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Creative Industries and Cultural Diversity: Crises, Diversities and London's Cultural Ecosystem

Crises, Diversities and London's Cultural Ecosystem
A report to the Creative Impact Research Centre Europe
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2

- Polydiversity
- ABC+ Crises
- Emergent ambivalences

INTRODUCTION..... 5

THE WORK OF THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY LAB 6

THE ABCs OF POLYCRISIS..... 8

- A for Austerity
- B for Brexit
- C for Covid-19
- In summary

EMERGING AREAS OF CONCERN..... 10

- Workforce Diversity
- Organisational Diversity
- Spatial Diversity
- Representational Diversity

IMPLICATIONS 12



Interlocking dimensions of diversity.

After Hall, S. 1997. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (London: Sage), p.1.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Crises are social constructs: the effects of sets of (political) decisions made by social actors, elite experts and electoral representatives, often with unintended (or initially occluded) consequences for the very systems of governance that are established to manage those decisions. The notion of “polycrisis” seeks to register multiple distinct but interlocking system crises, impacting one another and producing complexities, feedback loops, uncertainties and expectations at a historically novel intensity. This demands an order of governance, decision-making, resource allocation and institutional capacity-building beyond those which currently exist.

Accepting this, we argue that notions of “creative impact” and of “resilience” are intrinsically linked to ideas of “diversity”, which therefore also need to be pluralised.

Polydiversity

The London Cultural Diversity Laboratory produced an innovative framework for interrogating notions of cultural and creative diversity in a pluralistic and wide-ranging way while remaining embedded in localised contexts.

- 1) There has been increased industry and policy attention to the importance of **creative diversity** among the workforce in recent years, particularly in the Global North, where opening up access for talented individuals to pursue highly skilled value-adding jobs is a strategic priority and viewed as a key source of competitive advantage.
- 2) Meanwhile, recognition, representation, protection and promotion of a **diversity of cultural outputs** (often within a national context and often in the Global South) is a common approach, which is monitored intensively by international governmental organisations, most prominently UNESCO.

These two frames often move in different directions to one another, or do not speak at all: there is a disconnect between production and consumption. To these we add two additional concerns.

- 3) **spatial diversity**: the layered geography of resource and opportunity distribution, the importance of proximity and location, and the role of international mobility.
- 4) **organisational diversity**: the mixed economy of organisational forms and income models (large/small; public/private; for-profit/for-purpose) and their mutual interdependence and interaction in an organisational ecosystem.

Finally, we seek to acknowledge that all this demands a responsive system of:

- 5) **transversal governance** that works across different scales and administrative departments, with distinct and often competing rationales, but which shape the creative ecosystem.

Our innovation, then, is to apply this framework to an analysis of the creative sector in the UK (and specifically London), and crucially to attempt to articulate the linkages between these different analytic modalities, to consider its resilience within multiple crises.

ABC+ Crises

We do not deal with polycrisis as such. Instead we sensitise our framework with an initial periodisation based on three successive crises, which have defined and shaped the UK experience in specific ways: Austerity (post-2008 financial crisis); Brexit (post-2016 referendum); and Covid-19 (from 2020); plus ongoing dynamics – shaped, for example, by energy shocks, migration, military conflict and climate change – and attendant responses to injustices and subsequent social movements (such as Black Lives Matter and Anti-Asian Racial Violence).

Recognising longer-term shifts at play, we highlight the following dynamics that are revealed and intensified by these crises.

The **Austerity** period is associated with:

- (i) diversification of income streams (and forms of employment);
- (ii) policy instrumentalism i.e. more explicit accounting for a “return on investment” in cultural participation, in the form of economic, social or health impacts.

Brexit is associated with:

- (iii) uncertainty over travel, trade and employment (impacting capacity to plan);
- (iv) cultural identity profoundly shaping public debate and sense of division (particularly regarding migration patterns and regional distributional imbalances).

