

The future of culture post COVID-19 in France

Jack Lang

Former Minister of Culture, France, and President of the Institut du Monde Arabe

The pandemic has brought about severe challenges to the renowned arts and culture sector in France. Given the economic and social significance of the sector, the author argues that a “New Deal”, similar to what was implemented in the United States of America during the Great Depression, is needed to support the sector through the current crisis, and that countries must continue to commit to cultural exchange in the face of such adversity.

The health crisis due to the COVID-19 virus and the resulting lockdown have hit the cultural sphere hard in France and in all other countries. Performance venues, museums, bookstores, cinemas, and other cultural institutions were closed. As cultural life revolves around coming together, to deprive it of its core is to take away one of its primary sources of funding. The economic, social and political repercussions are considerable.

Culture is economically more important than the automotive industry

According to a survey conducted in July 2020 by the Department of Prospective Studies and Statistics at the Ministry of Culture, losses in the cultural sector are estimated at 22.3 billion euros, a 25 per cent decrease from the previous year. In France, cultural activity accounts for 700,000 jobs, far more than the 200,000 jobs in the automotive industry. To that figure, one could also add a good portion of jobs in the tourism industry, or about 900,000 jobs. In terms of Gross Domestic Product, it weighs twice as much as the automotive industry.

Despite this, culture is often seen as an accessory in times of health and economic crises (rising unemployment, poverty, inequalities). I think, however, that it is especially in times of crises that we must affirm loud and clear that culture is a pressing obligation. The artists, with their creativity and inventiveness, have shown how necessary their actions were during the lockdown. They provide an inexhaustible source of motivation, inventiveness, happiness, generosity, new encounters, and discoveries. By working around the constraints of confinement, notably through new technologies, they have made access to all kinds of creation available for a majority of people. Through the use of online broadcasting and social networks, they also helped to maintain social bonds among citizens forced into isolation.

As of October 2020, the cultural sphere has not recovered from the detrimental effects of the health crisis and one continues to fear the coming bankruptcies of bookstores, cinemas, theatres, etc. Nevertheless, the cultural sphere is trying to adapt to the new health guidelines and seize new opportunities that are opening up, in particular in the field of new technologies and the digital realm which offer great tools for innovation in practice and improving accessibility for all.

As an economic sector in its own right, culture, like other sectors, needs strong governmental action to support these changes and avoid the looming disaster. Tens of thousands of places all over the French territory—such as bookstores, museums, theatres, cinemas, libraries—risk closure if the state does not implement the necessary means and actions. This economic and cultural issue is also a real political issue because culture is essential for societal cohesion, considering how societies are divided today. As Jean Vilar—French actor and theatre director of great importance and fame in France—said, “Theatre is therefore, first and foremost, a public

service. Just like gas, water and electricity.” This vision applies to all cultural sectors.

While digital technology is one of the solutions available in the world of culture, it is of concern that many museums are turning to tech giants such as Google to digitise their collections, and producing virtual tours of their exhibitions with tech giants.

France and Europe must promote the emergence of French or European companies. In addition, they should create a set of rules to regulate and prevent these companies from dominating and controlling activities of which freedom of creation is at its core.

Culture has always been an essential component of French public policy. Through soft diplomacy, French culture has acquired a reputation and significant influence on the international stage.

To tackle the consequences of the pandemic, several measures have been taken by the French government, such as a “blank year” for the *intermittents du spectacle* (part-time workers in the entertainment industry with a specific status in France) which gives them access to unemployment benefits, as well as the creation of a temporary compensation fund for TV series and film shoots. In total, five billion euros were allocated to the culture and media industry. In addition, a recovery plan of two billion euros was launched in September 2020.

But the cultural sector remains under threat, especially with the resurgence of the pandemic and the strengthening of the sanitary measures. Only a real “New Deal” will be able to save businesses and cultural institutions, and provide the country with the capacity to rebound.

