

Research Note n°1 (2020)

“SLEEPING BEAUTY” I, A RELIEF POLICY FOR THE ARTS

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This research note is part of a series of four notes published by the Zurich Centre for Creative Economies (ZCCE) on the economic consequences of the coronavirus for the cultural sector.

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ABSTRACT | Since February 2020, the Covid-19 epidemic has affected entire sectors of the world economy. Differently and atypically, the creative economy is being hit hard, not only in economic terms but also in terms of its identity and organisation. Our four research notes aim: (1) to recall the history of the “relief” programmes set up in the past to aid the cultural sector, especially during the Great Depression of 1929; (2) to analyse the current situation of the cultural sectors, both as a whole and sector by sector; (3) to present the Swiss creative economy through some statistics-based reflections on the current debate in Switzerland; and finally (4), beyond the current debates: to consider alternative strategies for analysing the creative economy.

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The effects of Covid-19 on the cultural sector are only just beginning to be described, but they already appear to be dramatic. Almost all cultural institutions, including museums and galleries, concert halls or music clubs, bookstores or libraries are closed. Cultural demand has collapsed. The most important events have been cancelled, at least until autumn, and the lack of international flights even makes this recovery problematic. Smaller cultural enterprises and micro-entrepreneurs are sometimes no longer able to pay their rent and are threatened with eviction. There is even criticism that the protective measures for small and medium-sized enterprises are no longer adequate for the creative industries.

This overall view does not, however, reflect the reality of all sectors. Digital platforms, for example, those streaming content, are becoming increasingly popular in terms of subscriptions and consumption duration. As are some international agencies. Innovative organisations are repositioning themselves with new digital offerings. The situation seems confused, just as points of view and analyses are contradictory; usual concepts, such as public funding for culture or cultural industries, are becoming muddled.

As a centre for research and analysis, the Zurich Centre for Creative Economies (ZCCE) has been analysing cultural developments, contextualising current phenomena and identifying sustainable strategies for over ten years. It has done so always in conjunction with other disciplines, such as science, economics, social issues or politics. This work is presented in particular in form of “Research Notes,” which are published at irregular intervals, yet flexibly and swiftly.

These notes engage subjects and questions being researched at the ZCCE and which we wish to make accessible beyond the scientific community. These observations and analysis are “work in progress” and will be developed more fully in a scientific manner; we nevertheless consider them already relevant enough to feed into the ongoing debate.

For all these reasons, we have felt it essential to examine, without further delay, the consequences of the Covid-19 epidemic on the cultural sector in a series of three notes:

- The first note looks at the current situation from a historical perspective and shows how a comparable situation was “dealt with” in the past and to what extent insights and lessons might be drawn for today;
- The second note is based on interviews with actors and organisations in the cultural sector on different continents. The emerging picture reveals extremely heterogeneous situations and highly diverse requests for support;
- The third note offers analysis based on government statistics. We assess the latest available data and try to highlight specificities of the creative economy that are too often neglected in the current discussion. By observing the most recent data, we assess the first effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the cultural sector.

• The fourth and final note in this series will be published in June. It will provide an opportunity to discuss some alternative strategies for the creative economy, based on the conclusions drawn in note 3.

On the whole, we assume that the current crisis will not overturn existing problems but will more acutely reveal the challenges of the creative economy. Research Notes 1 to

4 are therefore not presented as short-term advice to resolve current problems, but rather as strategic analyses highlighting sustainable value creation or the need for long-term funding scenarios. We apply different perspectives — historical, sociological,

statistical or entrepreneurial — in accordance with the ZCCE's research principles — and with both a national and an international outlook.

Christoph Weckerle

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Roosevelt, the WPA and Artist Relief in America (1936–1939)

Closed cultural venues; cultural industries that have ceased production; artists without work and often without adequate unemployment insurance: this situation, which we have been experiencing in Europe since March, seems to be wholly unprecedented. In reality, however unique it may seem, it is not entirely new.

During the Great Depression, after 1929, an equivalent situation existed in Europe and, even more so, in the United States. Admittedly, the two periods are not comparable: the 1930s were engulfed by an economic and banking crisis whose effects on the economy lasted an entire decade and resulted in the Second World War; the coronavirus crisis — “the Great Lockdown,” as the IMF puts it — is primarily medical; its economic consequences, hopefully, should ease over several months. Especially digital technology marks a profound difference between the current crisis and that of 1929: thanks to 3G, Wi-Fi and streaming services, not to mention book deliveries by Amazon, today's vast cultural offerings remain accessible 24/7. While the cultural sector and artists are heavily affected, cultural consumption continues, at least online.

However, in order to indicate some pathways forward for the present, it seems

worthwhile to first retrace the history of the 1930s crisis in the arts and to review the public policies conceived at the time to alleviate mass employment among artists. What follows focuses on the cultural side of then President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.



Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1935
Credits: FDR Presidential Library & Museum

I.1 – The New Deal

In the early 1930s, the American economy collapsed and cultural life disintegrated. The administrations of Calvin Coolidge and subsequently Herbert Hoover were neither able to foresee the crisis, nor could they respond to it. When Franklin Roosevelt, the governor of New York State, was triumphantly elected president and took office in

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March 1933, he inherited a country in ruins. Unemployment was close to 30 per cent, and the banking system was broken and bankrupt. In his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck aptly described this tragic decade and its concrete economic and social consequences for millions of Americans across the country.

On entering the White House, Roosevelt launched a major economic and social programme that soon became known as the “New Deal.” Within a few years, he invented the American Welfare State, including a pension system, the right to unemployment, a minimum wage and the end of child labour. Further, he implemented an impressive number of regulations, resulting in strict state control over the financial system, the markets or communications (e.g. the creation of government agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communications Commission).

Yet, in parallel with these overall measures, Roosevelt decided to include a cultural component in his “New Deal.” This was a strange decision for a president who was not known for his love of the arts: he did not like the theatre, music or painting and preferred his stamp collections or miniature boats!

According to his collaborators, the explanation is simple: when the first programmes of the New Deal were conceived, and Roosevelt was informed that painters, musicians, theatre professionals or writers were unemployed across the country, he

reacted intuitively and pragmatically. He was guided by audacity and experimentation. Should we help artists, his entourage either asked or prompted Roosevelt? His answer has remained famous: “Why not,” he replied. “[After all], they are human beings. They have to live.

I guess they only know how to paint: there must surely be public places where paintings are wanted”¹.

Thus, for the first time in American history, the federal government’s massive commitment to the cultural sector was envisioned.

I.2 – Federal One

The New Deal for the arts was never intended to be a cultural policy. Instead, it was chiefly an economic and social measure to combat unemployment and aimed at “recovery” and “relief.” It has, however, remained unique².

The arts first appeared on the fringes of the New Deal. Among the major job creation programmes enacted by Roosevelt as early as 1933–1934 — four million people were paid by the government — a marginal, yet genuine number of artists were recruited. This initial plan, which essentially involved hiring artists for teaching, only enjoyed mixed success. The reasons included a certain amount of bureaucracy and little traction on the ground and in the states. Most of all, the first artists to be employed were not

¹ On Roosevelt, see the three volumes of the standard biography: Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, Houghton Mifflin, 1957–1960.

² This historical account is based on: Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, Princeton University Press, 1973 ; William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts, The Origins and*

Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration, Ohio State University Press, 1969; see also Francis O’Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, New York Graphic Society, 1973.

necessarily recognised professionals, nor were their assignments always artistic...

In 1935, Roosevelt launched the “Second New Deal,” at whose centre stood the creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This, too, focused on getting millions of unemployed back to work; now, however, artists were integrated more systematically into the project.

Harry Hopkins, the quasi-minister appointed director of the WPA, immediately foresaw a strong cultural dimension to his enormous transversal programme. Hopkins, unlike Roosevelt, was a man of culture; he surrounded himself with the best collaborators. Above all, he knew, as his memoirs and archives attest³, that the arts can exert leverage in times of crisis: not only could the WPA create a large number of cultural jobs, but these artists would be able to participate in a vast movement of indispensable popular education. They would be able to contribute to boosting the morale of Americans. Culture could reassure citizens, Hopkins believed, and help them regain unity. In short, culture could revitalise American democracy⁴.

“At the outset,” Hopkins said, “it was truly a compromise: a trade-off between providing jobs for workers in need and providing culture for America, with an emphasis on the social side.” He called the venture Federal Project Number One (known later as simply Federal One).

Within a few months, the new programme hired tens of thousands of artists, almost all of whom were employed in five main areas: the Federal Writers Project (with over

7,000 writers); the Federal Arts Project (with thousands of painters and sculptors); the Federal Music Project (with over 16,000 musicians; an average of 5,000 concerts were held each month); the Federal Dance Project; and, most importantly, the Federal Theatre Project. The latter programme, directed by theatre activist Hallie Flanagan, became the most symbolic and perhaps also the most famous of the New Deal’s cultural programmes. Five major regional theatres were established from scratch, with companies commissioned to tour the five major regions that were designated to cover the entire country. Nearly 13,000 actors were recruited by the Federal Theatre Project, which created 830 jobs in 31 states⁵.

What is interesting about theatre, and other programmes, was the emphasis on decentralization and excellence rather than on popular education. Hopkins had a clear vision for his arts programmes: to create new audiences, to train the new — and what he believed was the first — generation of American artists

And that is indeed what happened. If culture had still been European-centred before the 1930s, it took root in America between the wars. The artists funded by Federal One became some of the greatest cultural names in the history of the United States: writers Saul Bellow, Nelson Algren or Robert Frost; painters Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock; photographer Berenice Abbot and Walker Evans; and musician Aaron Copland (other milestones included the founding of the Pittsburgh Philharmonic Orchestra).

³ This note is also based on Hopkins’ archives and correspondence at the Franklin Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York.

⁴ See Harry Hopkins, *Spending to Save, the Complete Story of Relief*, Norton, 1936.

