German artists, cultural institutions fight for survival in COVID-19 crisis

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Germany's theatres, cinemas and museums have been closed for the month of November as the rate of new coronavirus cases soars, due to the coalition government's policy of ensuring that schools, businesses and industries remain open. Many of Germany's cultural institutions and artists fear bankruptcy and destitution as the COVID-19 crisis deepens and the government refuses to allocate adequate funding.

The second shutdown of Germany's cultural landscape has hit the country's relatively large community of independent and freelance artists and musicians hardest. Even before the pandemic, many were already living at the edge of subsistence. Now, they have been stripped of any income as concerts, exhibitions, art and film festivals have been cancelled and clubs shut down. Deprived of any regular income, they remain confronted with bills for rent, electricity, health insurance and living expenses for themselves and their families.

Following the lifting of the country's first lockdown in March, theatres, cinemas and museums reopened, but with health-related restrictions limiting the number of visitors. In major cities such as Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt-Main, cultural activity depends heavily on tourism, which also came to a virtual halt over the summer.

Due to the health crisis, large numbers of workers in every branch of industry either lost their jobs altogether or were placed on short-time working, with a corresponding loss of wages. As a result, according to one poll, almost two-thirds (64 percent) of Germans reported spending less this year on cultural events. The travel industry and gastronomy (both 57 percent) were also heavily affected.

In the initial stage of the coronavirus crisis, and following the lockdown in March, the German coalition government provided essentially unlimited sums of cash to big business and the banks, in what Finance Minister Olaf Scholz (Social Democratic Party, SPD) termed a "bazooka" and a "big bang." Artists and the self-employed, on the other hand, were allocated a pittance.

The latter, except in the case of a few programmes provided by individual German states, were only allowed to apply for limited funding depending on their ability to prove previous business expenses. No allowance was made for living costs, meaning that many cultural workers were denied any adequate compensation for their loss of income.

To give an example of the class character of the German government's generosity: in the spring of this year, one single concern, the country's national airline, Lufthansa, alone received a total of €9 billion (US$10.7 billion) from the government. At the same time, in most of the German federal states basically nothing was provided for the arts and artists. In Berlin self-employed artists and freelancers could apply for the one-time sum of €5,000 (US$5,929)—but not even that was provided to everyone.

In petitions and open letters, artists gave vent to their anger. In an open letter, world-famous violinists Anne-Sophie Mutter and Lisa Batiashvili, conductors Christian Thielemann and Thomas Hengelbrock, and opera singers René Pape and Matthias Goerne asked, also on behalf of lesser-known artists, "Are we only popular when times are rosy?" They demanded "to put artists in a position to bridge the next eight, nine, maybe even twelve months without slipping into unintentional and undeserved misery, into total depression."

That's not what the government did, and now—following the latest partial lockdown—the situation is even worse. While the government estimates that the country's cultural and entertainment industries could lose up to €28 billion in revenue, its latest "New Start in Culture" (*Neustart Kultur*) programme envisages providing the entirely inadequate sum of €1 billion for arts and culture. One quarter of this amount is earmarked for cultural institutions whose operation is not predominantly financed by the public sector, and less than half a billion has been allocated to provide compensation for workers in the cultural sector.

Just how little reach this programme has for individual artists can be seen in the ratio of the number of applicants to the number of scholarships awarded. In the programme for "visual artists," for example, out of 5,602 applications, only 675 scholarships were awarded. According to the programme, the money was not intended as "economic aid," but was awarded on the basis of performance-oriented criteria of supposed "artistic quality," independent of the applicants' initial financial situation, and is therefore completely unsuitable for providing substantial support to artists in financial need.

Various federal states have also promoted widely published

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initiatives and scholarships for the arts, which in reality amount to a drop in a bucket and will do nothing to alleviate the plight of cultural workers. In August, the Berlin Senate launched "Special Scholarship Programmes for Berlin Artists" to assist musicians, composers, dancers, actors, curators, authors and visual artists. Out of 8,075 applications, only 1,995 received scholarships, also independent of the financial situation of all applicants.