A New Deal for culture

This New Deal for culture must be implemented, as President Roosevelt of the United States did in 1929 during the Great Depression, to provide adequate support for artistic and cultural creation¹. Approximately 7,000 writers, 16,000 musicians, 13,000 actors were employed by state-supported initiatives. For example, a Federal Theatre was created and public commissions from painters like Rothko, Pollock, De Kooning multiplied. It was truly thanks to this New Deal that the triumphant rise of the United States on the world cultural scene was made possible.

This French New Deal for culture would be beneficial for artists and creators, and for society as a whole. As in 1929, misfortune can pave a way for happiness. In the history of France, moments of reinvention in the arts, knowledge and research often coincided with periods of rupture: the Popular Front in 1936, the Liberation in 1944, the birth of the Fifth Republic with De Gaulle and Malraux in 1958 and the election of François Mitterrand in 1981. The 2020 pandemic opens a rupture of this nature. It necessitates a committed effort to this cultural New Deal.

Culture can help to tackle social divides and re-create connections among French citizens. It is necessary to invest in associations, cultural centres, local organisations and all sorts of initiatives, by encouraging local authorities to formulate public policies adapted to local needs.

One of the priorities of this plan would be to invest significantly in the arts within schools and to breathe new life into creativity. This is especially among young people in schools all over the country, with the help of artists-in-residency

programmes. This way, we would be able to help artists and at the same time, develop the creativity of young people.

Recreating links between societies

Culture not only creates links within one society, it also helps to build bridges and develop greater understanding among people and cultures around the world. Temporary border closures and lockdowns must not lead to a withdrawal into oneself and from others. This is why exchanges between countries, particularly cultural exchanges, are essential.

It is with this mindset that the exhibition *Once Upon a Time, the Orient Express*, initiated by the Arab World Institute (IMA), will be coming to Singapore in December 2020. The exhibition was first organised by the IMA in Paris in 2014 and is now initiating its international tour with Singapore.

This achievement is a real feat because it was necessary to maintain the fervour of the teams and good understanding between all the partners, to bring together the works that will travel from France to Singapore, to restore the locomotive

the cars of the *Compagnie internationale des wagons-lits* and to ship these historic monuments on wheels, weighing more than 200 tonnes, over a distance of 11,000 km for 45 days. All of this took place in the midst of a period of lockdown and restriction measures on international trade and travel and accompanied by threats on contractual commitments and financing!

This exhibition is a three-fold adventure. Firstly, it is a technological and industrial one, as the railway network enabled the promotion, generosity and universalism of the end of the 19th century. It is also artistic and cultural, as the railway network was at the heart of French and Middle Eastern relations that were forged between 1880 and 1970. Finally, it is an intellectual adventure, because the technological advance of the railways made it possible to facilitate exchanges, in particular the exchanges between people, as embodied in the figure of Abdelkader ibn Muhieddine who, thanks to the train, was able to interact with Christians of Damascus, whom he defended against the intolerance and discrimination they faced at the time.

This moment will therefore be the occasion for great rapprochements between France, Singapore, and the Arab world. This project will show that cultural commitment is one of the most beautiful indicators of personal and collective resilience in the face of adversity.

About the Author



Prominent cultural figure Jack Lang was formerly Minister of Culture (1981-1986, 1988-1993) and Minister of Education (1992-1993, 2000-2002) in France. He had also held various other positions, such as Dean of the Law Faculty at Nancy-Université's Law Faculty, director of International University Theatre Festival in Nancy, director of Chaillot National Theatre, Mayor of Blois, Professor of Law at Paris X-Nanterre University, President of the Foreign Affairs Commission of France's National Assembly, President of the Jury at the Berlin International Film Festival and head of Milan's Piccolo Theatre. In 2013, French President Francois Hollande appointed him President of Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) in Paris. Jack Lang has authored various reference books and articles.

Notes:

1. The New Deal was a series of public programmes and projects enacted in the United States of America during the Great Depression to help mitigate the impact of the financial crisis.