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Impact of the 2020 crises on the arts and culture in the United States: The effect of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement in historical context

Stanley N. Katz* and Leah Reisman

Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, United States

*Corresponding author. Email: snkatz@princeton.edu

Abstract

This article discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement on the arts and cultural sector in the United States, placing the 2020 crises in the context of the United States's historically decentralized approach to supporting the arts and culture. After providing an overview of the United States's private, locally focused history of arts funding, we use this historical lens to analyze the combined effects of the pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement on a single metropolitan area – Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We trace a timeline of key events in the national and local pandemic response and the reaction of the arts community to the Black Lives Matter movement, arguing that the nature of these intersecting responses, and their fallout for the arts and cultural sector, stem directly from weaknesses in the United States's historical approach to administering the arts. We suggest that, in the context of widespread organizational vulnerability caused by the pandemic, the United States's decentralized approach to funding culture also undermines cultural organizations' abilities to respond to issues of public relevance and demonstrate their civic value, threatening these organizations' legitimacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement for social justice have had a profound impact on the arts and cultural sector in the United States and on the artists, culture workers, and organizations that make it up. We will explain in this article that the impact of the pandemic and concurrent Black Lives Matter movement on the arts and cultural sector¹ in the United States must be understood in the context of the particular history of public involvement – or lack thereof – in the arts and culture in the country. The US approach to administering culture is, fundamentally, decentralized, private, and local. Only by analyzing 2020's twin crises in light of the specific vulnerabilities of the US approach to managing culture can we understand their implications for the sector.

In calling the pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement twin crises, we do not intend to suggest that both were equally powerful or had similarly negative effects on the US arts and cultural sector. We show in this article that both crises provoked strong responses in the arts and cultural community in 2020. However, we argue that these two phenomena should be

¹ In this piece, by “arts and cultural sector” and “cultural organizations,” we refer primarily to nonprofit arts and cultural organizations in the United States, ranging from fine arts museums and symphonies to local cultural and humanities-focused groups.

considered together due to their intertwined and overlapping effects. We argue that the pandemic has had a widespread negative effect on cultural organizations and that the decentralized and locally focused nature of pandemic relief efforts for culture in the United States matches the country's historical approach to culture; it is neither the concern nor the responsibility of the federal government. However, the local governments and private funders on whom cultural organizations typically depend are themselves unable to support the arts and cultural sector economically during a sustained crisis – a marked difference from previous downturns. We suggest that these dynamics have hindered cultural organizations' abilities to implement racial equity commitments made in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and, simultaneously, have perpetuated some of the same unequal dynamics that in part led to reckonings in cultural organizations that were catalyzed by Black Lives Matter. As such, the sector faces a diminished ability to respond to issues of public pressure and relevance (of which the Black Lives Matter movement is an example), a key component of demonstrating civic value. We suggest that the combined effects of these crises have dire consequences for arts workers, cultural organizations, and the arts and cultural sector more generally.

In what follows, we first offer an historical analysis of the United States's decentralized, locally focused approach to supporting the arts and culture, positing this history as key to understanding the effect of the 2020 crises on the sector. Using the framework for culture that we identify and given its focus on local and regional culture, we then analyze the current crises through an extended case study of a single metropolitan area – Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We trace a timeline of key events in the national and local pandemic response and the reaction of the arts community to the Black Lives Matter movement, arguing that the nature of these intersecting responses, and their fallout for the arts and cultural sector, stem directly from weaknesses in the United States's historical approach to administering the arts.

Culture in the United States: Local, private, and autonomous

Most contemporary nations have a ministry of culture. But if you Google the “US Ministry of Culture,” the first hit you will get is not a US government agency but, rather, the website for a small, recently created, civil society organization, the US Department of Arts and Culture (USDAC): “A people-powered department – a grassroots action network inciting creativity and social imagination to shape a culture of empathy, equity, and belonging.”² The USDAC does not purport to be an official government agency, but this quotation, in fact, is a deliberately ironic comment on the absence of a ministry of culture in the United States.³

Why is it that the United States has no cultural ministry?

“Culture” as a concept is a modern development, but the early United States was nevertheless the site of cultural production. Native American cultural production has a long history, and white Americans' cultural production was well established by the eighteenth century. The emerging arts culture among white Americans included music, painting,

² US Department of Arts and Culture, <https://usdac.us/about> (accessed 22 December 2020).

³ For the most recent call for a US ministry of culture, see Peter Marks, “The Culture Is Ailing: It's Time for a Dr. Fauci for the Arts,” *Washington Post*, 2 December 2020. For a more traditional perspective on the problems that stem from the United States's approach to administering culture, see Joseph Horowitz, “Our Revels Now Are Ended: What the Pandemic Portends for the Performing Arts in America,” *American Scholar*, 7 December 2020.

architecture, crafts, and literature as well as libraries, churches, and other types of cultural institutions. But these were almost all private – that is, non-state – undertakings, though many cultural activities were unavoidably influenced by public actions and policies. By the 1830s, when Alexis de Tocqueville was making his now-famous journeys around the country, he was impressed by the proliferation of cultural activity, which he thought was characteristic of democratic society – practical, utilitarian, and unadorned. American culture, unlike the aristocratic cultures of Europe, Tocqueville contended, was inimical to the fine arts – it was oriented to the common person, not to the elites: “Democratic nations ... will ... cultivate the arts that serve to render life easy in preference to those whose object is to adorn it. They will habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful, and they will require that the beautiful should be useful.”⁴ Tocqueville and many other Europeans contrasted the plainness and utility of American culture with the sophistication and refinement of European culture, which was the result of inherited wealth and fine arts traditions. In Europe, culture was the product of monarchy, aristocracy, the church, wealth, and tradition. None of these was thought to be characteristic of, or necessary for, democracy.

