

INTRODUCTION

France in the Age of Covid-19

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What does Covid-19 reveal about France today? What are its effects on culture, politics, and society? One of the contentions of this special issue is that measuring its impacts takes on full significance when approached in the context of other crises that have affected the nation in recent years. These include growing inequality and social and political division, and the rise of populism. This special issue examines how these existing predicaments shed light on the impact of Covid-19. It also seeks to explore ways through which we may give meaning to this tragic moment in French history through art and the public humanities.

The pandemic has transcended boundaries. Anonymous medical professionals and caregivers, as much as relatives and loved ones, have identified with the victims and acquired an ongoing ethics of remembrance. Their ability to respond to the trauma of others was enabled through the departures they took from themselves. The study of trauma has shown in this respect how identification and empathy make individuals partake in the process of collective memory through a transference of affect. Stories of survivors entered the global public sphere, each testimony partaking in the construction of a collective memory.

Another way to consider the pandemic in a French context, Bernard-Henri Lévy has suggested, is to compare it to the contagion that René Girard analyzed through his concept of mimetic desire. A systemic outcome of human rivalry and scapegoating, mimetic desire brought us back to the origin of societies. On the other hand, referencing Étienne de la Boétie's *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, Lévy asks whether some of the most common features of people's reaction have not in fact been overreaction and implicit consent. Such an interpretation has implications for the future. Between denial and neurosis, humanity's withdrawal in face of the calamity constituted "an extraordinary global surrender."¹



Lévy makes two points in particular that underscore the need for and relevance of the present study. First, he emphasizes the urgency of such an inquiry: “It is time to discuss the effects of all this on our minds and societies. It is time to put our finger on what has begun to take place at the level of what connects us, as well as in the deepest and most obscure parts of ourselves.” Second, he suggests that this investigation should go beyond the realm of science to explore its human, societal, or even artistic implications: “An epidemic is a social phenomenon that has a few medical aspects.”²

This special issue predominantly discusses the nonmedical aspects of Covid-19’s impacts on France today. It seeks to make sense of a crisis that is still unfolding via its effects on people’s beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors, and through Lévy’s contention that “the risks and responsibilities of [this task] no longer fall to the politicians or the physicians.”³ These tragic circumstances call for renewed reflections inspired by the humanities (i.e., philosophy, literature, ethics) about our living experience: “Il faut profiter de cet instant tragique pour redonner du sens à l’investissement le plus important: celui que nous devons consentir pour la vie.”⁴

The pandemic has put at the forefront of our consideration the limits of scientific and political capabilities. According to Michel Onfray: “La gestion politique de cette épidémie est simple: il est impossible de l’arrêter, de la stopper, car ça n’est pas, pour l’heure, dans le pouvoir des hommes.”⁵ The vaccines that have been developed are evidence of the human capacity to control the spread of the virus, not its subsistence and possible resurgence in different forms. Since as living organisms, viruses possess a life of their own, it seems impossible for humans to eradicate them entirely:

Le virus est un parasite opportuniste qui colonise une cible pour se reproduire, donc vivre. Quand il a colonisé, au-delà du bien et du mal ... il a réalisé ce pour quoi, comme vous et moi, il est programmé : vivre, copuler, se reproduire et mourir. Le coronavirus obéit donc aux logiques de ce que Nietzsche nomme la volonté de puissance : en aveugle, il veut exister, et ce dans la plus pure innocence de son devenir.⁶

Beyond good and evil, writes Onfray, the virus underscores the limits of the capacity of humans to control their destiny. What can then be our responsibility from a non-medical perspective? It is, through our thoughts and actions as citizens, to lessen the virus’s capacity to cause harm and suffering; to care for its victims, wear masks, and get vaccinated; to prevent the spread of the disease. It also involves giving proper attention to the most vulnerable people who live in isolation. Paradoxically, Covid-19 reminds us of what we have in common through the shared acknowledgment of our fragility, suffering, and mortality. Healing, in this respect,

goes beyond the restoration of our physical health, as essential as it may be. It also entails the recognition and understanding of our responsibility as members of the human community.

