



Covid-19, War, and Working-Class Neighborhoods

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

The residents of France's working-class neighborhoods, accused of exacerbating the coronavirus pandemic through their supposed "incivility," have been the target of speeches that have sought to reactivate the fantasy of the urban ghetto. In reality, however, multiple sources of inequality—housing, health, transportation—have in fact made lockdown especially difficult in housing projects and exposed their residents to a greater risk of infection.

The epidemic that is sweeping the planet is an event in the broadest sense of the term: an unexpected occurrence that has shaken up our day-to-day lives, right down to our gestures and our most intimate spaces. In order to protect ourselves, protect our loved ones, and, above all, collectively halt the spread of the virus, a new moral imperative has emerged and been communicated far and wide: "stay at home," as it is the best way of "saving lives." Many of those who realized early on that there was a significant risk of a pandemic did not wait for official government announcements before implementing isolation measures, such as canceling plans made with friends, avoiding gatherings, limiting trips outside to a strict minimum, and choosing not to go and vote in the first round of France's municipal elections, which went ahead as planned on Sunday, March 15 (the day before the official lockdown announcement).

While these "pioneers" were already in self-imposed lockdown, they observed with anguish—and in some cases annoyance and disapproval—that a large portion of the population was continuing to live their lives as if nothing was amiss, ignoring the risks inherent in their everyday activities. As protective measures and social distancing are only effective if they are followed on a massive scale, the behavior of less careful members of the population renders useless the sacrifices made by the pioneers. The French government, seeking to echo this moral concern (while also seeking to mask its own responsibility in failing to anticipate the crisis), very quickly adjusted its official communications by condemning "irresponsible" behavior and decrying gatherings in certain public places in large cities. In the days that followed, the nature of this moral condemnation shifted within the public debate, and began to take aim in particular at residents of working-class neighborhoods, whose supposed behavior was deemed to be responsible for accelerating the spread of the epidemic. Were the populations of these neighborhoods more obstinate when it came to following lockdown rules? Were working-class neighborhoods truly responsible for propagating the disease? The sociology of class and working-class neighborhoods offers certain vantage points from which to gain a little more perspective on these issues.

A fragile premise

On March 18, a number of media outlets announced that the *département* (county) of Seine-Saint-Denis—mainland France's poorest *département*, covering the northeastern inner suburbs of

Paris—accounted for 10% of all fines issued for breaking the rules on the first day of lockdown.¹ Like a familiar and reassuring template in troubled times, much discourse focused on condemning the “incivility” of residents of working-class neighborhoods and bemoaning the existence of “lawless areas,” reactivating the old chimera that certain neighborhoods have been transformed into ghettos, where the rules don’t apply as elsewhere and which represent a danger for the French Republic (Gilbert 2011). This framing of affairs by certain sections of the media, fueled by the far right and certain commentators,² is based not only on a flawed vision of the reality of working-class neighborhoods, but also, and above all, on a premise—namely that lockdown rules are broken more frequently in housing projects—that is not borne out by the evidence. The figures for police checks that led people to point fingers at the behavior of these residents must be treated with the greatest caution. It has long been established in the field of sociology of the police that the statistics produced by police institutions are not the most reliable when it comes to measuring offenses committed by the general public; they are, however, an excellent indicator of police activity, that is to say the types of violations and populations on which the police focuses its resources. In other words, the greater frequency of police checks and the greater number of fines issued in Seine-Saint-Denis on the first day of lockdown is evidence of greater police activity on this particular day—but it is impossible to say whether there truly were more violations here than elsewhere, or whether checks were simply targeted on this *département* to a greater extent than elsewhere.

It is therefore difficult to assert at present whether lockdown restrictions are less well respected by certain populations or in certain neighborhoods.³ Sociological research, however, does highlight two major effects of the current situation on working-class neighborhoods: first, lockdown has created specific inequalities in these areas and considerable difficulties for the households that live there; and second, owing to the various inequalities to which they are subject—health, housing, work, transportation—working-class households and neighborhoods have found themselves particularly exposed to the virus and ultimately risk paying a heavy price as a result of the pandemic.