Such broad generalizations mask the complexity and diversity of people and culture in both Europe and America, to be sure, and elide long-standing inequalities in the people and types of work considered under the category of art in the early United States. However, they nevertheless reflect in a general way how Americans – at least white Americans of British descent – thought about what they were doing.⁵ They tended to pride themselves on individual and local autonomy and to feel that the federal government constituted a problem for culture, not an opportunity. The framers of our government imagined that culture, like the rest of ordinary life and almost all of local life, should be reserved for the people in their localities.

Thus, as formal national governmental institutions emerged in the nineteenth-century United States, analysts could consider none of them to be an explicitly cultural institution. The primary possible exception is what is now known as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. The Smithsonian resulted from a bequest from the British scientist James Smithson, who specified that it should be dedicated to “the increase and diffusion of knowledge,” and it came formally into existence in 1846. It was originally named the United States National Museum, and it now comprises a sizeable complex of museums and libraries of all kinds as well as research institutions. Although it continues to draw upon the original Smithson endowment, the Smithsonian Institution’s current annual \$1 billion budget is primarily supported by congressional appropriations. The Smithsonian has also begun to raise significant private sector funding. But it is fair to guess that, without the stimulus of the Smithson gift, Congress would never have established any cultural institution of this sort. And, by and large, American national cultural policy has been to have no public cultural policy.

For a variety of reasons, however, various federal cultural institutions were ultimately established, but, importantly, for a variety of different reasons rather than for a single purpose, focusing on preservation and dissemination of knowledge and history rather than on the arts and culture. The first, other than the Smithsonian, was the Library of Congress, though it had a very circumscribed purpose at its inception. The Congress had maintained a small library for the use of its members from the earliest days of the republic, but the first appropriation explicitly for that purpose was made in 1800, when the national capital was established in Washington, DC. The initial library was burned by the British during the War of 1812, but an appropriation of \$5,000 was made in 1815 to reestablish the library (and

⁴ De Tocqueville (1835) 1948, 2:50.

⁵ Braziller 1966.

purchase the private library of Thomas Jefferson). Representative Daniel Webster of New Hampshire wanted Congress to return “all books of an atheistical, irreligious, and immoral tendency,” in a forewarning of the perils of congressional support of culture. Although the primary purpose of the library was to inform national legislators, the Library of Congress much later emerged as the de facto national library of the United States and the sponsor of a wide range of cultural activity. Congress continues to provide the bulk of annual financial support, although in recent decades the library has succeeded in attracting substantial private donations. In contrast to the national libraries in most other countries in the global North, however, it is not functionally a “national” library – it is a national deposit library, but it does not set collections or other policies for the libraries of the United States.

For the first century and a half of the United States’s national existence, the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress (along with the National Gallery) comprised the totality of our federal cultural institutions. But they were separate entities since the United States had no mechanism for the federal supervision of culture. Importantly, there was also no public call for a federal cultural policy. It is probably fair to say that the production and regulation of culture was not considered the responsibility of the federal government, which, in any case, had no clearly delegated constitutional power to manage cultural activity. But the Great Depression of the early 1930s changed the situation since many Americans of that era accepted a radical expansion of federal activity as an appropriate response – in the form of the New Deal – to the terrifying economic conditions of the time. To be sure, the intervention of New Deal programs in arts and culture were less a deliberate attempt at federal intervention into the cultural sector than they were economic and employment programs. In an attempt to put people back to work, the Works Progress Administration initiated the Federal Art Project (1935–43) in order to create community art centers and to employ artists, including both white artists and artists of color, to produce paintings, murals, sculpture, and other forms of visual art. The Works Progress Administration similarly funded work by writers, musicians, and other cultural creators. Notably, though funded and supervised by the federal government, these projects were, by and large, locally and regionally focused and specific. Additionally, all of these New Deal projects came to an end in the early years of World War II as the United States recovered a healthy economy and Americans went back to work, or to war.⁶

The American public was prepared to accept the federal government’s subsidy of the arts as appropriate economic policy but not as cultural policy. It was not until the dramatically expanded notion of federal government authority in President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society that the country undertook responsibility for funding explicitly cultural programs. Congressional legislation in 1965 created both the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), whose mandates were to provide funding for the promotion of cultural work in the arts and humanities. Despite their titles, however, neither organization was truly “endowed” (possessed of significant capital invested in perpetuity, with only annual income devoted to expenditure). Each organization was dependent upon annual congressional appropriations, and, even today, Congress only modestly financially supports the two endowments. While the creation of these agencies marked a turning point in federal involvement in the arts and culture, their dependence on annual appropriations has rendered the endowments vulnerable to political controversy, and, indeed, from time to time (Republican) presidents and politicians have threatened to terminate the endowments by cutting off funding entirely.

The so-called “Culture War” of the early 1990s pitted political conservatives, who contended that the federal government had no power to support cultural activity (in the

⁶ Katznelson 2013.

context of arguments about what art was appropriate for government support), against liberals who defended it. The practical results were to restrict levels of congressional funding for both endowments and to limit the range of arts and humanities programming in an attempt to avoid what some Americans considered “radical” artistic and cultural activity. Probably the most important change was to mandate that a significant proportion of funding by the endowments be diverted to state-based councils of arts and humanities so as to limit the amount of funding available to the centrally located national endowments. This was consistent with the emerging view that if government is to fund culture, funding (and cultural planning) ought to be done as locally as possible. In recent years, Congress has been funding each of the endowments at about \$150 million per annum, which are obviously sums far less than those provided by most European nations for the support of the arts and humanities. Despite the fact that every recent Republican president has recommended defunding the endowments, Congress has consistently continued its modest funding, primarily because so much of the funding for the national endowments is now automatically transferred to state councils and thus benefits nearly every congressional district in the United States. This is really more like cultural pork-barrel politics than an attempt to manage cultural policies.⁷

Another congressional program that bears on cultural policy is support for radio and television. Here, the United States has famously preferred the market model for broadcasting, in contrast to the state-sponsored model in the United Kingdom (and similar approaches in Europe). In the broadcasting space, unlike the space for “high” culture, the federal government has clear authority to regulate “interstate commerce,” which is how commercial radio came to think of itself, and this was also the case for television when it began to develop fully in the late 1940s. The Radio Act of 1927 was the first modern federal regulatory scheme, later developed in the Communications Act of 1934, which also created the Federal Communications Commission. The federal government proceeded to develop policies to regulate broadcast communications, though, in the United States, these were always subservient to the broadly permissive free speech mandate of the First Amendment of the Constitution.

