Youth on Edge
Facing Global Crises in Multicultural French Society

Vincenzo Cicchelli
Sylvie Octobre

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Translated by Sarah-Louise Raillard

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FOREWORD

As they enter adulthood, young people find themselves constrained by institutions they did not build, problems they did not create, and norms and values they did not consent to. Moreover, they find themselves confronted by groups and individuals who are well-established in contemporary life—people who have the experience, power, and self-interest to use their positions of privilege to maintain and strengthen their places in the world. In addition, young people face emergent problems that inevitably arise in the course of ordinary social, political, and economic life on a planet that is changing as a result of both its own natural processes and the actions humans have taken on it.

In and of itself, this fact is nothing new. Every generation inherits the institutions, cultural systems, and empirical conditions that shaped the lives of its predecessors. Every generation adapts and alters the world it enters while leaving a legacy that its successors will enter, adapt to, and alter in their own way and in their own circumstances.

Yet for all its ordinariness, the fact that there are generational rhythms to life, but ones that play out in contingent circumstances, is a profound matter. The challenges and opportunities facing each generation are always different even as each defines itself in relation to the ones that preceded it and those that will succeed it.

Which brings us to the question that frames *Youth on Edge: Facing Global Crises in Multicultural French Society*: what conditions do French youths today face as they make the transition to adulthood? Even a partial list of recent global-historical events suggests the complexities of the world

young French people are entering. The collapse of the Soviet Union occurred just a few years before they were born. The end of that Soviet empire has seemingly encouraged Russian President Vladimir Putin to pursue the establishment of a new Russian superstate in contemporary Europe. The neoliberal project of social, cultural, and economic globalization that drew new life from the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of China to global trade once promised not just low-cost consumer goods but also a transformation of global culture and a surge of democratic freedom. After all, it was thought that the need to compete for talent would compel closed nations to open their systems to freedom, creativity, and individual opportunity—if they did not, the thinking went, authoritarian systems would fail. Meanwhile, vast inequalities in wealth distribution both within societies and across them emerged, in no small measure because of the neoliberal globalization unleashed at the end of the Cold War. At the same time—also in part as a reaction to globalization—populist movements arose demanding that governments assert economic sovereignty rather than global integration as the basis of their national economies. Populists also insisted that governments needed to protect native, "authentic" peoples against harmful schemes that social and political elites were allegedly imposing on them. The U.S.-led War on Terror that followed the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, spawned global conflicts that led to military interventions around the world, stimulating significant population displacements (and subsequent movement of refugees from conflict zones to, among other places, France) and terror attacks across the globe. In yet another change, work became increasingly de-centered in the internet age. Social media, in turn, transformed the ways people interact—even as it, like all media, focused attention in some directions and not others. All the while, global climate change accelerated, ineluctably altering the world in which life struggles to thrive. And in the midst of it all, the COVID-19 global pandemic upended all of our assumptions about the way life would flow—everywhere, all at once.

Such experiences, and many others not named, share a feature that deserves careful focus: they were experienced virtually all at once, with little time for society and culture to adapt. That is, regardless of where these events began, or how they specifically unfolded, they were experienced quickly, one on top of the other. Thus, whereas once Russia's invasion of Ukraine might have been treated as big news but only been addressed in newspapers or on television news programs once a day, today, it is an event viewed by people all over the world almost as it happens, in

a continuous feed of tweets and blog posts and twenty-four-hour news channels. Where once people might have experienced aspirational lifestyles intermittently, from movies set in places like New York or Paris or London, for example, today, influencers are ubiquitous and updates on the latest trend or fantasy are a mere screen refresh away. In other words, the notion that something can happen "out there" without having much connection to one's own life has been largely replaced with the expectation that one is always "on"—everyone is in some way or another aware of and connected to what is going on around them. As a result, we all end up being buffeted by circumstances that are numerous, impervious to direct action, and deeply unsettling.

