Festival: Definition and Morphology

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Festival is an event, a social phenomenon, encountered in virtually all human cultures. The colorful variety and dramatic intensity of its dynamic choreographic and aesthetic aspects, the signs of deep meaning underlying them, its historical roots and the involvement of the "natives" have always attracted the attention of casual visitors, have consumed travelers and men of letters alike. Since the last century, scholars from disciplines such as comparative religion, anthropology, sociology, and folklore have concerned themselves with the description, the analysis, and, more recently, the interpretation of festivities. Yet little explicit theoretical effort has been devoted to the nomenclature of festive events or to the definition of the term *festival*. As a result, the meaning of *festival* in the social sciences is simply taken from common language, where the term covers a constellation of very different events, sacred and profane, private and public, sanctioning tradition and introducing innovation, proposing nostalgic revivals, providing the expressive means for the survival of the most archaic folk customs, and celebrating the highly speculative and experimental avant-gardes of the elite fine arts.

Etymologically the term *festival* derives ultimately from the Latin *festum*. But
originally Latin had two terms for festive events: *festum*, for “public joy, merriment, revelry,” and *feria*, meaning “abstinence from work in honor of the gods.” Both terms were used in the plural, *festa* and *feriae*, which indicates that at that time festivals already lasted many days and included many events. In classical Latin, the two terms tended to become synonyms, as the two types of events tended to merge.¹

From *festa* derived the Italian *festa* (pl. *feste*), the French *fête* (pl. *festes*) and *festival* (adj.), the Spanish *fiesta* (pl. *fiestas*), the Portuguese *festa*, the Middle English *feste, feste daie, fesial* then *festival*, at first an adjective connoting events and then a noun denoting them.

*Feria* (pl. *feriae*) had a semantic implication of lack, intermission, and absence that remained in the original meaning of the Italian *feria* (abstinence from work in honor of a saint), *ferie* (time away from work), and *giorni feriali* (days of absence of religious ceremonies) as well as in the medieval *feriae* (truce), *feriae matricularum* (festive vacation for University students), and the Spanish *ferias* (day of rest in honor of a saint). The meaning of “empty” (which could be taken to indicate that festival is the resounding cage of culture) was later joined and overshadowed by the festive events that progressively filled such days of “rest from.” Thus *feria* became the term for market and exposition of commercial produce, such as in the Portuguese *feira*, the Spanish *feria*, the Italian *fiera*, the Old French *feire*, then *foire*, and the Old English *faire*, then *fair*.

Other secondary meanings of these two basic terms indicate in different languages forms of festive behavior or segments of festivals, such as *feast* and *fesitive* for an abundant formal meal, the Spanish *fiesta* for public combat of knights to show their ability and valor, the Latin *festa* for sacred offerings, the Rumanian *festa* for “prank,” or the Italian *festa* and the French *fête* for “birthday celebration” or simply “warm welcome.”²

In contemporary English, festival means (a) a sacred or profane time of celebration, marked by special observances; (b) the annual celebration of a notable person or event, or the harvest of an important product; (c) a cultural event consisting of a series of performances of works in the fine arts, often devoted to a single artist or genre; (d) a fair; (e) generic gaiety, conviviality, cheerfulness.³ Similar common-language uses are to be found in all Romance languages.

As for the social sciences, the definition that can be inferred from the works of scholars who have dealt with festival while studying social and ritual events from the viewpoint of various disciplines such as comparative religion, anthropology, social psychology, folklore, and sociology indicates that festival commonly means a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees, all members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview. Both the social function and the symbolic meaning of the festival are closely related to a series of overt values that the community recognizes as essential to its ideology and worldview, to its social identity, its historical continuity, and to its physical survival, which is ultimately what festival celebrates.⁴

