivals can reach and for the ways that they can seek to engage. Edensor and Sumartojo (2018) explicitly dispute that festivalisation is simply a neoliberal process that reduces spectators to passive onlookers and serves only commercial interests. Instead, they argue that the power of festivals to transform places encourages a fresh engagement with familiar surroundings. Negative commentary

still surrounds the instrumental use of festivals in neoliberal urban policies, justifiably so in my view, but Edensor and Sumartojo's recent work encourages a closer examination of how technologically inspired festivals like light festivals in this case, throw cities into new and different perspectives and encourage citizens to rethink the familiar in ways that require creativity and can be challenging, thought provoking and arresting. They suggest that more research into smaller scale, experimental, radical and participatory festivals might shed further insights into the abilities of festivals to transform space and remake place, much like some of the work on community-engaged arts practice in cities has done (McLean, 2018). In effect, arguments like these maintain that binary thinking is not very productive. As Olsen (2018b) argues: it is important to acknowledge that 'the boundaries between artistic autonomy, social responsibility and instrumentalised art are not clear cut'. Further research is needed into the multi-faceted and highly nuanced roles that contemporary arts festivals play in contributing to the artistic activities, cultural vibrancy and economic vitality of urban societies.

I ended my 2013 article by saying that the continued fracturing between arts festivals, urban tourism and cultural policy needs to be mended. This remains true, but the fracturing is not going to be mended at the level and scale of either arts festivals, tourism or cultural activity uniquely, rather there is a need to focus more on understanding how these spheres of activity interweave and interact, however contentiously, to shape contemporary cities and disruptively contribute to broader urban agenda.

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