The **Covid-19** pandemic, and subsequent lockdown periods, first amplified each of these dynamics – but also made it crucial to attend to:

- (v) internal industry differentiation between cultural and creative outputs, particularly live performances and digital platforms;
- (vi) “non-standard” employment forms, which proliferate in this sector, making support packages difficult to access (and distribute).

Navigating this specific collection of internal challenges revealed, most glaringly, the fragility of the ecosystem; but moreover, how marginalised individuals face specific ongoing challenges as a result of structural conditions.

Emergent ambivalences

Applying our analytic framework highlights the following emergent areas of interest. Rarely articulated together, they are not “solutions” but systemic ambivalences that hold the potential for new breakdowns. This requires careful stewardship to be rendered sustainable, contributing to a cultural ecosystem that produces innovative, interesting and useful ideas, values debate, contestation and critical encounters with the past, and engenders the possibility of collective ownership of the future.

Workforce Diversity: We note a rise in attempts to monitor workforce diversity through counting and through training and strategic consultancy exercises. However, there is a lack of methodological agreement, curtailing the potential for comparison between occupations, organisations and industries, or change over time. Meanwhile, de facto expectations that

marginalised individuals are best placed to take on the burden of “fixing” organisational problems produces new areas of concern.

Organisational Diversity: We note a highly competitive funding environment, with efforts to govern the mixed ecosystem through compliance with funding stipulations and commercial supplier agreements (for example to monitor and support a diverse workforce). The difficulty of accessing funding (and recipients' distrust of funders) remains unevenly distributed. Meanwhile, alternative models of organisation and ownership have flourished – but frequently replicate problems of unpaid and volunteer work, contributing to demographic closure.

Spatial Diversity: We note that government rhetoric to “level up” regional inequalities has produced little material change beyond competitive allocation of local funding (that hardly compensates for decimated local authority budgets) and some high-profile organisational decisions to relocate or invest in other parts of the country. More novel experiments with space within London sees coalitions of creatives and related businesses, residents and property developers bid to take a lead on affordable and community-engaged local development. Sustaining such efforts over time is an open and unresolved challenge.

Representational Diversity: We note tensions between the quantity and quality of growing visibility: historically underrepresented communities have become “hyper-visible” in arts and media outputs; yet too often relegated to a position of being obliged to tell (a particular version of) “their story”. This tension equally plays out within the capacity of data collection regimes to “represent” the population, alongside efforts to encourage participation in engaging, interpreting and retelling these stories. The category of “class”, harder to visibilise and to monitor, remains a notable structuring absence in many discussions around diversity.

Transversal Governance: Any notion of “creative impact” requires the recognition and the maintenance of an underlying supportive ecosystem. In recent years, attention to “cultural infrastructure”, “foundational” or “everyday” cultural economies, to sustainable development and to connectivity across value chains (whether in local clusters or transnational trade relations) has produced novel policy frames. But there remains a lack of concerted material investment, and institutional capacity, which would “join up” at the national level (and beyond).

There is, therefore, much to learn from the UK's work in using “creative industries” as a new problem-space for joining up policymaking. Yet its experiences, its creative resources and its institutional frameworks are distinct, while ABC+ crises reveal the limits of those efforts. An innovative, sustainable and inclusive growth process needs attention from the ground up. As such the cultural and creative ecosystem appears as the ‘canary in the coal mine’ for changing patterns of socio-economic organisation. Whether social contracts forged in the 20th century can be refitted for the 21st century is an open question; more optimistically, this ecosystem would be a good place to begin the experiment.

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, London and the wider UK has been fêted as a creative economy success: an example of how jobs, regeneration, and place-making could be combined in an apparently unending stream. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the sector has experienced successive challenges: an extended period of public funding reductions over the 2010s; the impact of the country's exit from the European Union from 2016-2020; a global pandemic in the early 2020s. Despite these "A-B-C" (Austerity-Brexit-Covid 19) shocks, creative industries continue to be placed at the centre of a national "2030 vision" to revitalise growth, work, wellbeing, international influence and green transition.