For many years, the federal government avoided even indirect support of broadcasting, until, in 1967, a Public Broadcasting Act created the current US public broadcast system, with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and the National Public Radio (NPR). The CPB is publicly funded, but it does not provide any actual programming; PBS is a nonprofit whose members are the public broadcasting stations of the nation; NPR is a radio-producing agency, supported by local stations and the listening public. Thus, public broadcasting is an example of our mixed market/nonprofit system – it was proposed by a private philanthropic foundation, and it is supported by minimal (though crucial) federal funds and voluntary charitable contributions from listeners, philanthropic foundations, and other sources. Most Americans will recognize the repetitive fundraising drives on their local NPR stations, and the equally repetitive thanks from the stations to “listeners like you.” In most other countries, however, broadcasting is a state function, supported by taxes or user fees; in the United States, broadcasting is mostly market driven, with a very small “public” sector supported by philanthropy.

The contemporary situation of radio and television is a characteristically American cultural response to the question of how to produce culture in a democratic society. Our deepest political tradition teaches that the state has a natural tendency to be the enemy of society and, therefore, that state control of culture is particularly threatening to individual

⁷ Indeed, the National Endowment for the Arts, from its founding moment, asserted that its aims did not include making cultural policy.

freedom. Our earliest, republican, instinct was that culture was best left to local communities. By the early nineteenth century, some Americans came to think that market solutions were the best defense against the growth of state power, and the attitude developed that some combination of local self-determination and market solutions were the safest modes for democratic decision making (apart from clearly political questions). These background, frequently unspoken, political assumptions generally dominated American cultural life until the era of the New Deal.⁸

Fortunately, de Tocqueville's prediction that the bourgeois origins of American society would lead to mass, utilitarian, and mundane artistic production has proved to be quite wrong. He imagined that American craftsmen

rarely have an opportunity of showing what they can do; they are scrupulously sparing of their powers; they remain in a state of accomplished mediocrity, which judges itself, and though well able to shoot beyond the mark before it, aims only at what it hits. In aristocracies, on the contrary, workmen always do all they can; and when they stop, it is because they have reached the limit of their art.⁹

Of course, de Tocqueville misunderstood the situation, possibly because he could not have known that the United States would produce a plutocracy that created the same incentives for the production of high culture as the aristocracy had done in his day. But the more interesting observation is that the United States has proved to be such a congenial environment for the production of cultural goods of all kinds and in remarkable quantities, from world class museums of European and American art to grassroots cultural festivals, theater groups, and collectives (though the relative value and resources allotted to the cultural production of different groups varies wildly). How has this been possible in a nation that has refused, as a matter of principle, to establish a cultural policy?

The short answer is that, from the earliest days of the republic, Americans have mainly relied upon local and private initiative to produce culture. For the most part, Americans have never viewed it as the responsibility of the state to create the objects and behaviors that constitute culture nor have they identified the national state with culture. Our emphasis has been on individuals and localities. This has meant that financial support for arts and culture has not ordinarily come from the public fisc or at least not to any great extent. The organizations that produce culture have been supported through earned income (the sale of tickets or art objects) or by charitable giving. Our cultural activity is thus the product of a distinctively American mixture of market and charitable incentives. We are a nation of many different cultures and diverse approaches to the creation of culture. This is because the state, especially the federal government, has had relatively little impact on the content of culture in the United States, but it has also meant that our arts and cultural sector has been unusually exposed to the inequalities built into the market system and the dangers of market failure.¹⁰

Another consequence of our distributed and localized cultural systems is that the United States creates a vast number of very small cultural organizations. Almost every small town has its own dance groups, choruses, and pottery-making clubs, and many larger communities have their own museums and orchestras. The smaller organizations normally receive little or no public financial support, while the larger ones probably receive some municipal funding in addition to earned income and charitable support. But they all exist without

⁸ Balogh 2015; Gerstle 2015; Cowie 2016; Cebul, Geismer, and Williams 2019.

⁹ De Tocqueville 1960, 403.

¹⁰ O'Connor 2009; Rodgers 2011; Zunz 2014; Gerstle, Lichtenstein, and O'Connor 2019.

national cultural planning or substantial state financial support, so that they all need to appeal to their local communities for financial backing.

In the United States, most of these cultural organizations, even many small ones, are legally organized as “nonprofits.” The nonprofit sector has been the major site for cultural production in a society that generally prefers private to public action. This is not the place to analyze the operational significance of the charitable venue for culture in America, but we can pause to note the broad claims that are made for the advantages of the nonprofit character of the American arts and cultural sector: it is separate from, and therefore protected from, both politics and the market; it is unusually diverse and innovative; it tends to be small scale, regionally distributed, and sensitive to local concerns; it is not subject to the bureaucratic imperatives of public agencies. But these advantages come at a cost since the sector: lacks centrally provided public financial resources; finds it hard to develop regional and national approaches; lacks uniformity, national coordination, and standards; and is vulnerable to changes in federal charitable tax policy (such as the diminished scope of the individual charitable deduction in the Trump Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017).¹¹

The potential advantages for individual American cultural organizations situated in the charitable (rather than the public) sector include: the need and opportunity to seek financial support from local citizens, governments, and wealthy donors; separation from most political controversies; and access to both mass giving and philanthropic support. In the American way of supporting culture, therefore, there is a necessary reciprocity between the needs of cultural organizations and the preferences of local donors, and this provides characteristic problems and opportunities. It is a world open to the possibilities of cultural and artistic entrepreneurship. But we need to remind ourselves that many entrepreneurs crash and burn (more of this when we discuss the impact of the pandemic upon cultural organizations in Philadelphia) and that access to resources and opportunity is unequally distributed across the field.¹²

Before concluding this historical review of the evolution of cultural institutions in the United States as particularly small-scale, local nonprofits, we should note that the United States also has large-scale and relatively national-in-scope cultural institutions. Major nonprofit cultural organizations with national impact began to appear in US cities at the end of the nineteenth century. The Metropolitan Museum in New York (1870), the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1879), the Huntington Library in southern California (1919) were all begun and funded by wealthy local families. So were opera houses and opera companies, dance companies, and art galleries. Some of them, like the Metropolitan Museum and the New York Public Library (1895), were situated on public land and partly supported by tax dollars, but they were all substantially (or totally) supported by private charity. These were mostly the products of the *haute bourgeoisie*'s charitable investments, and they became the dominant sites for the production of high culture in America.

