

In honour of Robert Castel

[Hélène Périvier](#), Bruno Palier, Bernard Gazier

It is with great sadness that we have learned of the death of Robert Castel. He left his mark on French sociology and on the social sciences more generally with his analysis of wage society and the way it's changing. In his work *les métamorphoses de la question sociale*, he highlighted the emancipatory power of "wage society", which has endowed workers with "social property". This concept facilitates an understanding of the challenges related to the acquisition of social rights in certain market economies. He preferred the term *Etat social*, the welfare state, to the commonly used term *Etat providence*, the provident state, as he saw in the latter the notion of a welfare state that had just dropped out of the sky, whereas it is the fruit of battles and negotiations and has been built over a long period of time. The flexibilisation of the labour market, the weakening of social rights and the casualisation of labour have, in his opinion, all been leading to the phenomenon of disaffiliation, as some individuals are simply beyond the reach of the welfare state's protections.

We had the good fortune of collaborating with him on a project to redesign a new generation of social rights. Always ready to share and to learn from many-sided discussions, we also discovered a man of great humility, someone who listened to the contributions of others, but also to their criticisms – including to the feminists who pointed out his silence on the sexual division of labour. He accepted and recognized the relevance of their observations. During our discussions, he showed his concern about developments in our economic and social organization, which are shunting aside those who are most vulnerable: young people, especially those living in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, who are starting life with little educational preparation. He proclaimed equality as a

founding principle of our social contract, but he also thought of equality as equality of opportunity. He argued for “solidarism”, as did Léon Bourgeois in his time.

In a world scarred by crisis and increasingly violent inequalities, Robert Castel was present in the public debate, and brought a long-term perspective to the failings of our social systems, as well as to the principles that could guide reform. His absence will affect the quality of this debate. While we can still benefit from the great contributions of his work, we will miss his always relevant interventions, his intellectual honesty, and his kindness to all. More than a researcher, we have lost a thinker, and a friend.