Underpinning this success and resilience is arguably London's position as a global city and a node of global migration. This flux of population has gifted the capital with a seemingly never-ending stream of new knowledges, ideas and trends, facilitating an innovative mixing of ideas and a relatively safe space for experimentation. Yet this growth has often been at the cost of fundamental social inequalities. This past decade has also seen growing recognition that those who work in the sector do not reflect the wider populace: not only in terms of what gets seen, read, heard and performed but also who gets funded, employed or promoted. Alongside the intrinsic injustices, persistent structural imbalances restrict the very creativity that such industries are founded on. Such an apparent paradox lies behind the rise in "diversity" rhetoric, in public discourse, organisational strategy and government policymaking.

"Diversity" is a deceptively simple, everyday term to describe a hugely complex topic, both in the scholarly and policy literature and, moreover, at the experiential level of what happens in practice. It is commonly used not only to recognise identity and difference as productive features of mundane cultural life in a range of settings but also (particularly in corporate or public policy contexts) to nurture and "manage" it. In UNESCO's 2005 convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the term refers to diversity between nations in the context of a globalised trade in cultural goods and services, and recognises the need to protect longstanding heritage sites and community craft practices alongside the rights of artists. Within the UK, there is a related but different inflection, picking up from turn-of-the-century discourses of multiculturalism associated with post-war decolonisation and processes of migration, and what is sometimes referred to as the "superdiversity" of global cities.

Such processes have been paired with a broader recognition of the need to be inclusive of gender and sexuality, physical and mental impairment, age and belief – whether codified and legislated as "protected characteristics" under the Equality Act 2010, or theorised and popularised using the language of "intersectionality". It also includes reference to socio-economic advantage, regional imbalances, generational inequalities and – perhaps especially within creative contexts – the cognitive differences associated with neurodivergence. In this sense, "creative diversity" might be celebrated and encouraged as a resource for creativity, innovation and competitive advantage: a way to "think different", be more sensitive to social complexity and cater to niche markets. Equally, notions of diversity have risen to the centre of a politicised "culture war" framing of heated public discourse, deploying nativist rhetoric amid a backlash to the perceived threats of globalisation by pitting the alleged values of a "left-behind" section of the population with those of a highly-educated professional "elite" residing in the metropole.

Within this critical conjuncture, our concern was to:

1. explore what relationships exist, if any, between the rhetoric and practice of “diversity” and the experience of compounding “A-B-C” crises, and the continuing challenges over the course of 2023, within London’s cultural production ecosystem;
2. consider what lessons policymakers might learn from this particular example for supporting the resilience and impact of cultural ecosystems elsewhere and amid other crisis conditions.

THE WORK OF THE CULTURAL DIVERSITY LAB

Our approach was primarily synthetic, aiming to assemble and triangulate multiple information sources and generate dialogue and conceptual innovation that could potentially inform better governance in this arena. We began by reviewing existing scholarly literature to identify core themes and critical consensus on challenges and opportunities identified over the past fifteen years. We then assembled a corpus of industry/policy reporting and practical initiatives addressing the need for diversity interventions in the UK’s cultural and creative industries in recent years, identifying around 80 such documents since 2015.

In order to check this against the evolving reality of life “on the ground” in London in 2023, we supplemented this literature search with small-scale exploratory qualitative research – drawing from interviews, focus groups and observations, as well as more informal conversations – with around 40-50 key practitioners and informants working in this field.

Finally, we held two workshop events. Drawing from existing networks and from the research we were undertaking, we gathered together academics, practitioners and other expert professionals to discuss the issues at stake: first, on the theme of UNESCO’s 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion Cultural Diversity; second, on the theme of London’s creative ecosystem and our work as a lab. These further informed our understanding and analysis, as well as generating opportunities for knowledge exchange and dissemination.