We need first and foremost to recognize the ways that human devastation of the global ecosystem contributed to the outbreak of this pandemic, as well as SARS and Ebola before it. Its origin is linked to the profound modifications made by humans of their natural environment, through pollution and deforestation:

Près de 70 percent des maladies infectieuses humaines sont zoonotiques, ce qui signifie qu'elles ont un porteur animal de transmission. Ces porteurs évoluent dans des habitats naturels : forêts, rivières, prairies. On a déstabilisé les équilibres en place avec les espèces présentes et affecté des réservoirs vecteurs de pathogènes infectieux de types virus, bactéries et parasites.⁷

The coronavirus reminds us also of the vulnerability of civilizations. Published in 1919, Paul Valéry's "The Crisis of the Mind" revealed, via the aftermath of the massive death and destruction caused by World War I, that a civilization has the same fragility as a life. The conflict set in motion an intellectual crisis. Following the deaths of millions, the illusion of a European culture was lost, according to the French poet. Knowledge had proved impotent to save anything. Science was mortally wounded by its mortal ambitions, and, as it were, put to shame by the cruelty of its applications. The cataclysm was followed by the 1918 influenza that was instigated by a virus of avian origin, causing the death of fifty million people worldwide.

The horrific outcomes of that pandemic and the two world wars brought forth a disillusionment that has carried over into the postmodern age. Closer to us, Francis Fukuyama's prediction—that the fall of Communism and the end of the Cold War had brought forth the end of history and that the "universalization" of democracy and peace among nations would follow—did not fully grasp the challenges to come in the twenty-first century: not only the struggle among peoples of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, but also, from an environmental standpoint, the conflict between planet Earth and civilizations, in which no human being is assured survival.

The study of Covid-19 in France takes on a broader significance through our shared recognition that we live in a time of crises. Like nature, inhabited by millions of viruses that can affect us at any moment, our technologically driven world possesses the means of its own destruction; economic and financial policies undermine the very existence of our democracy; and the postmodern and post-human age fundamentally challenges our ability and legitimacy to conceive future ideals.

Studying the impact of Covid-19 in France reveals weaknesses and strengths. What challenges has France experienced through this crisis? To what extent do these difficulties result from past and ongoing predicaments? What lessons can be drawn from the repercussions and responses generated by Covid-19? One is that it calls into question different ideas of progress: “En 2020, c’est dans le ‘nouveau monde’ de la ‘start-up nation’ que se promène d’un air malin le coronavirus, obligeant une nation avancée et moderne, une puissance mondiale, à recourir à la pratique primitive de la quarantaine généralisée.”⁸

The first diagnosis is that the coronavirus has struck a society that is already vulnerable: “Cette crise intervient dans une France dont les fractures sont immenses, et qui alimente depuis longtemps déjà la défiance, le ressentiment, la violence.”⁹ The texts that follow explore the nature of the divisiveness and hostility that have significantly grown in the Hexagon since the start of the pandemic. They study the nature of these growing divides, but also the cohesion and allegiance of an entire nation in confronting the virus, and call for a renewed unity:

En perdant le sens de ce qui nous relie, nous avons fini par nous enliser dans l’indifférence et le chacun pour soi, et la politique même s’est peu à peu dissoute dans le conflit d’intérêts. [...] Il est urgent de vivre de nouveau comme un peuple, c’est-à-dire comme des personnes qui se savent liées les unes aux autres par une communauté de destin.¹⁰

On the opposite side of this vision, Covid-19 happened in a climate of fear and violence within French society. This was illustrated, for example, by acts of Islamophobia against Muslim women and the Mila Affair, in which a sixteen-year-old received thousands of hate messages and multiple death threats for the comments she made about Islam on Instagram in January 2020. This climate culminated in October 2020 with the beheading of schoolteacher Samuel Paty who had shown caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad during a class taught on freedom of expression.

