

Social inequalities in health as a scientific and social problem: visibility, ignorance and politics

International symposium, 11-12-13 June 2025, Haute École de Santé Vaud (Lausanne, Switzerland)

CR30.06 auditorium, Rue Dr César-Roux 19, 1005 Lausanne

Health inequalities have long been considered and denounced as a public issue by various scientists and activists. But their crucial importance for public health remains largely overlooked. As British medical historian Charles Webster pointed out, active interest on the topic “tends to have been very much a periodic phenomenon, stimulated by perceptions of social crisis¹”. The COVID pandemic is a case in point, as it has recently brought social inequalities in health back to the forefront – but it remains to be seen how long this concern will last. This begs the question: what are the factors influencing the attention of public institutions, researchers, healthcare professionals and the general public to this key health and political issue? Under what conditions, and at what cost, is it given visibility or, on the contrary, ignored?

The Swiss National Science Foundation project behind this is aimed precisely at answering these questions, focusing more specifically on the cases of Switzerland and France². In line with the project, the symposium aims at bringing together specialists in social inequalities in health from various backgrounds – working in social epidemiology as well as in the humanities and social sciences. The symposium will be the opportunity to collectively examine what has been learned from research into social inequalities in health, especially in recent decades but also more generally, and the reasons why these findings have been (in)visibilized, on a local or global basis. Special attention will be paid to ideas, methods and findings from the field of agnotology – *i.e.* the “study of the cultural production of ignorance”³ – which offers a perspective that is particularly well-suited to these issues.

¹ Charles Webster, “Investigating Inequalities in Health before Black”, in Virginia Berridge & Stuart Blume (eds.), *Poor Health. Social Inequality Before and After the Black Report*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 82.

² For more information on the project, entitled “Acknowledging and Invisibilizing Social Inequalities in Health. The Reception of World Health Organization Strategies in Switzerland and France from the 1970s to the present day”, please visit our website (in French): fns-iss.hesav.ch.

³ Robert N. Proctor, “Agnotology. A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study)”, in Robert N. Proctor & Londa Schiebinger (eds.), *Agnotology. The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008, pp. 1-36.

Program:

Wednesday June 11

12h00-13h30	<p>Nancy Krieger (Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health): “Health Justice and Critical Science in a Time of Oligarchy and Opportunistic Science Denialism. An Ecosocial Analysis”</p> <p>△ <i>Special lecture organized with Unisanté at Lausanne University Hospital: Alexandre Yersin auditorium, CHUV main building (Unisanté/CHUV)</i> △</p>
17h30-19h00	<p>Virginia Berridge (London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine): “Public Health and Inequality in the UK. From Chadwick to COVID”</p>

Thursday June 12

09h00-09h30	<i>Coffee & welcoming remarks</i>
09h30-10h15	<p>Élodie Giroux (Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3) & Émilie Counil (Institut national d’études démographiques): “Epistemological Obstacles to the Consideration of Social Causation in Epidemiology and Public Health”</p>
10h15-11h00	<p>Joëlle Schwarz (Unisanté & Université de Lausanne) & Carole Clair (Unisanté & Université de Lausanne): “From Gender Blind to Sex-Specific Research in Health. How the Social Is Continuously Ignored”</p>
11h00-11h15	<i>Break</i>
11h15-12h00	<p>Patrick Bodenmann (Unisanté & Université de Lausanne): “Innovations and Implementations Against Health Inequities. A Touch of Boldness!”</p>
12h00-14h00	<i>Lunch</i>
14h00-14h45	<p>Yohan Fayet (Université Clermont Auvergne): “Spatial Inequalities in Health as a Subject of Agnotology. Examining the Tilt of Data, Knowledge, and Policies on Urban Environments”</p>
14h45-15h30	<p>Séverine Louvel (Université Grenoble Alpes): “Interdisciplinarity and the (In)visibility of the Embodiment of Social Inequalities in Health. Social Epigenetics at the Crossroads Between Epidemiology and Sociology”</p>
15h30-15h45	<i>Break</i>
15h45-16h30	<p>Thomas Bonnin (Politecnico di Milano): “Looking for the Right Causes. A Comparative Assessment of Approaches to Population Health Research”</p>
16h30-17h00	General discussion
17h00-17h30	<i>Break</i>
17h30-19h00	<p>Nancy Krieger (Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health): “Growth of, and Backlash against, 21st Century Social Epidemiologic Theories of Disease Distribution. A Critical Ecosocial Analysis in Fraught Times”</p>

Friday June 13

09h00-09h30	<i>Coffee</i>
09h30-10h15	<p>Emmanuel Henry (Université Paris Dauphine-PSL): “How Public Health Issues Challenge the Sociology of Social Problems and Public Policy Research”</p>
10h15-11h00	<p>Mathias Girel (ENS-PSL): “Three decades of Ignorance Studies: Enduring Inequalities”</p>
11h00-11h15	<i>Break</i>
11h15-12h00	<p>Scott Frickel (Brown University): “Science, Society, and the Paradox of Inequality”</p>