Domestic lockdown and housing inequalities

On the stylish poster designed by Mathieu Persan (Figure 1), widely shared on social media during the weekend preceding lockdown in France (March 14–15), the call to stay at home is illustrated by a detached, single-family home, on its own in the middle of the countryside and bathed in sunlight. This image got the message across clearly and had the desired effect, but evoked a reality that exists in rural areas and around the second homes to which a proportion of the urban upper classes decamped,⁴ rather than the material conditions of an apartment in a housing project.

While housing conditions have improved vastly since the middle of the 20th century in France, with a widespread increase in the comfort, amenities, and floor space offered by dwellings, glaring social inequalities remain with regard to housing. Over the last 30 years in France, as housing costs have rocketed and economic inequalities widened, particularly in terms of property assets, all

¹ For example (in French): www.leparisien.fr/seine-saint-denis-93/coronavirus-en-seine-saint-denis-un-nombre-record-d-amendes-police-et-justice-durcissent-le-ton-19-03-2020-8284008.php.

² See: Lucie Delaporte, “Coronavirus : l’extrême droite cible les quartiers populaires”, *Mediapart*, March 24, 2020 (in French; subscription-only), URL: www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/240320/coronavirus-l-extreme-droite-cible-les-quartiers-populaires.

³ Indeed, this notion is widely contested. See, for example (in French; subscription-only): Olivier Bertrand, “Dans les quartiers nord de Marseille, le confinement est une gageure”, *Mediapart*, March 30, 2020. URL: www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/300320/dans-les-quartiers-nord-de-marseille-le-confinement-est-une-gageure.

⁴ During the week before lockdown, it is estimated that almost a million people left the Paris–Île-de-France region. See (in French): Martin Untersinger, “Confinement : plus d’un million de Franciliens ont quitté la région parisienne en une semaine”, *Le Monde*, March 2, 2020. URL: www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2020/03/26/confinement-plus-d-un-million-de-franciliens-ont-quitte-la-region-parisienne-en-une-semaine_6034568_4408996.html.

indicators suggest that social inequalities with respect to housing have become more pronounced. Housing costs represent a large proportion of working-class household budgets, whose chances of becoming homeowners or living in socially valorized locations are already reduced. These inequalities have a direct affect on access to housing, as well as on physical housing conditions, as shown by the rise in the number of homeless people and people living in nonstandard dwellings, such as shantytowns, squats, or all-year-round campsites.⁵

Figure 1. Poster by Mathieu Persan, created on March 13, 2020



Translation: “Work, read books, watch films, play video games, draw, think, write, cook, sleep, play music, listen to music, sing, dance in the living room, take care of your plants, call old friends, keep fit, play with your children, or do nothing at all, but...

STAY AT HOME.

Saving lives has never been so easy.”

⁵ Fondation Abbé Pierre (2020). The number of homeless people increased by 50% between 2001 and 2012 (*Enquêtes Sans Domicile*, INSEE–INED).

One of the effects of these changes concerns overoccupancy in housing.⁶ While overoccupancy rates have fallen significantly over the years (by 50% between 1984 and 2006), this phenomenon still concerns 8% of households in France, or some 8.6 million people. Unsurprisingly, it is the poorest in society, the working classes, immigrants, and single-parent families who are the most affected.⁷ While overoccupancy has continued to fall for the rest of the population, it has started to rise again among the poorest households since the mid-2000s: in the first income decile, the overoccupancy rate jumped from 24.3% to 30.5% between 2006 and 2013 (the years in which the two most recent “*Enquête Logement*” housing surveys were conducted by French statistics office INSEE), and from 16.3% to 18.2% for the second decile.⁸ Moreover, among this poorest 20% of the population, 39% were couples with at least one child, and 28% were single-parent families (Calvo *et al.* 2019).

