CultureCase

What happens to cultural engagement during times of profound social change?

This research was conducted by **Mikhail Sokolov** at the **European University at Saint Petersburg, Russia**.

Summary

One of the aims of Soviet public policy was to reduce (even eliminate) the cultural distinctions between classes and professional groups by making the population more professionalised. This did not occur. During Perestrioka, when the elites in Russian society lost many of their privileges and status, there was the possibility of changes in patterns of cultural engagement. This did not occur either. The author suggests that in St Petersburg over the last 30 years, 'participation in “high culture” is much more resistant to economic adversity than participation in “mere entertainment”', which is why cinema attendance changed in line with economic fortunes but high art forms like classical music and opera did not. Those art forms are linked to identity and status and hence are more important to maintain in order that individuals feel positive about themselves and their place in society.

There are generally three types of change in contemporary patterns of cultural engagement

“Meltdown” is when people stop attending high art events like opera and ballet; “Transfer” is when other people – new elites – replace current attendees in the expensive seats at theatres and concert halls; “Permanence” is when the same types of people continue to engage in the same activities, but perhaps less frequently or with less flamboyance.

The paper used data from the annual Saint Petersburg Surveys of Arts Participation from between 1991 and 2011 (and adds an extra survey in 2017)

Overall there was very little change in the level of engagement in different forms of cultural activity, this being despite the fact that 'the vast majority of Russians' real income dropped by at least 50 per cent'. Cinema attendance fell sharply through the 1990s but regained popularity in the early 2000s. Because Russian society remains socially stratified by region more than occupation, wealth or social class, it may be that the results of this study reveal the ongoing importance of high arts engagement for the metropolitan residents of St Petersburg, and say less about the wider experience of Russians during this period.

Keywords

attendance **Russia** **class** **survey**

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