A key issue here was to organise and make sense of this wealth of information. We identified four core themes early on, addressing the “diversity of diversities”, in relation to: (1) the creative workforce; (2) organisational formations; (3) spatial distribution; (4) and cultural representation. Partially, this reflects disciplinary differences – respectively: the sociology of employment; management studies; human geography; humanities and cultural studies – differences that are, in part, reflected in the nature of public debate, which is often fragmented and disconnected. Clearly, however, each theme intersects with and inflects the others and our goal was to explore and reveal these intersections holistically. A fifth theme therefore takes a cross-cutting view of policymaking implications, which are themselves transversal, requiring work across disciplinary and departmental siloes, public and private sectors, and at different spatial scales.

This conceptual frame appears as a key contribution of the lab: a tentative but nonetheless generative way of bringing broad-scale socio-economic and political shifts at a trans-continental level down to the specific interconnected challenges of a particular ecosystem in a particular physical location.

An early task was to recruit new early-career researchers. Four Research Assistants (RAs) joined in May, each attached to the four key themes above, and closely mentored by a

member of the lab. They took ownership of the project's thematic content, from conducting literature searches and setting research sub-questions through to mobilising the empirical work through institutional ethical approval and recruiting research participants, as well as additional activity through social media and event participation. In this way, RAs were encouraged to bring their own individual strengths and interests to the project. Simultaneously, they were also supported to bolster their own professional development, networks and career aspirations, in interaction with the wider CIRCE community. In addition to regular focused discussions around lab research, City staff also facilitated discussions around methods, ethics and funding applications, arranged contact between RAs and established research professionals in the field (inside and outside the academy) to enable them to explore potential options, and encouraged and supported them to take on some public speaking roles and engagement roles.

Coinciding with primary research tasks, a central aim of CIRCE was to retain and develop links between UK and EU expertise around the creative economy, building awareness and potential pathways to exchange and collaboration. To this end, the lab, assembled from academics at the Centre for Culture and the Creative Industries at City, drew from existing links to creative community, industry, academic and policy stakeholders within the UK and elsewhere. Vice versa, the project's goals were leveraged to build new relationships.

Our events and research enrolled a range of practitioners: from the "creatives in residence" at City's School of Communication and Creativity, to the Director of the British Council's creative economy team, to multiple artists and consultants active in this field. Three external high-level policy experts were commissioned for a report on the UK's policy ecosystem. We also commissioned a four-episode podcast from artist Laura Yuile on "culture-led housing" and supported two additional "Futures" workshops for young Black and ESEA Creatives. Members of the team also contributed to podcasts in their lab roles: Hannah Curran-Troop appeared on an episode of the diversity leadership podcast *The Privilege Eruption*; Andy Pratt contributed to the curation of a series of concerts (and accompanying podcast series) titled *Harmony Beyond Music*; while Si Long Chan also contributed to the *Culture-Led Housing* podcast.

While at first seeming to be a relatively incidental aspect of lab setup and structure, the nurture of such interpersonal relationships, and the development of focused spaces for interaction and exchange, became increasingly central to our work, requiring active (but often invisible or overlooked) intervention and administration. This process-oriented observation applies not only in the context of Brexit but as a particular feature of the diverse knowledges and practices that define the creative economy – especially given the considerable uncertainty in the academic labour market faced by emerging researchers. We were alarmed and humbled to witness the combined quantity (over 200) and quality of applications for the RA roles from early-career researchers, in full knowledge of how few employment opportunities, and of what kind, exist for such individuals. Yet equally, the rising importance of research, across a range of levels, within the sector and outside the university became apparent through the project: from institutional evaluation, to arts and social activism, to consumer and audience research, to industry's representation within policymaking communities. There is a clear need to make connections here and this impetus guided our activities and working principles.