Commenting on the Berlin programme, the Professional Association of Visual Artists Berlin (bbk berlin) insisted there had been "More losers than winners." And it criticised the government's "New Start in Culture" programme for ignoring the needs of artists in favour of "promoting an elite."

Deprived of any type of income, tens of thousands of artists are being forced to apply for the state's miserly Hartz IV social welfare payments. Instead of properly compensating cultural workers, the SDP in the German coalition government proposes to "simplify" the application process for Hartz IV payments.

In a press release titled "The SPD sets a Hartz IV trap" issued at the start of this month, bbk berlin denounced the SPD's opposition to proposals for adequate "bridging assistance" for artists and its advocacy instead of Hartz IV unemployment payments.

Addressing the first secretary of the SPD parliamentary group, Carsten Schneider, the bbk press release observes, "No, Mr. Schneider, no, ladies and gentlemen of the SPD, it is not about further aggravation of the already notorious 'simplified access' to unemployment benefit II. Artists as well as other single, self-employed persons whose professional existence is threatened by the coronavirus episodes are not unemployed. They are gainfully employed. Therefore they do not require social welfare benefits."

The press release argues for "unbureaucratic, accessible programmes to enable artists to maintain their professional existence through the pandemic crisis," and continues: "What they need—and what society as a whole needs—is equal treatment of self-employed workers…if we do not want to stand in the ruins of the cultural landscape in Germany after the coronavirus crisis."

In addition to the individual artists and cultural workers affected, the current crisis is also hitting the country's leading theatres and opera houses. One of Germany's leading theatre directors, Thomas Ostermeier (Berliner Schaubühne), reports that, despite declining incomes, many citizens have expressed their concern for the state of culture in Germany and eagerly await a return to theatres, cinemas and opera houses.

In an interview with *Die Zeit*, Ostermeier also pointed to the international ramifications of the crisis for touring companies. "Before the pandemic," he explained, "we visited around twenty countries each year, bringing in around two and a half million euros. I know from our partner stages in New York, London, Paris and in faraway Asia that the pandemic is wreaking massive financial havoc on them, especially in the USA and the UK. The National Theatre in London has had to lay off a third of its staff, and the theatres in New York are unlikely to open their doors before autumn 2021. The Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Armory Theatre are threatened in their existence because their sponsors are also struggling with economic problems."

The overwhelming majority of artists and cultural institutions in Germany fully accept the need for protective and lockdown measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, anger and protests are growing at the failure of the government to protect the arts.

Last week, numerous musical ensembles and opera houses, including the Munich Philharmonic, the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Bavarian State Opera and the Staatskapelle Berlin, took part in a video action "20 Minutes of silence" (hashtag #sangundklanglos) aimed at stressing the social implications of orchestras and ensembles forced into silence.

One of Germany's leading musicians, trumpet player Till Brönner, posted a video recently expressing his ire over the government's failure to support musicians and artists. When asked what made him so angry, Brönner responded: "I'm furious that since February, I—along with very many others—have had to watch how the government of Germany, the government of a cultural nation, apparently doesn't think at all about the life and professional reality of artists."

In particular, Brönner objects to the government's degradation of the arts and culture to the "leisure economy," which must subordinate itself to the "real economy." The danger that Brönner and other artists raise is that the government will use the present crisis to drastically reduce spending on the arts to free up even more funds for big business, the banks and the military.

In a recent Perspective defending the outstanding pianist Igor Levit against anti-Semitic attacks, we quoted from Leon Trotsky's famous essay "Art and Politics in Our Epoch" (1938): "Art can neither escape the crisis nor partition itself off. Art cannot save itself. It will rot away inevitably—as Grecian art rotted beneath the ruins of a culture founded on slavery—unless present-day society is able to rebuild itself. This task is essentially revolutionary in character."

And we stressed: "These words resonate powerfully today, as the pandemic and the crisis of world capitalism have thrown the very survival of major cultural institutions and countless artists into question, while the bourgeoisie is moving to dismantle all remaining social, democratic and cultural rights of the working class."

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