

## **Society of Discontent or Discontent in Society? A Response to Robert Castel**

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**Alain Ehrenberg believes that Robert Castel's review of his book in *La Vie des Idées* is grounded in a misunderstanding about his approach. As opposed to presenting America as a model, Ehrenberg's comparative approach attempts to describe the social meanings of autonomy in order to transcend the opposition between liberalist and anti-liberalist orientations. His objective is to replace an individualistic sociology with a sociology of individualism.**

What follows is Alain Ehrenberg's response to Robert Castel's review of his recently published book, *La Société du malaise*, Odile Jacob, 2010. The review appeared under the title « *L'autonomie, aspiration ou condition ?* », in *La Vie des Idées*, 26 mars 2010 (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/L-autonomie-aspiration-ou.html>)

I appreciate more than anybody the compliments paid to me by Robert Castel in his review, but the extent and systematic nature of his apparent misinterpretation of my work compel me to try to co-construct a dialogue with him that I hope will clarify the issues. Castel's misinterpretation can--and I am afraid will--be made by others as well<sup>1</sup>, because societal roles are pre-assigned in France, and merely mentioning concepts like "individualism" or "psychological problems" tends to elicit routinized reactions that stem from entrenched patterns of thought. My books strive to unsettle these routines, but I am forced to acknowledge that my efforts have just experienced their first failure, and a colossal failure at that, given Robert Castel's stature.

Castel attributes the following argument to me<sup>2</sup>. He claims that I offer America as the model that we should all emulate, and that I allegedly constructed "an opposition between an

<sup>1</sup> See as proof the debate between the psychoanalyst Roland Gori and me in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, March 25-31, 2010

<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside the misinterpretations of my previous book, (*La Fatigue d'être soi. Dépression et société*, Odile Jacob, 1998/*The Weariness of the Self. Diagnosis the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, McGill-Queens University Press, 2010) the most frequent of which concerned my discussion of supposed changes in the psychological make-up of individuals, whereas I was attempting to how use depression to explore and understand how psychological problems represent such a significant issue in society.

American configuration that supposedly does its utmost to achieve true autonomy, and a French configuration that does its utmost to refuse it". At that point, I stand accused of suggesting that "autonomy is in itself a prerogative of the self and would embrace a discourse, that is in fact liberal, according to which an individual must be the agent of his own change and act as an entrepreneur of himself". As for the victims of "social suffering" who are experiencing a sense of helplessness (see Chapters 7 and 8 of my book), I allegedly ignore the basic fact that they lack even the minimal resources required for re-entering the labor market. Robert Castel further objects that "it is therefore at that point a bit thoughtless to ask people to take charge of themselves without noticing that this order to become autonomous risks making them feel even more defeated". My theoretical goal, in my supposed role as strong proponent of liberal ideas, can be summarized as building an argument against the social safety-net that is available to individuals in difficulty in order to compel them to take charge of themselves and thus to be in a better position to take advantage of opportunities. According to his view, I ostensibly give in "to the unconditional celebration of decontextualized autonomy" while I "avoid dealing with the economic dynamics and social constraints that destroy autonomy".

According to this interpretation, every player is cast in his or her perfect role in a perfectly French scenario: the liberal right (me), which vaunts the cult of performance, and the anti-liberal left (Robert Castel), which extols the cult of social protection: readers can retreat to their corners thoroughly reassured about how these roles were assigned. The big problem is that this "reading" bears not the slightest relationship to the arguments that I develop in my book, and my hypotheses appear nowhere in Castel's review. On the contrary, my entire argument seeks to break free of the endless game-of-mirrors of liberal versus anti-liberal that locks us into what Marcel Mauss called the "mystique of words".

Castel's two principal criticisms<sup>3</sup> concern, first, my use of America as a basis for comparison with France (as if I were trying to model France on the US), and second, the "order to

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<sup>3</sup> I note several errors that indicate the scope of the misunderstanding. Thus, autonomy in the United States is that of the individual *and* of the community (the latter, despite being a constant in American political discourse, was forgotten by Castel). A further error: the psychology of the ego is not culturalism (of Karen Horney, Fromm, etc.), but the school of thought developed by Anna Freud, Heinz Hartmann, etc. according to which, by contrast with Castel's assertion, drives retain all of their value ; this is the direct opposite of culturalism. I am not talking about autonomy as it exists in the United States, because, to use Saul Bellow's formulation, "...America, under the jurisdiction of the *Archai*, or Spirits of Personality, produced autonomous modern individuals with all of the giddiness and despair of the free, and infected with hundred diseases unknown during the long peasant epochs" (cited p. 68 in my book; see S. Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift*, Penguin Books, 1996, p. 292.).

become autonomous” that he attributes to me, which he reads as entailing the over-turning of (excess ?) social safety-nets in order to foster the development of autonomy. Let me first address what I believe to be the most serious misunderstandings concerning these two points before discussing the broader sociological question that my book tries to address.

