Reclaiming Oktoberfest: Celebrating Sustainability Instead of Consumerism

14 June 2021

Series,Student Research,The Taproom

On a sunny day, tens of thousands of people flock to the ‘Theresienwiese’ festival grounds. Source: Pixabay

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Every year in late September, the atmosphere in Munich becomes thicker when Oktoberfest takes place. The intense odors of roasted almonds and grilled chicken mingle with those of specially brewed lager and the sweat of thousands of people roaming the festival grounds. This olfactory sensation is accompanied by the dazzling lights of the various roller coasters and the amplified lure of the ghost trains’ impresarios.

Since its beginnings as a celebration in honor of the wedding of Crown Prince Ludwig of Bavaria and Princess Therese in 1810, the world’s largest folk festival seems to put the city into a collective state of frenzy. Over time, the ‘Wiesn,’ as the locals call it, has become notorious not only as a typical Bavarian folk festival but also as a German one. Today, more than 6 million people from all over the world flock to the festival grounds and into one of the 15 football field-sized festival tents. The vast number of visitors often causes the tents to close around noon due to overcrowding.

Those who make it inside usually gulp down over 7.3 million liters of beer during the two weeks of the festival. In 2019, a staggering 124 oxen and 29 calves were eaten, with the number of chickens, ducks, pork knuckles, and sausages together adding up to millions. But the ravenousness not only fills the coffers of the festival tents’ innkeepers. International tourists attracted by Oktoberfest’s global reputation spend quite some time and money in Munich, bringing around €1.23 billion into the city’s economy (according to a **survey among businessmen in 2014**). So it comes as no surprise that the city’s marketing department diligently promotes pictures of tourists and locals in ‘traditional’ Bavarian dress, sitting together in harmony and toasting with the one-liter beer mugs called ‘Maß.’

Despite these idyllic images, questions of sustainability are increasingly becoming of concern to the event's organizers. In order to reduce the consumption of resources and promote the folk festival as a model for large-scale events, the water used for rinsing beer mugs in many festival tents is now transferred to the toilets where it can be used a second time. Since 2012, electricity has been generated from renewable energy sources. According to **Stadtwerke München**, the public utility company providing the natural gas that is used to prepare the food, carbon dioxide emissions are compensated for by emission reduction certificates.

However, carbon dioxide emissions are only one problem among many and despite efforts to tackle the waste of resources, Oktoberfest still cannot be considered a sustainable event. **Public statistics** show that about 105,000 cubic meters of water, as well as 2.84 million kilowatt-hours of electricity, were consumed in 2019. In addition, in 2018, **researchers at the Technical University of Munich** (TUM) conducted measurements showing that methane gas emissions in Munich during the festival were three times higher than usual. The emissions even exceed those generated by the metropolitan area of the major US city of Boston by a factor of ten. Given that methane is the second largest contributor to the man-made greenhouse effect after carbon dioxide, and said to have 28 to 34 times its global warming potential, the researchers called for systematic strategies to reduce these emissions.

Following the cancellation of Oktoberfest in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2021 Oktoberfest, which was due to take place from 18 September to 3 October, was also cancelled by organizers. This disruption can be seen as an opportunity to think about how to do things differently in terms of sustainability. But what could these strategies look like in practice? Would it be sufficient to examine the festival's many kilometers of gas pipelines in search of potential methane leaks, and then seal them, as researchers from TUM have suggested? This would certainly be an important step. But it seems just as important to think about how we as individuals and as a society organize our leisure time and about the sustainability of the ways we celebrate. Considering the many visitors from all over the world, the question arises of how Oktoberfest can become an 'authentic' and at the same time sustainable experience for both tourists and locals.

The role Oktoberfest plays for the population has changed dramatically over the last two hundred years. The first Oktoberfest was held just a few years after Napoleon made the Duchy of Bavaria a kingdom. In order to instil feelings of attachment to the new nation and form a common identity, the celebrations were designed in such a way that

not only the royal court but also common people could participate. There were contests, such as horse races, in which people could actively take part. They were not just expected to consume. Nowadays, the main purpose of the folk festival is to stimulate mass consumption and keep profits flowing.

In its current manifestation, Oktoberfest stands for a form of social organization in which leisure time and celebration have become a product with a price tag that can only be consumed and no longer produced or organized by people themselves. This leads to a situation in which the individual, or rather the consumer, becomes more and more alienated from the products they consume. Following insights from critical theory, I argue that in order to rethink Oktoberfest in a more sustainable way, people need to reclaim their pastimes and the ways they celebrate. More specifically, Oktoberfest must be reclaimed!

To achieve this, mass consumption needs to be countered with sustainable alternatives that promote cooperation. Oktoberfest visitors could participate in the production of food consumed at the festival. Locals, as well as foreign tourists, could help in the growing of vegetables in urban gardens and in the raising of and caring for animals on nearby farms. In this way, they would not only get to know the urban hinterland but also gain insight into the joys and toils of food production, especially when it comes to meat. Likewise, locals and tourists could brew beer together and learn to appreciate not only the craft but also the product (to an appropriate extent, of course).

Learning together, working together, and celebrating together, rather than just the latter, could be one way of developing a holistic, more sustainable, and connected form of leisure. Reclaiming Oktoberfest is about changing the way locals and visitors alike celebrate Munich's culture.

This might be considered an unrealistic proposal. However, the establishment of a palm garden on the site of the *Theresienwiese* in the wake of the corona crisis shows that something previously unimaginable—that of a beach emerging from the festival grounds—is not altogether unthinkable or even impossible.

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