It is also in large urban areas—where apartments dominate, real-estate prices are high, and increasing numbers of poorer households live—that overoccupancy is most frequent. In 2013, in the Greater Paris area, one household in five was concerned by overoccupancy. Tenants are particularly affected, especially in the social-housing sector, where overoccupancy had fallen continuously since the early 1980s but proceeded to increase again two decades later, rising from 15.5% in 2006 to 17.2% in 2013. Lastly, in neighborhoods targeted by urban policy programs, where dwellings are generally older and more run-down than elsewhere (particularly in the private rental sector), the situation is especially difficult: more than one in five households (22%) is overoccupied, rising to a full third of households in the Paris–Île-de-France region (Sala 2018).

While the *Gilets Jaunes* (“Yellow Vests”) movement exposed the difficulties faced by the working and lower middle classes in rural and periurban areas in terms of transportation and the ever-growing distances involved in accessing employment and public services (Coquard 2019; Jeanpierre 2019), the current health crisis highlights another reality, namely that working-class housing conditions are the most difficult in the big cities, and in particular on social-housing estates. More specifically, it underlines the depth of the divide, within the French working classes, between “*les pavillons*” (tract housing) and “*les cités*” (the projects). The residents of the former are more often homeowners who occupy single-family houses rather than apartments, and tend to benefit not only from more floor space and more rooms, but also from additional spaces (garden, workshop, garage, etc.) that offer both breathing space for family members and a place in which to do “work on the side” (Weber 1989), a form of “do-it-yourself” action midway between work and leisure that enables the production of items at home for consumption by one’s own household or for exchanges among neighbors. By contrast, the residents of the latter are more often tenants who live in smaller dwellings, usually apartments, that tend to open directly on to a landing and the public spaces of the surrounding neighborhood, offering their inhabitants very few of the kinds of “third spaces”—midway between residential spaces and workspaces—that are so important in the “private realm” of the working classes (Schwartz 1990).

Lockdown has therefore brought the full extent of housing inequalities into the cold light of day. While housing is a domain in which, under normal circumstances, certain power relations play out—it is behind the closed doors of the domestic setting that women and children suffer the most frequent and most serious acts of physical and sexual violence, the risk of which is aggravated by lockdown—it is also a place of refuge that shields its occupants from institutional constraints and

⁶ According to INSEE’s dwelling occupancy index, a dwelling is overoccupied when it has at least one fewer room than the number specified in INSEE’s standard for the household composition in question, and is underoccupied if it has at least one room more than this number. A dwelling is said to be severely overoccupied if it has at least two rooms fewer than this number. For more information, see here: www.insee.fr/en/metadonnees/definition/c1236.

⁷ Accordingly, overoccupancy (including severe overoccupancy) concerns: 18% (3%) of households in the first quartile in terms of income per consumption unit (i.e. the 25% poorest households); 16% (2%) of manual workers and 15% (2%) of office workers, compared to 7% (0.5%) of executives; 29% (5%) of immigrants; and 21% (4%) of single-parent families (INSEE 2017; *Observatoire des Inégalités* 2020).

⁸ Here, income is expressed in terms of income per consumption unit, where a consumption unit corresponds, very broadly speaking, to an adult household member.

the imperatives of production. It is a breathing space, a space of one's own, a place to be appropriated, where one can escape from the relationships of subordination experienced in other spaces (at work, at school, etc.). Under lockdown, however, this space is put under pressure: exhortations to work from home bring economic productivity and market value into this space that ordinarily is to a certain extent protected from such forces (albeit less and less so), just as exhortations to ensure "educational continuity" brings more of the constraints of school into the private domain. Above all, where households have several members, the equilibrium of the household group typically depends a great deal on each member being able to enjoy moments of solitude and some kind of personal space: a space for DIY, an office or study, a garden, a workshop, a bedroom—in short, a "room of one's own" (Woolf 2020 [1929]). The long-term lockdown of household members puts this equilibrium under significant strain. Moreover, the material conditions for dealing with this situation are very unequally distributed.