Additionally, although crime was down sharply in 2020 due to the *confinements*, domestic and sexual violence were significantly on the rise. A communiqué of the National Academy of Medicine published on December 18, 2020 indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic provided fertile ground for the increase in domestic violence. From the beginning of April 2020, the UN also sounded the alert regarding the increasing incidence of violence against women in the world. In France, this increased by 30 percent during the first confinement.¹¹

Hostility in French society has traditionally been symptomatic of a division that manifested itself, for example, during the *gilets jaunes* movement. It has had multiple causes; among them, the consequences of glo-

balization on the French economy and the radicalization of political debates. The coronavirus era, however, saw an amplification of new types of violent behavior, such as gratuitous and senseless violence and an increase in femicides and anti-LGBTQ violence.¹²

From the perspective of French politics, Covid-19 exacerbated a malaise already palpable in the *gilets jaunes* crisis. The pandemic extended the lack of confidence of French people in their medical, scientific, and political authorities. The head of a department of medicine at the Raymond Poincaré University Hospital in Garches notably pointed to the failures of the French government to adequately tackle the crisis. These included the shortages of masks and tests, wait-and-see attitudes, conflicts of interest, and the preeminence of dogmatism over pragmatism in decision-making.¹³ This explains why, according to this view, the coronavirus crisis hit France for longer than other countries and increased the level of disconnect between the people and their elites:

Dans le détail, les trois quarts des Français reprochent au gouvernement de ne pas leur avoir dit la vérité sur l'ampleur de l'épidémie (75 percent), de ne pas avoir su prendre les bonnes décisions au bon moment (74 percent) ou de ne pas avoir correctement équipé les hôpitaux et les soignants pour faire face au virus (76 percent). Ils sont également 76 percent à regretter que le gouvernement n'a pas été plus clair sur les mesures à prendre.¹⁴

In "Political Ramifications of Covid-19: Inequalities, Divides, Populism," Éric Touya de Marenne examines how the pandemic crosses into existing socio-economic, political, and existential crises that the nation has faced in recent years. He considers its impact in the context of the multiple budget cuts that have negatively affected the French health-care system over the past decade, and significantly lessen, according to health officials, the country's ability to tackle Covid-19.¹⁵ He explores the fact that a growing number of people link the failures of their leaders to France's growing dependence on the EU and the decline of its sovereignty in a globalized world. The coronavirus's repercussions are measured through the prism of the current socio-economic crisis triggered by months of confinements, the rise of unemployment and populism, and what this could mean for the future of democracy.

In "Stages, Streets, and Social Media: Intersectional Feminism and Online Activism in France during the Pandemic," Claire Mouflard analyzes the work of "Camille et Justine," two theater actresses living in Paris who have been publishing humorous videos on YouTube since 2016. With over 150 publications, ranging from "Ma jupe n'est pas une invitation" and "On répond aux commentaires des masculinistes" to "Les règles" and "Pourquoi l'homophobie," their videos have been de-

voted to defending women's and LGBTQ rights in France. Their virtual platforms have allowed their message to reach a large audience: with eight million total views, 82.8K subscribers on YouTube, and over 70K followers on Instagram, the two comedians have become staples of the French virtual feminist world.

Overall, Mouflard's article is a study of intersectional feminist activism in France, shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic (in relation to the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements) and during the March-May 2020 lockdown. In particular, this research addresses the rivalries exposed on social media between second-wave feminists, the "féministes identitaires," and the following intersectional feminists: Rokhaya Diallo, Aïssa Maïga, Nadège Beausson-Diagne, Noémie de Lattre, Camille et Justine, and the *Colleuses*. While the use of social media became a necessity during the 2020 French lockdown, it has also allowed artists to become full-fledged activists and to nurture debates and conversations around the topics of sexual assault and femicides, as well as institutional racism and misogyny in France.

The existence of bookstores, cafés, and theaters has revealed the importance of the role that the arts and humanities have played in French society. Considered non-essential during the confinement by the French government, their closure was met with vigorous opposition and protest. The Syndicat de la Librairie Française contended that "le livre est un bien essentiel,"¹⁶ and sales remained strong despite two confinements that lasted several months, driven by people in search of proximity who wanted to support small local businesses and through this support defend a certain lifestyle and way of life.

In the alienation of Covid-19 lockdowns, the humanities constituted an essential path through which citizens could reflect and take part in community. In a world dominated by social media, Sherry Turkle has explored recently how the art of storytelling, the traditions of oral history, and conversation promote self-reflection and develop our capacity for empathy. In this respect, the coronavirus demonstrated the importance of bookstores and libraries as spaces where French people could exchange ideas and converse through the act of reading.