⁵ John O’Connor and Lorraine Brown, eds, *Free, Adult, Uncensored : the Living History of the Federal Theatre Project*, New Republic Books, 1978; see also Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan, A Life in the American Theatre*, Knopf, 1988.

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Besides, the careers of filmmakers John Huston, Nicholas Ray and Joseph Losey were launched from the theatre, as was that of Arthur Miller, and of course Orson Welles, who became one of the symbols of the Federal Theatre Project (for example, with his “voodoo” version of Macbeth and a fascist Julius Caesar). Add to this the cultural recognition, for the first time ever by the federal government, of a large number of women artists (one of whose symbols was Hallie Flanagan), but also of black artists: writers Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, as well as the creation of many “Negro Theaters” (including Orson Welles’ in Harlem).

The WPA also had a social dimension. Hopkins consistently emphasised the artist’s “social responsibility.” His “art functionaries” performed across the country, yet priority was been given to schools, isolated rural audiences, difficult neighbourhoods, retirement homes, hospitals and prisons. Many of the spectators at Federal One concerts, plays and exhibitions had never been exposed to culture until the WPA brought culture to their city or village.

The culture created under the WPA was also, in itself, very social. Plays were produced about syphilis, poor housing, racism, or disability; Jazz was energised and its African-American roots were enhanced; American art became “abstract expressionism”. For the WPA, it was not a question of spending money on administration, buildings or sets: 90 per cent of its budgets had to be spent on salaries. “We’re here for jobs. From start to finish. And all the time. The WPA is the job”, Hopkins repeatedly told his staff.

I.3 – A mixed, yet enduring record

No sooner had the United States entered the war at the end of 1941, Roosevelt terminated the main programmes of the New Deal; those that survived were soon dismantled by Congress. They also attracted recurring criticism as early as 1938: Federal One was accused of having contributed to funding many “communist” artists — a heated political controversy ensued, resulting in the establishment of a House Committee on Un-American Activities. “I still can’t accept that all the enthusiastic young [artists] should start painting Lenin’s face on the official buildings of the Department of Justice,” Roosevelt admitted. With the advent of war, and after his death, the last cultural programmes of Roosevelt’s New Deal were largely disbanded. A great American cultural ambition had had its day.

As its critics observed, this “functionalised” culture might have played only a minor role at a time when the market became so central to American culture. Indeed, what weight did photographs of the Great Depression carry compared to those of Life magazine? Or subsidised concerts against Billie Holiday’s or Duke Ellington’s records? The brochures published by the WPA versus the paperbacks that were spreading at that time? Regionalised public theatre versus Broadway or Hollywood?⁶

⁶ Michael Dennig, *The Cultural Front, The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Verso, 1997.

We might, however, take stock of the WPA's cultural policy for America differently, in a manner not openly disclosed by its name. Between 1935 and 1939, nearly 25 million Americans are estimated to have attended a Federal One cultural event.



A scene from a play produced by the WPA Federal Theater Project in New York Negro Unit, ca.1935
Credits: FDR Presidential Library & Museum

Thus, a programme that lasted no more than a decade, became a major audience success.

An even greater influence is worth mentioning: when Federal One was discontinued, its still existing projects were allocated to the American states, as were the buildings, companies, auditoriums or museums established at the time. After the Normandy landings, when the federal government invested vast sums to enable the returning soldiers to attend college (G.I Bill of 1944), the American states developed many public university campuses, often taking over the staff and sites funded or created by the WPA.

The post-war American cultural system was thus largely imagined and built by the WPA. Moreover, its countless artists, who emerged from Greenwich Village, the Harlem Renaissance, or "abstract expressionism," and who were now being recruited by

universities, went on to make American culture a worldwide success in the 1950s. This culture, then, soon led to a major paradigm shift: the transition, at the end of the 1940s, from Paris to New York as the world's capital of modern art.

Roosevelt sized up this essential movement in his famous speech at the opening of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 1941: "There was a time when the people of this country would never have imagined that the artistic heritage of history could be theirs or that they could have the responsibility to protect it. Until a few generations ago, Americans were told that art was something foreign to America and to themselves. Something from [Europe], something that wasn't theirs... But recently, in recent years, they've seen rooms full of sculptures made by Americans, walls covered with paintings made by Americans... The people of this country now know, whatever they've been taught, that art is not just something you can own, but something they can make. It's the art of making, not the art of owning, that is art."⁷

Frédéric Martel

Translated from French by Mark Kyburz

This first research note is part of a series of four notes published by the Zurich Centre for Creative Economies (ZCCE) on the economic consequences of the coronavirus.

⁷ This account of the WPA, in addition to the works cited, draw on Frédéric Martel, *De la Culture en Amérique*, Gallimard, 2006 (chapter III).

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING:

Note 2 – The Great Cultural Depression (Frédéric Martel)

Note 3 – The Swiss Creative Economy: Some statistics-based reflections on the current debates in Switzerland (Romain Page, Christoph Weckerle)

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We work closely with our international partners, researchers, academics and startupper.

The Zurich Centre for Creative Economies (ZCCE) is part of Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK).

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May 2020