Relevant to the contemporary moment, some bourgeois groups used these early, major institutions and the “high culture” they sustained as instruments of class distinction. In Boston, an elite social group created and controlled the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Boston Symphony Orchestra to centralize high art, monopolizing the art form and forging boundaries between high and popular art. To accomplish this, elite entrepreneurs purified programming, professionalized staff, and created norms for interacting with art that were accessible only to elites who had the leisure and resources to cultivate connoisseurship, thus

¹¹ Trump Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, 2 November 2017, 131 Stat. 2054.

¹² Brinkley 1995; Gerstle, Lichtenstein, and O'Connor 2019.

consolidating an elite class and subordinating lower classes.¹³ Taken as a whole, these institutions, along with the later established privately funded film, publishing, and professional sport industries, constituted what are now thought of as the “national” cultural organizations of the United States, along with the few federal cultural institutions that we have already noted. Our point, however, is that even these large cultural organizations were established by individuals in the charitable sector and that they were vastly outnumbered by smaller and more local cultural organizations.

The 2020 crises

With this historical framework as an analytical tool, we turn to an accounting of the twin 2020 crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement – and how they have impacted the arts and cultural sector in the United States. As we write in early 2021, the pandemic is still very much an ongoing event, and no one can be certain when the end will be or what forms it will take. Notably, the pandemic has, in its evolution and impact on the arts and cultural sector in the United States, combined with an additional, concurrent crisis, which was brought on by the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the early summer of 2020. This movement, born in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Black teen Trayvon Martin in 2012, has led to a proliferation of both formal organizations and initiatives focused on anti-racism and Black liberation in the United States as well as recurrent nonviolent mass mobilizations to protest police killings of Black Americans.¹⁴ In the summer of 2020, at least 15 million people across the United States gathered to protest the deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police, touching off a fervor and organizational imperative to address systemic racism that swept the nation. In the wake of widespread social unrest, many cultural institutions were prompted by social and staff pressure to reckon with institutional legacies of racism and exclusion, as they simultaneously grappled with profound financial crisis stemming from the pandemic. These combined crises have produced a moment of widespread uncertainty and flux for the US arts and cultural sector.

As mentioned previously, we do not suggest that the pandemic and Black Lives Matter have had equally strong effects on the arts and cultural sector in the United States. Both crises have caused significant responses from cultural organizations and philanthropic foundations, resulting in changes to discourse, behavior, and, for some funders and cultural organizations, policy. But while the root causes of both crises – the pandemic and systemic racism – continue unabated, the latter is, for some organizations, beginning to lose priority, while the former continues to occupy most cultural organizations’ attention. We argue that this dynamic has been exacerbated by, and can be understood in reference to, the United States’s particular approach to supporting the arts and culture, which we have traced in the preceding pages.

It is important to note, before proceeding with an analysis of the 2020 crises, that these are not the first major crises to affect the arts and cultural sector in recent times. The Great Depression in 1929 was mostly an economic crisis. The depression brought major cultural organizations to a stop for several years, but it also provided the opportunity for a series of new federal cultural initiatives sponsored by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal administration. American society has also encountered serious social disruptions in the years since the end of World War II, but they seem to us very different from the current crises created by a combined social movement and national natural or economic disaster. The turbulence of

¹³ DiMaggio 1982; Tani 2016; Steensland 2018; Kettl 2020.

¹⁴ Ransby 2018.

the Vietnam War years possibly constituted a crisis of that sort, but it stretched out for nearly a decade and had a much more diffuse and distributed impact on American society.

The Great Recession of 2008–9, however, is surely a case in point, at least for the economic component of the current crisis. The Great Recession developed quickly and soon rivaled the Great Depression in the severity of its economic impact across American society. What was initially a housing and real estate bubble exploded into a broad economic disaster that touched almost all aspects of economic and social activity, not least arts and cultural life. Those years began to expose the vulnerability of an arts and cultural sector that was so economically dependent upon both earned income and philanthropy. In a country in which the state, at all levels, contributes so little directly to the support of culture, the weakening of audience demand and the reduction of charitable contributions damaged the careers of individual cultural creators and the viability of cultural institutions, particularly midsize and small ones.¹⁵ There were government bailouts for banks and automobile companies, but not for museums and opera companies. There was a good deal of short-term damage, but, fortunately, federal funding pumped up the economy, and within five years the arts and cultural sector had mostly gotten back on its feet, as evidenced by rebounding asset levels and audiences, among other metrics.¹⁶ But not all institutions survived, at least in their original forms, and not all individuals were able to resume their creative lives. The Great Recession was a frightening moment for the American arts and cultural sector, and it probably should have made us aware of just how vulnerable the sector might be to a larger, longer shock. But the rapid recovery of much of the sector obscured the inherent weaknesses that the 2009 crisis had revealed.

