

# The Pandemic as a Manifesto of a General and Prolonged Crisis of the Capitalist System

— *The Case of France*

Alejandro Teitelbaum

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## Introduction

**T**he COVID pandemic constitutes a significant health crisis on a global scale. Additionally, it exposes a general and prolonged crisis of the current capitalist system in its multiple aspects: economic, social, political and cultural, with its specificities in each country. We will attempt to analyse the case of France by considering these different aspects. When articulated together, they can give us a coherent and objective picture of the current state of French society.

As almost everywhere else in the world, the dominant problem in France is the pandemic and its physical and psychological consequences. This is followed, in order of importance, because the second-largest population group in France—ten per cent of the total—is of Arab-Muslim origin and Islamic confession, whether practising or not.



Photo by [Nick Fewings](#) on [Unsplash](#)

## The Economic-Social Framework

Several variables interlink and determine France's socio-economic framework in terms of wages, unemployment, poverty, inequalities, qualifications of the working population (graduate or otherwise), content and quality of education,

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the population of local or migrant origin, productive or speculative capital, health policies and the - hopefully transitory - variable of the pandemic. Let us look at some of them.

### Wages

According to statistics, employees in the lowest decile earn between seven and eight times less than those in the highest decile, and the trend for years has been for the gap to widen.

And in the lowest salaries, there is also a gap between non-immigrants and immigrants: the latter earn on average one third less than the former. The gap is even wider for immigrants from North Africa.

### Unemployment

The national average is nine per cent, which is rising rapidly due to the pandemic. Among immigrants, the number of unemployed is 14 per cent and is slightly higher among children of French-born immigrants. The increase can be attributed to their lack of education and partly because they are discriminated against as job seekers.

### Poverty

Half of the poor population is under 30 years old, and of the 5 million poor in 2017, almost a third were children and adolescents. Among 18-29-year-olds, more than one in ten is poor at the threshold of 50% of the median living standard. 38,6% of people living in an immigrant household are considered poor (at the 60% threshold of the median standard of living, i.e. 3,5 times more than non-immigrants). For people living in an immigrant household, including the person born in Africa, the rate is 44%, compared to 25% for those born in Europe.

### Inequality

Figures differ according to sources (Forbes, Bloomberg, Challenges, Capital, Oxfam and others.). However, all agree that during the pandemic in 2020, the biggest fortunes in France and the world each increased from a few billion to tens and, in some cases, hundreds of billions of euros or dollars.

At the same time, one million people would have fallen into poverty in France in 2020. Women and single mothers, young people, and precarious workers, who are the hardest hit by this crisis, are nevertheless the forgotten ones in the French government's economic recovery plan.

## Quality and Content of Education

The socio-economic framework determines the different levels of professional qualification existing in the French population. For the poor and impoverished social strata whose children and young people cannot count on the help of middle and upper-class parents with higher education and available time, the educational deficit is considerably aggravated by the pandemic and the suspension of classroom lessons. This leads to the question of the quality and content of education in France.

### Quality of Education

According to the sixth PISA study of 2015, the problem in France is not that of the "quantity" but that of the "quality" of education. An analysis confirmed today by the OECD's new PISA opus: the inequalities in student performance, which are very marked socially in France, can largely be explained by the disparities between students in terms of being able to count on teachers of a good teaching level. According to the same study, the French education system was still "average" but too unequal.

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Evaluation of the School System (Cnesco) in the same study.<sup>1</sup>

This is mainly because schools continue to treat disadvantaged students who attend classes in so-called "priority education" schools worse in France. In these "difficult" schools, students are worse off, especially because the number of teachers with little or no training or experience assigned to them has

increased over the last decade. For example, the number of teachers under 30 in priority education is twice as high as in other schools. The number of new teachers assigned to schools considered "difficult" has increased significantly since 2011, from 1,738 in 2011 to 3,185 in 2016.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of March 2021, in Seine-Saint-Denis (the worst social and health situation in France), schools were still open

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despite a staff shortage to care for students. In one of them, the neighbourhood kindergarten, the headmistress reported: "I have to warn parents that no teacher will be at the school gate tomorrow". In these problematic schools, pupils are also worse off not due to chance: the education system is organised in such a way that instead of assigning the most

qualified teachers to problematic schools, the opposite happens: the least qualified teachers are sent to these schools.

