COVID-19: Rebuilding Post-Crisis Society Through the Arts and Culture

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We are experiencing unprecedented times. Throughout history, humanity has overcome a variety of global and humanitarian crises, each of which was unique from a contextual perspective. Today, as with previous crises, our need to understand leads us to compare ourselves to other nations, to observe our neighbours and to analyze what’s happening elsewhere. How is the situation being managed in other parts of the world? What are the best practices that hold the potential to address our problems and resolve this crisis? It is unlikely that we will come across a single, universally applicable response to these questions. Rather, there appears to be a variety of solutions, as we engage in the co-creation of responses through trial and error, and adapt to evolving contexts and new elements such as deconfinement. Part of the solution may come from another area of the world, but what if it also comes from another era? By looking to the past through a different lens, namely that of the arts and culture, we can gain insight on how populations reconstruct themselves during and after periods of crisis.

Art and Culture in Times of Crisis

To begin, what do we mean by “crisis”? Are we only referring to the epidemic’s sanitary element? Some state officials have compared this period to a state of war, in which the battle is waged against a viral enemy, rather than a human one.¹ Wars produce after-effects that are sometimes structural, but the consequences are inevitably human, social and societal.

Research and literature from the humanitarian field reveal that one crisis often leads to the emergence of a new one. In 2015, Jean-Bernard Véron² expressed his concerns relating to the loosening of measures that typically occurs in post-crisis situations. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, he argues that humanitarian interventions tend to promptly cease once the peak of the calamity has passed³. According to him, states exhibit a lack of vision when

² Jean-Bernard Véron is an associate researcher at IRIS, Chief Editor of Afrique Contemporaine and chair of the Fondation de France’s international solidarity committee.
it comes to rebuilding the social bonds that have been negatively affected by crisis. Along similar lines, Amaël Cattaruzza and Élisabeth Dorier⁴, whose research has looked at the post-conflict period of humanitarian action, suggest that interventions tend to occur in stages. Though they question the neutrality of donor states and organizations, they highlight the symbolic importance of the last stage of intervention, as it represents rehabilitation and societal healing.

In times of conflict, art and culture, which are pillars of society, tend to be severely affected and even sometimes strategically destroyed. Though the current crisis is not conflict-related, the global pandemic has exerted a heavy toll on the cultural sector: concert halls and theatres have been closed, large gatherings are banned and summer festivals are cancelled. Living arts, visual arts and cultural heritage were among the first areas to be affected by social distancing measures, and will likely be last to resume after deconfinement. Recognizing the heavy cost borne by the cultural industry, the federal government announced the launch of a CDN $500 million fund to help cultural organizations overcome these difficult times.

Khmer Art and Culture

A research initiative undertaken by OCCAH and the authors of this paper has looked at the ways in which art and culture have been leveraged in Haiti and Cambodia in postcrisis times. For example, in Cambodia, art and culture had all but virtually disappeared, following the 1979 genocide and the Khmer Rouge’s reign of violence, which ended in 1997. Twenty percent of the population was exterminated by Pol Pot’s regime. As explained by Phloeun Prim, Executive Director of Cambodian Living Arts, the destruction of cultural symbols and artefacts such as religious and cultural sites, monuments and visual arts, is a systemic consequence of conflict. Oppressive dictators, regimes, or foreign countries steadily weaken an oppressed society by destroying its cultural heritage, thereby unsettling its identity and culture. The oppressor may then impose its societal vision upon weakened and culturally uprooted populations.

Cambodia’s long and rich history predates the European Middle Ages. From the 9th to the 13th century, the golden age of the Khmer Empire, the arts and culture were integrated into society through religious rites and customs. However, the wealth of Cambodia’s culture and its history of oral legacy were greatly impacted by wars and genocide. In an effort to revive and preserve its ancient nobility, artist Arn Chorn-Pond founded the Cambodian Masters Performers Program, which subsequently became Cambodian Living Arts. Born to a family of artists, Arn Chorn-Pond survived the Khmer Rouge regime as a boy by escaping to a refugee camp in Thailand, before being adopted into an American family from New England. He studied in the U.S. and worked as a social worker for a few years, before returning to Cambodia.

Today, Cambodian Living Arts is an NGO comprised of several hundreds of artists and employees working to advance artistic education, protect Cambodia’s cultural heritage, develop the skills of tomorrow’s leaders, build alliances and support the expansion of the cultural and artistic market. By leveraging art and culture, the organization is achieving its objectives of safekeeping tradition, instilling sense into communities and enabling youth to contribute to the country’s development. Over the last decades, the organization, which now operates in a vast ecosystem that includes partners from around the world, has helped individuals recover from their trauma and work towards peace through the recovery of their roots and sense-making.

