

BOLD VISIONS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

The Legacy of the Baby Boomers or the French Social System?

Issues of Equality and Brain Drain

Marie-Claire Patron



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The Legacy of the Baby Boomers or the French Social System?

BOLD VISIONS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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Marie-Claire Patron

Bond University, Australia



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DEDICATION

For my daughters, Dominique and Danièle Juriansz

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NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

The quotations in this book, derived from the interviews of the French participants in my inquiry have been transcribed verbatim and all incidences of vernacular and incorrect speech and orthography have been reproduced faithfully both in French and English.

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND: THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Chollet's (2006) thought-provoking quotation from an article in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, on the plight of French graduates aptly sets the scene in this book that investigates the precarious living and employment conditions, and bleak future in which Generation X finds itself today.

I'm from the intellectual underclass. One of those who fry their brains, read megabytes of books, magazines, web pages, political pamphlets and petitions, and never get anything out of it. I'm like an engine guzzling fuel just to stay in overdrive, burning up mental energy for nothing. (Chollet, 2006. Séverine, p. 1).

In the midst of profound uncertainties in France the socio-economic situation has become untenable for the young generation. Who can be held responsible for the crisis depicted above? How can the downward social mobility of the young generations be reconciled? What are the factors that are corroding the objective model of a society of middle classes, lacking accumulation of wealth, homogeneity, and foresight? (Chauvel, 2006a). According to Louis Chauvel, the interruption of the model of social upward mobility from generation to generation is the pivotal point of the crisis of the middle classes, from which many are excluded. Can one point the finger of blame on any one sector of French society, on isolated issues such as:

- economic stagnation, uncertainties and unpredictability of the future?
- France's social model, incorporating their renowned welfare regime? – the social protection scheme, *La Sécurité Sociale* founded in 1945 and fondly referred to as *La Sécu* that provides multiple benefits, a generous retirement package, unemployment insurance etc. based on public solidarity between generations.
- increasing intergenerational inequalities that have provoked ever-widening socio-economic gaps between the Baby Boomer generation and Generation X?
- the inflexibility of the labour market in the face of globalisation?

Could the escalating social and economic problems in France instead emanate from the policies and practices of past and current French government administrations that have

- perpetuated an elitist education model where educational meritocracy and valorisation of credentials have lost their meaning?

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- curtailed employment opportunities as a result of an inflexible labour market?
- adopted globalisation by stealth?
- promulgated disastrous fiscal policies?
- and ignored urgent social issues?

Is it possible on the other hand that a combination of these factors has contributed to the lamentable state of affairs for the educated sector in France? Substantiated by quantitative research, these are the issues that I discuss in this book from the perspective of my small qualitative ethnographic study on the plight of university students, early and mid-career graduates who have expatriated or are currently contemplating a move to predominantly Anglo-Saxon countries. This dramatic response to the troubling economic and social crises in France is preferable in lieu of suffering the consequences of injustices as the French witness the disappearance of the middle classes or its re-definition, along with all the privileges that come with social stratification systems.

This disquieting trend among the increasingly highly-qualified young French educated sector is graphically epitomised by the case of Séverine, one of the subjects of Chollet's (2006) inquiry, introduced in the opening quotation, who describes her life in France in her blog. Séverine depicts an insecure working life that has 'bounced between internships, welfare benefits, temping and unemployment'. Her case is but one of myriad anecdotal examples that I have sourced online, numerous blogs and YouTube interviews that complement my qualitative inquiry into the issues affecting Generation Xers in France. This is a worrying state of affairs in anyone's language, as the scenario translates into an exodus of talented individuals who have a great deal to contribute to their nation. Increasingly, this new phenomenon of the French *Diaspora* abroad, a sociological term employed to explain the alleged outflow of gifted individuals from their country of origin, is becoming reality (Dobson, Birrell, Rapson, & Smith, 2005). The French have traditionally been known as timid travellers, reluctant to expatriate to foreign shores for work or even extended holidays because of their lack of proficiency in foreign languages (Patron, 2007, 2009).