With the effects of the Great Recession as a reference point, we discuss in the remainder of this article the similar contours of the pandemic's effect on cultural organizations and cultural workers in the United States and how this situation has intersected with the Black Lives Matter movement. Given our argument about the fundamentally local nature of the arts and cultural sector in the United States, we turn to the case of a single metropolitan area, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in order to analyze the specific effects of the combined pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement on the arts and cultural sector. A midsize city on the east coast of the United States, Philadelphia, while not as well known for the arts (in contrast to larger cities like Los Angeles and New York), has a robust arts and cultural sector that includes generalist and arts-focused philanthropic funders, large, medium, and many small-sized cultural organizations, and a substantial population of artists. While we do not claim the case of Philadelphia to be generalizable to the United States as a whole, within this local case we can see both the unique vulnerabilities of the US system to crisis and observe the impact and implications of crisis in one particular locality in that system.

The case of Philadelphia

Philadelphia has a rich and vibrant arts and cultural sector. A 2011 Social Impact of the Arts Project census of artists and cultural organizations estimated that the city had at least 1,707 nonprofit cultural organizations, 2,661 commercial cultural organizations, and thousands of resident artists.¹⁷ Consistent with the United States as a whole, the Philadelphia arts and cultural sector primarily comprises small organizations, with a small number of disproportionately large institutions. In a 2014 analysis of 473 cultural groups, the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance found that a small number of large nonprofits commanded an outsized percentage of arts spending in the city. The 25 largest organizations (for example,

¹⁵ Rosenstein et al. 2013.

¹⁶ Rosenstein et al. 2013.

¹⁷ Stern and Seifert 2013.

the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Kimmel Center, a large presenting organization) accounted for 71 percent of organizations' pooled total expenses. By contrast, small organizations represented 52 percent of the population but comprised only 2 percent of expenses.¹⁸

Despite their vibrancy, Philadelphia's cultural organizations are financially vulnerable across the board. A 2009 report found that 70 percent of organizations had weak financial health and were constrained in their ability to survive economic downturns, a finding that spanned organizations of all sizes. The study found that performance-based and audience-reliant organizations were particularly weak, while museums were comparatively stronger in terms of financial health.¹⁹ The Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance's 2014 report came to similar conclusions, finding that two out of every five cultural organizations in the city ran a deficit, a figure that increased to three out of five for very large organizations, arts education-focused organizations, and community cultural organizations. A quarter of organizations owned their space, meaning that the majority were responsible for paying rent as a substantial portion of expenses. As such, Philadelphia's arts and cultural sector largely operates without cash reserves, a situation that has made it vulnerable to crisis.

Corresponding with the decentralized, private nature of support for the arts in the United States, most Philadelphia cultural organizations depend on earned revenue and private contributions for survival. However, Philadelphia has a small funder community – the set of local and regional philanthropic foundations located in, or focused on, the metropolitan area that serve as the backbone of support for the arts and culture in the Philadelphia region. This ad hoc system directly reflects the private, decentralized American approach to the arts and culture. In Philadelphia, many arts workers bemoan less available philanthropic funding, especially for the arts, compared to other cities. This situation has worsened in recent years with the departure of the Annenberg Foundation for Los Angeles, the announced closure of the Lenfest Foundation, and the restructuring of the Pew Charitable Trusts, all funders who had traditionally and substantially subsidized Philadelphia arts.²⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter in the Philadelphia arts and cultural sector

In mid-March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic gained speed, Philadelphia's cultural organizations began to shut their doors. Some did so before Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf's 19 March mandate that all non-life-sustaining businesses must close, while others closed after the mandate. Organizations simultaneously scrambled to find a way forward as their seasons, revenue, and programs suddenly vanished. Some rapidly shifted their focus to online content – the Philadelphia Orchestra cancelled concerts, encouraging patrons to donate the cost of their tickets and offering exchanges for those who did not. The orchestra began offering nightly virtual concerts to audience members, announced via frequent emails. The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (the Penn Museum) directed patrons to digital artifact explorations and educational materials for children, hosted on their website. Other organizations paused their operations, postponing programming until the summer. Many non-arts-specific organizations that had arts and cultural programs shifted their energies away from the arts, instead refocusing efforts on crisis relief. For example, some Latinx-serving organizations shifted arts capacity and staff toward developing food distribution efforts for communities in need. All individuals

¹⁸ Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance 2014.

¹⁹ Allison Crump, Juliana Koo, and Susan Nelson, "Getting Beyond Breakeven: A Review of Capitalization Needs and Challenges of Philadelphia-Area Arts and Culture Organizations." *TDC*, 5 March 2015.

²⁰ Peter Dobrin, "For Phila: Arts, a Shifting Donor Base," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 30 September 2013.

hoped, and many believed, that the crisis would pass quickly and that business as usual would be around the corner. Most exhorted their supporters to make donations to their favored institutions in order to improve their likelihood of survival.

In keeping with the fundamentally local nature of the US arts and cultural sector, relief efforts for the arts and culture in Philadelphia stemmed primarily from area funders. While the US Congress debated stimulus measures, local funders stepped into the void. Funders first focused on organizations that directly served people in need rather than supporting nonprofits themselves to weather the crisis. The Philadelphia COVID-19 fund launched on 19 March. Led by the Philadelphia Foundation (the local community foundation) and the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (the local chapter of a national nonprofit focused on coordinating charitable giving and fund distribution in communities), it was anchored by a leading gift from the William Penn Foundation, one of the small number of major Philadelphia funders of the arts. The fund made grants to organizations that provided relief services to populations affected by the crisis; as such, most cultural organizations were ineligible. Nearly a month later, the COVID-19 Arts Aid Philadelphia fund was launched by a collaborative of funders and city agencies. Created by the city agencies responsible for culture in Philadelphia – the Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy and the Philadelphia Cultural Fund – as well as the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, the fund was again led by the William Penn Foundation, which made a \$2.5 million grant. Other smaller Philadelphia funders, national funders active in the Philadelphia arts, and local corporations and utilities also contributed. While impressive in the breadth of collaboration and laudable in its intention, the fund distributed relatively few total dollars early in the pandemic (\$4 million). The fund reported that all eligible organizations that applied received some funding.