⁴ Amaël Cattaruzza is a Lecturer in Geography at the Centre de recherches des Écoles (CREC), Saint-Cyr, ENeC. Élisabeth Dorier is a Professor of Geography and member of the Laboratoire population, environnement et développement (LPED), Aix-Marseille University.
**Art and Culture as a Means of Survival**

The arts and culture are drivers of social development, enabled by artistic and cultural education and the generative creative force that it produces. How then, might this insight inspire us today in the context of our sanitary crisis?

For Phloeun Prim, cultural revival and regeneration were essential to Cambodia’s recovery, from which arose a desire to transmit culture to establish bridges between generations, individuals and institutions. The transmission of one’s art orally is not simply about sharing know-how; it also communicates knowledge about how-to-be, or social values. Master artists do not simply teach their art, but they also transmit a part of their humanity from one individual to the next. The student then has the duty of acquiring this knowledge, but also to help it expand by creating his or her own interpretation of its symbols. This process fuels individual and collective dreams, from which emerge stronger and more resilient societies. Today, Cambodian Living Arts is investing in present and future cultural leaders, as it is they who will inherit the challenge of a post-epidemic context of altered interactions, communities and identities.

Culture, according to Guy Rocher⁵, is an assemblage of ways of thinking, feeling and acting that may be more or less formalized. Once learned and shared by members of a group, this assemblage serves, both subjectively and symbolically, to construct these individuals both collectively and distinctly⁶. As such, teaching and propagating culture entails coming together as groups, and being with other individuals. Confinement has revealed the pertinence of reflecting upon this.

According to Ana Mae Barbosa, every human being is capable, through art, of re-establishing its ties with society.⁷ The importance of art as a means of development and social change need not be debated, therefore, nor is the key role of artistic and cultural consumption during this period of confinement⁸.

Creativity is one of the five key competencies that have been identified as essential in the 21st century, along with critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving and informatics thinking⁹. While creativity may be acquired through a variety of means, research reveals that education, practice and the consumption of arts and culture are directly linked to the development of this competency¹⁰.

To conclude, we would like to draw from insight shared by Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the emeritus conductor and artistic director: When the possibility of experiencing a live performance no longer exists, seeking alternative solutions for disseminating culture is far better than silence. We must be creative. Surely every individual has this

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⁵ Guy Rocher is a sociologist and Professor of Social Sciences at the University of Montréal, as well as a member of the Centre for research in public law.
⁷ Barbosa, A. M. (2002). La reconstrucción social a través del arte. PERSPECTIVAS Revista trimestral de educación comparada. (124), 104-110
faculty, but during these trying times, we must pool our ideas together, because it is only as a collective that we will be able to start anew.\textsuperscript{11}

Now is the time, therefore, for governments to encourage this creativity, to mobilize populations around art and culture in order to provide them with a sense of collective solace, of being united in a common endeavour and affirmation of cultural identity. We salute the actions of Louis Morissette and Benoît Fréchette, and their virtual concert hall, Yoop\textsuperscript{12}. We also acknowledge the efforts of the Metropolitain Orchestra\textsuperscript{13}, of the Montreal Symphonic Orchestra\textsuperscript{14} and of the street theatres\textsuperscript{15} to bring culture to people’s home through virtual channels. Not all of these cultural activities enjoy the same level of funding, therefore more needs to be done to support them. Our new, post COVID-19 reality will alter how communities relate to each other and redefine tourism. Nationalism will also likely increase, and it is our belief at the Canadian Research Institute on Humanitarian Crises and Aid, that in light of these preliminary findings, we must more than ever invest in the arts and culture.

\textsuperscript{12} https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1695620/louis-morissette-spectacle-espace-yoop-coronavirus
\textsuperscript{13} https://orchestremetropolitain.com/fr/concerts/lom-a-la-maison/
\textsuperscript{14} https://www.osm.ca/fr/écouter-et-visionner/?gclid=CjwKCAjwwMn1BRAUEiwAZ_jnEoPINUE5t-fGV301m2u2gHuDT_Sec_4X9Kg4Vh0tXeZbcTKqE__9RoCqEQAVD_BwE
\textsuperscript{15} https://www.omhm.qc.ca/fr/actualites/une-sortie-au-theatre-pour-les-aines-sur-leur-balcon