### **Why a comparison? The social origin of categories and concepts**

According to Castel, my main lesson is: “To sum things up, it is high time that we emulate the American model !” Well, not whatsoever!

The goal of the comparative *method* is to *use contrast to derive a truth*. This approach is so classic that I am amazed to have to remind a seasoned sociologist of its principal function, particularly one who conflates it with liberal political discourse. This method in no way tries to say that Americans are fantastic and that we are pathetic, and I defy anyone to find a sentence of this kind in my book. Instead, comparison is intended to help us to step back from overly franco-French debates, which may explain why Robert Castel views me as so American. My comparison rests on the hypothesis that the self occupies exactly the same position in the United States that institutions hold in France. First of all, the self is not a philosophical or psychological category, but a social category, in other words, it originates in society. By asserting this, I am taking the opposite view from Robert Castel, who, as we all know, has been promoting the idea of a “new psychological culture” since the 1980’s. Autonomy is a topic closely linked to self—think of self-reliance—, a point that requires clarification. References to autonomy as the ultimate value bring Americans together, just as they divide the French, but *they do not refer to the same autonomy*. My question is, where does Castel mention this distinction, which I hammer home in my book, in his review? Why does he not take it into account? The answer is that if he had included it in his review, he would have also noticed that there is no such concept as “true autonomy” in my book. Nor, conversely, can there be any such concept as false autonomy. Instead, there are different *social meanings* assigned to the word « autonomy » on the two sides of the Atlantic, meanings transformed over the course of the histories of two versions of individualism, of two ways of making up society. In America, autonomy is characterized by three features: independence, cooperation, and competition. In France, on the contrary, it is independence that is the principal value. The comparative method allows us to tease out and explain these differences as well as the reasons behind them, but it does not at all try to situate hierarchically.

Allow me to quickly illustrate this contention with two points.

While mental health and psychic suffering are central issues in social life in Europe and North America, the issue of discontent (or *malaise*) in society is singularly French, and it is closely bound to a sense that life is becoming ever-increasingly precarious. *The Society of Discontent* is thus a Durkheimian title, because discontent in society is a collective representation of itself that French society projects, and, although it is widely understood by the people of France, this construction means nothing to an American (nor to a Swede), unless they are academics. One case in point is the striking number of French psychoanalysts who refer to Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, whereas few of their American colleagues have ever even heard of it.

Am I saying there is no discontent in France? That it is simply a “representational bi-product”? Absolutely not! I will return to the reasons for French society's discontent by showing why the French have solid reasons for representing their issues in the way that they do, but first, it is worth noting that this collective self-representation is rooted in a specific narrative. I compare the emergence of the theme of narcissism in the two countries and of the idea that social ideals cause psychic sufferings. The comparison shows that the meanings attributed to narcissistic pathologies in France and in the US are quite different. In the US, they first surface at the end of what one might call a liberal cycle that spanned the period between Presidents Roosevelt and Johnson, a period characterized by strong federal intervention that was particularly focused on the reduction of social inequalities. These pathologies have been described as symptoms of a *decline* in individual responsibility due to the state's excessive interference, a view that reveals a certain nostalgia for the period when rugged individualism and self-governed communities reigned. They express a crisis of American self-reliance. In France, on the contrary, the same pathologies have been interpreted as an excess of individual responsibility that resulted from the State's disengagement during the 1980's.

From this perspective, “narcissistic pathologies” are manifestations of a crisis of *their* liberalism and a crisis in *our own* anti-liberalism. The comparison, then, reveals different social meanings of identical concepts. The comparatist approach produces an interesting outcome in sociological terms in showing that instead of a psychologization of the social, there are merely divergent and asymmetrical social uses made of the psychological vocabulary. So let's stop believing that Society is dead and that political action has become

mysteriously powerless!

### **From autonomy-as-aspiration to autonomy as a condition: The great change in inequality**

Allow me to pursue this issue further, because what Robert Castel fails to see are the ultimately practical, and hence political, consequences of my analysis and the shift of the gaze on which they depend, consequences that touch on the issue that he cares so deeply about, namely social inequality.

