British government's pandemic response threatens art and culture

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Britain faces the possible loss of its enormous artistic heritage through the philistinism of the ruling class. It is a cultural crime that demands a political answer from the working class. The ruling class is no longer capable of any defence of culture.

The crisis has come to a head during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's second lockdown halted the partial resumption of performances, which his government had insisted would rescue the arts from looming disaster and showed the absence of any safety net for the arts or their creators.

When the government belatedly imposed its first lockdown, performers were among the last to be offered any financial support. That lockdown was lifted prematurely to bail out businesses. Commercially the government wanted venues reopened, as their tokenistic and long-delayed Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF) showed, but it was clear this could not be done safely.

The government has shown a complete disregard for artists, who have struggled conscientiously with the implications of coronavirus. This was not simply commercial: the virus poses particular health challenges for singers and actors.

The premature lifting of the first lockdown endangered the whole population. A surge in infection was inevitable. The resulting second lockdown halted even the performances that had resumed, whilst casting doubt on others.

Ed Lay, of the band Editors, spoke for many artists when he told the *World Socialist Web Site*, he thought it might be "the beginning of the end for my career." Liz Rossi, a classical violinist, told us she had worked only four full days as a player since March 17.

Actor and director Samuel West, of lobbying group the National Campaign for the Arts (NCA), has said live performance is "in a fight for its very existence," but the crisis affects all forms of culture. A survey of museums and art galleries reported 60 percent of respondents seeing this situation as an existential threat. Many museums, struggling with the loss of local funding, face uncertainty, and some are already discussing selling parts of their collections.

In September, Chancellor Rishi Sunak presented the Jobs Support Scheme (JSS), another bailout for big corporations, as a wage top-up to protect "viable" jobs.

Discussing job losses last month, Sunak made clear that he did not regard arts jobs as viable. Pressed on the lack of work for many artists under the present circumstances, Sunak said everyone had to "find ways to adapt and adjust to the new reality… And that is why we're allowing that to happen but also providing new opportunity for people if that is the right vehicle for them."

Sunak said, "I can't pretend that everyone can do exactly the same job that they were doing at the beginning of this crisis."

The following week, as the first grants from the £1.57 billion CRF were about to be announced, his message was hammered home by the circulation of a 2019 advert encouraging training in cyber and tech security. A photograph of a ballerina was captioned, "Fatima's next job could be in cyber (she just doesn't know it yet): Rethink. Reskill. Reboot."

The response from artists was so furious that even Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden had to admit the advert was "crass." It was swiftly withdrawn, but it reflects accurately their attitude.

The initial wage furlough scheme made no provision for self-employed and freelance workers, who make up the bulk of arts workers. When the government did eventually introduce its Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS), many artists did not benefit. The Musicians' Union (MU) estimates that 38 percent of musicians are not eligible for SEISS support.

Eligibility for the JSS top-up was made conditional on being able to work one-third of normal hours. This could not apply to industries still shut down, or unable to employ workers for the immediate future, like theatres. Soprano Louise Alder tweeted, "I cannot currently work in the UK because my industry doesn't exist… In Germany I am 'viable'."

Even where SEISS has been available to performers, it is barely a lifeline. The first SEISS grant offered 80 percent of three months' profits. Unlike the wage furlough, there is no employer to contribute the balance. The second grant provided 70 percent of profit up to August, with nothing for September and October. From next month it will resume at 20 percent.

The average musician's wage in Britain is £23,059, below the overall national average of £29,832. Under SEISS this would mean an income for 2020 of just £4,600. Musicians still have to prioritise bills relating to instrument loans, maintenance

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and insurance ahead of other costs.

Musicians report already living off savings. An MU survey reported 87 percent of respondents will face financial hardship when the support schemes end. Around 70 percent of musicians cannot now undertake more than a quarter of their usual work. One third are contemplating leaving the profession.

Musicians are predicted to lose 65 percent of income this year, rising to 80 percent for those most dependent on live performance and studio work. Losing 65 percent of a £23,059 wage leaves an income of £8,070.

Dowden's CRF was directed at venues, but it will be impossible to reconstruct an orchestra if its musicians have been forced out of the profession. This is not a logistical question, but one of culture itself.

The CRF reflected the ruling class's attitude that the arts are a commercial numbers game. Over the last decade the Treasury's arts budget has been cut to two-thirds of its 2010 level. The axing of subsidies has left arts organisations dependent on ticket sales, venue hire, and food and drink income.

To avoid complete disappearance, venues have tried to work within these constraints. Most UK venues with producing companies earn around 85 percent of their running costs and receive 15 percent or less in government money.

The financial requirement to play to 80-90 percent capacity means they cannot afford socially distanced opening.

The arts are now being killed off by the legacy of those cuts. In West's words, "Doing the very thing the sector was asked do is what has brought it to its knees."

The British ruling class may outstrip its international rivals in philistinism, but it is a difference of degree, not of kind. The OECD reports that cultural and creative sectors are among the most affected across its regions, with jobs at risk reaching up 5.5 percent of employment in some places.

Germany has a similar legacy of enforced privatisation and austerity budgeting for the arts. That its pandemic subsidies are seen by the NCA as relatively attractive is a further shocking indictment of the criminality of the British response.

The smaller the venue, the sharper the crisis. Small venues are vital in nurturing emerging artists and allowing experimental and non-commercial performances. Some fringe theatres—most recently the Bridge House in south London—have already closed. Thirty music venues are reported to be at risk of imminent, permanent closure. Some received nothing from the CRF. Others received insufficient funding to ensure their survival.

Under conditions of economic crisis, the bourgeoisie reveals itself as increasingly philistine. It is little concerned with culture, looking only to the commercially viable and the high arts, but even these will struggle without any plan for socially distanced and safe venues.

The Royal Shakespeare Company has suspended indoor performances at two Stratford theatres until 2022. It will reopen the third next year, but 158 jobs are at risk.

What is in peril is not just an artistic culture of performance, although this is no small thing. Actors have worked with streaming projects, but the experience of live performance, of seeing an artwork in the flesh rather than onscreen, is a vital part of the cultural development of society.

It also requires training and cultivation, which is directly threatened. The Department for Education last month announced it would not provide any bursaries for trainee art and design teachers for 2021-22.

We cannot yet know when it will be safe to reopen venues. This demonstrates the need for thinking ahead, for elaborating advance policies that will ensure the survival and development of art and culture. These in turn must be fully funded.

The safety of artists and audiences must be ensured. For venues to open with appropriate social distancing, when safe to do so, means supporting artists in the meantime. To ensure that small venues can open with appropriate social distancing means taking responsibility for arts and culture outside the government's commercial boorishness.

Billions must be made available in support as part of an organised funding of all social measures. This requires the establishment of workers' ownership and democratic control of the major banks and corporations.

This crisis has threatened the very survival of cultural institutions and artists, while the bourgeoisie is moving to dismantle all the social, democratic and cultural rights of the working class.

As Trotsky wrote in 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."

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