Likewise, the role of relationship management also speaks to the challenges of connecting the informal world of short-term project working by freelancers, micro-businesses and loose-knit collectives to the very structured formality and lengthy timescales of the university – both in terms of building trust and aligning goals as well as processing contracts and payments. This is something that is difficult to struggle with within an institution like the university – in which supplier relationships are normally long-term arrangements, rather than the delivery of

bespoke one-off services, aimed at organisations with substantial liquidity (meaning, for example, that they do not face an issue paying sub-contractors while waiting for the first invoice to be processed).

We considered that a significant part of the budget might have been productively redirected towards a dedicated project manager, sensitive to the particular timelines and concerns of the project team and funders, while adept and conversant with the systems and institutional logics of the university. Yet responsibilities for the hiring and management of such an individual, on a fixed-term basis, remain unclear. We were instead able to second a junior member of professional services staff to work closely with the team, albeit on a temporary and limited basis, and within these limits this was an enormous asset.

Nonetheless, if working with individual freelancers is an institutional challenge, it is doubly so in the context of marginalised creatives who are often asked to put themselves and their identities at the service of an institution widely understood to be exclusionary (for example in its recruitment and teaching practices, or in its celebrations of historic benefactors) and extractive (for example, in the use of images and voices of those seen to represent “diverse” communities in the institution’s publicity materials). In this context, researchers themselves take on the additional burden, and the considerable (but invisible) emotional labour, of embodying the university; we were then keen for this not to fall exclusively on the shoulders of those RAs in charge of much of the everyday practicalities of the research. In such ways, managing a range of relationships, internal and external, became a major part of the lab’s work.

THE ABCs OF POLYCRISIS

An initial celebratory moment in the early years of the millennium tended to characterise the creative economy as a model of innovation and “good work”, allowing individuals to find autonomy, control and self-fulfilment and offering firms more flexible access to a range of skills and new ideas. For many this was the case. However, fine-grained social-scientific attention, both qualitative and quantitative, public reporting and arts activism, has increasingly placed these assumptions under pressure. Over the 2010s, so too did a series of crises characterised by both calculated policy decisions and unprecedented external shocks.

A for Austerity

In response to the global financial crisis of 2008-09, a concerted austerity programme was implemented by a succession of governments from 2010-2019, most dramatically prior to 2015. Considerable “efficiency savings” were sought throughout the public sector, particularly local authorities (the primary funders of much cultural provision, including museums, libraries, theatres and heritage sites), and closures of some national non-departmental public bodies, notably the UK Film Council. While other policy areas such as education and health were equally affected, culture is clearly hard to justify as a recipient of public support and is also subject to reductions in consumer expenditure. This reshaped not only what services were sustainable but also occupational pathways and organisational models within cultural organisations, and their geographical distribution.

The period is therefore associated with (i) accelerated diversification i.e. the need for both organisations and individuals to develop new (usually multiple) income streams; and (ii) instrumentalism i.e. more explicit accounting for a “return on investment” in cultural participation, in the form of economic, social or health impacts. To some extent this only

intensified a longer-term turn in administration and governance that required public services to conform to specific spending rules and outcome-driven targets, as well as a reliance on unpaid labour across the sector.

B for Brexit

The period of 2016-2019 was dominated by the Brexit referendum and subsequent negotiations, with the primary effect being considerable uncertainty over the future relationship with the other 27 EU nations and the wider world. A key issue here concerned mobility for creatives, whether as a performing musician or as a touring exhibition, and the retention of EU migrants within the creative workforce, as well as the increased supply chain costs particularly for distribution of physical cultural goods (e.g. handmade crafts, artworks or vinyl records). Several years of uncertainty (over visa regulations or customs carnets, for example) made long-term planning difficult, disincentivising those without financial liquidity and who could ill-afford to change plans. Also at stake was a profound public debate, and sense of division, over cultural identity (particularly regarding migration patterns and regional distributional imbalances) and a sense that creativity remained the preserve of disembedded Remain-voting "elite" professional class, whether in fine arts and acting, or science and technology. This picture was acknowledged to be driven by London's indisputable and overwhelming dominance of the broader economic picture – while obscuring the considerable inequalities within the capital, not least among the creative workforce itself. Here there is a danger of acceding explanatory power to a seductively simplistic binary framing (south/north; urban/rural; London/the rest) that does not reflect lived reality for most.