Moreover, the number of teachers in France is insufficient: each teacher has twice as many pupils in each class as in Denmark and Sweden. And their salaries are among the lowest in Europe. As some specialists have been writing for quite some time: the French school system reproduces social inequalities.

### Content of Education

In the teaching of natural sciences (biology, chemistry and physics), the aim for pupils is not to explain events and facts. The objective is just to know them and describe them. Since 1995, pupils' abilities in mathematics and science have been in constant decline.

For a quarter of a century, the Academy of Sciences has constantly been reminding us of the need to establish active education, inquiry-based pedagogy, and provide teachers with adequate training and support from primary school. This picture of the content of education in France results from a process of abandonment of the rationalist heritage of the

<sup>1</sup> ↪ In the past, Cnesco produced, in five years, more than 80 studies on a score of topics such as mathematics learning, reading, social diversity, vocational training, social and territorial inequalities, etc. Cnesco has always claimed field research methods without omitting original approaches to shed light on grey areas of public education policies. This, together with its independent character, made it a scientific, demanding, and necessary tool, which, it seems, made the political elite uneasy. The current government, through Minister Blanquer, had programmed its demise, but there was strong resistance, and it finally survived, "retouched".

<sup>2</sup> ↪ Source: [Informe del Tribunal de Cuentas - Octubre 2017](#).

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encyclopaedists and its replacement by the predominance of irrational thinking that has been going on for several decades and extends to other areas outside education.

The above situation was well summed up 41 years ago on the cover of issue 392 of the French magazine Critique of January 1980: The political-philosophical year: the height of emptiness. On page 52, the following sentence—in an ironic tone—by Jacques Bouveresse can be read:

*There was a time when someone who had used more or less exclusively such relative and subjective categories as pleasure or boredom to justify his philosophical adherences and rejections would have been taken for a gentle joker and politely invited to deal with something else. But, thank God, that was so long ago ... It has long since been explained to us by the most authoritative and influential voices that philosophy has no worse enemies than the spirit of seriousness, the zeal for truth, logic, the taste for precision and the ridiculous desire to justify what we say with real arguments .... "*

The spokesmen of the dominant ideological currents are, among others, Michel Foucault, Bernard Henry Lévy, Alain Finkelkraut, André Gluksman and Alain Badiou.<sup>3</sup> All of them are imbued with Heideggerian philosophy.<sup>4</sup> We will dwell on Michel Foucault, who remains a "maître à penser" and a sort of representative model of the dominant ideologies in France.

Michel Foucault declared himself heir to the ideas of Heidegger and Nietzsche: *My entire philosophical development was determined by my reading of Heidegger. But I recognise that my preference was for Nietzsche.* Foucault agreed with Heidegger in rejecting "bourgeois humanism", which, according to the latter, restricts the freedom to "think of being" with its anthropocentrism and rationalism.<sup>5</sup>