What overoccupancy means

Many families in housing projects live in small dwellings, fueling all sorts of tensions within their thin walls at the best of times.⁹ Many parents and young adults have no choice but to sleep in the living room or share their bedroom with one or more children. And, for these children, the absence of personal space and the continuous demands of family life considerably reduce their chances of educational success (Bertrand *et al.* 2012). In order to deal with such cramped living conditions, each household member seeks to find moments and spaces of respite, either by going out (trips to neighborhood parks, meeting up with neighbors and loved ones in public spaces, visiting family and friends' homes, participating in team sports, going for solitary runs in the vicinity, etc.) or by developing tactics to appropriate spaces within the dwelling that are available at certain times of day or night: the living room when it is quietest, the kitchen in cases where it is a decent size, the balcony, the child's bedroom that is home to the family's computer, where the father who works nights can sleep in the day when his son is at school, and so forth. These arrangements, which are based on the alternation between household members' presences and absences, are put to the test when one or more members of the household is suddenly forced to stay at home. For example, in the early 1980s, Oliver Schwartz (1990) highlighted the extent to which mass unemployment jeopardized the household equilibrium of working-class families.

The tensions and discomfort created by living in such close quarters act as powerful centrifugal forces, inciting household members to go out, beyond the confines of the home. Overoccupancy thus plays a key role in exposing teenagers living in social-housing projects to street culture and the world of gangs (Mohammed 2011). More generally, there are close links between, on the one hand, suboptimal housing conditions and cramped domestic situations, and, on the other, the appropriation of outdoor spaces and the intensity of social life in public spaces (Coing 1966; Rivière 2017). When housing conditions are a source of tension, the option of being able to go out is a pressure-release valve: a time and space of respite that provides relief both for the person who goes out and for the rest of the household group.

While lockdown is difficult for everyone, it is especially hard for families living in housing projects, as it makes all these little arrangements based on the alternating presence and absence of household members—and providing the time and space necessary for individual and group equilibrium—difficult or even impossible. Before passing moral judgment on the residents of housing projects, might it not be advisable to reflect first upon the physical conditions that govern their existence and the inequalities they face under lockdown?

⁹ This is something I observed myself in the course of research conducted in a housing project (Gilbert 2014).

Social inequalities and exposure to the virus

What was particularly surprising in the days following the lockdown announcement was the speed with which fingers were pointed at working-class neighborhoods. Of course, as people became aware of the worrying ways in which the epidemic was spreading, with moral injunctions—followed by regulatory and police injunctions—to follow lockdown rules, the behavior of those who did not apply “social distancing” strategies could cause annoyance and indignation, and seem selfish and dangerous. And yet it is worth recalling the wavering nature of the French government’s own communications in the run-up to mid-March: on March 7, the president and his wife went to the theater, as there was “no reason to change our habits when we go out,” before announcing, five days later, the closure of schools while maintaining the first round of municipal elections, and then announcing on the day after the elections—Monday, March 16—that the entire country was to go into lockdown.

Bearing in mind politicians’ hesitations, the scientific uncertainties concerning the virus, and contradictory elements of discourse in the public space, is it surprising that the health advice issued did not seem immediately clear to a significant portion of the population? Research into the sociology of health shows that while the upper classes assimilate medical standards and recommendations more readily, the health and hygiene practices of the working classes tend more often to be guided by family-related rationales, forged through family networks and past family socialization (Gojard 2010). While the emergence of “good health intentions” within the stable strata of the working classes tempers these findings (Arborio and Lechien 2019), the populations of working-class neighborhoods (very few qualifications, high levels of precarity, very often foreign-born with the linguistic difficulties that this implies, etc.) are less receptive to the health messages disseminated by medical institutions. In a context where instructions appear to be ambiguous to say the least (consider, for example, the contradictory statements and policy reversals concerning the utility of face masks), it should hardly come as a surprise that not everyone grasped the imperative and urgent nature of lockdown straight away.

