Cultural Relations and Crisis: Results, Impact, New Questions
ICRRA online conference summary

We live in uniquely challenging times. We face crises and challenges that are both interconnected and global. How does this affect and inform the work of international cultural relations – efforts to build trust, enhance cooperation and understanding across national borders and develop intercultural dialogue? This was the central theme of the 2020 ICRRA conference (26-29 October), a global online gathering of practitioners, researchers, students and others interested in the theory, practice, impact and application of international cultural relations.

In her keynote on Day 1 of the conference, Professor Ilhem Allagui (Northwestern University, Qatar) focused on the cultural relations impact of Covid-19 in the Middle East and North Africa. Sharing research into the shifting patterns of production and consumption of social media and online content in the region, Professor Allagui emphasised the role of culture in everyday life and the value of international cultural exchange and interaction as a basic human right. The discussion also considered the changing relationships between media and national governments, whilst addressing the implications that government responses to the pandemic have had on citizenship and the rights of immigrants and foreign nationals in some states.

This was followed by updates on recent and ongoing research from ICRRA network members.

Professor Avril Joffe and Elroy Bell (Wits University, South Africa) outlined their ongoing research on China’s growing cultural presence in Africa, prompting discussion on the implications of this investment and engagement for the cultural sector across the continent. This highlighted the need for further empirical research to understand and evaluate China’s approach to cultural diplomacy, including through comparative approaches that bring in perspectives and insights from other regions such as Latin America.

Stuart MacDonald (International Cultural Relations, UK) presented findings from a recently completed study for the British Council comparing the practice of cultural relations organizations in different countries, with a particular focus on key insights from this research into the impact of the pandemic on cultural relations agendas and on the interplay between these agendas and national soft power or cultural diplomacy objectives.

Day 2 of the conference gave a platform to those actively involved in shaping cultural relations on the ground. A panel of “Voices from the Frontline” discussed the impact of the pandemic on their work in diverse global settings. Josh Nyapimbi, Ghada Rifai, Eriel Huang, Dorothy Grace Guerrero, Ivonne Yanez, and Zhenya Kuleba provided insights in their work during the pandemic which include coordinating an NGO network in Syria, promoting local socio-economic development in Zimbabwe, and advocating for ecological action and social justice in Ecuador (see conference website for full panel details).

A common theme to emerge through this lively discussion was the urgency of the need to enable genuine global inclusivity within, and equality of access to, international cultural exchange and collaboration. The internet is not a panacea for a world in lockdown when, as panellists emphasised,
digital connectivity, infrastructure and expertise remains so unevenly spread. The right to access the internet, to have a device that enables everyone to connect to others, has to be seen as a fundamental human right. Cultural relations researchers, practitioners and policy makers need to reflect on who is not in the virtual room, and why, in order to promote genuine trust, cooperation and exchange between (and within) the Global North and Global South. The cultural relations research community has to redouble its efforts to build an inclusive, democratic global research agenda to support this.

In his keynote talk opening Day 3 of the conference, Ivan Krastev (Centre for Liberal Strategies, Bulgaria) shared reflections on the unfolding impact of Covid-19 in Europe, noting that the crisis had amplified pre-existing trends and tensions – but suggesting that Covid may do more than either climate change or global social injustice, for example, to prompt urgent international cooperation. A wide-ranging discussion covered themes such as trust (in governments, in science, and between generations and within society more broadly) globalisation, populism and the political (dis-)engagement of young people, as well the impact of lockdown on our ideas of citizenship and what it means to be free.

This was followed by two further research updates from ICRA members. Professor Naren Chitty (Macquarie University, Australia) focused on international education as a form of cultural relations, reflecting on the impact of the current crisis on the experiences of international students and the values host countries demonstrate towards them – and how this relates to soft power.

Dr HwaJung Kim (Ewha Womans University, Seoul) outlined research that is forthcoming in the Korea Observer into the concept of sports public diplomacy. With particular reference to the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, Dr Kim offered an insightful overview of the evolution of the relationship between sport and public diplomacy in Korea, noting its potential and also its constraints and limitations as a form of soft power and as a potential tool of national foreign policy objectives.

The conference concluded on Day 4 with a final keynote presentation from Professor Nasar Meer (University of Edinburgh, UK) on the unique cultural relations role that cities play in the incorporation of displaced migrants and refugees - although this happens within, and may be constrained by, policies and frameworks set by national governments. In a wide-ranging discussion, it was noted that the global pandemic has exposed and foregrounded crucial questions around who has the ‘right to the city’ and that this relates to broader issues of social justice and inclusion around access to housing, healthcare and the right to (and role of) public space.

The conference marked the one year ‘anniversary’ of ICRA, following its inaugural meeting in London in November 2019. ICRA was formed to foster knowledge exchange and discussion around international cultural relations, and to do so both with a global lens and through drawing on the complementary insights and perspectives of research and practice. The conference has reinforced our appreciation of the need for, and value of, this approach. We look forward to continuing the development of ICRA over the year ahead, particularly through expanding membership across the Global South, and to building the network’s capacity to become a genuinely global platform for, and facilitator of, new cultural relations research collaboration and insight.

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