

## **What will Culture Look Like After the Pandemic?**

### **Summary:**

The first part of this paper examines the geopolitical and socio-political situation since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, with a focus on Europe. The second part discusses possible consequences for the cultural sector within the European continent. The paper concludes by attempting to understand the role of culture in post-pandemic society.

### **Comments on the geopolitical situation:**

Last winter, the first (and hopefully only) wave of COVID-19 swept across Asia/Australia (with China and Hubei as its centre) before hitting Europe in mid-February and spreading to Africa and the Americas in late March. The evolution of the disease has had a strong impact on global organisations (such as the WHO) and governments. Our public and private institutions and the media also have had to deal with the growing crisis. It is reasonable to assume at this stage that although the virus first broke out in China, the strong crackdown measures taken by its authorities led to much more rapid control over the situation (if information on, and from, China is to be believed). With this, China qualified itself as the leading coronavirus expert and soon began to extend this soft power into Western countries (Italy etc.). Although the Chinese economy has also been severely affected, we can expect it to make a stronger and quicker recovery than the Western (including the Japanese and South Korean) economies. Paradoxically, by the end of the crisis China may have cemented its global position as an economic and soft powerhouse.

This is probably where the vehement US criticism of China stems from. The US has been observed to have become increasingly isolated. At the governmental level, for example, there was initially no coordination between the US and its European partners on many key issues.

In general, both governmental and non-governmental institutions seem to have come together more successfully for this crisis than any in the past. In my opinion it is the problematic rhetoric of some leading statesmen (not: -women) who have compared the pandemic to a war, with the virus as the enemy to be fought, which casually describes the intellectual challenge.

Even within Europe, there was an initial lack of coordination and cooperation. Our latent economic and cultural differences, especially between "Latin" Europe and "Protestant-Northern" Europe, have once again become apparent (see Euro crisis). Russia has also played its own uncooperative role in the crisis (apart from self-promoting campaigns such as flying the two planes to Italy and the USA with aid material).

Nevertheless, the EU in particular soon found its way back to a coordinated policy and distanced itself from going it alone like Hungary (I will leave the special case of Sweden aside here). The conflict over aid and costs ("Eurobonds") runs deep. Most countries have paid a high toll and expect massive recession. Despite the liberal trade in goods, countries are already looking to create independence from imports now and into the future (for example in the pharmaceutical sector). It remains to be seen whether this will lead to new borders and alienation between nations.

In the long term, Africa and South America (and to some extent Asia) will be hardest hit by the crisis due to their lack of harnessed resources and structure while their development activities with Western countries and China will shrink. Once the vaccine becomes available, it remains to be seen if the international community will show solidarity among themselves.

Thus, the traditional tensions between East and West and North and South will continue to increase significantly, both globally and within Europe. A renewed rise in religious fundamentalism and nationalist populism is to be expected (certainly in Europe as well). The UN Millennium Goals, which European states have played a central role in formulating, will take a back seat to the new political, social and economic priorities.

### **Comments on the socio-political situation:**

The consequences of the crisis described above are largely negative and will leave deep scars in our society. Concern about the future of democracy and freedom of expression is just as great and justified as that of social balance and solidarity. Nationalist populism, separatism, cultural essentialism, localism and anti-globalism are some of the current trends that are intensifying. The limited activity of parliaments, for example, has already led to a concentration of official and executive decisions which bypassed the democratic process.

At the same time, we are witnessing the accumulation of even more power being put in the hands of faceless multinational corporations, especially in the pharmaceutical industry and in the digital and IT sectors, as well as private investors a la Buffett and Gates.

A return to the social life before the virus now seems impossible. Social and existential fears are rampant and dominate public communication. In view of widespread information fraud and fake news, many media outlets no longer succeed in living up to their social responsibility (balanced, objective reporting). Social media is a colourful hodge-podge of opinions. Public space, as the agora of society, is being virtualised even further and at a faster pace. The drain from ever larger areas of life (information, commerce, entertainment, services, but also culture) gives cause for concern. After the crisis, all physical third places will only be able to be revived or recreated under great restrictions.

The global cultural exchange will be further decelerated in favour of the local, regional and national. Borders will again play a greater role – and also, for better or worse, in culture.

However, despite all the alarm, there are also positive trends: people almost everywhere in the world have greater confidence in rational arguments and coping concepts than in the whisperers of conspiracy theories, religious fanaticism or New Age escapism. They have generally shown solidarity and responsibility for themselves and towards others. Governments have tended to act decisively after understandable uncertainty.

Women in particular have demonstrated great leadership qualities in such a time (see also the assessment of global institutions such as the WHO on this issue). The discourse on how to remedy the crisis has so far been largely transparent and conducted by experts.

Today's communication technologies have made it possible for people to follow current trends in the spread and control of the virus around the world.