Meanwhile, cultural organizations also applied to national and state relief programs, including arts-focused programs such as the NEH and NEA Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funds, and general organization and business-focused relief programs, such as the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), Small Business Administration loans, and state loan and grant programs. Most of the latter category of programs accepted applications from nonprofits but were not nonprofit specific. Few local cultural organizations received PPP loans in the program's initial round of awards, amidst prevalent accounts of government mismanagement of fund distribution. Reflecting federal agencies' extremely limited role in the nation's arts and cultural sector, NEH and NEA competitions were highly competitive, with only limited funds available. The NEA competition was typically administered via state arts agencies; the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts was awarded just over \$500,000 to disburse to cultural organizations. Announced in mid-June, the handful of Philadelphia NEH recipients were primarily large, prominent organizations, including major universities (the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University), historical societies, and arboretums. These circumstances led to widespread furloughs and layoffs in Philadelphia's cultural organizations, as they exhausted limited or nonexistent reserves with little income on the horizon.²¹

While most relief funding for culture in Philadelphia reflected a national tendency toward local effort and the devolution of federal involvement to the states, an additional infusion of federal PPP loans into struggling organizations in April 2020 represented a stunning, if unique, federal investment in the arts and culture. In this set of PPP loans, many Philadelphia cultural organizations of varying sizes received loans that were forgivable contingent on the rehiring of staff. Organizations rehired their laid-off staff, but some workers expressed displeasure at being compelled to forfeit temporarily expanded

²¹ Preliminary data suggest that this situation was replicated across the country. In a survey conducted by Americans for the Arts, a quarter of cultural organizations reported layoffs, with 40 percent likely to reduce their staff. Americans for the Arts, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Artists and Creative Workers," 4 May 2020.

unemployment benefits for what many suspected might be a short time back to work. For example, at some organizations, staff members did not understand that the institution had no choice but to rehire staff or risk having to repay PPP loans; they believed their employer was purposely compelling them back to work.²²

As organizations pursued new grant and loan programs, many institutional funders also loosened grant requirements for existing grantees, allowing them to direct project-restricted funds to general operating support. This policy was supported by the professional association that supported the region's philanthropic funders, Philanthropy Network Greater Philadelphia. Local consultants also recommended that their clients proactively request such flexibility from institutional funders. This relational aid was a lifeline for many struggling organizations as they leveraged local networks to survive; however, for some it meant that some programs considered ancillary to the organizations' core missions were eliminated. For example, at one prominent presenter, permission from a funder to reallocate project funds to operating expenses led the organization to cut some community engagement programming.²³ As a whole, across Philadelphia, cultural organizations cobbled together a patchwork of support from local entities, existing relationships, and unprecedented federal programs in order to plot a path forward in the pandemic. This situation resulted in difficult decisions and uncertain futures for many organizations, but it also perfectly reflected America's tradition of investment in the arts and culture as decentralized and organic and the lack of sustained federal involvement or policy.

It was in the context of this uncertain and chaotic situation that, at the end of May 2020, Black Lives Matter protests exploded in the wake of George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis at the hands of police. As social unrest and mass protest spread across the United States, some cultural organizations experienced reckonings, catalyzed by the burgeoning social movement and existing tensions between managers and staff traumatized by layoffs. Frontline staff confronted organizational leaders with demands related to past and current concerns about racial equity, gender discrimination, and institutional racism. This led to responses in institutions across the spectrum, including collections removed from view at the Penn Museum,²⁴ conflicts between students, staff, and the board at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts,²⁵ a formal institutional apology from the Philadelphia Museum of Art for insufficient language in a public statement of solidarity,²⁶ and firings and scandal at PlayPenn, an incubator for new plays.²⁷ In response, many organizations made commitments to change their practices to rectify intra-organizational racial inequities. While these commitments varied in concreteness and content, examples of proposed changes included revised staff and board recruitment policies to prioritize people of color, commitments to highlighting and producing the work of artists of color, the development of staff working groups, and proactive outreach to communities of color as partners and potential audiences. However, for some organizations, these reckonings occurred just as organizations cut grant-funded programs aimed at broader community engagement in order to redirect funds to

²² Personal correspondence, 8 August 2020.

²³ Personal correspondence, 16 July 2020.

²⁴ Nora McGreevy, "The Penn Museum Moves Collection of Enslaved People's Skulls into Storage," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 4 August 2020.

²⁵ Max Marin, "PAFA Stands by CEO and Vows Reforms after Black Lives Matter Tensions Go Public," *Billy Penn*, 8 June 2020.

²⁶ Stephan Salisbury, "Philadelphia Art Museum Leaders Apologize for Word Choices in Black Lives Matter Message," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 June 2020.

²⁷ Rob Weinert-Kendt, "What Went Wrong at Philly's PlayPenn?" *American Theatre*, 27 July 2020. Similar reckonings and controversies have occurred in cultural organizations across the country. Peggy McGlone and Sebastian Smee, "Coronavirus Shutdowns and Charges of White Supremacy: American Art Museums Are in Crisis," *Washington Post*, 12 October 2020.

general operating support.²⁸ This fueled staff frustrations, adding to the narrative that powerful cultural organizations regarded community engagement, especially with communities of color, as ancillary to their missions.

Concurrently, on 1 May, the Philadelphia mayor's office released its proposed budget for the coming year. In the context of dramatically increased public spending on food distribution, testing, contact tracing, and other crisis-related initiatives, the budget proposed to eliminate Philadelphia's Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy and, along with it, the Philadelphia Cultural Fund – two of the entities that coordinated the COVID-19 Arts Aid Philadelphia Fund and that served as public cornerstones of support for the arts – especially for small cultural organizations and organizations of color – in Philadelphia. This proposal encountered major community pushback, including an open letter signed by nearly 1,000 arts professionals, which combined demands for reinstated arts funding and calls for reductions in police funding, demonstrating the overlapping nature of the pandemic and Black Lives Matter crises. In the face of public outcry, the mayor's office reinstated the Philadelphia Cultural Fund at \$1 million, which was one-third of its usual budget. However, the Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy was eliminated, making Philadelphia the only major US city without a publicly funded office focused on the arts.

