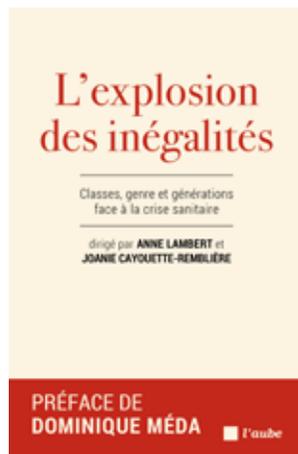




Book review



The explosion of inequalities: Class, gender and generations in the health crisis

Edited by Anne Lambert and Joanie Cayouette-Remblière

Éditions de l'Aube, 2021, 446 pages

The deeply inegalitarian ramifications of this pandemic

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How has the health crisis affected living and working conditions in France? Have the wealthiest, the middle classes, those on modest incomes, and the poorest members of society felt its impact in different ways? How have the pandemic and lockdown measures impacted the existing inequalities between social classes, between men and women, and between the young and the elderly?

Sociologists Anne Lambert and Joanie Cayouette-Remblière have addressed these questions in their new publication *L'explosion des inégalités: Classes, genre et générations face à la crise sanitaire* (*The explosion of inequalities: Class, gender and generations in the health crisis*).

Including contributions from 20 or so sociologists, social science researchers and geographers, this book, which is based on statistical data and interviews conducted over a lengthy period, immerses us in the diverse reality prevailing in homes throughout France. It takes the pulse of French society in the wake of the state of emergency declared on health grounds and widespread lockdown imposed in spring 2020.

The publication paints a picture of certain individuals and their lockdown experiences: readers are introduced to airline pilot Laurent and teacher/researcher Sophie, along with their three children; artisan confectioners and chocolate-makers Paul and Magdalena, and their two children; Christophe, who works in horticulture, his wife Marie-Claire and their four children; Nicole, who is now retired but used to work as a housekeeper assisting people in need; student midwife Louise; and, finally, Clémène and Mona, both of whom are undocumented migrants originally from Senegal, and their four children. All of these people tell of the paths their lives had taken before the health crisis struck and what, if anything, lockdown changed in their lives.

As expected, the more well off among them withstood the stresses of lockdown well and were able to carry on their professional activities mostly through teleworking, and because they enjoyed more stable employment conditions. But many labourers, employees or retailers had to cease their activity and consequently fell into debt during that period. Lockdown therefore heightened the disparities in the standards of living between the most affluent and the poorest groups of society.

The pandemic itself and the ensuing lockdown have also entrenched the existing inequalities between men and women, both in the workplace and in the home. The health crisis triggered a huge swell in the number of female workers returning to the home, leading to an increase in their domestic and parental duties and further weakening their income levels in comparison to those achieved by men. In the long run, this crisis will probably affect women's careers and might further undermine their promotion opportunities and eligibility conditions for retirement.

Young people have also suffered the pandemic's socioeconomic consequences.

Bearing in mind that they are poorly housed and dependent on parental assistance in more cases than their elders, the health crisis has added further to their woes in finding secure employment and accommodation of their own, and ultimately in achieving their independence.

This book is an important reference because it documents the deeply inegalitarian ramifications of the health crisis and highlights how the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing social inequalities. The people most deeply affected are those on the lowest incomes, the poorest, those in casual or undeclared employment, and people with few qualifications or who do not qualify for social assistance and cannot fall back on any savings, property assets or family support to weather the storm of this crisis.

Looking at the literature devoted to the health crisis and published by researchers across the entire continent, including at the European Trade Union Institute,¹ it can be concluded that the findings set out in this publication in relation to France are broadly reflected in other European countries.

This publication serves as a reminder that the European Union and its Member States need to change the direction of their economic and social policies as a matter of urgency by introducing multidimensional redistributive policies on a large scale with a view to offsetting the excesses of economic liberalism and curbing social decline.

¹ See ETUI and ETUC (2021) *Benchmarking Working Europe 2021, Unequal Europe*, Brussels, ETUI.