In the field of culture, too, crisis alliances and action groups have quickly been formed. Many cultural workers have contributed as enablers of communication among people in times of social isolation. Cultural workers can also be found among the "coronavirus-heroes" of Politico-eu, among others.

Surely a market of ideas will now emerge to find out how to deal with them. To observe and influence this market can be interesting. Trends will certainly become apparent in the coming weeks as the paralysis gives way to a new objectivity.

### **Summary of expected consequences in Europe:**

The cultural consequences must be considered in conjunction with the political, economic and social consequences.

Past developments have displayed the following trends:

- i) There is a high degree of social fear and insecurity, also provoked by the gloomy prognoses of experts (from virologists to economists).
- ii) Dramatic economic slumps and resulting national debts are to be expected.
- iii) There will be ad-hoc government by nation states. Tactical action, basically the motto at the moment is: "Hold out until the vaccine is in".
- iv) A temporary increase in executive power at the expense of legislature is observed, with no foreseeable plans for what might follow after the introduction of a vaccine.
- v) Also observed:
  - a temporary reduction of social rights of the individual and of institutions.
  - a growing resurgence of national institutions and resources. (Many EU countries are currently demonstrating political and economic protectionism in some cases. The future of the European identity that has grown up in recent years, especially thanks to an increasing interconnectedness of economy and society, is uncertain).
  - renewed tensions between North and South in Europe, fear of a virtual "troika" dominance à la Euro crisis, underlying sympathies for a "Latin alliance" within the EU (France, Italy, Spain) vis-à-vis the Protestant northern states (Scandinavia, Germany, Benelux).
  - a new Eurocentrism due to the growing isolationism of the USA and the expanding Chinese power.
  - a new wave of xenophobia and populism (conspiracy theories).

- a political restructure of strategic societal goals, with priority on budget relief and healthcare placed over important long-term aspects such as migration and environmental protection.
- a growing localism in the face of the (negatively perceived) influences of economic and cultural globalisation.
- a decrease in desire for travel, especially intercontinental, reduction of travel in professional capacities.
- an acceleration of the progress in virtual communication versus physical space.
- Restrictions of life in public space impacting civil society and social events.

### **What effects do these trends in society as a whole have on culture in Europe?**

- i) A deep and long-term crisis in the financing of culture is to be expected. Some European governments have launched or announced support programmes for cultural workers and institutions. These include social benefits and support. Nevertheless, given the current number of public aid programmes in effect, it is likely that public debt (and that of smaller local authorities) will be immense. This will trigger a massive downward correction in cultural funding. The duration and effects of this correction are difficult to predict. However, the following can be expected: unemployment, thinning of the cultural landscape, alienation of culture and society, decline in production, lowered reception and reduced social effects of culture and cultural education.
- ii) An intensive debate on the ongoing role and relevance of culture in our society is to be expected, especially considering the temporary breakdown of the vital link between producers and recipients/consumers. (I consider this a positive development signifying the cultural landscape's capacity for reform and a new cultural mission.)
- iii) A trend towards localisation, possibly also regionalisation and nationalisation, of cultural work is to be expected. Culture can be understood as an instrument for transcending borders and developing expanded cultural identities. In Europe, especially, culture enables people of different national origins to distinguish themselves from one another, but also to facilitate cultural exchange and bridge political or language barriers. At present, borders are being newly reinforced. Even after the

physical borders in Europe are reopened, long-term mechanisms to keep people separate can be expected. This plays into the hands of the populists in our society. In this context, it will become more important than ever for cultural workers and cultural institutions use English, the *lingua franca* within Europe, in their communication to supplement the local languages.

iv) Artists, cultural practitioners and cultural institutions will deal with the consequences in a creative manner and explore their role in our changing society. See also ii).

This development is, in my view, very welcome. In fact, it was already underway before and during the crisis. However, the current spirit of solidarity may not hold up when the inevitable battle for resources begins. In the end, this struggle for resources will draw our focus away from innovation and cooperation and force us to enter merciless competition.

v) European cultural creators and institutions may show solidarity against the regression in their countries.

See also iv). In order to ensure that the discourse is not conducted exclusively at the national level, which is of course particularly relevant, a stable and flexible International (European) network is needed to create discussion offerings and platforms beyond political and economic boundaries. For now, it is uncertain what role the EU can play in this. The announcements of the EU Commission to date show no indication that the committee has placed a priority in this regard. Among many cultural workers, the EU institutions are considered too bureaucratic and un conducive to creativity. On the other hand, independent platforms such as the already-mentioned CultureActionEurope, Manifesta, re:publica, AIM or curators-network have an important function in promoting freeform and content-oriented cooperation between cultural workers and institutions, as well as the knowledge-transfer necessary to overcome the crisis.

vi) The state may partially withdraw its previous support for culture, possibly becoming more paternalistic in its attitude. Public culture, threatened by closures, unemployment and loss of significance, is thus also exposed to the danger of accepting state-authorian thinking and action. The question: How do we protect the freedoms and self-governance of culture?

vii) The above question should give rise to new strategies for participation and self-determination within local, regional, national and European cultural work.

viii) Cultural work will undergo redefinitions of value in its digital or virtual forms : the virtual space not only as a means of communication, but also as the public space alternative to its physical counterpart, where cultural work takes place just as tangibly as in the physical world and where producers and recipients/consumers exchange in diverse and innovative ways.