II

Scholars have defined various types of festival, relying mainly on the sacred/secular dichotomy first discussed by Durkheim. This is more a theoretical than a practical distinction, since each type usually includes elements of the other, even if
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Festivals have evident secular implications, and secular ones almost invariably resort to metaphysics to gain solemnity and sanction for their events or for their sponsors. Another basic typological distinction that is often made draws upon the setting of the festival, opposing rural to urban festivals. Rural festivals are supposedly older, agrarian, centered on fertility rites and cosmogony myths, while the more recent, urban festivals celebrate prosperity in less archaic forms and may be tied to foundation legends and historical events and feats. Another typology can be based on power, class structure, and social roles, distinguishing among festivals given by the people for the people, those given by the establishment for itself, and those held by the people for the establishment, by the establishment for the people, and by the people against the establishment.\(^5\)

Festive behavior has also been studied as a whole complex with one basic symbolic characteristic. While some scholars have indicated as most important the symbolic inversion, the topsy-turvy aspect apparent in festivals such as the Roman Saturnalia or the Feast of Fools, others have insisted on the similarities between daily and festive behavior, stressing that the latter parallels the former but with a more stylized form and with greatly increased semantic meaning.

The two approaches are not mutually exclusive. If we consider that the primary and most general function of the festival is to renounce and then to announce culture, to renew periodically the lifeflow of a community by creating new energy, and to give sanction to its institutions, the symbolic means to achieve it is to represent the primordial chaos before creation, or a historical disorder before the establishment of the culture, society, or regime where the festival happens to take place.

Such representation cannot be properly accomplished by reversal behavior or by rites of intensification alone, but only by the simultaneous presence in the same festival of all the basic behavioral modalities of daily social life, all modified—by distortion, inversion, stylization, or disguise—in such a way that they take on an especially meaningful symbolic character. Consequently, both symbolic inversion and intensification must be present in the festival, and in addition there will be the element of symbolic abstinence—for instance from work, from play, from study, from religious observances. In sum, festival presents a complete range of behavioral modalities, each one related to the modalities of normal daily life. At festival times, people do something they normally do not; they abstain from something they normally do; they carry to the extreme behaviors that are usually regulated by measure; they invert patterns of daily social life. Reversal, intensification, trespassing, and abstinence are the four cardinal points of festive behavior.\(^6\)

III

A morphology of festivals must indicate their minimal units and their possible sequences. Such a theoretical operation, analogous to what Vladimir Propp did for the constituent parts of the folktales, may aim at an archetype accounting for all festivals, or more accurately at "oicotypes" accounting for a class of festivals of the same kind or from the same cultural area.\(^7\) Studies have indicated that several constituent parts seem to be quantitatively ever-recurrent and qualitatively important in festive events. These units, building blocks of festivals, can all be considered ritual acts, "rites,"
since they happen within an exceptional frame of time and space, and their meaning is considered to go beyond their literal and explicit aspects.

The framing ritual that opens the festival is one of valorization (which for religious events has been called sacralization) that modifies the usual and daily function and meaning of time and space. To serve as the theater of the festive events an area is reclaimed, cleared, delimited, blessed, adorned, forbidden to normal activities.  

Similarly, daily time is modified by a gradual or sudden interruption that introduces “time out of time,” a special temporal dimension devoted to special activities. Festival time imposes itself as an autonomous duration, not so much to be perceived and measured in days or hours, but to be divided internally by what happens within it from its beginning to its end, as in the “movements” of mythical narratives or musical scores. The opening rite is followed by a number of events that belong to a limited group of general ritual types. There are rites of purification and cleansing by means of fire, water, or air, or centered around the solemn expulsion of some sort of scapegoat carrying the “evil” and “negative” out of the community. If the rationale of these rites is to expel the evil that is already within, as in exorcisms, other complementary rites aim at keeping away the evil perceived as a threat coming from outside. These rites of safeguard include various forms of benediction and procession of sacred objects around and through significant points of the festival space setting, in order to renew the magical defenses of the community against natural and supernatural enemies.