C for Covid-19

The events of 2020-2022 were determined by the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic and government's subsequent response in lengthy "lockdown" periods and attendant financial support packages. Two issues are stark here. First, internal industry differentiation between cultural and creative outputs. That is, how firms and workers up and down value chains were able to navigate these shocks was dependent on the different goods and services they produced: cultural forms and organisational processes (such as music venues, cinemas and television productions) that rely on proximity were clearly substantially affected, with knock-on effects for support workers and suppliers further downstream (e.g. in ticketing agencies or postproduction suites); conversely, meanwhile, the digitised platform economy, dominated by global tech firms, experienced a significant boost from increased home access. A second issue concerned the preponderance of "non-standard" employment forms in this sector. Support packages for self-employed freelancers and full-time employees were designed around notions of "standard" work, conceived in the previous century, revealing the sector's reliance on short-term contracts and multiple contract types. As a result, many fell through the safety net and were ineligible for support, or not to the same extent as full-time employees or larger business owners.

In summary

The compounding effects of these trends was to widen divisions between large organisations with multiple sources of funding and small, nimble, often volunteer-led enterprises – the "missing middle" grows. The apparent "resilience" of the UK's cultural and creative ecosystem, widely discussed and often praised, is an undoubted testament to pragmatism, inventiveness and strategic diversification. Yet this period reveals how it is also contingent on hidden unpaid labour and paid work that can be highly irregular (and hence also difficult for the policymaker to "see"). A single individual typically needs to put in the "extra hours" of looking for work, pitching for contracts and funding, maintaining productive relationships, and investing in education and training, across multiple projects and professional roles, in addition to carrying out their primary roles. The capacity to carry out

such work is typically dependent on free time, a pre-existing financial safety net and social networks, with unequal access to health insurance, sick pay and maternity leave. Unpredictable income not only makes it hard to plan but also to access credit, loans and mortgages. While such a situation can be exciting for some, it is undoubtedly hard for many others, favouring the young, the wealthy and the able-bodied while disadvantaging those with caring responsibilities and who are not already on the “inside”.

EMERGING AREAS OF CONCERN

Workforce Diversity

While hard to see from the outside, the systemic aspects of “non-standard” work clearly act as a filter for recruitment and retention – presenting a barrier to those seeking access to employment in the sector. Consequently, the sector has been a fertile testing ground for Diversity interventions, usually framed using the umbrella acronym of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and increasingly also Belonging (EDIB). There is seemingly no industry that has not made some kind of intervention regarding its workforce, or employer that has not invested in diversity training. While this is undoubtedly the result of a long-term process, it has been particularly noticeable since the international wave of protests and awareness prompted by the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, while the Covid-19 pandemic brought the prevalence of non-standard work arrangements into public view on one hand and fostered hostility towards some (particularly East and Southeast Asian) communities on the other.

In particular, there has been a sharp rise in industry attention to its workforce, fostering a host of reports, measures, strategic initiatives and policy lobbying. There remains no methodological standard for doing so, however, and the headline figures that are routinely generated rarely allow for comparisons (between organisations, industries or employment strata, or over time). As well as a rise of research and reporting, this period has also seen an increased demand for the expertise and labour of “diversity” consultancy in CCIs, combining advice and training in awareness with subject expertise. Equally, overload and burnout are common features as heightened demand to address systemic inequities falls on overburdened and typically already-marginalised individuals. While such initiatives suggest that existing inequalities and issues of diversity are now being acknowledged and addressed, there is a danger of simply enacting “diversity discourse management” (or public relations) that feeds new crises, rather than a more rigorous process of monitoring and improvement.