This trend began to change at the turn of the century and it has now become de rigueur for French youth in particular to spend time abroad in countries they had never contemplated visiting previously. The inflexibility of job contract laws was already signaled as the blame for high unemployment provoking the brain drain of educated young people in 2006, even whilst some sociologists preferred a more optimistic outlook (See also Rohan, 2006). These exiles have been dubbed the *Eurostar Generation* by Campbell, (2007) who depicts an increasing number of young French professionals who owe the dramatic changes in their lives to the services of the Eurostar. With their one-way ticket in hand, they are heading to lands of opportunity, to London, Dublin, New York and other cities abroad where immigration protocols are less onerous (Campbell, 2007). Chantal, a French expatriate professor in Australia who is a participant in my inquiry adds: 'There are increasing numbers of French graduates heading to Wall St, setting themselves up

as entrepreneurs in a short period of time. It's no wonder they're leaving France.' (Chantal, July, 2010).

In 2011, from the perspective of this *Eurostar generation*, insufficient progress has been made to improve the economic and social situation that could stem this outward flow of talent as the issue worsens by the day. The reality is that French brain drain can no longer be dismissed by ministers and various other organisations as fictitious because this phenomenon has affected France for at least a decade. In 2000, Jean François-Poncet, president of the Commission for Economic Affairs suggested that opponents of the notion of brain drain were inclined to treat the issue with banality, minimising the effects of the phenomenon and rejecting the idea that the expatriation of highly-qualified graduates (from the schools of Engineering, IT and Business, the Sciences, the *grandes écoles*, and executives and entrepreneurs in new information technologies in particular) had no impact on the macro-economics of a nation (François-Poncet, 2000). How frustrating to acknowledge that after years of a costly education financed by the French public and the State, that a foreign country should benefit from their expertise, creating riches for both the individual and the host nation. This is quite an indictment for France and perhaps a metaphorical slap on the face of the French that the young generation is choosing Anglo-Saxon nations over their homeland. This phenomenon undeniably signifies brain gain for the receiving countries but sadly France is the loser; notwithstanding incoming foreign graduates balance the equation to some extent.

The exile of French graduates signifies appreciation for the talents of these young people in contrast with their own country where they perceive that their cultural and intercultural capital is not valued by French companies. In a *Le Point* article in 2008, co-author of a provocative article entitled: *Baby-Boomers: Le Casse du Siècle*, (Baby Boomers: The Heist of the Century), Melanie Delattre includes the testimonial of twenty-six year old Julien Burbach who chose to settle in Ireland after his Masters degree in Commercial Negotiations, qualified as a *baccalauréat+5*¹ ('bac+' thereafter) years of tertiary studies. The following quotation is but the tip of the iceberg when one considers how French education is perceived abroad and within France itself. Burbach suggests:

En France, être jeune est un handicap ... Démarrer en France, c'est dur. Il n'y a pas de place pour les jeunes ... [Ses griefs à l'égard de son pays natal – la dette et sa conséquence]. Cela décourage les nouveaux entrants sur le marché du travail [en France]. En Irlande, je gagne 25% net de plus qu'en France ... [La première raison de son exil reste] le manque de perspectives d'évolution de carrière rapide quand on est jeune. Les vieux nous appuient sur la tête ... [A Dublin] être jeune est un atout. En France, c'est un handicap. (Gernelle, Delattre, & Levy, 2008 p. 5). In France, being young is a handicap ... starting out in France is hard. There's no place for the young. [His grievance – the national debt and its consequences]. This discourages integration of new entrants into the labour market [in France]. In Ireland, I earn 25% net more than in France. [The first reason for this exile concerns] the lack of

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prospects for rapid promotion up the corporate ladder for young people. The older generation is weighing down on us. [In Dublin] being young is an asset. In France, it's a handicap.