Rites of passage, in the form described by van Gennep, mark the transition from one life stage to the next. They may be given special relevance by being part of a festive event. These may include forms of initiation into age groups, such as childhood, youth, adulthood, and even public execution of criminals, or initiation into occupational, military, or religious groups.

Rites of reversal through symbolic inversion drastically represent the mutability of people, culture, and life itself. Significant terms which are in binary opposition in the “normal” life of a culture are inverted. Sex roles are inverted in masquerade with males dressing as females and females dressing as males, social roles with masters serving their serfs. Sacred and profane spaces are also used in reverse.

Rites of conspicuous display permit the most important symbolic elements of the community to be seen, touched, adored, or worshipped; their communicative function is “phatic,” of contact. Sacred shrines, relics, magic objects are solemnly displayed and become the destination of visitations from within the immediate boundaries of the festival, or of pilgrimages from faraway places. In sacred processions and secular parades, the icons and symbolic elements are instead moved through space specifically adorned with ephemeral festive decorations such as festoons, flower arrangements, hangings, lights, and flags. In such perambulatory events, along with the community icons, the ruling groups typically display themselves as their guardians and keepers, and as depositories of religious or secular power, authority, and military might.

Rites of conspicuous consumption usually involve food and drink. These are prepared in abundance and even excess, made generously available, and solemnly consumed in various forms of feasts, banquets, or symposia (lit. “drinking together at the end of a banquet”). Traditional meals or blessed foods are one of the most frequent and typical features of festival, since they are a very eloquent way to represent and enjoy abundance, fertility, and prosperity. Ritual food is also a means to communicate with gods and ancestors, as in the Christian belief in the presence of Christ in the
sacred meal of Communion, the Greek tradition that Zeus is invisibly present at the ritual banquets of the Olympic Games, or the practice of the Tsembanga Maring people of New Guinea, who raise, slaughter, and eat pigs for and with the ancestors. In far less frequent cases, as in the potlatch, objects with special material and symbolic value are ritually consumed, wasted, or destroyed.  

Ritual dramas are usually staged at festival sites, as rites have a strong tie to myths. Their subject matter is often a creation myth, a foundation or migratory legend, or a military success particularly relevant in the mythical or historical memory of the community staging the festival. By means of the drama, the community members are reminded of their Golden Age, the trials and tribulations of their founding fathers in reaching the present location of the community, the miracles of a saint, or the periodic visit of a deity to whom the festival is dedicated. When the sacred story is not directly staged, it is very often hinted at or referred to in some segments or events of the festival.  

Rites of exchange express the abstract equality of the community members, their theoretical status as equally relevant members of a "communitas," a community of equals under certain shared laws of reciprocity. At the fair, money and goods are exchanged at an economic level. At more abstract and symbolic levels, information, ritual gifts, or visits may be exchanged; public acts of pacification, symbolic remissio debitum, or thanksgiving for a grace received may take place in various forms of redistribution, sponsored by the community or a privileged individual, who thus repays the community or the gods for what he has received in excess.  

Festival typically includes rites of competition, which often constitute its cathartic moment in the form of games. Even if games are commonly defined as competitions regulated by special rules and with uncertain outcome (as opposed to ritual, the outcome of which is known in advance), the logic of festival is concerned with the competition and the awards for the winner; the rules of the game are canonic, and its paradigm is ritual. The parts or roles are assigned at the beginning to the personae as equals and undifferentiated "contestants," "hopefuls," "candidates." Then the development and the result of the game create among them a "final" hierarchical order—either binary (winners and losers) or by rank (from first to last). Games show how equality may be turned into hierarchy. Besides games in the strict sense, festival competitions include various forms of contest and prize giving, from the election of the beauty queen to the selection of the best musician, player, singer, or dancer, individual or group, to awards to a new improvised narrative or work of art of any kind or to the best festive decorations. By singling out its outstanding members and giving them prizes, the group implicitly reaffirms some of its most important values.  