Meanwhile, due to the limitations of federal relief programs, temporarily bailed-out cultural organizations again careened toward crisis. Those that had received PPP loans quickly approached the end of their loan periods, at which time they would need to reopen or lay off staff once again. At nearly the same time, Philadelphia advanced toward an economic restart, entering the phase at which some arts institutions (including museums and libraries) could reopen at 50 percent capacity. Outdoor performances were to be permitted with 50 or fewer attendees, but theaters remained closed and indoor performances prohibited. Many organizations felt reopening was premature and too risky to be successful. Large museums, such as the Penn Museum and Philadelphia Museum of Art chose to delay reopening, while other, smaller organizations such as Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, chose to reopen in order to retain staff and shore up an unclear financial future.

However, scaled-down capacity and public uncertainty meant that revenue for those organizations that reopened was significantly reduced. By early August, for organizations that chose to remain closed, a new round of layoffs, perceived to be more permanent, occurred as PPP loans ended with no new sources of revenue to replace them. Most, if not all, organizations, confronted uncertain financial futures with curtailed local public funding, no additional federal or state support on the horizon, waning philanthropic responses in light of the looming longer-term economic catastrophe, and, for many, ongoing rent obligations. As the temporary relief of uncharacteristic federal investment faded, the vulnerability of the United States's patchwork approach to cultural investment was revealed anew. While local support systems patched holes in the wake of acute crisis, they were insufficient to keep afloat a sector unilaterally affected by ongoing economic depression.²⁹

This situation has produced severe precarity and poses an existential threat to survival for many Philadelphia cultural organizations. Notably, the specifics of the overlapping pandemic and Black Lives Matter crises in Philadelphia, and of organizations' attempts to survive the pandemic, also run the risk of exacerbating the kinds of inequalities in the racial composition of staff, the prioritization of affluent audiences, and access to resources to support artistic work that motivated Black Lives Matter activists' critiques of cultural organizations in the first place. This situation threatens organizations' legitimacy in the

²⁸ Personal correspondence, 16 July 2020.

²⁹ Indeed, this situation was further worsened by an additional round of city-mandated closures of museums beginning in late November 2020.

eyes of the public, and it undermines their ability to respond to issues of public concern and thereby demonstrate and defend their civic value.

In the coming months, organizations will continue to attempt to replace in-person engagement with online content, an unclear proposition rife with assumptions about the public's willingness to participate in (and pay for) online content amidst a large-scale economic downturn. Access to such content, of course, depends on adequate financial resources, technology, and internet access, which is stratified along socioeconomic lines and excludes marginalized communities. This solution thus once again prioritizes affluent arts patrons, reproducing a traditional focus on privileged audiences at the exact moment that organizations have pledged, in the midst of critique, to take steps to dismantle such unequal foci. Additionally, the loss of the Philadelphia Cultural Fund will multiply small and diverse organizations' already increased likelihood of failure, as this agency overwhelmingly funded such organizations. In an analysis of 8,526 grants made to 777 Philadelphia cultural organizations between 1997 and 2011, the Philadelphia Cultural Fund was found to be the sole institutional funder of 129 organizations (17 percent).³⁰ As such, just as 2020's social movement leaders are pushing for increased funding for diverse cultural organizations, public funding for the arts in Philadelphia is trending in the opposite direction.³¹

Financial precarity produced by the pandemic also represents a major barrier to cultural organizations making good on their professed commitments to change toward racial equity, which runs the risk of undermining their legitimacy. Larger organizations and funders are more likely than smaller organizations to survive the economic crisis brought on by the pandemic. However, these organizations may become more, rather than less, insular and traditional in the wake of the crisis. Given flexibility from funders about reallocating grant money earmarked for programming to general operating support, larger organizations may cut experimental programming or programming perceived to be ancillary to their core missions to ensure institutional survival. Correspondingly, some of these organizations face a future with diminished staff confidence, as temporary federal loan programs, combined with emergent and entrenched racial equity concerns, lead staff to feel abandoned and unheard. This situation has been exacerbated for some organizations as they cut grant-funded inclusion-focused programs due to funders' relaxation of requirements and extreme financial need. For others, it has been exacerbated by decisions to delay reopening after federal loans ran out, resulting in layoffs.

Additionally, faced with reduced capacity and very limited possibilities to hire in the near future, organizations are unlikely to be able to act on commitments to increase staff diversity and conduct proactive outreach to communities of color, though some may find creative ways by which to take action on these goals. Across the board, laid-off arts workers face financial disaster, as federally mandated expansions of unemployment benefits expire, with no jobs on the horizon. These layoffs are likely to disproportionately affect staff of color, who are more prevalent in the front-of-house departments that are at higher risk of reduction than in senior management and curatorial roles, potentially decreasing staff diversity in some organizations.³²

As a whole, the pandemic has had a profoundly negative impact on the arts and cultural sector in the United States. This situation exposes the drawbacks of decentralized, characteristically American arts relief efforts. The pandemic and these relief efforts limit cultural organizations' ability to be responsive to public pressures and desires (as expressed through Black Lives Matter-catalyzed critiques of cultural organizations) at the precise moment in which responsiveness and legitimacy may be most critical to organizations' ability to attract individual and institutional support and thus survive.

³⁰ Reisman 2017.

³¹ Notably, the situation is reversed for private philanthropy; we discuss this in more detail in the conclusion.

³² Schonfeld, Westermann, and Sweeney 2015.

