Book Review

*Festival Cities. Culture, Planning and Urban Life,*

By John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold (2020)

Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2020, 324 pages, ISBN: 9780415486569, US$ PRICE.

*Festival Cities* by John and Margaret Gold offers a place-based, thoroughly-researched historical perspective on city festivals. The book interrogates the cultural roots of these events and their impact on the life of host cities. Through plenty of examples from across Europe and beyond, and encompassing modern and contemporary events, the main goal of the book is to explore art festivals and carnivals in relation to culture, place and economy, and to understand how festivals have become embedded into the life and planning of host cities. The book refreshingly responds to long-lasting calls in the field for contextualizing the study of major events in relation to the history, values and meanings of host cities and communities, by building stronger links with factors from the past and present of these localities that contribute to shaping these events.

Chapter 1 opens with a detailed account of the 1769 Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford-upon-Avon which sets the scene showing how an early modern event went through all the stages that we commonly associate with contemporary major events – proposal, announcement, event planning, construction of event venues and public realm improvements, promotion, delivery, legacy – and some of the recurrent aspects visible in many of these events today, such as scepticism around local delivery capabilities, forms of rent seeking around the event, civic boosterism, logistics issues, criticisms, post-event fiscal crisis. The authors then provide an in-depth historical overview of the evolution of festivals (chapter 2), from antiquity, and in particular Roman times, to the outbreak of the First World War. This rich historical account explores the origins of these special occasions in connection with faith, warfare, power, and their role in asserting social status and providing ‘controlled’ spaces for opposition to take place. It then looks at the emergence of art festivals, in a context of different relationships between classes and societal change driven by industrialisation.

The core chapters of the book (chapters 3-6) provide an analysis of four internationally-known events that have acted as catalysts for the proliferation of city festivals worldwide, namely Venice Biennale, Salzburg Festspiele, Cannes Film Festival, Edinburgh International Festival. The narration is deeply embedded into each host city’s socio-cultural and political life, with plenty of insights on how festivals evolve in relation to their ever-changing contexts. On the basis of these accounts, the authors then reflect on the global spread of art festivals (chapter 7), focusing on theatre, literature and biennial events. They touch upon the issue of festivalization and its connection with competition between cities within a neoliberal economy, despite being cautious throughout the book in using this concept, in the light of the diversity of festivals and of the contexts in which they are celebrated. They highlight a number of critical points, such as the difficulty to identify accurate figures of the number of festivals being celebrated nationally, and the evolution of art festivals into more comprehensive events as a way of diversifying local cultural offerings and developing audiences. A similar discussion develops around the diversification of carnivals in relation to asserting identities and local meanings (chapter 8), which opens with the example of how the meaning of Mardi Gras changed in post-Katrina New Orleans. The authors explore crucial aspects such as the commodification of minority groups’ street processions, which become local heritage assets to be consumed by tourists, and the potential erosion of the transgressive element of carnivals because of changes within the very groups and communities that are behind the celebration of these events.

The authors conclude (chapter 9) that despite potential issues of fatigue amongst audiences and of struggle to differentiate on the organizers’ side, there is little evidence that the market is saturated. If anything, the pace of proliferation of such events seems to be increasing, together with the extent of their replication. This point is of particular interest to event studies scholars, as these processes are visible across events of different kinds (the growing interest in and spread of ‘city of culture’ events is an example). The authors highlight a number of challenges facing today’s city festivals, such as the issues associated with the provision of event spaces and facilities (e.g. noise, disruption), public opposition and resistance, securitisation as a response to terrorist threats, and of course the issues posed more recently by COVID-19. However, one key takeaway is that despite these challenges, to which we could add a number of economic problems, city festivals are likely to continue to thrive.

Building on the authors’ long-established research on major and mega events, this book targets a wide range of scholars in the emerging interdisciplinary field of event studies, such as urban planners, human geographers, urban historians, sociologists and anthropologists, researchers in areas such as cultural policy, visual and performing arts, and the ‘city of culture’ debate in particular in the UK and Europe. Because of its accessibility and rich historical accounts, the book is also to be recommended to MA and PhD students from a range of subject areas who are interested in the symbolic aspects of art festivals and carnivals and in their mutual relationships with the city’s life.

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