Athletic or competitive sporting events include individual or collective games of luck, strength, or ability. These have been considered a "corruption" of older plays of ritual combats with fixed routine and obligatory ending, such as the fight between Light and Darkness representing cosmogony, then progressively historicized and territorialized into combats between, for example, the Christians and the Moors, or representative individuals, the champions (literally "the sample") carrying the colors of the whole group.  

In their functional aspects, such games may be seen as display and encouragement of skills such as strength, endurance, and precision, required in daily work and military occupations; such was for instance the rationale of medieval mock battles.
In their symbolic aspect, festival competitions may be seen as a metaphor for the emergence and establishment of power, as when the “winner takes all,” or when the winning faction symbolically takes over the arena, or the city in triumph.

At the end of the festival, a *rite of devalorization*, symmetrical to the opening one, marks the end of the festive activities and the return to the normal spatial and temporal dimensions of daily life.20

IV

Admittedly, a complete or even an extensive morphology of festivals will correspond to very few—if any—actual events. Real-life festivals will not present all the ritual components listed, not even in “de-semanticized,” that is, secondary and scarcely meaningful, forms. A complete festival morphology will correspond to the complete festive cycle, and several of its parts will form the configuration of each of the actual festive events.21 This fragmentation of the festive complex into events distributed all along the calendrical cycle follows the course of history and its trends of centralization and decentralization in social life, as well as the interplay of religious and secular powers and their division in the running of social and symbolic life and its “collective rituals.” Furthermore, in today’s western and westernized cultures, larger, often more abstract and distant entities try to substitute themselves for the older, smaller, tightly woven communities as reference groups and centers of the symbolic life of the people.22

Today we try to bring the audience close to the event by means of the mass media, or to bring the event close to the audience by delegating smaller entities such as the family, to administer it everywhere at the same time, or to fragment the older festivals into simpler festive events centered on one highly significant ritual. Such fragmentation is seen in the United States, where the ritual meal is the focus of Thanksgiving, the exchange of gifts the focus of Christmas, excess of New Year’s, military might and victories and civic pride are the themes underlying the parade on the Fourth of July and the Rose Parade. Carnivalesque aspects underlie Mardi Gras and Halloween. And symbolic reversal is nowhere more evident than in the demolition derby. Even the tradition of dynastic anniversaries is present, modified though it may be, in Washington’s and Lincoln’s birthdays; competitions are perfectly typified by the Indianapolis 500, the Superbowl, and the Kentucky Derby. Even the archaic tendency to consider the ritual games of the festival as cosmic events may be surfacing in the term *world championship*, obstinately used for events that in the strict sense are encounters of local teams playing a culture-bound and territorially limited game, such as American football or baseball. Festive rites of passage take place on Valentine’s Day, at debutantes’ balls, drinking celebrations of the eighteenth birthday and fraternity and sorority rushes. Rites of deference and confirmation of status include presidential inaugurations, Father’s Day, and Mother’s Day. The archaic Kings and Queens of the May have their functional equivalents in the yearly beauty pageants of Miss, Mister, and Mrs. America. Plays have been grouped in various yearly festivals of the arts that range from Shakespeare festivals to the Oscars ceremonies in Los Angeles, through symphonies, jazz festivals, and fiddling contests. And the modern *ferias*, the county fairs, are numerous and ever-present.23

If not festival proper, such events are part of a festive cycle, a series of events that in other times and cultures would fall within tighter boundaries of time, space,
and action. This festive complex is everchanging and evolving. But with all its modifications, festival has retained its primary importance in all cultures, for the human social animal still does not have a more significant way to feel in tune with his world than to partake in the special reality of the Festival, and celebrate life in its “time out of time.”

NOTES


13. On pilgrimages see Surinder Mohan
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20. See notes 8 and 9.

