



Institut
Ad Memoriam



Covid-19 Ad memoriam

What we remember and what remains

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La Documentation
française

For many of us, the Covid-19 pandemic was a breach, a moment of personal and collective upheaval. To varying degrees, we were all stunned, as if the world we lived in suddenly didn't make sense anymore. This "anthropological rupture" was experienced in a variety of ways by different people, in different contexts, in different countries, and it left deep scars, as we will see throughout these pages.

When the Covid-19 crisis erupted in France, it became clear to me that we needed to collect the traces of this singular event. Not just the extraordinary stories, the heroic deeds, the great decisions, but also the ways our daily lives were turned upside down. So it was that in March 2020, with the help of a team that shared the same conviction and wanted to join in a unique adventure, I founded the Ad Memoriam Institute at Paris Cité Université. The challenge, simple but ambitious, was to collect, archive and analyse the fragments and testimonies of the crises – mundane or exceptional, individual or collective – and to do so as it unfolded, rather than in retrospect, as most often happens with memorial projects. We used a range of methods, from fieldwork and archival research to digital tools, to collect a broad range of discourse and practices generated during the crisis.

This book draws on two unique collections of material contributed by people from across the nation. The first is composed of personal

testimonies. After creating a digital platform to collect this material, I made public appeals so that all who wished to do so – not just the recognized or self-proclaimed experts – could both share their stories with their fellow citizens and, perhaps more important, pass on to future generations what they considered meaningful in their memory of the pandemic. This book presents a selection of these testimonies, which I believe is representative of their great diversity.

The second collection is made up of objects gathered by the Museum of the Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (Mucem) in Marseille, which their contributors felt were representative of their daily life during the pandemic. After the museum entrusted them to me for this project, I was pleased when Olivier Foulon agreed to photograph them.

These testimonies and objects are interwoven with a final element in the book: a set of cartoons generously provided by Plantu (the pen name of the French political cartoonist best known for his work in the French journal *Le Monde*). These drawings could be found pinned up on the walls of public hospitals across the country in 2021 and 2022, and are remembered by all those who life, or death, brought to these places of care.

The photos and drawings are not intended to illustrate the written testimonies, but to engage the reader in their own experience of the pandemic in a different way.

This is what this book is all about: to contribute to individual and collective memory work by illustrating the diversity of lived experiences, and by bringing back to the surface our own, sometimes buried, stories.

The book is also a tribute to the way individuals and groups took initiative at a time of powerful stress, forging unprecedented forms of cooperation without simply waiting for the state to step in and provide or organise the response. These experiences reveal unexpected solidarities, but also fault lines. They show how local solidarity and individual initiatives have maintained cohesion in the gaps left by institutional responses. Neighbours helped each other, families came together, communities improvised solutions. But at the same time, the pandemic exacerbated inequalities, as the testimonies express with particular clarity. The virus, inherently discriminatory, hit the most vulnerable much harder, particularly because of their age or socio-economic conditions. Crisis management measures applied uniformly in the name of equality have often increased existing disparities. There is thus an urgent need to think about more equitable responses in future crises, where attention to the most vulnerable should be a priority.

The book also shows that the pandemic is not over, at least not for everyone. While we have learned to live with the virus and our hospital services are no longer overwhelmed by patients, and now that the main measures taken during the pandemic are history, the fact remains that despair and social suffering are

still widely experienced today, and not just in the sorrow of bereaved families or in the physical effects on people stricken with long Covid. This crisis has left deep scars; it has claimed lives, widened inequalities, and had profound impacts on groups such as students, professionals and patients. It has also left a bitter aftertaste for all those who, after being applauded every evening in the spring of 2020, have been cast back into anonymity and whose working conditions worse than before the pandemic. In short, while this crisis has fuelled astonishing outpourings of solidarity throughout French society, it has also claimed victims, and not just those directly linked to the virus. Its impacts are not all behind us, and we are still experiencing its delayed effects.

A pervasive official narrative emphasizes the role of the state in managing the crisis without questioning the impacts or validity of the measures taken. It also often downplays or even ignores the role of many other players, not only healthcare professionals and essential workers but also civil society organizations, local authorities and religious communities.

Yet, if we are to prepare for future crises, we need to draw all the lessons we can from what we just experienced as a society. Unlike other countries, France has not undertaken an in-depth lesson learning exercise on the management of the pandemic and does not have a national policy on commemoration of Covid-19. There is also no national day of commemoration, despite repeated calls from many of us since 2020. (For that matter, given

that the pandemic was a global phenomenon, why not create an International Covid-19 Day, along the lines of the United Nations' special days dedicated to key topics?).

The Covid-19 pandemic was a defining event for us all, comparable in some respects to the wars of the twentieth century. Not to commemorate it is tantamount to trivialising it, without giving us the opportunity to share its memory collectively.

Why are commemorations for epidemics so difficult for public authorities to organise, when such events are commonplace when it comes to commemorating wars? Think of 1918-1920 "Spanish flu" pandemic, AIDS (despite the best efforts of the non-governmental organizations involved) and now Covid-19. I would hypothesize that whereas commemoration of armed conflicts serves to honour heroic figures as the embodiment of a strong nation, efforts to commemorate deadly epidemics, with their trail of victims, simply remind us of our weaknesses.

As a social anthropologist, I think of this book as a "counter-gift", a form of reciprocity that is symbolic, but nonetheless a way of paying back. It is a way of recognising, in the strongest sense of the word, the value of the efforts made by all those individuals – many of them invisible and anonymous – who contributed to holding our society together.