Which is exactly the moment in which *Youth on Edge: Facing Global Crises in Multicultural French Society* engages its topic. All generations enter adulthood—much in this book is of relevance outside its French context. However, each community has a unique array of concerns, problems, opportunities, and constraints that shape the ways young people transition to adulthood. These, in turn, shape what those young people make of adult life once they move into that phase of their lives. Economic changes, immigration, struggles over French identity, populist movements, and cultural insecurities, among other forces, have shaped life in French society in recent years. Moreover, these issues have significantly affected young French people's understanding of what exactly being "French" entails even as they have constrained the opportunities French youths sense that they will have in the future. They have, in other words, experienced what has been termed a "Great Unsettling": the transformation of established paths for meaning and success into something as yet undetermined and perhaps even unimagined (Maraniss and Samuels 2016; Steger and James 2022).

Hence this remarkable book's project is to go out and ask young people who find themselves unsettled what they think about the way the world is today and where they might fit—or might not fit—into it. Rather than opining from afar, Vincenzo Cicchelli and Sylvie Octobre let French youths speak for themselves. They then identify a broad array of ways those young people make sense of how things came to be the way they are. Vincenzo Cicchelli and Sylvie Octobre also explore how these youths frame their responses to life in contemporary France. As is clear throughout this book, French youths see the sources of the crises of France's multicultural society differently. They also imagine a diverse array of places for themselves in France in the future and offer notably disparate ideas

about how to address the problems they see and how to build the futures they hope for. What they most decidedly are not is caricatures, exemplars of labels like "Gen Z" that simplify much but explain little.

This book accomplishes its goals with great skill and deep insight. It engages effectively with questions that are central to the future of French culture and civilization precisely because it examines the strengths of French society as well as its challenges. Moreover, it achieves this balance in accessible terms, eschewing jargon in favor of emphasizing the stories its subjects seek to tell. I, for one, came away from reading this book feeling sensitive to the real struggles youths in France face as they move forward in their lives, but also hopeful that the thoughtful and serious ways these young people addressed these concerns suggest that French culture and society will remain vibrant for decades to come.

Listening is the first step toward understanding. Understanding, in turn, is a step in the direction of building, maintaining, and strengthening the kinds of rights-respecting, dignity-empowering communities so many people crave to live in. Listening and understanding will not, of course, ensure that such societies grow and thrive. But the only chance we have of building our lives together is to take the time to hear and recognize what we each can contribute to our shared world.

Normal, IL, USA   Lane Crothers

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Acknowledgments

Praise for *Youth on Edge: Facing Global Crises in Multicultural French Society*

"*Youth on Edge* offers a close analysis of young people's thoughts about social problems and forms of social cohesion in multicultural French society. By listening to varied voices, a landscape of political potentials ascends. The authors pose an important question: 'What can still unite young French people and transcend what separates them?' In spite of political despair, a possibility of change arises if young people's will to participate in rebuilding solidarity is taken seriously. The book brings hope to the table without turning a blind eye to unevenly distributed structural uncertainties and the simultaneous presence of different suggestions for how to repair fractures in the social fabric—from pressures to assimilate to cosmopolitanism."

—Anna Lund, Professor of Sociology, *Stockholm University, Sweden*

"This is a great project that can even inspire a new course on the topic. The material studied is diverse and gives a nice sociological dimension to the question explored and in relation with youth and belonging in multicultural and global contexts. It proposes a nuanced account of youth and crisis in multicultural societies."

—Hervé Tchumkam, Altshuler Distinguished Teaching
Professor and Professor of French and Postcolonial Studies,
Southern Methodist University, USA

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Introduction: Does a Globalized Society Produce a Youth on Edge?

1 Toward a New Narrative

In the vast corpus of now seminal studies on youth, it is generally accepted that the historical invention of this age of life was linked to the advent of modernity in Western societies. During the twentieth century, youth became one of the ideal vantage points from which to observe the structural factors involved in the modernization of society (Eisenstadt 1956; Coleman 1961; Mead 1970). We should not be surprised, therefore, that even though young people have often been the subject of moral panic over the years, they have also been tasked with furthering the core values of Western society, ostensibly driving it toward ever more freedom, equality, solidarity, modernity, and democracy.

