The Festival in the Mediterranean Today: Tradition, Modernity and Heritage

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The festival is a very important component of intangible heritage and a fundamental concept when defining Mediterranean identity. Thus, faced with processes of globalisation, the festival is a response at the heart of modernity and, at the same time, is rooted in the collective and popular imaginary of a society. In the Mediterranean basin, there are endless festive celebrations that foster dialogue and citizenry through shared knowledge and rapprochement. In this respect, an effort is needed to carry out integrating policies in the festive context, promoting a city-memory that encourages the integration and coexistence of citizens.

The Context

The Mediterranean, as the Catalan architect Josep Lluís Sert stated, is a great region on a human scale, unique in the world, with particular conditions that facilitate and stimulate the exchange of peoples and civilisations to the point that, as Paul Valéry wrote, it has become an authentic “civilisation creating machine”. In fact, it can be said that Mediterranean cities have existed between creative intensity and the most extensive problematic issues and, nevertheless, have made possible the formalisation of aspects such as democracy, rational thought, religious monotheisms or even the first hints of what over time has become known as “human rights”. In short, all these aspects have sought out new forms of coexistence. Moreover, this was fostered by the development of Mediterranean cities, which were based on geometric layouts that created meeting places, such as squares, avenues or markets. A conception of this kind, which could almost be called “civic”, meant that throughout history the urban landscape itself became an element of attraction and sharing, making possible the exchange of experiences and new opportunities in all areas, whether economic, social, political or cultural. These aspects, although they emerged in the past, are far more visible today.

The Festival as a Temporal Reference

If the urban landscape is one of the heritage signs of Mediterranean identity, the festival is another of the references of this heritage, in this case intangible. However, we must examine the etymology of the word to reveal its original meaning and thus understand the importance of the concept. The word “festival” has its roots in the Latin word festum and, specifically, festa was used as an adjective more
than a noun. In this way, originally, the word always accompanied the name dies, so that dies festa emerged. Later, and as Latin developed into the Romance languages such as Catalan (c. 10th century), the word became a noun, meaning “a day periodically dedicated to the memory of a saint or the holding of a solemn ceremony in the liturgical year”, and as “[…] a point of temporal reference” (Cartulario de Sant Cugat, I, 102, p. 83, year 973). This meaning makes clear the original character of the concept of “festival”: “temporal point of reference”. Therefore, and with the passage of time, this has been a fundamental reference in the structure of the calendar and celebrations, initially of a religious nature but, with time, open to many other aspects and expressions. This has determined the main characteristics of the concept of festival. In this respect, and as set out by diverse academics, we can say that the characteristics of the festival can be summarised in the following aspects: sociability, participation, rituality, temporal and symbolic annulment of time and, finally, pleasure.

Festival and Modernity

Very concisely, when we speak of the festival phenomenon in the context of urban societies and the market economy, we must first go back to Max Weber when he pointed out that our era is marked by a “generalised rationalisation of existence,” which has led to strong mechanisms and the emergence of a “positivist technostucture.” Thus, enjoying yourself, going on holiday, celebrating... has become part of the framework of a productivist and economicist system, a system that to a great extent has “positivised” situations, objects and people, leaving little space for expressivity (individual and/or collective), as well as the more ritualistic manifestations. This system has been characterised by creating “cultures of low context and monochronic time” (segmentation, planning, punctuality, individualism, etc.), as against “cultures of polychronic time and high context” where the – individual, group, productive... – interrelation is highly elevated (the case, for example, of Mediterranean cultures). Positivist abstract reason has brought with it, as known, major socio-cultural modifications, which have produced, as Martin Heidegger pointed out, a “loss of proximity”. This situation has meant that, since the mid-20th century, two important desires or demands have emerged in the social group. On the one hand, there is an increasingly stronger feeling about those aspects that could be classified as of “proximity”; in other words, against the abstraction of the system, a return to the sources, roots, to direct contact with man and nature. Ecology, identity and festival come together here. On the other hand, what Michel Maffesoli called “social vitalism” has emerged. The “rupture of history”, “multiculturality”, “mediatisation” or “telematicisation”, the inclusion of a multitude of “personal stories” (ethnic, life, etc.) have meant that values notably forgotten in the life of groups or in social research progressively have a new consideration. “Rational monovalence” as an explanation of the social world has been broken in favour, as Octavio Paz wrote, of an “exaltation of orgiastic values”, values that mean a revaluing of the collective imaginary.