Organisational Diversity

Diversification and reductions in state spending have produced an extremely competitive funding landscape – and one that is difficult to navigate. For both grant recipients and commercial suppliers, contractual compliance with the requirements of funders and clients has become an important mechanism of governing culture – via public funding audits, Corporate Social Responsibility or Economic/Social/Governance reporting – requiring organisations to meet targets around diversity and social impact, for instance. Funders remain key gatekeepers in the ecosystem, although the bureaucratic requirements can de facto restrict successful candidates to “the usual suspects”.

Interest has also grown in alternative (old and new) models of organisation, ownership and governance, particularly social enterprises such as worker cooperatives and Community Interest Companies (CICs). The latter combines the non-profit, pro-social elements of a

charitable body with the greater control, agility and leadership of a small firm, setting clear rules around the use of profits and assets to meet community needs and address a social purpose. Other creatives experiment with new technologies such as blockchain-driven Decentralized Autonomous Organisations (DAOs). In both cases, the notion of a participatory “community”, one that goes beyond employees and customers, bound together by common purpose (or sense of “belonging”), is crucial. Nonetheless, there are echoes here of the historic reliance of creative organisations on unpaid and volunteer work: considerable amounts of invisible and uncounted labour, usually going well beyond the normal working day, must take place to sustain such enterprises – which, even more intensely than the broader cultural sector, suffer from a sense of demographic monoculture.

Spatial Diversity

We note a particular paradox whereby many of the above issues around access, ownership and unpaid labour are exacerbated by the substantial living costs of London. Rents (for both housing and workspace) remain high thanks to an artificially sustained property market during an ongoing housing crisis and the Covid effect of working from home and provoked relocation. Much of the UK's unbalanced creative economy remains centred on London, despite high-profile relocations from parts of the BBC and English National Opera, as well as commercial investments such as EMI North. Many of these are loosely associated with the UK government's “Levelling Up” agenda, which seeks to address geographic inequities although, in practice, remains a largely rhetorical exercise backed up by competitive funding allocation. The power of local authorities to act here is severely curtailed by over a decade of successive austerity-driven funding cuts.

Within London, a particular innovation since 2018 has been the Creative Enterprise Zone model, in which coalitions of creatives and related businesses, residents and developers bid to take a lead on local development that remains affordable and community-engaged. Artists, cultural organisations and developers increasingly form (often-uneasy) partnerships to secure affordable housing, co-working spaces and funding for community-engaged arts – usually with the express intention to counter gentrification and displacement, although not always successfully. This remains tricky terrain to navigate, particularly with a view to sustaining such coalitions and initiatives for more than a few years.

Representational Diversity

Finally, the central rationale for the very existence of a cultural and creative ecosystem at all lies in the stories, experiences and sensations that are available as a result: what gets told, seen, heard, shared, preserved and protected; and, crucially, who gets to participate in the kind of critical dialogue this process entails (and not simply “consume” its products). A meta-story here therefore regards the dual questions of who, in all these debates, is seen and heard and how much is known (about and by whom). There remains a tension between the quantity and quality of growing visibility: historically underrepresented communities have become in some ways hyper-visible in recent years (e.g. on-screen); yet too often at the cost of stereotyping and homogeneity, relegated to a position where they are obliged to tell (a particular version of) “their story” in a way that those who adhere to social and aesthetic norms are not – in so doing obscuring the diversity within diversity.

The UK's data collection regime is relatively fine-grained in this regard, allowing for a range of ethnicities and “hybrid” categories (e.g. Black-British) that can be monitored. Such categories come to prominence in, for example, funding programmes that require, for example (in the case of the BFI), reporting on adherence to “diversity standards”, such as casting decisions and storytelling content. Rendered as a statistical, administrative and institutional mechanism, these labels and acronyms can become a new burden and locus of

contestation. The acronym BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), favoured for a long time, has recently been abandoned by government agencies in recognition of the huge variation it contains. (B)ESEA (British/East and South East Asian) has emerged in a counter-movement – particularly in response to anti-Asian violence and stereotypes perpetuated throughout the pandemic – but this too threatens to homogenise diasporic groups too much, especially if mobilised in quantitative terms.