But is this narrative still relevant in a context where the triumphal discourse of modernity has lost much of its potency, where disillusioned, anti-intellectual, and doom-saying attitudes drive public debate (Sternhell 2009; Geiselberger 2017; Bauman 2017), and where the pillars of the republican social pact seem to be not just under attack, but in some cases already toppled (Martin 2018; Fourquet 2019; Perrineau 2019)? How should we tell the story of this youth, which was promised the hopes, certainties, and optimism of a protective society and a State committed to the socialization of risks but received the exact opposite? Can analyzing youth in the twenty-first century help us understand how societies are managing the growing number of global risks (in particular terrorism,

environmental, economic, and public health concerns) that continuously thwart the ability of nation-states to intervene and impose regulations (Beck 2012)? More broadly, to what extent does globalization produce global generations? (Edmunds and Turner 2005; Thorpe and Inglis 2019; Roudometof 2019).

As we attempt to answer these questions, we shall argue that the changing narrative of youth (which is produced equally by young people and those who talk about the latter) is inextricably linked to the lengthy series of crises that this generation has experienced for at least the last twenty years. The recent COVID-19 pandemic is emblematic of these changes: this public health global crisis has bolstered the media coverage of a "sacrificed generation," an expression which had already been prevalent for years in France to describe the deteriorating conditions facing young people as they transitioned to adulthood (Chauvel 1998). While the downward mobility of young people is not a new topic (Maurin 2009; Peugny 2009), the current context has now definitively convinced even the most skeptical French observers of the vast scope of the crisis that affects youth today and the inevitable dependence of any nation's youth on a variety of transnational phenomena, given that the latter shape living conditions and jeopardize the future for all. Consequently, although the narrative of youth was traditionally a national one, the story told by today's youth is necessarily a global one. Today's young people are navigating by sight alone (Evans and Furlong 1997), and the old maps are not of much use: carried out ever further by the successive waves of global crises, it is of the utmost urgency for them to find a life raft amidst such tumultuous waters.

2   Youth at the Intersection of Global Crises

To go beyond hackneyed slogans, we must first and foremost try to understand to what extent the dynamics of globalization have become relevant to the socialization of young people, without heeding the siren call of a new determinism (i.e., of the all-powerful global) or of a new cause to champion (e.g., the conservation of the local and traditional) (Cicchelli and Octobre 2019a). By strengthening interdependence between societies—thanks to the intensification of the global flows of capital, ideals, persons, and goods—globalization has had a powerful impact on the internal functioning of societies, which has led them to modify their political systems, their economies, their educational models, their job markets, their

social structures, and even their cultures (Appadurai 1996; Beck 2006; Castells 2009). The scope of this impact has widened the gap between public faith in the ability of nation-states to chart a course for their societies and the reality that their room for maneuver is severely hampered by the rise of inequalities and the rules of competition in the global economy. Changes observed in the various ages of life (and notably among young people) are thus closely linked to the systemic interconnectedness of today's world, rather than depending solely on the endogenous dynamics at play in any one nation (Blossfeld et al. 2005).

At the same time, the extent to which global changes affect conditions for young people is also tied to the internal transformations and historical particularities of each society (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004). Despite the emergence of a globalized world, there are still important differences between countries, including different social systems, trade regulations, labor protections, and national cultures and identities (Meyer et al. 1997; Galland and Lemel 2007). National societies enjoy a high degree of socio-historical inertia, in particular when it comes to religion, sexual mores, nationalism, political engagement, and economic orientation (Norris and Inglehart 2009). In European countries, despite a lengthy process of Europeanization (Esping-Andersen 1990; Therborn 1995) and the development of shared political objectives, national particularities based on the traditions of the welfare state remain quite significant—this translates, for instance, into a number of public policies targeting youth (Walther 2006; Chevalier and Loncle 2021). France is emblematic in this regard, as it occupies an intermediate position when it comes to supporting youth, halfway between the universalist social-democratic models of Northern European nations and the more familialist models adopted in most Southern European countries (Becquet, Loncle, and Van de Velde 2012).