Digitality will be an inevitable manifestation within all types of culture. Those cultural creators and institutions that succeed early and convincingly in establishing a digital presence, which represents an essential alternative to the physical presence, will be the trendsetters in redefining the role of art and culture in society. In this context, it will have to be shown whether small, medium-sized and even nationally relevant actors can develop autonomy and willingness to cooperate in the face of global providers such as Netflix or Amazon. English, the *lingua franca*, will become an even more important instrument for strengthening communication not only between European networks but also between cultural producers and recipients beyond the national borders.

ix) An increase in demand for traditional art, less for content-related and experimentative art, with a stronger focus on the local cultural context. This will be to the detriment of international cultural work.

x) Cultural education will, to a large extent, be delivered by digital means. There will also be strong competition from global providers. Amazon already offers a wide range of online courses, including programming and software development. It would not be a surprise if Amazon wants to move into language and culture programs at some point.

xi) Such cultural projects will be prioritised within the EU, which in turn serve to counteract the above trends. Pandemic-related topics (e.g. domestic violence, historical pandemics, solidarity in international emergency situations) will be given precedence.

xii) Funding policies will show preference in promoting science and research, youth and sport, over art.

xiii) Commercial (often global) providers of culture will provide fierce competition to the respective actors of local cultural landscape(s). In this context, it remains to be seen whether local, non-global cultural producers can hold a firm position in local and physical public space while standing up to the presence of digital multinationals with alternative offers.

xiv) A hard fight for survival is expected between institutionalized and independent art. Innovative cultural policy will have to ensure above all that tradition and institutions in culture do not marginalize the new, alternative and non-institutionalized forms of culture.

xv) The trend towards marginalisation and specialisation of media monitoring could become much more pronounced. Fake news, information fraud, commercialisation and restriction of freedom are the challenges that media are facing and will increasingly face. Professional, culturally beneficial communication about culture may become less frequent. Cultural creators and institutions will have to invest in their own communication strategy to far greater degrees.

xvi) An involuntary conflict may exist between the socially more secure state-subsidised artists and the socially weaker independent artists. This loss of solidarity could also spread to other areas of public life, where people have to put up with major losses that do not affect state-subsidised artists as much.

### **In Conclusion:**

The current pandemic will result in permanent changes to all areas of human life. Critical voices currently point out that our previous way of life had already been unsustainable. European politicians suspect that our society has “exaggerated many things in the recent past”. As with all historical pandemics, there is a sense of punishment for human sins. As long as this feeling cannot be manipulated for the purposes of populism and fundamentalism, perhaps it poses no need for worry.

Nevertheless, it is my belief that the rationalist worldview of our post-modern era is currently facing a great challenge. At present, it is not possible to predict in which direction cultural and social values will be shifted. But there *will* be a shift. Basically, we are currently seeing how certain early trends (new borders, anonymous globalisation, digitalisation/virtualisation) are being solidified and reinforced. One could therefore also counter the politicians that while some things may have been exaggerated, others have been understated. The result is that we now also have to live with, or compensate for, the lack of those things we have understated.



If material resources (and their scarcity) were to dominate the discourse on the future of our civilization in the coming months and years, the basic rights of our free and democratic society may come under severe threat. Benjamin Franklin is oft-quoted as having said: " He who would trade liberty for some temporary security, deserves neither liberty nor security."

Culture has so far been an essential instrument for defending and promoting our - genuinely European - fundamental democratic rights. In difficult times, cultural creators and institutions have had to make the judgement call on submit to the pressure of populism and fundamentalism and howl with the wolves, or whether to communicate and embody an expanded world view in which the values of freedom, multiculturalism, human dignity, and so on, are confidently represented and developed. In the years 2020/21, the main direction of Europe's, and the rest of the world's, cultural development will surely be revealed to us.

Despite all challenges, there are good reasons to build on the robustness of European culture. It may sound paradoxical, but it is a simple fact: we can go back many decades in world history to compare the current crisis with earlier dramatic events. History also makes it clear that Europe, in particular, has enjoyed a long period of relative stability. This stability has resulted in the culture of Europe today. Whatever happens to our society in the coming years, it will be hard to imagine why European culture should not continue to be a major driving force of our society and the world.

Michael Schindhelm, April 27, 2020