But besides attitudes to health recommendations, the primary distinction between different social classes when it comes to the issue of health is the existence of profound inequalities in this domain—one of the signs that French society is still very much a class-based society (Siblot *et al.* 2015; Gelly and Pitt 2016). Disparities in access to healthcare, life expectancy, and healthy life years between social classes are all evidence of these inequalities, regardless of the indicator considered (socioprofessional category, qualifications, income level). More specifically, the working classes are more often faced with not just premature mortality but also the risk of suffering poor health in older age and being exposed to various pathologies (diabetes, respiratory diseases, obesity, etc.) that exacerbate the risk of coronavirus-related comorbidity. While these health inequalities affect working-class areas in particular (DREES 2018), housing conditions makes lockdown even more difficult to endure (at the risk of causing other health problems, especially with respect to mental health). These inequalities exert considerable pressure on household members to go outside, even before considering the many families—in working-class neighborhoods, or who live in shantytowns or in forms of housing where lockdown is not possible—who are exposed to a greater risk of contamination.

Furthermore, these risks are accentuated by the nature of the jobs done by residents of working-class neighborhoods that are essential for our economic survival (supermarket workers, home care providers, auxiliary nurses and porters in hospitals, refuse collectors, delivery drivers, mail carriers, etc.). Unlike the upper classes, the vast majority of whom are exempt from leaving their homes because their work is either non-essential or can be done remotely, manual and service-sector workers are typically required to keep going into their workplaces, where they are frequently in situations that bring them into contact with customers or users. At the end of the first week of

lockdown, 39% of such workers were continuing to work on-site, compared with just 17% of people in managerial roles and intellectual professions.¹⁰

Lastly, exposure to the virus is increased tenfold by transportation inequalities. In France, working-class households are less likely to have access to a car, and those that do are less likely to have more than one car and more likely to have a car that is in poor condition: in 2008, some 18% of manual workers and 29% of service-sector employees did not own a car, compared to just 10% of managers and intellectual professionals, and 6% of business leaders and liberal professionals (Coulangeon and Petev 2012). These inequalities concern residents of social-housing projects in particular,¹¹ as they are highly dependent on public transportation. Transit services were heavily reduced during lockdown, which meant that routine travel to work or to do grocery shopping had to be undertaken using often crowded public transportation, where the risk of contamination was consequently very high. This sector of the population, deemed irresponsible by some people, could well prove to be among the first victims of the coronavirus in France, as indicated by the excess mortality figures produced by INSEE in the Seine-Saint-Denis *département* in March 2020.¹²

The war on coronavirus?

In the face of this epidemic and these social inequalities, what health policies did the French government come up with? Crisis management is heavily affected by decisions taken in the recent past, and in particular by policies of austerity and budget cuts¹³ which, over the last 20 years, have weakened the public hospital system in France and reinforced inequalities in terms of access to healthcare (Juven, Pierru and Vincent 2019). In the absence of mass testing programs and the widespread use of face masks, lockdown has been the primary tool used to contain the pandemic in France. Responsibility for implementing this measure has been entrusted to the interior ministry (the equivalent of the US Department of Homeland Security or the UK Home Office), which seems fitting given the extent to which the government has prioritized this ministry in budgetary terms since 2017. As a result, the application of lockdown measures to limit the spread of the epidemic has been based on controls and sanctions enforced by police officers.

While police officers form part of the cohort of essential workers most exposed to the risk of contamination, and thus have something in common with many inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods, the relations they maintain with these residents could hardly be described as being characterized by trust or proximity (Mouhanna 2011). Since the start of the lockdown period, there have been growing numbers of reports of unwarranted checks, controls, and fines, and even of police violence, particularly in working-class neighborhoods and particularly targeting racialized individuals.¹⁴ While in-depth studies will be necessary to objectively establish and understand the extent and justification of such controls during lockdown, these witness reports are consistent with

¹⁰ Fondation Jean Jaurès/IFOP, “Les actifs et le télétravail à l’heure du confinement,” survey conducted between March 21 and March 23, 2020 (in French). URL: <https://jean-jaures.org/nos-productions/premiers-de-corvee-et-premiers-de-cordee-quel-avenir-pour-le-travail-deconfiner>.