In a world shaped by the proliferation of global risks, understanding youth thus entails not just establishing connections between the local and global levels of analysis, but also examining the historicity of living conditions for young people. Born during the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, young people who are between 18 and 30 years old today have grown up in a state of such near-constant crisis that one can reasonably argue the word no longer stands for an extraordinary or transitional moment between two supposedly stable periods (the world "before" and the world "after" a given event). This period of quick succession of global crises can in fact be considered as a *sui generis* age of crisis, that is, a

permanent crisis, one which produces uncertainty, fragmentation, and tension (Leccardi 2005; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009; Castells 2009; Grusky et al. 2011; Kelly et al. 2018), as well as questions about what kind of society young people will want to build for themselves and others.

3   OPEN TO THE WORLD, BUT ROOTED IN NATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Taking into account the socialization of a generation that has been rocked by one crisis after another in a global world (Cicchelli 2018) will allow us to understand the paradoxes of its condition. On the one hand, the younger generations share a strong norm of openness to the world which aligns with the societal diktats of the elite, be they concerning the European project, the regulation of international economic competition (free trade treaties in particular), or the standardization of credential evaluation for higher education (the Lisbon Recognition Convention). This standard of cultural openness finds its parallel in the growing mobility of young people and the increasing internationalization of their cultural consumption patterns, repertoires, and imaginaries (Cicchelli and Octobre 2018). The cosmopolitan amateur thus thrives in a global market where cultural industries have transformed the marketing of difference into a major driver of interest in alterity, albeit one of a consumerist nature (Emonstpool and Woodward 2018). While aesthetico-cultural cosmopolitanism is thus closely tied to the historical form of contemporary capitalism, in the realm of social cohesion,[1] no institutional body (be it post-, inter-, or supranational, like the UN, the European Commission, or the various international criminal courts) has been able to support the development, on an ethico-political level (especially with regard to human rights) of a narrative of the *cosmopolis* that is as popular and compelling as exoticism, and which could thus prevail over the ancient concept of the nation (Cicchelli and Octobre 2019b). French youth may therefore have vast global cultural imaginaries, and they may also adopt forms of ethico-political engagement and action that are truly transnational—as evidenced by youth

[1] Translator's note: the French expression used in the original text, *vivre ensemble,* translates literally to "living together." However, I have chosen to translate this concept using various other expressions such as "social cohesion" and "social coexistence" depending on syntax and the aspect of life in a society that is being emphasized at any given point, be it tolerance, community harmony, solidarity, or, on the contrary, mere parallel existence.

mobilizations across the world in the name of shared values such as the freedom of expression, democracy, the fight against discrimination and inequalities, and the protection of the environment (Cuzzocrea et al. 2021). Nonetheless, the immediate experience of the social fabric that French youth have is deeply rooted in an (infra)national institutional and structural reality (with its share of shared reference points, life challenges, and social protections) that shapes how they relate to others and conceive of social cohesion (Mayer et al. 2020).

On the other hand, this standard of openness is perceived differently depending on one's social class. In fact, some individuals are tempted by identitarian closure. While the most educated young people tend to use cultural openness as an opportunity, young members of the working class (a population segment that is often concealed behind the more visible student population) have suffered deteriorating conditions in the job market for the last fifty years (with the advent of public policies to integrate young people into the workforce that became derogations from the right to work, such as temporary employment, fixed-term contracts, social integration and professionalization contracts, and apprenticeships). As a result, many have denounced globalization and cosmopolitan openness as an ideology that completely ignores the working classes and instead just serves the interests of the moneyed cosmopolitan classes (Calhoun 2003).

4   How to Live Together

Western societies, including France, are at a historical turning point: the model that was the result of the economic, political, cultural, ideological, and social equilibrium of the post-war period is on its last leg, as evidenced by the fact that progress—be it toward greater democracy, greater social, racial, gender, and age equality, greater individual freedom in negotiated collective contexts, more peace, more material well-being, or more personal fulfillment—has ground to a halt (Geiselberger 2017).