Whilst Burbach acknowledges the sacrifices that his parents made to support him during his studies and job search, he argues: *Les soixante-huitards nous assistent plutôt que de nous laisser prendre nos responsabilités.* (The sixty-eight-year-olds, or Generation '68 prefer to help us [financially] rather than allow us to assume our responsibilities.) (Gernelle, et al., 2008. Ibid.).

As France struggles with questions of identity, particularly in light of the huge influx of immigration from North Africa and its position in the European Union, if the nation's brightest are leaving this is bound to be cause for concern in many sectors of society. Could this predicament help explain France's snail-paced access to the world of the Internet and global communications, particularly during the feverish years of information technology development where French start-up companies re-located to the Silicon Valley in the US? In the 2000 report, François-Poncet revealed that 1.8 million French individuals had settled outside of France. This number might seem inconsequential in light of France's population of sixty-three million plus inhabitants except for the fact that this increasing exodus has been depriving France of an entrepreneurial elite group with an economic and strategic role to play. He warned that 'a hemorrhage, even numerically insignificant, would have within the medium term, very serious consequences' (François-Poncet, 2000 p. 2). The commission's report stipulated that France would only retain its elite expatriates and would only attract others of their ilk from other countries if France overcame her ideological obstructions and implemented policies and practices backing innovation, the youth and consequently the future.

If 'France is still indisputably one of the richest and most economically successful countries in the world ... [with] a GDP of \$2.2 trillion [in 2007] ... in the same league as Japan and Germany' (Gurfinkiel, 2007), why are the French facing profound uncertainties not witnessed since the establishment of the 5th Republic by President Charles de Gaulle in 1958? The stakes are high as France faces a bleak future, and not only as a result of the Global Financial Crisis ('GFC' thereafter) or the threat of a possible second wave of economic downturn in 2010. Is France at risk of morphing into a mere shadow of the country that was once one of the advanced economies and democracies of Europe? The French are evidently not alone in facing such difficult circumstances as other European economies share similar characteristics, particularly Greece and the Latin Rim countries, Italy, Belgium, Portugal and Spain that have similar conservative corporatist welfare regimes (Chauvel, 2008). The United Kingdom and European nations such as Ireland, Poland and Germany to name but a few, are poised to experience similar structural problems such as an ageing population, escalating immigration, public debt along with other social and political issues that may fuel the brain drain of young prodigious graduates (generally middle class professionals aged between twenty – forty) toward the US in particular.

The situation of brain drain is a prickly issue as the perception of social scientists, social actors such as politicians, and the media on this concept is largely

contingent on current rhetoric when it concerns the nation's youngest and brightest leaving their homeland. In this age of globalisation it would indeed be remiss of any government or institution if they did not promote academic mobility especially for the youth of the nation state, as the economic benefits of the foreign experience for their country are enormous, that is if they return and are willing to stay. A tenuous balance exists between the retention of a nation's talent and the brain drain of its finest graduates. Those graduates who have emigrated can represent an important asset for governments if they support and mobilise them efficiently by engaging with their overseas Diaspora in a coherent and strategic way (Russell, 2010). On the other hand, expatriates can represent an additional burden, on top of the brain drain of human and cultural capital on the French government as access to their beloved *Sécu*, the generous Social Security welfare system or *L'Insécurité Sociale* as it is becoming known today, continues to be available to its citizens whilst abroad through the *Caisse des Français de L'Etranger (CFE)*, the foreign equivalent. This French system of protection is exorbitant and the deficit in the Social Security System has been increasing dramatically since the 1980s. Various measures have been envisaged to slow the relentless pace of these debts but they have proved extremely unpopular and have not been implemented successfully.

In her interview, Chantal was scathing in her comments about those who have the gall (pun intended) to milk the French social security system whilst they denigrate their adoptive country.