Festival and Change

The aforementioned aspects allow us to see that the festival, an essential social and heritage diacritic, is immersed in the social, cultural and political future of Mediterranean communities, which takes it to an almost permanent adaptation to respond to social and cultural changes. In this respect, we should remember that, summarising the foregoing, our societies have found themselves affected by a dual tension, as Maurice Godelier points out, between the meaning of the processes of globalisation (migrations, circulation of ideas and capitals, etc.) and those of an identity character as a response to the frenzy of the former. In this way, today the festival fully forms part of what modernity means, which, among other things, is characterised by the acceleration of time and lifestyles. Thus, many Mediterranean festivals have broken their traditional moulds, which largely emerged in the ambit of the pre-industrial and religious calendar. Therefore, the festival, throughout the 20th century, especially the latter part, experienced diverse transformations motivated by aspects as varied as changes in religious rituals, the evolution of free time,

the active role of trade, popular association movements and, finally, artistic creation. By way of example, note that, more frequently, groups of artists and creators are becoming the real invigorators of the festival with their creations, many of them based on the collective, popular and traditional imaginary, such as the numerous creations by artistic companies such as the Catalan Els Comediants or La Fura dels Baus. Both have been employed in many Mediterranean cities for the production of shows in events of all kinds, but with the traditional festival imaginary as a reference, recreated for each event. The creation of Els Comediants for the Seville Universal Exhibition or that of La Fura dels Baus for the Barcelona Olympic Games, both held in 1992, are clear examples of this.

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Moreover, together with the aforementioned variables, we should note another that, day after day, is gaining ground in everything represented by the “festival”: “folkloricism”, also known as “second hand popular culture”, which can be defined as the “interest of current society in so-called popular or traditional culture.” This interest includes an attitude both passive (viewer) and active (seeking to reproduce the traditional world outside the original context). In this way, “the concept [...] therefore presupposes the existence of an awareness of tradition, its positive a priori re-assertion and a specific intentionality in terms of the use one wishes to give to this tradition. This intentionality can be of an aesthetic, commercial, ideological or reviving nature. In this way, “folkloricism”, in its active aspect, implies, therefore, “manipulation” of the traditional cultural elements.” This process has very significantly affected the festival, as it has meant the reinvention of a great many traditional festive elements to adapt the festive celebrations to the new social, cultural and political interests. Thus, the tension between globalisation and identity favours the rise of an endless number of festive celebrations and/or recreations the length and breadth of the Mediterranean. As already said, the festival, as a social diacritic, is a significant scenario where a multitude of variables of all kinds come together that allow us to explain, alone and/or together, a large number of social dynamics.

“Folkloricism” – or “second hand popular culture” – has greatly affected the concepts of “tradition” and “festival”. Thus, both ideas have been immersed in a process of great transformations. The centuries-old “sacred” vs. “profane” dichotomy, which had structured the traditional calendar, has begun to separate until arriving at new configurations depending on new situations, experiences and social interests. In this respect, the festival has become far more “quotidian” and has spread to many other manifestations. Therefore, the birth and rise of a series of festivals – or events – that have in their festive format the package to transmit messages referring to specific ambitions or problematic areas are significant; thus, for example, the festivals of Water, Solidarity, Peace, the Earth, etc.

The adaptation of the festival to social rhythms has meant that other new festive expressions have emerged throughout the Mediterranean: today modernity is, on many occasions, a reinvention of the past, giving it new meanings. Indeed, Mediterranean cultures

6. Ibid., pp. 318-319.
have been able to make the most of their traditions, their peoples and their music: thus, the old festivals of many Spanish, Italian or Greek neighbourhoods have become places of fun for the whole city. Despite wishing to preserve the traditional character – street decorations, community meals, children’s games, traditional dances, etc. –, citizens have made these festivals part of their festive calendar as important as the main festival of their cities. In fact, many of the festive expressions have wider repercussions, and the social dynamic has made the festive manifestations go much further. The popular and participative festival has become, possibly, an instrument for creating “citizenry”, rejecting everything that breaks models of group coexistence and solidarity. Thus, the festival becomes a powerful instrument to go beyond simple leisure and favour freer, more committed and critical citizens and, therefore, to help build far more democratic societies.

**Festival, Heritage and Coexistence**

Today, the festival has also become a prime instrument that can notably contribute to channelling social and cultural situations and problematic issues. Thus, in societies like those of Spain, France or Italy, with high levels of immigration, the festival can help create the always-necessary empathy between people and groups, favouring mutual understanding and social rapprochement. It can therefore be the instrument of social cohesion and it can contribute not only to intercultural dialogue but
also intergenerational. Moreover, it can foster greater experience of the urban space by people and, therefore, the commitment to cities and a much more sustainable society. In this respect, we must mention Paul Virilo’s theory of “non-places”, an important idea to understand that against the “city-fiction” – that is, the “non-places”: motorways, big shopping and leisure centres, etc. – it is necessary to stimulate the “city-memory” – that which gives a privileged position to collective past, present and future imaginaries, seeking coexistence, integration and respect among its citizens. It is necessary to reflect on the fact that we need to develop open and brave policies that fight against anti-urbanism; or, as Marc Augé has written, “the dark night of antisocial behaviour, of the lack of solidarity and social rupture” will determine our future urban landscape. Thus, committing to the presence of the imaginaries, memory and the festival, in their multiple traditional and modern manifestations, can allow us “[…] to once again symbolise the real and, with the same force, resuscitate the imaginary, the city and the social link, [otherwise] there is only terror or madness.”

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As has been said, “in the end […] the festival is only a pause in daily life, but a pause that, without doubt, must be exploited in all its scope and potential.”

8. Ibid.