At the national level, there are many stress lines: the rise in perceived and observed inequalities (embodied by the *Gilets jaunes* ["Yellow Vests"][2] protests which raged for close to 18 months); virulent debates about racial discrimination and, more broadly, the heuristic ability of existing

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[2] The *Gilets jaunes* protests were a series of populist grassroots protests that occurred on a weekly basis in France starting in November 2018. The protests originally targeted economic justice and later a number of institutional political reforms (Guerra et al. 2019).

categories to account for social inequalities (race vs. class, community vs. nation, identity vs. citizenship, etc.); equally significant questions about the impact of technology on human life, including gestational surrogacy, and more generally on the tensions caused by increasingly liberal mores; recurring challenges to secularism (and especially French *laïcité*), both in terms of how it should be interpreted and of the role it should play in the republican social contract; the simultaneous rise of fake news and alternative facts; and finally, the emergence of forms of political action (both on the internet and in the streets) that eschew representation as the primary goal and thus undermine the pillars of living together inherited from the twentieth century, either by flatly rejecting the former or by illustrating its many failures. The republican concept of citizenship is thus singled out by postcolonial critiques of universalism: the promise of integration is challenged by the continued reproduction of many exclusions, while meritocratic value crumbles in the face of the reproduction of the elites; the liberalism of social mores is faced with new strains of conservatism; and finally, the French choice to champion a civic perspective of the nation that is tied to the exercise of rights seems to be threatened by the rise of a more identitarian conception of belonging, according to which culture (language, customs, religions) and the historical narrative (the existence of shared ancestry or not) play a central role (Martigny 2016).

At the same time, on the international level, the implicit agreement to enhance cooperation on economic and political matters has also encountered a number of obstacles. Faith in the virtues of multilateralism has been sorely tested by the latter's slow rate of success, as well as its inability to regulate global crises (in particular the economic, migrant, and climate crises). Brexit was seen as a warning shot for the European project, while the Trump presidency accelerated the United States' retreat into isolationism. China increasingly looks like an imperial power with little concern for civil liberties, while Turkey questions the value of secularism, and international climate agreements have failed to produce the hoped-for and, given the global environment stakes, highly necessary effects.

Young people are thus asking a lot of questions, including of themselves, given that they have borne the brunt of our societies' most significant changes—they are among the most vulnerable population segments—but also because they operate as a kind of litmus test with regard to the transformation of the ideologies that had anchored Western societies since the second half of the twentieth century. Touched by

successive waves of global crises and the emergence of new fault lines, young people today have a hard time recognizing themselves in our society's values, even as they struggle to find their place in the former.

5   Voicing Tensions

As the campaigns for the 2022 French presidential election have shown, it is important to understand how the crisis has affected young people and their perception of living together, including their visions for potential new social pacts. Today's youth is troubled by the evident tears in the social fabric and maintains an ambiguous relationship to globalization: young people clearly desire strong, chosen forms of belonging and appear to be searching, perhaps more than ever, for a narrative that could bring French people together above and beyond their divisions. This volume shall thus explore these various forms of tensions.

Setting aside the plentiful data that describe the objective vulnerability of certain segments of the youth population (in particular those with lower levels of education, who are often marginalized), the voice of young people is rarely heard directly. This is in stark contrast to the (over)abundance of speeches, pamphlets, and documents that purport to talk about young people, or even on their behalf. We have thus chosen to let young people speak about how they view the central question of living together in a multicultural French society. We have tried to mobilize their capacity for reflection, viewing them as informed and even enlightened citizens who want to help shape both the fate of their city and their *politeia* by making critiques, demands, and suggestions. In addition to categorizing the various forms of identitarian closure, we will uncover the sources of tension that put young people on edge: points of irritation and annoyance which can, when violent or frequent enough, transform into bitterness and resentment.

Although French youth distrust politics more than ever before, and have increasingly distanced themselves from traditional channels of political participation, they are nonetheless keenly aware of what is at stake when they praise or criticize various aspects of social cohesion—especially given the national backdrop of a public space saturated with debates on *laïcité* and the role of Islam, terrorism, the migrant crisis, racism, increased domestic insecurity and border control, national identity and attachment to the republican ideal, multiculturalism, and communitarianism. Living in a society with significant flows of information and knowledge, and for

the most part enjoying access to education and social networks, the young people that we interviewed engage in a multiscalar and multidimensional form of reasoning that simultaneously takes into account the impact of transnational phenomena, the repercussions of changes to geopolitical power struggles, diversity, and the severity of national issues in France.

