

Transcript

Protestivals - What are they?

Dr Maria Nita:

XR has made quite an impact on the public and the media. And I think we've all seen at least one picture of the XR Red Brigade in the media. The XR activists that wear red gowns as a way of symbolising blood, the species that have been lost. So, extinction and loss.

And I'm particularly interested in religious networks that are involved in the climate movement because I want to understand how do religious people transform some of their practices and traditions as they become environmentally minded, or more environmentally minded. And I think that this is relevant because we can all learn from that as we become more ecologically responsible.

Clearly protestivals, or the word protestival, is just shorthand for a protest festival. And scholars say that the roots of this particular form of protest can be found in the Alternative Globalisation Movements that started in the 1980s. And what is meant by that - alternative globalisation - is that these movements would not necessarily be resisting globalisation or opposing globalisation. They were indeed global movements often, but they wanted a different kind of global society. So they oppose big corporations, for instance, and were concerned with social justice. And the key slogan was 'another world is possible'.

Now we've seen many more movements recently use this protestival model. And indeed, in my own research in XR, in the Extinction Rebellion Movement, the protestival is a very common form of protest. So, whether activists are camping and, you know, this is in, in the context of a protest camp or marching, oftentimes we've got art performance, music, samba bands and carnival atmosphere. And it is this carnival atmosphere that makes these occasions protestivals.

Now although this particular form of protest, the protestival, has only been around for the past three or four decades, their origin, according to some scholars, goes much further into history. So, even modern festivals are thought by some scholars to be rooted in the celebrations that are almost connecting humans with a pre-history and, and freedom from social norms.

And the classical example there is the cult of Dionysus in Ancient Greece where people would go into the wild and, you know, escape for a time only, the constraints of, of civilised society.

Now some scholars suggest that these early festival carnival occasions - when things would go a bit crazy, wild and, you know, social norms would be reversed, for instance, the fool will become king for a day - they were unintentionally created by the Christian Church. Because during the Middle Ages and even earlier in Christian history religious ecstasy, dance and celebration were excluded from worship occasions.

So, one possible explanation is that the reason why we have modern festivals is that as church life became more sober and sombre these carnival festival occasions became a kind of secular counterpart.

The paradox is that this form of protest, the protestival, makes protest itself quite manageable. It's quite formulaic. You know, it's a, it has a style, a genre. And some scholars claim that protestivals, just like carnivals, maintain or help maintain the status quo rather than provoke change. And that is because they provide a kind of release valve of sorts. And, you know, people can come and express their feelings of frustration and then go home. So, you know, things can go back to normal.

However, another argument in their favour, or the favour of, in the favour of protestivals is that they are transformative events. Not only because, you know, participants are transformed by the experience but also the audience, the media. You know, they, they don't go back to normal because at the end of the protestival everyone is actually changed by the experience.

A key aspect of modern festivals, by which I mean the art and performance festivals that started in the 60s and 70s was their protest status. Many early festivals were concerned with social justice and the environment. Like, for instance, the anti-nuclear campaigns around this time, the 70s. And my own research suggests that this protest status became somehow, let's say dormant, in the mainstream festival culture that followed. But it very much remained, you know, a kind of protest ethos that is celebrated and remembered.

So, you know, major festival occasions like Glastonbury, for instance, have, you know, their art and performance is very much a way in which these early protestivals are celebrated. Protest is very much embedded in their art and performance.

So, another way in which the lines are blurring is that festivals themselves are kind of spilling out of their fields. And, you know, the designated time in the year when they take place. And increasingly we have these festival communities that go on for the entire year or stay in touch virtually through social media. And of course, we've seen a lot of this now since the Covid-19 situation started and it seems that, you know, community itself may become transformed as a result.