John Weightman, who was a professor of French language and literature at Kings College London and Westfield College, University of London, concentrates on an analysis of Foucault's book *Words and Things* in an opuscle of just over 30 pages entitled *Not Understanding Michel Foucault*.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> ↪ A former Maoist and alleged ultra-leftist, who states unhesitatingly in his book *Heidegger: Nazism, Women and Politics*, that "Heidegger is the greatest philosopher of the 20th century". Bricmont and Sokal, in their book "Intellectual Impostures" (p. 163 of the French edition), quote Badiou: "In *Theorie du Sujet* Alan Badiou blithely mixes politics, Lacanian psychoanalysis and set theory. The following excerpt from the chapter entitled "Logic of Excess" gives an idea of his tone. After briefly outlining the situation of migrant workers, Badiou cites the continuum hypothesis and adds: "What is at stake is nothing more and nothing less than the fusion of algebra (ordered succession of cardinals) and topology (excess of the participatory over the elementary). The truth of the hypothesis of the continuum would make a law [ferait loi] of the fact that the excess of the multiple has no other mission than the occupation of the empty place, that the existence of the non-existent proper to the initial multiple. There would be this sustained filiation of coherence, that is to say, that what internally exceeds the whole does not go beyond naming the limit point of this whole. But the hypothesis of the continuum is not provable. Mathematical triumph of politics over trade union realism. (Badiou, 1982, pp. 282-283)".

<sup>4</sup> ↪ Heidegger postulated an end to the humanism inherited from Greek philosophy by the French Encyclopaedists and its anthropocentric and rationalist philosophical foundations. Heidegger does not propose a new humanism, but a transition from a "rational animal" to a being who thinks "where being is capable of being thought". That is to say, a transition that would be reserved for those capable of "thinking about the being". In other words, the "pure Aryans", excluding the "inferior races": Jews and others. There is, therefore, a coherence throughout Heidegger's work, between his irrationalism with theological and mystical overtones and his elitist and racist ideas, preached from the Rectorate of Freiburg in 1933/34, with his Nazi party card in his pocket.

<sup>5</sup> ↪ "Humanism implies flabbiness". [Michel Foucault entrevistado por Paolo Caruso.](#)

<sup>6</sup> ↪ In Spanish: <http://www.arcadiespada.es/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/fuco.doc>

Weightman begins by saying that in French literary prose and academic writing, it was rare for a thinker to indulge in logical fallacies or obscurities in the presentation of his ideas, and that this tradition "continued until the time of Sartre and Camus, but that the most prominent maîtres à penser of the next two or three decades—Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida—generated a change in the milieu that quickly caught up with their numerous disciples. In some speculative fields, traditional French clarity disappeared to be replaced, to varying degrees, by obliquity, preciousness and hermeticism, as if these were, by definition, more valid modes of operating than the lucid and rationally established.

This "Foucaultian expository chaos", as Weightman calls it, is nevertheless consistent with Foucault's idea of freedom, which must consist in freeing thought from all constraints, including those imposed on it by rationalism and logical thinking.

Howard Richards, professor-researcher in philosophy at Earlham College, Richmond, United States, in a lecture he gave at the University of Chile on 23 October 2010 under the title Michel Foucault today,<sup>7</sup> gave a complete profile of Foucault. In one part of it, he said:

*.... Any reader of any of Foucault's works, at any stage of his life, and up to his last enquiries into the forms of self-discipline among the ancient Greeks and Romans, is surprised or should be surprised, by his complete indifference to what we usually call (with vulgar simplification) the scientific method...Yet the academic world considers Foucault to be an expert on the various subjects he has investigated: psychiatry; medicine; the history of science; the penal system; various aspects of politics, jurisprudence, history, economics; sexuality, and others. His findings are taken seriously in universities all over the world.*

In the cultural, ideological, political, scientific and "communicational" media, there is a kind of selection or hierarchisation—between spontaneous and provoked—of the prestige or renown of certain people, where those who have in common not to question the current capitalist system and consider it immutable and inherent to human society—the Thatcherian There is no alternative—TINA—occupy almost always the first positions—and are beneficiaries of a "positive discrimination" in terms of media coverage, standings, grants and prizes. And to evaluate as the best the elitist political system called "representative democracy", which is now in a state of advanced decomposition.<sup>8</sup>

In France, the bearers of these ideas have taken advantage of their dominant position to discard from the milieu in which

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they operate (universities and others) the method of investigation of social phenomena which consists in the study without preconceptions of the socio-economic structures in force, which generate antagonistic classes of exploiters and exploited, of oppressors and oppressed,<sup>9</sup> and to impose the virtual monopoly of their irrationalist

and conservative ideologies.