In a broader context, the public humanities move citizens beyond themselves toward a renewed collective consciousness. They give access to the narrative imagination of different individuals and cultures and significantly widen people's perspectives on the human condition.

In "France in the Times of Covid-19: The Public Humanities as a Vaccine for Coexistence," Araceli Hernández-Laroche describes the role of French public intellectuals in the pandemic, particularly existentialists who have appealed more recently to non-traditional audiences beyond

the university. Several community and faith leaders have referred to Albert Camus's *La peste* as a literary touchstone. Her article focuses on how this pandemic has accelerated the pace, urgency, and demand for her collaborative public-facing work outside academia. She also argues that the public humanities offer a framework not just for public intellectuals but also for activist engagement. The Parisians' ad-hoc shelter system through which they opened their homes and apartments to migrants and asylum seekers illustrates this engagement.¹⁷ As a college professor and immigrant rights activist advocating beyond university walls, Hernández-Laroche contends that we must seize this historical moment to re-articulate the value of the public humanities, re-imagine new frontiers of public scholarship, and transform the relationships between the university and its surrounding communities.

During the past months, people have created new virtual spaces through art and music in which they can continue exchange and conversation. This occurred when the musicians of the Orchestre National de France performed an online rendition of Ravel's *Boléro*. The video was watched on YouTube over three million times. Significantly, the musicians contended that their aim was to "maintenir du lien, pendant cette période particulière" while others asserted that the experience provided a feeling of unity. For Didier Benetti, escaping confinement through the event was therapeutic.¹⁸

The experience revealed the relevance of art in the age of Covid-19, and the ways that it enabled encounters with others, and beyond that, an escape and time for reflection. The *Boléro* musical performance entailed a return to life and extended the participants' (both performers and listeners) search for meaning, along with the feeling of unity with others.

Flânerie, for its part, allows idlers to distance themselves from the stresses and uncertainties of life. Significantly, in *Jeux de massacre*, a play by Eugène Ionesco in which a mysterious infectious disease is terrorizing and disseminating throughout an entire community, the city official forbids the exercise of most human activities, including all movements, meetings, and *flânerie*. In "Flânerie in the Time of Covid-19: French Journalistic References to Bookstore Strolling and Fashion Walking," Marylaura Papalas explores contemporary *flânerie* during a time of quarantine, isolation, and curfews. She examines how the act of urban walking that is rooted in nineteenth-century French culture evolved into current times, and how Parisians and other French citizens changed their peripatetic habits under these new, irregular, and sometimes unexpected rules. She also questions whether these new Covid-19 policies were in fact limiting or liberating through contemporary French texts, digital media, and recent publications on the subject. Cataloging new ways of experiencing

the city stroll; questioning whether *flânerie* can exist under such circumstances; asking what contemporary walking conditions mean for ethnic, gender, and racial minorities; and examining whether digital and virtual iterations of the nineteenth-century practice can be meaningful—all these considerations are vital to this study of Covid-19 and its effects on French society and culture.

Tessa Ashlin Nunn analyzes the episode during which the seats of the Palais Garnier and Opéra Bastille remained empty for a significant portion of the 2019-2020 season of the Paris Opera Ballet, first as a result of pension reform strikes and then because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing from Susan Leigh Foster's work on the value of dance as a commodity and a gift, she explores, in "The Paris Opera Ballet Dancing Offstage: Work, Grace, and Race," the ways in which spectators—who may or may not be able to afford access to the traditional sites of the Paris Opera Ballet—engaged with the company's dancers and their work during the strikes and the national lock-down. Furthermore, she considers the performances of dancers in three sites: the city, the internet, and at home. These atypical performances also present dance as an accessible gift given to summon people into relations. They allow us to reconsider the social value of performing artists as creators and givers of beauty and knowledge.