Laëtitia Atlani-Duault

Post script. The photo on the cover of this book is the only significant difference between its English edition and the French original. The original presents a crumpled "Attestation de Déplacement Dérégatoire", the official travel exemption form explaining a person's reason for leaving their home (see page 79). While the form was ubiquitous in France, I worried it would mean nothing to an English-speaking readership. In its stead, I have substituted a face mask created from a map of Manhattan, sent to me by a friend I made while I was working at the United Nations headquarters in New York – something both intensely personal and a reminder of the international dimension of the pandemic.



© Plantu

I repeat the question: yes or no, do you have any antibodies?

Like many people in France I saw and heard the media reports about a new virus from China without really believing them. What was going on in China seemed so incredible, and we weren't prepared for what was to come. I'll never forget 25 March 2020, when I suddenly fell ill during the night, the day when my life was turned upside down. Living all alone in a flat in Paris it was the worst time of my life. After three days in bed I was visited by a doctor wearing a kind of spacesuit, who said I might have Covid, but he couldn't be sure. Back then there were no tests or face masks, and the emergency services were swamped. I had to stay in bed

Falling ill

for five days without moving or eating, and take ten days off work. At the beginning of June 2020 I was due to be scanned for another illness, and when the results came the radiologist said that, considering the state my lungs were in, I must have had Covid, and this was confirmed by a serum test. I've been growing weaker ever since March 2020. It's been a dreadful time, you can't imagine what it's like...



Heroes 1/Thank you carers,
doctors, nurses!

By the time I fell ill, the virus had had time to progress. I was asked for a phone number in case anything serious happened, and first I thought of my 22-year-old son who was then staying with his uncle in Melun, south of Paris. But then I thought he should stay there, that was better for him, even if he was the person I most wanted to see right then. So I gave them my husband's number, and meanwhile I'd heard that my brother and my mother had been transferred to the infectious and tropical diseases unit, but not to resuscitation (they were both bedridden – she because of her condition and age, and he because of his serious disability). I was worried. I had my phone with me in the resuscitation unit. I was being given several litres of oxygen a day, with goggles and a face mask. 48 hours later I got a call from the hospital where my mother had been under observation since her stroke – I was the contact in her medical file and also my brother's. A doctor told me we could see my mother if we wanted to, for her condition was getting worse despite being given sixty litres of oxygen a day – she was sinking very fast. I didn't know what to do, and told him I was already being resuscitated. Of course he didn't know what to do either. I asked to see my mother, as I was afraid she would die before I could see her alive again. The unit categorically refused, because my condition was too serious. I would have to move to another building, and that was risky. The stress raised my blood pressure, and I felt grief-stricken. My brothers arrived and asked me on the phone if I really couldn't come. They sent a WhatsApp to my mother, who was unconscious, and then I decided to

talk to the doctor, who got in touch with the head of the section, who finally agreed, but only on certain conditions. I wasn't allowed to walk, had to be protected head to foot, and must always be on oxygen. I went in a wheelchair, connected to an oxygen cylinder and a catheter, and completely covered. When I reached the intensive-care unit I went into my mother's room; my brothers and my husband were already there. My husband was saying prayers to her, and I took her hand and spoke to her. I had trouble speaking and was soon very tired. After a quarter of an hour she opened her eyes, looked around and said "My dear children, you're all here!" Normally so embarrassed around her, I told her I loved her and how much we needed her, and I kissed her hand, which was difficult with all the oxygen cylinder and catheter tubes. My allotted time ran out, and as I left I asked the assistant nurse who was pushing my wheelchair to do me a favour. I told him that my disabled brother, for whom I and my mother were jointly responsible, was in the same hospital ward and seriously ill. I said that neither he nor his mother were aware that they were both in hospital. He spent two minutes talking to a colleague, who showed him my brother's room. When he returned he said it was OK, but "keep it to yourself, because I'm not supposed to have told you". I went into the room, and I could see him staring at the ceiling, so small and frail. I called out to him, "No, no", pausing between each syllable, he recognized my voice, opened his eyes wide and reached out his hand to me. It was the first time he'd heard a familiar voice in the several days that he'd been there.



Things don't taste the same

Since I caught Covid in November 2020,
some foods no longer taste the same...
The fatigue has gone, but the changed
sense of taste hasn't. Now I can't stand
celery.



Manhattan Mask

Yes, I know things are worse elsewhere

Lockdown. Grey skies beyond our shores.
Grey skies above the pebbles. Locked up on
the island. No way out beyond the lagoon.
Yes, I know things are worse elsewhere.



Sharing
and lockdown

Life
wasn't
over

I'm now twelve, nearly thirteen. I was eleven when the lockdown was announced. I was in fifth grade. I listened to the president's speech with my parents and two little sisters, and we heard the schools were going to close. A week before we'd been regularly demonstrating against the pension reform, and when talking to friends we laughed about the virus that was causing a lockdown in China, and we said how silly it would be if it happened here. And then it did happen. The crisis made me grow up, I used computers more, I thought about things and I realised life wasn't all just fun and games. It had its ups and downs, but when we saw people on their balconies in the evening clapping for the doctors and nurses, we felt better – life wasn't over.

USB flash drive



Working all alone in bed

It was hard to keep up with lessons and homework, even though my school made a good job of online lessons. I discovered what it was like to work all alone in bed, which may seem useful with some subjects, but not seeing your teachers and classmates for weeks on end is pretty tough...