<sup>7</sup> ↪ [Agitando las Neuronas](#)

<sup>8</sup> ↪ Alejandro Teitelbaum: "[Representative" Democracy in a State of Advanced Decomposition](#) — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, July 2020.

<sup>9</sup> ↪ That is to say, the materialist and dialectical method. Already Marx referred to this rejection of dialectical materialism in the Epilogue to the second German edition of Capital (London, 24 January 1873): "In its rational form, [dialectics] is scandal and abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because in the positive intellection that the existent also includes, at the same time, the intelligence of its negation, of its necessary ruin,...its perishable side, because nothing turns it back, and it is, by essence, critical and revolutionary." In other words, the preaching of the existing social status quo and the dialectical materialist method of investigation are incompatible.

As Accardo points out,<sup>10</sup> such ideological-cultural hegemony is also maintained and consolidated more subtly and less visibly through all human, social, cultural, ideological and even scientific activities, "formatting" the consciousness of the vast majority of human beings. Accardo also refers to the three domestication devices integrated into the capitalist system that he considers essential: the school and university system, the media system of information-communication and the political system of representative democracy.

This has contributed to the relegation of logical and rational thinking, essential for examining and understanding the reality of contradictory and constantly changing facts. And to the predominance of ideas-theologising and dogmatic about the existence of definitive and absolute truths.

The consequence is the progression among young people of irrationalism, the abandonment of reflection and the loss of critical thinking. The over-consumption of mobile phones and other electronic devices and the twitterisation of language are effective contributors to this situation.<sup>11</sup> Laplace is credited with the answer he gave Napoleon in 1802 when asked why God was not mentioned in his works on astronomy: Sire, I had no need of this hypothesis.

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## Violence and Islamo-Leftism

It can be said that the reprehensible behaviour of some young Muslims (delinquency, violence, various forms of trafficking...) is a product of the current state of French society. Not only in terms of education, but also in terms of social status: poverty, high unemployment rates, school drop-outs, ...

The different forms of anti-social behaviour of many young people in France are not exclusive to Muslim origins. They also include French young people who suffer from the same social, economic and educational environment as most young people of Muslim heritage. And there is no shortage of young people from middle and upper-class families in the statistics of criminal acts (rapes, fights and traffic accidents) under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

The recent spate of particularly heinous attacks and crimes committed in France by Islamist fanatics have provoked a general reaction of repudiation and a rise in the terrorism/Arab-Muslim amalgam population.

Promoted by racist figures and groups, the government took the opportunity, through ministers Blanquer and Vidal, to declare war on the "Islamо-leftists" and to initiate an investigation by the National Council for Scientific Research (which

<sup>10</sup> ↪ Alain Accardo, Notre servitude involontaire, Edit. Agone, Francia, 2001, pág. 50 y ss.

<sup>11</sup> ↪ There is an interdependence between oral and written expression and the formation of logical thinking, the capacity for abstraction and conceptualisation, and the ability to differentiate between the real and the virtual. Lev Vigotsky writes: Concept is impossible without words, thinking in concepts is impossible without thinking based on language. (Vigotsky, [Pensamiento y Lenguaje](#), página 72 de la edición electrónica). Jean Piaget has also stressed the intimate relationship between thought and language (Piaget, J. and Inhelder, B. (1968). Child psychology; Piaget, J. (1968/1976). Language and thought in children. Study on the logic of the child (I), etc. Michel Desmurget provides statistics on the extremely harmful effects of television, excessive consumption and use of the Twitter language on French children and adolescents (Desmurget, TV Lobotomie, la verité scientifique sur les effets de la television, Edit J'Ai Lu, Paris, September 2013 reprint); Michel Desmurget, La fabrique du crétin digital. 2019. The adolescent uses about 400/500 words to communicate, and an adult, depending on his level of education, between 5000 and 30,000. ([La vie avec 500 mots de français : un emprisonnement social qui menace de plus en plus de jeunes](#)). As text messages and the twitterisation of language replace face-to-face dialogue and rational argumentation, it becomes increasingly difficult to know and understand each other and to achieve the peaceful resolution of conflicts that may arise.

the latter rejected) ...into all the currents of research on these subjects in the university so that we can distinguish what falls within academic research from what falls precisely within activism and 'opinion'.