¹¹ In 2011, 65% of households in disadvantaged neighborhoods designated *zones urbaines sensibles* (“sensitive urban zones”) owned or had previously owned a car, compared with 77% in all other neighborhoods of built-up areas (Onzus, 2004 report).

¹² The number of deaths observed between March 1 and April 3, 2020, increased by 82% compared to the previous year—the highest increase for any French *département* with the exception of Haut-Rhin (in eastern France), where the Covid-19 epidemic began in France (source, in French: www.insee.fr/fr/information/4470857).

¹³ Including massive cuts to assisted-jobs schemes that were made at the start of the current government’s term, and which have weakened local health policies in working-class neighborhoods. See (in French): Collectif, « La suppression des emplois aidés “met en péril tout un travail d’innovation” dans la santé », *Le Monde*, October 20, 2017, URL: www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/10/20/la-suppression-des-emplois-aides-met-en-peril-tout-un-travail-d-innovation-dans-la-sante_5203874_3232.html.

¹⁴ See, for example, the accounts (in French) collected on this website: https://n.survol.fr/n/verbalise-parce-que?fbclid=IwAR2YMpWqPe9LO4XSFNjsno_QMmJnliEXuNE3B0fDUUnAonxMb1DGTTTrVRZl.

the way the police ordinarily operates in working-class neighborhoods, which is to say by adopting an enforcement-oriented approach—with priority given to patrols and identity checks, despite the inefficiency of such methods in fighting crime—and by targeting young, racialized working-class men, as well as through the application of violence. While police violence concerns only a minority of all police cases, it disproportionately and systematically affects young, racialized working-class men (Gauthier 2017). For the inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods, therefore, the role entrusted to the police in the management of this crisis raises certain questions and gives cause for concern. While the prodigious speed with which the virus has spread is the result of globalization, and initially affected the social elites, it now seems clear that the capacity to protect oneself from the virus and its effects, particularly in a context of domestic lockdown, is far from equitable. And yet the political management of the crisis in France seems to be following the path of dependency that has been created by the political priorities of recent decades—the same priorities that have weakened the public hospital system, diminished civil liberties, and heightened the disconnect between the police and a growing proportion of the working classes and social movements, which now extends far beyond the realm of social-housing projects alone. While calls for each of us to act responsibly are legitimate and indeed essential, they also reflect the anthropological fiction on which neoliberal policies are constructed, namely that each individual is responsible for his or own fate—an element of the collective political subconscious that came abruptly to the surface on April 3, when Didier Lallement, the *préfet de police de Paris* (Paris Prefect of Police, who exercises wide-ranging administrative, police and security powers across Greater Paris), implied that those who had died from Covid-19 were guilty of not following lockdown rules.

Calls for civic duty and individual responsibility seek—quite rightly—to modify individual behavior in order to ensure that collective efforts to combat the epidemic are effective. But the aim of such appeals has also been to legitimize the punitive, police-led management of the health crisis in France, which has involved issuing large numbers of penalty notices: half a million in the first three weeks of lockdown.¹⁵ The associated fine is fixed at €135 (around \$150 or £120, rising potentially to €3,750/\$4,230/£3,340 and six months’ imprisonment in the case of repeat offenses), which represents a quarter of monthly income for a single person on income support.¹⁶ As these fines are the same for everyone in France—unlike some other countries, where fines issued are proportional to individuals’ economic resources—this policy blindly ignores inequalities and thus penalizes the poorest in society, while allowing the wealthiest to buy themselves a degree of freedom of movement.

The French government chose to adopt a military, warlike tone for its communications surrounding the pandemic: it is now vital we ensure that the “war on coronavirus” does not turn into a war on the poor.

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¹⁵ According to figures published by the French ministry of the interior, on April 7, 2020.

¹⁶ Translator’s note: specifically, an income-support program known as RSA (*revenu de solidarité active*), an in-work welfare benefit that provides a minimum income for unemployed and underemployed workers, currently fixed at €550/\$620/£490.

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