The problem is that some expatriates are obviously lucid, some of them are uncivil minded. You know the blogs, the reactions from people. Marc in New York will comment on French issues in *Le Monde* about French or American debates, for example, about the elections when there was a lot of commentary about Obama's attempt to reform the American health system ... a lot of them were very lucid to say that there's still something to value in the French model whilst saying: 'I do not like that I am here, I have to work here but I don't want to be here.' They make a lot of money in Wall Street, in London but they remain French. They only go back to France when they want health care or their retirement! I also read comments from some of those French guys working in Wall Street that had been Americanised ... well they are very ignorant of the fact that if they end up being in Wall Street and are able to make millions it's because the mathematical skills they acquired, they acquired because they went through the education system and they didn't have to pay for it ... there are other people who say that cheating is nice. They are there because we supported them ... (Chantal, July, 2010).

Chantal disapproves of those who take advantage of the scheme when they need medical treatment because they believe that the health system in their host country is inadequate and less efficient. After all, once a French national, always a French national and they are entitled to benefit from the generous social assistance even whilst abroad. Chantal is evidently one who believes that if they criticise France for her shortcomings they should not be receiving any assistance from their homeland. They need to show some gratitude instead.

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My focus in this book is essentially on the French circumstances, as the substantive areas of research that are needed to inform the discussions in this book are voluminous. The scene is set to gain momentum as the potential leaders of France, who should, under normal circumstances, consist of a young dynamic workforce, are actually made up of thousands of disgruntled graduates aged between twenty – forty. This group faces pressing social issues including intergenerational inequalities, a disintegrating social class system, precarious employment, highly regressive taxes and integration problems. Whilst graduates from the *grandes écoles* today still enjoy the status of *Enarques* – revered graduates or mentors and guardians of the nation (Gurfinkiel, 2007), the predicament of statist university graduates paints a vastly different picture.² The *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* – *ENA* is recognised as the epitome of meritocracy and is one of the 60 prestigious 'leadership schools' set up in 1945 when Charles de Gaulle presided over the provisional French Republic Government (Pierre Bourdieu, 1977). Statist university graduates have to endure a merry-go-round of internships, training and temporary contracts perennially resulting in few genuine opportunities for a lasting and meaningful career in their field (Gurfinkiel, 2007).

Who is being primed to take over the reins of this country if France's brightest continue to leave? Time is clearly of the essence for significant change to intensify. As the GFC worsened in Europe in 2009 and sovereign debt also became an issue, the European Union was forced to bail out Greece, Portugal, Spain and Ireland. In 2011, Italy is now under the European Union's microscope. Is France, whose economic growth, steady at the turn of the century, is currently struggling to maintain stability, likely to follow in the same path as her neighbours? What harsh measures will then have to be implemented to bring France back onto a stronger economic path? The OECD Employment Outlook in 2009 forecast a dismal future for France as unemployment was expected to rise to 11% by the end of 2010 if recovery failed to gain momentum. The recovery was in fact declared to be underway in their 2010 report with an unemployment rate of 9.7% recorded in the first quarter of 2010. Real GDP growth was projected to continue into 2011 at the rate of 2%, led by investment growth, exports and an end to destocking (OECD, 2009a). This in fact did not eventuate as France plunged to 0% growth in August 2011 and into negative growth in September. In spite of the OECD outlook the youth unemployment rate reached new heights in 2009, a situation that did not augur well for the jobs crisis. In 2011, OECD data indicate unemployment rates at 9.5% in May, 2011 with recent statistics revealing 9.8% in October of 2011.

Nicolas Sarkozy is a champion of globalisation in France, is pro-America and keen to reverse anti-American sentiment in his country, no mean feat certainly. Further, he is intent on improving the status of foreign language acquisition in the process, particularly English. A little contradictory it would appear, in light of a speech the president made at the fortieth anniversary of the International Organisation of *Francophonie*, where he complained of the '*snobisme*' of French diplomats who are 'happy to speak English' rather than French, which is 'under siege' (Kimmelman, 2010 p. 1). In the Francophone forum celebrating French worldwide, Nicolas Sarkozy argued that defending French language and the values