Conclusion: Implications for the arts and cultural sector

Cultural organizations in the United States are, as the case of Philadelphia makes clear, facing two simultaneous and interconnected crises, rather than a single crisis. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement exposed existing weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and problems in US cultural organizations and the sector at large and, in their combination, exacerbated these problems. US cultural organizations in 2020 and 2021 face a reality in which there is simply not enough money available for them all to survive. While the arts and cultural sector as a whole will probably somehow bounce back when the pandemic fades, many organizations will not survive, and others will not persist unchanged.³³ With expenses continuing, revenue at best a fraction of normal and no coordinated support at the national level (beyond arts advocacy nonprofits), many organizations will be forced to close their doors, fade into skeletal facsimiles of their former selves, or radically reinvent themselves. This will produce scores of unemployed arts workers as the crisis wears on, with disproportionately negative outcomes likely for similar populations – small and diverse cultural organizations and arts workers of color – to those many organizations pledged to prioritize during summer protests.³⁴ More broadly, with a diminished ability to respond to issues of public pressure and relevance and without representation in city agencies, a struggling arts and cultural sector and laid-off workforce will be unable to defend or demonstrate its civic value. Many arguments for the civic value of the arts, after all, focus on fostering social cohesion and connection across difference, resonating with concerns raised by the Black Lives Matter movement.³⁵ This situation represents a general replication of the United States's implicit assumption that the arts are not of national concern in the country, with such responsibility devolved to the localities themselves, which are unable to support the arts and cultural sector through sustained crisis.

Reflecting on this situation, we suggest that there are three primary policy implications for the United States's arts and cultural sector. First, as we have suggested, mass layoffs and decimated organizational budgets could contribute to an unraveling of many of the nascent efforts toward racial equity and inclusion that have swept the arts and culture field, as the lower-level staff who served as instigators in this effort, many of whom are people of color, are let go in an attempt to prevent organizational collapse and as organizations fail to act on their commitments due to a lack of funds. For some organizations, this will reveal the fragility or performativity of commitments to change; for others, the pandemic will impede organizations genuinely committed to equity-focused change from making progress.

Second and relatedly, prolonged financial starvation could cripple the broader arts and cultural field in the United States. In this possible future, many organizations will fail, radically reinvent themselves, or become skeletal versions of their former selves, joined by a crop of new creative endeavors when the country emerges from the pandemic. These new organizations will bear the mark of the pandemic's effect on social norms, patterns, and expectations – they will surely be innovative and exciting, produced by a generation of resilient, critical, and, perhaps, resentful, creatives. Some of these new and reinvented

³³ This situation is not unique to Philadelphia. Preliminary studies of the impact of the pandemic on the arts and cultural sector in the United States as a whole show widespread vulnerability and predict long-term negative effects on jobs and organizations revenue (Florida and Seman 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020).

³⁴ We do not intend, here, to suggest that cultural organizations should never fail or never decide to close their doors. However, the scale of vulnerability in the pandemic context – in which most cultural organizations are in some danger of failure – exceeds what one might expect in a healthy sector. Rather than representing balanced ebb and flow, organizational failures caused by the pandemic run the risk of fundamentally altering the arts and cultural landscape in the United States for years to come.

³⁵ Brown 2006; Kisida and Bowen 2019.

organizations will shine brightly, with diverse, innovative leaders and fresh takes on art's role in society, products of the cultural reckoning and profound organizational pause of 2020. However, many existing organizations, especially larger ones without endowments, will continue as shadows of their former selves, gutted by a loss of staff and resources, and with their legitimacy and relevance compromised by a redoubled focus on core missions and affluent audiences and an inability to respond to the social challenges of 2020. They will limp forward, their financial health poor and risk tolerance nonexistent, but keenly aware of the dangers of austerity in terms of public perception amidst profound cultural change.

Third, as an extension of our main argument, extensive layoffs and the continued shuttering of performing arts organizations will spell particular disaster for performers, many of whom stand to lose at least a year of performance opportunities. In this context, many performing artists will leave the arts out of necessity. Also lost will be a cohort of young people – recent arts graduates and new entrants to the field – who will be forced to seek work elsewhere in order to make ends meet. These people will continue, of course, to make art and identify as artists; they will be deprived, however, of their chance, however slim, of making a living by art. They will become a “lost generation.” Notably, such an outcome is not a foregone conclusion – in many European countries, arts workers have been included in countrywide job protection programs. However, such protections stem from these countries' fundamentally different – and much more centralized – theories of the relationship between the arts and government and, more generally, the relationship of the economy to workers.

The arts and cultural sector will also face a diminished and uncertain funding landscape, which will jeopardize anew its ability to make ends meet. Given the intentionally limited nature of national involvement in the arts in the United States, federal arts agencies are unlikely to expand their funding role post-disaster; such investment would, after all, represent a departure from the historical model for culture in the country. Individual donors and local public and private funders, however, who are key sources of revenue for the United States's fundamentally local arts and cultural sector, will also have less to offer the arts. State and municipal budgets, decimated by pressing needs for food and basic necessities across vast swaths of the population, are unlikely to prioritize the arts anytime soon. And the combined pandemic crisis and racial justice movement are likely to further accelerate private philanthropic foundations' drift away from the arts. While most major legacy foundations had arts programs 20 years ago, few do today, and of those that remain, some have already shifted their focus to issues they perceive to be more urgent, with crisis relief and anti-racism at center stage. For example, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation recently announced that, within its existing funding priorities (for example, higher education and the arts), it will orient all of its grant making toward social justice. Large-scale private investment in both issues is sorely needed, and funders' emerging commitments to social justice may help counteract some of the ways in which the pandemic might reproduce existing power dynamics and prevent cultural organizations from taking action toward racial equity. However, some such initiatives entail a focus on social justice instead of the arts, and those that do not do so will never be sufficiently extensive to prop up the sector as a whole. As private philanthropic and local public funders turn away from the arts in tandem, they leave the arts and cultural sector without a lifeline.

Piecemeal private funding and the whims of individual donors will be profoundly insufficient to revitalize a sector of skeleton organizations, or to catalyze widespread change in the arts, toward racial equity or other improved future states. The lack of national responsibility for the arts encoded in the United States's decentralized, locally oriented, and market-based approach to culture will give way to a general de-prioritization of cultural organizations across the board. Unable to defend or demonstrate their civic value, cultural organizations will be left to fend for themselves in a survival-of-the-fittest competition that is very American indeed.

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