It is evident that the rhetoric analyzed in this volume owes a lot to the *zeitgeist*, and in particular to the ideological templates that inform social debates, to the power relations between political parties and public intellectuals (Roza 2020; Policar 2021), and to the media's ability (thanks to the work of opinion makers, journalists, influencers, comedians, and commentators) to decide both what topics are going to be discussed and when, including by ascribing meaning to a selection of national and international events. And yet, the opinions of young people cannot be reduced to the faithful transcription of the seismic waves that have traveled through French society. Nor do they merely regurgitate the ambient social debates wholesale. While young people do belong to a generation with declining rates of political participation and activism in the strictest sense (i.e., in political parties and trade unions), they are deeply invested in political issues in the broader sense (Muxel 2018). This study thus confirms that young people are in the process of reinventing their forms of participation, trying to craft a new type of citizenship that would allow for a more direct, more just, and more effective democracy (Lardeux and Tiberj 2021).

6   A Survey Conducted in Two Phases

To understand how young people conceive of social cohesion in the era of globalization, we used a corpus of 54 semi-structured interviews conducted on young residents of the greater Paris region aged 18 to 30 years old recruited using the "snowball sampling" method during two phases: in December 2018 and May 2019.[3]

We have attempted to capture as many different voices as possible: different in terms of objective social conditions, but also in terms of

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[3] These interviews were conducted thanks to a funding convention between the Université de Paris (PID "Sociétés Plurielles"/Global Research Institute of Paris, IDEX) and the CNAF (the *Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales*, or National Family Benefits Fund). A certain number of interviews were conducted in courses on qualitative methods offered at the *Faculté des sciences humaines et sociales* (Faculty of Human and Social Sciences) of the Sorbonne (Université Paris Descartes) in 2018 and 2019. We thank the students who participated in these surveys profusely.

subjective attitudes toward the zones of tension in French society. The young people interviewed thus exhibit a wide variety of religious and political sentiments, live in different social situations, and have varying immigrant backgrounds. The sample has slightly fewer young women than men and a majority of 19–24-year-olds (65%, compared to 35% of 25–30-year-olds). Fewer than 1 out of every 2 individuals interviewed is employed, while 2 out of 5 are in school and more than 1 out of 10 are in some kind of technical training program while working. About half of the young people interviewed come from an immigrant background (which is a higher percentage than the national population, thus allowing us to better represent the variety of positions held by second- and third-generation immigrants). Our sample contains young people from a variety of social backgrounds as well: 24% are upper class, 30% middle class, and 46% lower or working class. Among the young people who are currently employed, a quarter of them have jobs that place them squarely in the upper class, one-third of them in the middle class, and less than two out of five individuals have lower-class jobs. To round out the portrayal of youth social positions, we added a question concerning their perception of their social trajectory (by comparing their parents' social status to their own now, or what they hope to achieve in the future). This subjective judgment is a confidence indicator and is likely to capture how a given young person envisions the future they desire: half of the interviewees expressed the feeling that they have or will enjoy upwards social mobility, while one-third felt they had a stable trajectory and 15% felt they were experiencing or would experience downward mobility. Finally, we recorded youth attitudes toward globalization: two out of five have a positive vision of globalization, whereas one-fourth were ambivalent and one-third critical.

The variety of youth profiles (in terms of age, sex, education level, social origin and status for those who are employed, immigrant background, political affiliation, and religion), and the fact that we also included more subjective indicators (with regard to social mobility and globalization) allow us to demonstrate that even if one's relationship to the world is partially governed by concrete living conditions—which may vary depending on the degree of social integration, on one's family culture, on the transmission and reinvention of one's immigrant history, on one's immediate urban environment—the dynamics of individual empowerment and of openness and closure powerfully influence how young people view the world. Especially given that today's social transformations encourage a growing disconnect between one's ideological positions and