it represented was a battle for cultural diversity in the world. Securing the votes of conservative French voters in the process, he argued the problem was not English per se but 'ready-to-wear culture, uniformity, monolingualism' effectively referring to English. As globalisation becomes firmly entrenched, language is an obvious tool used to differentiate between cultures as pressure is exerted on other than Anglo-Saxon countries to reaffirm their cultural heritage (Kimmelman, 2010. Ibid.). In 2008, the Minister of Education Xavier Darcos 'promised that all pupils would go out of compulsory school bilingual!' (Joffre, 2008). A tall order, given the dissatisfaction that has reigned supreme among language students over the past decades with regard to foreign language pedagogy in France.

It cannot be denied however, that with the increasing mobility of young French nationals toward Anglo-Saxon countries in particular, and in light of the invasiveness and speed of the Internet finally becoming their most significant tool, the acquisition of English added to their linguistic repertoire is finally being recognised and lauded, by some members of society at least. That is, for those who return home and actually stay! As far as *L'Académie Française*, the custodians of French language and culture are concerned, and the country's elite that have tried to maintain the integrity of French language, the adoption of English is seen as detrimental to French culture. Although, in light of the supremacy of English globally, it appears that the Academy has abandoned the fight to preserve the integrity of French language, by actually promoting multilingualism (Leonard, 2007). 'Abandoned' is a little extreme one could think, considering the prestigious position of this organisation and the mantra of protection that members endorse for French language and culture. A thirty-eight year old academic whose testimonies have contributed significantly to this study is Danielle, one of the French national participants of this study. She explains: 'The nickname for the Academy members is *Les Immortels* (The Immortals), symbolised by the seal they receive when being intronised (inducted) because of its encryption: *A l'immortalité* (For eternity)' (Danielle, April, 2008). She clarifies this does not refer to the members but to the language and its duration throughout the ages.

In 2007, prior to the national elections, Nicolas Sarkozy travelled to London to implore the French exiles, composed of an estimated 300,000 French expatriates, to return home, bringing with them their talents, their passion, their imagination and intelligence. He promised significant reforms to fiscal policies and to the overzealous bureaucratic system, particularly where employment legislation is concerned. He vowed to free up the inflexible labour market and to promote hard work, longer working hours for those interested, espousing a spirit of meritocracy and free enterprise (Chrisafis, 2007). What of the social and political changes needed to address the intergenerational inequalities between the Baby Boomers and the X generation of highly-qualified graduates and graduating students who have been denied the same privileges that their parents enjoyed in the workforce and socially? In spite of being more qualified than their elders, as tertiary education is relatively inexpensive in France, ostensibly a cheaper option than employing the graduates, the latter group are unlikely to climb the social ladder, can barely expect to be gainfully employed in their area of expertise, and owning

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their own homes has become unachievable. As limited career opportunities are becoming a perpetual concern for this generation who must face challenges dramatically more distressing than the previous generation had to endure, expatriating is becoming far more appealing than fighting for a right to work, live decently and enjoy the benefits that many Baby Boomers take for granted. And what of the *bête noire* of French entrepreneurs, the draconian level of taxes imposed on stock options? These stock options are sometimes offered to upper level management staff in companies as an extra incentive on top of their salary, their willingness to join the company often contingent on lucrative deals (Edmondson, 1998). Even if the laws governing this complex issue were modified in 2010, there are implications for the way the Incentive Stock Options (ISO) and the Nonqualified Stock Options are managed. The issue is far from being resolved satisfactorily.