The position of “class” within diversity is also telling here: not an official “protected characteristic” (administratively), it is also difficult to “represent” (e.g. visually or sonically), other than in a crudely reductive manner. Class is therefore absent in much representational discourse – yet, understood in terms of access to wealth, social networks, education and cultural opportunity, a hugely important structuring absence. Once again, with any such label, the question is not simply one of accuracy but of holding open space for new knowledge and collective understanding to emerge. It is the resultant quality of understanding of this contingent and dynamic process, and the possibility for shared experiences to be articulated, that is most highly sought – not somehow “correctly” accounting, in quantitative terms, for the full range of available identities.

IMPLICATIONS

The research undertaken by the London Cultural Diversity Lab has aimed to take stock of the UK's experiences of (i) creative industries policymaking, (ii) Equality, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives; and (iii) experiences of multiple compounding crises. Our insights are substantive, regarding how this ecosystem “works” (or in what areas and in what ways it does not), but also reflexive and processual, regarding the conduct of research on this domain itself. Both of these are specific to the institutional make-up and governance dynamics of the UK.

There is much to learn from the UK experience in terms of “joined-up” policy experimentation, demanding institutional work to mediate and translate between multiple government departments, industry actors and civil society, across spatial scales. An ongoing task has been connect the centrality of cultural value to a concerted industrial strategy; a more recent one has been to bring in the underlying importance of social infrastructure. Understanding how this comes to take shape requires recognition that policy innovation only occurs within specific national, cultural and institutional contexts.

A growth strategy, difficult enough to develop in itself, is not sufficient for the CCI. An innovative, sustainable and inclusive growth process needs attention from the start. Access to training and education is obvious but so is support for creative work as a viable career option. Of course, a major failure in achieving a diverse and inclusive workforce is not simply access but issues of retention, which often relate to the work quality and employment conditions (notably, entitlement to holiday, sick leave, maternity pay, and pensions). Until these issues are addressed, little progress will be made.

In this light, the CCI appear as the ‘canary in the coal mine’ for changing socio-economic patterns: not least, flexible and agile but casualised and precarious forms of work. The question finally hinges on whether social contracts forged in the 20th century can be refitted for the 21st century. Put more optimistically, the CCI would be a good place to begin the new experiment of how to fix this issue.

A key final insight for the CIRCE project concerns the nature of “creative impact”. This often appears in policy prescriptions that seek to “add creativity” to increase X (where X is growth, employment, tourism, wellbeing, social cohesion and so on). Yet impact is not linear and mechanical but bidirectional; impacts on the system itself must not be forgotten. If this ecosystem has been resilient in the face of crisis, it is for systemic reasons that cannot be taken for granted.

Polycrisis requires, in summary, the active protection and promotion of cultural polydiversity: a plurality of diversities – not just of available goods and services, or of demographic representation, but of strategic approaches, collaborative spaces and economic models. This requires novel languages and analytic frameworks, such as that we have sought to develop which, we argue, draws attention to internal processes of intermediation and underlying socio-economic infrastructure.

The implications here are that new intermediary institutions are required, and new forms of knowledge and data collection that can speak across existing domains of research, practice and governance, to inform action at scale. To some extent, the work of our own lab is testament to the limits of the university as an institution capable of carrying out this kind of experimental and innovative work in ways that are, despite best intentions, engaged and inclusive.

A different way of conceiving of creative impact, then, might be as a way of holding space for apparent societal contradictions to be worked out in public. This might sometimes be to envision culture as a balm or an escape, generating inspiration or new modes of expression. But it can also be a provocation, criticism or disruption; it can enable difficult conversations to take place. A key policy implication then simply concerns first the recognition and then the governance of an open cultural and creative sector as an ecosystem in itself – albeit one which is irreducibly diverse, hybrid and dynamic.