The initiative launched by Ministers Blanquer and Vidal bears some resemblance to the university policy in Germany

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proclaimed by Heidegger in his speech when he assumed the rectorship of the University of Freiburg on 27 May 1933, titled "The Self-Assertion of the German University Student", four months after Hitler's investiture as Reich Chancellor on 30 January 1933. In his speech, Heidegger, who clearly stated his elitist and racist ideas, declared in one of the paragraphs of his speech: [...] The famous "academic freedom" is expelled from the

German university because, as purely negative, it was not authentic.

The war declared against "Islamism" (a kind of substitute for Hitler's "Judeo-Bolshevism") also aims (as Heidegger did in 1933) to liquidate academic freedom in France.

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and those outside the state who share its strategy of preserving a profoundly unjust system at any cost by linking Islamism (equated with terrorism) with ideas that take a critical view of different aspects of the dominant system, such as xenophobia, sexism, environmental and health problems, endemic poverty,

the crimes of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

In the face of the ranting of minority student groups, duly exploited by the right-wing, which declares itself scandalised and cynically reminds them of the class struggle, we must stress that racial antagonism cannot help develop and implement a project aimed at eliminating the ever-deepening existing social inequalities. The latter must be the project of all the exploited and oppressed acting in coordination, without exclusion.

At present, there is a tendency to privilege the mediatisation of racist, elitist and conservative ideas (sometimes in populist disguise) that are functional to the nefarious social-political practices that the dominant system is now inflicting on the whole world.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> ↪ Several surveys show, especially since 2010, a strong deterioration of the image of Islam in France. Over a longer period, French non-Muslims' reluctance towards Islam is growing: in 1989, 33% of respondents said they favoured building mosques. In 2012, it was only 18%. "For the veil in the street, and in the same period, people against it goes from 31% to 63%." We note a decline in indifference to Islam, the "rejection of Western values" is blamed on Muslims. (The image of Islam in France [archive], ifop.com, 25 October 2012; The image of Islam is deteriorating drastically in France [archive], lefigaro.fr, 25 October 2012. SURVEY. The image of Islam is deteriorating in France and Germany [archive], lejdd.fr, 29 April 2016).

<sup>13</sup> ↪ Eric Zemmour, an extreme right-wing figure currently in the media limelight, opposes the rule of law and "vague texts such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" to what he calls the government of the people, by the people and for the people. The government of the people claimed by Zemmour is the one advocated by German National Socialism, according to which the notion of the people is racial since it consists only of pure Aryan people to the exclusion of mongrels and other inferior races. And where the written law must be subordinated to the "healthy feeling of the people" ("gesundes Volksempfinden") organised around the basic idea of Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer (one people, one state, one leader). With this ideological platform, Zemmour tackles the immigration issue and declares, by manipulating the figures, that white France submerged by immigration is in mortal danger. And he proposes a radical programme against immigrants living in France and the hermetic closing of borders for those who try to enter it. Zemmour is thus not only trying to convince a growing part of the population lacking a point of reference and paralyse their reasoning capacity and their critical sense by terrorising them with the image of the imminent disappearance of France overwhelmed by immigration. A unique case in the media: Zemmour has more than thirty minutes a day on the CNews channel (owned by Vivendi/Bolloré) during prime time to distil his philonazi venom and unscrupulously adulterate the facts.

## Pandemic

The erratic management of the pandemic by the French government must be attributed to the inability and

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incompetence of the government team to foresee and anticipate, defying—with an eye on opinion polls and the upcoming elections<sup>14</sup>—the warnings of competent and bona fide people.