In light of the difficulty in obtaining accurate data on the French exiles, only 4.2% of tertiary educated French individuals were registered in the (OECD, 2008) report of the Profile of Immigrant Populations in the 21st century as emigrating from France. Other sources indicate that 2.5 million French people are living abroad whilst the official figure appears to be between 1.4 and 1.5 million. One can only speculate as to more accurate figures in 2010 and 2011 as a result of the GFC and the difficulties in establishing statistics. At grass roots level on the other hand, through my qualitative research with French nationals and expatriates and from the innumerable blog entries depicting this phenomenon on the Internet, the exact number of expatriates is far from simple to determine. Internet blogs testifying to a better and richer life abroad for the French are commonplace but it seems the French do not spend much time in setting up these sites, even though many credible examples highlight the successes of entrepreneurs in particular. YouTube interviews sourced from the Internet for this project provide additional data that document the inequalities in the workplace as a result of not only intergenerational but racial inequalities, compounding already existing issues in French society for the youth of the nation. In some instances, this provokes an exodus and in others, a difficult state of affairs for those who do not have the means, the linguistic and cultural competence or the confidence to venture abroad. This issue is further discussed in Chapter 4. (For further information, see Banks, 2010).

A great number of French exiles have no intention of returning home, treating Sarkozy's attempts to woo them back with contempt, suggesting he is an embarrassment (Walden, 2008). Not even Sarkozy's historic speech in London could persuade 300 000 expatriates to return home, a finding hammered home by a French polling company, the TNS SOFRES that surveyed French expatriates abroad. They found 93% of French émigrés satisfied with their lives abroad and 25% declaring that they 'never' expected to return home (Applebaum, 2007). After scrutinising the developments or lack thereof, in France from across the channel after Sarkozy had been in office for several months as president, many swiftly denigrated the pledges of their leader as mere political hyperbole. Their

disenchantment lay in the agonisingly slow rate of progress of the proposed reforms, the bureaucratic machine still cranking at the same laborious pace.

Stereotypically, French resistance to change is not a new concept and changing French psyche is not an easy feat. Although Nicolas Sarkozy acknowledged that France could not lead Europe by being anti-American, anti-enlargement and anti-reform, he does not seem to have convinced his constituents to be like-minded. Prior to his election as President of France in 2007, the Sarkozy vision was that a forward looking France would be a formidable force to contend with if it combined the rhetoric of social Europe with a reformist, integrationist agenda (Leonard, 2007). This was certainly a dignified position to assume but the wheels of change appear to be grinding a little too slowly for the French expatriates to envisage returning. Conversely, prior to his election, Nicolas Sarkozy was revered among the successful young French expatriates in New York. In 2007, in Time magazine on the iPad, one of these expatriates, Camille Agon wrote:

Chanting and singing [*La Marseillaise*], these talented and ambitious young expatriates were celebrating the triumph of the principles of hard work, individuality and merit in a country whose dysfunctional economy had forced them to choose a voluntary exile in order to pursue their career potential. To them including myself, Sarkozy represents the hope that one day they will be able to chase their entrepreneurial dreams in the land of their birth (Agon, 2007 p. 1).

It is impossible to tell whether these expatriates have returned to France but reports indicate that since the GFC many French exiles, especially those initially contracted to work abroad by French companies, have headed home as their situation in foreign countries has become tenuous. However, the trend appears to be different in Asia as the French expatriate to other Asian countries instead of returning home. Nonetheless, the dissatisfaction the returnees feel upon resuming French positions, if they manage to find employment in these difficult economic circumstances, is fuelling a desire to leave once again. The reverse culture shock they experience upon returning to France is increasing in intensity as research shows the management of the return to be a constant negative when expatriates as well as academic sojourners go home (N. Adler, 1981; Patron, 2007). The insularity of their fellow nationals towards their achievements abroad is not new. It is well known that many French companies do not recognise the diplomas and the experience French educated people have acquired abroad, placing little value on the intercultural competence developed outside of France. It seems certain that should they secure employment, the prospect of advancement through the system is highly unlikely (Jasor, De Grandi, & Senges, 2009).

From a different perspective, many expatriates envisage returning home for retirement. This in itself may provoke serious problems with the growing number of elderly people who form the generation of the *Papy Boomers*.³ As many of the intellectual underclass begrudge the ageing Baby Boomers the ease with which they have obtained and held on to their dream careers during *Les Trente*