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Volunteering for Festivals: Why and How?

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This chapter reflects on some features of a topic that is both a source of controversy as well as importance in the cultural sector, that of 'volunteering'. In 2001 Cultural Information and Research Centres Liaison in Europe (CIRCLE) published the results of a Pan-European enquiry which remains today as one of the few authoritative sources of reliable European statistical data on the subject (Dodd, 2001). This chapter will discuss the role of volunteering in different festivals and countries and provide some analysis of more recent research.

What is volunteering? A simple definition is that provided by Canadian authors Gagnon and Fortin (2002: 67): volunteers "are people who freely assume to provide a service without being paid through a group or an organisation".

Self-interest in a collective context

What motivates volunteers? According to Bernd Wagner (Ratzenböck, 2001: 33), motivations appear to have changed from one of Christian brotherly love and solidarity to a stronger connection with self-interest. However it can be argued that beyond solidarity, the idea of self-interest was already a factor in the cultural sector, for example in the motivation of volunteers with the National Trust in the UK, which has had volunteers working for it since 1895. Even here, being able to enjoy some privileged access to heritage sites and acquiring valuable knowledge was still linked to a commitment to collective usefulness.

The idea of renewing the feeling of neighbourhood and place could also be one of the key motivations for volunteering. The research completed by CIRCLE showed that people living in small urban centres or villages were generally more eager to volunteer than residents in cities (Dodd, 2001). Volunteering in one's region may be a part of an identification process, both personal and communal. While building their own identity, volunteers may help to create or recreate a sense of common belonging.

As a general observation it appears that personal reasons for supporting volunteering in the cultural sector have been the focus of limited research. Given its value throughout Europe, it would be useful to explore what motivates people to volunteer in support of an artistic or cultural activity. Some anthropologists have suggested that to remedy Western Europe's potential lack of clear political commitment, volunteering may provide an alternative activism. To people already working volunteering could be a way to reveal or develop another identity, one that could transcend daily life and its hierarchical barriers. The manager of a big French harbour, for example, who devotes his free time to a rock music festival, contributing his technical knowledge to a small team motivated by friendship, shared interests and a break from everyday pressures. Volunteering on the board of cultural associations provides some people with the opportunity to realise a passion undeveloped in paid employment. It is also a way for an individual or a community to feel involved in a cultural event and to feel a sense of ownership, as Silvanto described for many festivals in Helsinki (2009).

Volunteering cannot be investigated independently from people's positions in the labour market, nor from individual and collective representations about the legitimacy of unpaid work. As with any other individual commitment, it is also associated with people's cultural capital. In underprivileged countries, where people must manage several jobs in order to earn their living, there is little time nor will to volunteer. In the UK, CIRCLE's respondents underlined that those in paid employment were more likely to volunteer than unemployed people (Fisher and Fox 2001). By comparison, in Belgium people without professional activities give more time to volunteering. However Belgian citizens with a lower degree of education are less engaged with volunteering (Høbye 2001). The topic of employment may lead to a paradox: in the Netherlands, in a period of economic prosperity and low unemployment, women, who used to volunteer more than men, now prefer paid employment. Interestingly some Dutch national authorities responded to this by launching campaigns to promote the value of voluntary work to both volunteers and to the community (Smithuijsen, 2001). Collective history is clearly a critical factor too, not least in some countries where the word is associated with activities and a culture of control. For example the CIRCLE report noted that the word 'volunteer' – '*dobrovolstvo*' – had military connotations in Bulgaria (Varbanova et al., 2001). In Poland the term 'social activist' was associated with 'mandatory volunteering' during the Communist regime (Sicinski et al., 2001).

Young people are interested in volunteering to varying degrees across Europe. The CIRCLE report noted that in Denmark and the UK younger people