This is compounded by decades of applying the commercial cost/benefit principle to health policies, deliberately ignoring the fact that this is a priority public service of general interest. The result is a permanent shortage—now aggravated—of equipment and staff at all levels.

Since 2005, the French public hospital budget has decreased by 10%.<sup>15\_16</sup> In his speech on 25 March (at 22:39), Macron could not have been clearer: Europe is not a selfish continent. We let the value chains function as they existed.<sup>17</sup>

Macron referred to the strategy of transnational companies—which he allowed to continue to operate despite the pandemic—of parcelling up or dividing their production into several countries, either by creating subsidiaries or by subcontracting with other companies and thus gaining comparative advantages over wages and other factors of production to reduce costs and increase profits.

This is the strategy of Sanofi, which has long been offshoring most of its activity to other countries so that it cannot produce its vaccine and takes time to manufacture in France a vaccine created by another laboratory. In other words, all the activity of most states—including the French state—and the respective governments is not aimed at achieving general welfare. However, their mission is to preserve and increase the profits of the economy's owners and preserve the political, ideological, cultural and repressive mechanisms of domination that ensure the status quo.

This is the dogma—clearly evidenced by the pandemic that governs the capitalist system in all its aspects.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> ↩ If he is not re-elected, Macron has nothing to worry about: he will have the (revolving) doors of his principal and patron, the Rothschild Bank, wide open.

<sup>15</sup> ↩ Cathy Dogón: [Dans les entrailles budgétaires de l'hôpital public](#) — Pour l'Éco

<sup>16</sup> ↩ Third scientific country in 1970, fifth in 1985, still seventh in 1995, France now ranks only fourteenth in the world and seventh in Europe, behind Austria, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Sweden in terms of financial effort devoted to research or DIRD (Internal Spending on Research and Development). This French lag in research investment concerns both the public and private sectors. The French DIRD represented 2.25% of GDP in 2016, slightly below the OECD countries' average of 2.34% and far behind Korea, the leader in the ranking with DIRD at 4.23% of GDP. When military research is excluded, France is reduced to around 1.90% of GDP for civilian research. (<http://www.oecd.org/fr/science/pist.htm>)

<sup>17</sup> ↩ "Value chains" is a term defined in 1985 by Michael Porter, professor of business strategy at Harvard University and business consultant.

<sup>18</sup> ↩ Note: The author developed some of the above topics in:

-El papel desempeñado por las ideas y culturas dominantes en la preservación del orden vigente. Editorial Dunken, Buenos Aires, 2015. Also published in Colombia under the title: El colapso del progresismo y el desvarío de las izquierdas. La Carreta Editores. Medellín 2017. On Internet: <https://www.surysur.net/teitelbaum-el-colapso-del-progresismo-y-el-desvario-de-las-izquierdas>. -Delincuencia juvenil: evitar respuestas simples a un problema grave y complejo. 2017. <https://www.alainet.org/es/articulo/184165>

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❖ **About the author:** Alejandro Teitelbaum is a Fellow Associate with Jus Semper since 2010. He worked for many years on the issue of human rights in the realm of global corporations and other business enterprises. As the former Permanent Representative, successively from 1985 to 2006, to the United Nations Office in Geneva, for the International Federation of Human Rights and the American Association of Jurists, he spent time toiling with the bureaucracies of the UN and member states in pursuit of an international legal framework that would harness the business activity so that it would stop violating a wide array of human rights in its sphere of influence, as is customarily the case today. As such, he witnessed how, time and time again, the bureaucracies succumbed to the will of the leading economic powers, that were adamant at maintaining the preeminence of corporate interests over their responsibility for their infringement on human rights. Alejandro Teitelbaum is a Lawyer, a graduate of the Universidad de Buenos Aires, and a Postgraduate in International Economic Relations at the Institute of Economic and Social Development Studies, Université Paris I.



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