Covid-19 has lifted the veil on the opacity of our nature, the human fallibility that divulges its fragile constitution. In France, it revealed the human capacity for violence, our deep anxiety and vulnerability, but also the paths through which we can find healing, through our attention to the other (victim or caregiver), altruism, and sometimes sacrifice.¹⁹

The successive lockdowns and travel restrictions brought about anxiety and depression and significantly impacted people's mental health. Bookstores, cafés, and theaters could, like hospitals, become places of healing. Bibliotherapy has demonstrated in this respect that literature possesses the power to liberate the mind from the bondage of anguish. Like art and music, it heals the mind and soul by restoring the emotional and psychological health of patients affected by the disorders of a stressful world. Its therapeutic foundations provide a means of soothing troubled minds. From an ancient Greek perspective, the library constitutes a healing place for the soul.

In a text about the meaning and importance of literature, Marcel Proust explored, during and after World War I, the state of individuals experiencing depression, and how reading could bring about psychotherapeutic care. He observed that fragile minds could fall into a state of inertia, unable to want or desire. To find again a taste for yearning, including that for healing, Proust believed that patients should seek help through

the intercession of an external mind (a novel's narrator or character), and experience, through a form of therapeutic reading, a solitary and salutary introspection.

If the coronavirus makes us reformulate healing to counter the source of depression and violence, it also demands a praxis for the present and future, asking not only why it is happening but also how to respond to it collectively: "La réponse de l'action, c'est: que faire *contre* le mal? Le regard est ainsi tourné vers l'avenir, par l'idée d'une *tâche* à accomplir, qui réplique à celle d'une origine à découvrir."²⁰ This act is inspired by an ethics of responsibility that engages all participants in society.

Covid-19 breaks through the ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, and ideological realms. It encompasses the undefined, infinite, and invisible "other" engaged in the same traumatic experience. It transgresses limits and norms so that we may elevate ourselves to a higher degree of awareness and responsibility: how and why should we live individually and collectively, what might be our purpose on this earth, how should we organize society so that we may live in harmony with others and our environment? These questions concern the future of French society and of humanity. They call on French people and the global community to conceive a renewed shared experience of life.

Notes

1. Bernard-Henri Lévy, *The Virus in the Age of Madness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 13.
2. Lévy, *The Virus in the Age of Madness*, 15.
3. Lévy, *The Virus in the Age of Madness*, 17.
4. Alain Bauer and Roger Dachez, *Comment vivre au temps du Coronavirus: Un manuel pour comprendre et résister* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2020), 24.
5. Michel Onfray, *La vengeance du pangolin: Penser le virus* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2020), 252.
6. Onfray, *La vengeance du pangolin*, 251.
7. Sébastien Billard, "'Le Covid-19 était inévitable, et même prévisible' du fait de notre impact," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 17 March 2020.
8. Eugénie Bastié, *Rester vivants: Qu'est-ce qu'une civilisation après le Coronavirus?* (Paris: Fayard, 2020), 218.
9. Bastié, *Rester vivants*, 218.
10. Bastié, *Rester vivants*, 19-20.
11. Alison Sargent, "French Domestic Violence Cases Soar During Coronavirus Lockdown," *France 24*, 10 April 2020.
12. Bahar Makooi, "Covid-19 lockdowns fuel anti-LGBT violence in French Families," *France 24*, 17 May 2021.
13. See Christian Perronne, *Y-a-t-il une erreur qu'ils n'ont pas commise? Covid-19: L'union sacrée de l'incompétence et de l'arrogance* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2020).

14. Raphaëlle De Tappie, "Coronavirus: Les Français particulièrement critiques envers leur gouvernement," *Pourquoi docteur*, 11 May 2020.
15. Philippe Douste-Blazy, *Maladie française: Pandémie* (Paris: L'Archipel, 2020).
16. Benoît Grossin, "Covid 19: Les librairies ont limité les dégâts en 2020," *France Culture*, 5 January 2021.
17. Annie Hylton, "The Parisians Housing Refugees during the Pandemic," *The New Yorker*, 13 April 2021.
18. Stéphane Capron, "Un Boléro de Ravel en confinement avec les musiciens de l'Orchestre National de France," *France Inter*, 30 March 2020.
19. Sonia Kronlund and Delphine Saltel, "En première ligne, jeune médecin à l'épreuve du covid," *France Culture*, 18 November 2020.
20. Paul Ricoeur, *Le Mal: Un défi à la philosophie et à la théologie* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2004), 58.