**COVID – 19 impacts cities, culture and society**

In the current decade, we have passed a significant marker in urban history, the moment when more than half of the world population lives in cities. Whatever else this century is, it will be without doubt ‘the urban century’. Academics and policy makers have for the last half century been raising warning signs concerning the capacity of cities, their governments and their populations, to cope with these new circumstances. Any historian of cities will remind you that urbanisation has always been a balancing act between health and sanitation, and food and shelter. Of course, the global pandemic that has touched every corner of the planet has been most keenly felt in cities. The pandemic has taken so many lives and exposed those left behind to grief and precarious circumstances.

It is seldom that social scientists, and urbanists, are presented with such a stark ‘new normal’ as that which the ‘pause’ to our societies due to Covid-19 restrictions has presented us with. Whilst nobody would want it, or wish it, the last three months have nevertheless seen a startling transformation of our cities. Just at the moment when protesters had once again reminded us of the climate emergency; when governments had once again seemed unable to fulfil their promises made at the 2009 UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen (COP15); and carbon-based companies had reiterated that such reductions in emissions were impossible, or unrealistic – just at this moment we have been presented, on one hand, with falling emissions, carless streets, and even wildlife returning to city streets and rivers; o the other hand, we have seen exacerbation of existing inequalities. Change is possible, and more necessary than ever.

Moreover, the last half-century has also been characterised by a global lack of faith in the power and legitimacy of the state to serve the public purpose. City administrations have got smaller, and had powers taken away from them. We will have to wait and see if this diminishing trend in the role of the state in supporting and co-ordinating society will now change based on the experience of COVID-19.

The unfamiliarity of ‘lockdown’ has been a challenge to our societies and how we care for others, but also how we consider the household. Families, individuals and social groups have had to ‘self-provide’ leading to new experiences of caring and schooling for many, as well as the intensification of ‘juggling’ roles for some, and isolation for others. A common experience has been the increased reliance on digital technologies to enable some continuity of social and working lives. Many have been exposed to the reality of digital-only communication. For some, this has generated ideas of an isolated idyll and telecommuting (a long running myth); for others, the realisation of the crucial role played by communication ‘in real life’ has been underlined.

What about culture? On the one hand, culture has been a saviour: the availability of access to various digital services has led to huge economic gains for the technology companies. On the other hand, we have seen the immiseration of live performance: venues closed down, and staff furloughed, or laid off. Immediately, we consult the history books for lessons of how culture faired in previous recessions. The lesson is that culture is resilient, it can bounce back. However, this is not a recession in the normal sense (although without doubt it will develop as one), it is a full stop: recovery from this may well do fatal damage to our cultural infrastructure.

The cultural economy of cities is not something that can simply be rejuvenated with the ‘flick of a switch’; continuing social distancing will have a draining effect on live performance and viability. Whilst many governments around the world have offered ‘rent holidays’ for buildings, the real impact will be for cultural workers: already in one of the most precarious labour market positions. Government schemes have predominantly focused on ‘employees’, but the cultural sector is comprised of free-lance labour. Moreover, the cultural ecosystems that those writing within the covers of this journal have discussed, and which have generally not been appreciated, have become badly damaged.

Cities will gradually come back to life, streets will be full, pollution will again rise; the social and cultural interchange and interaction will return. How the cultural economy will get rebuilt is an open question: it provides scholars with an (unlooked for, and unwanted) opportunity to witness the ‘cultural heart attack’ at first hand, it also provides a unique opportunity to address the systemic problems of precarity and injustice in the urban cultural economy and (hopefully) to change it. The Covid-19 moment has given us a glimpse of the fragile thread that city, culture and society hang from. Whether cities, their representatives, and their citizens will embrace this opportunity is another question.