In the French context, autonomy-as-aspiration, which roughly corresponds to the “Trente Glorieuses” the period of rapid economic expansion in the West between 1945 and 1974, expressed itself as independence. Autonomy has been our condition ever since, our state of being, but it has acquired a new meaning and became an autonomy of competition and cooperation. It turns out that it is competition that divides French society, and it is on this movement that my analysis focuses. I do not call for autonomy as a state of being quite simply because it is already established as a fact, as our shared condition.

“Discontent” or “*Malaise*” can be summarized by the dual idea that the social bond is weakening and that the individual becomes correspondingly over-burdened with responsibilities and challenges that s/he did not previously have to contend with. Evidence of this discontent/*malaise* is to be found in social pathologies, the illnesses of the social bonds that develop in our modern world. “Symptoms have changed? Personalities are altered?”: these questions are recurrent among clinicians, and the central focus is to *question the social and historical presuppositions of these issues*. The locus of pain in France derives from the opposition between our notions of person, personality or personnel, and the notion of institution. Evocations of personality appear as a result of a process that French sociologists call “deinstitutionalization”. In the US, on the contrary, the concept of personality is an institution. This concept, as I have shown, is the trademark of American social science, whereas the institution is the key concept for the French school of sociology (Durkheim, Mauss).

Our society is facing problems of social *cohesion* resulting from the loss of effectiveness of our systems of social protection and the struggle against inequality established during the twentieth century. I do not see what Robert Castel takes issue with, because I do not for a single moment deny that the French system of social protection is in crisis. But the primary

sociological and political problem arises from the confusion surrounding the paradigm shift in inequalities, and our accustomed institutional arrangements are powerless to face it. This is significant, because the French conceptualization of equality is defined as protection under the aegis of the State, which represents society's solidarity with each individual. It is a French tradition that the state functions as the "originator of the social" ("l'instituteur du social") that keeps society moving, society in and of itself possessing no value. It is our distrust of the unregulated confrontation between the interests of different social actors that makes our society anti- or non-liberal.

The driving force that makes of "discontent in society" a collective representation that French society ascribes to itself is the following: We are currently experiencing a crisis of equality *à la française* in that equality is tending ever-closer towards an equality of opportunity, which means helping individuals to become *capable* of seizing *opportunities* by helping them to enter into *competition*. The earlier focus of public policy solely on protection led to the balkanization of the labor market. Today's inequalities, however, require personal responsibility because in knowledge-based economies, equality of opportunity hinges on an individual's own relational and cognitive capacities (see in particular the work of G. Esping-Andersen<sup>4</sup>). This situation calls for the widespread development of practices that amount to helping people to help themselves, practices that Americans call empowerment<sup>5</sup> and that rely on individuals' self-confidence. These practices exist, even massively, in France, and Castel alludes to them while criticizing me (p. 7-8 of his review). Moreover, I show that they constitute empowerment *à la française*. They are empowerment because such practices give the power to act back to those who no longer have it, and they try to enable these individuals to face further constraints on their re-insertion; they are *à la française* because those who use these practices think of them as compensation for deinstitutionalization, despite the fact that they show the new spirit of institution, the spirit of autonomy-as-condition. Contrary to what Castel wrote, I do not at all believe that these empowerment professionals are "declinologists". Actually, it is the sociologists who theorize what empowerment professionals do as compensating for the dwindling importance of institutions who are declinologists. Furthermore, one of my goals is to propose to mental health professionals, the front lines in facing tensions within French society, an alternative sociology to that of Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Castel, a sociology free of

<sup>4</sup> G. Esping-Andersen, with Gallie D., Hemerijck A., Myles J., *Why we need a new Welfare State*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, and G. Esping-Andersen, *Trois leçons sur l'État-providence*, Paris, Seuil/République des Idées, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> On this subject Jacques Donzelot (with C. Mevel et A. Wyvekens) has written an illuminating book, *Faire société. La politique de la ville aux États-Unis et en France*, Paris, Seuil, 2003.

hypercritical pessimism.

One of the most serious misunderstandings between Robert Castel and me relates to this last question. Speaking of someone as an “agent of his own change” is not associated with a liberal discourse (the French meaning of *libéral* pertains to free-market, whereas the American meaning denotes federal government intervention) that demands that individuals manage on their own. Rather, it is a social and political idea that calls upon the capacity to act within the framework of autonomy-as-condition so that they are not exclusively passive. In order to escape from the mystique of words (liberal versus anti-liberal), I am arguing for a politics of autonomy, i.e., a politics that does indeed center on individuals’ capacity for action, and more specifically on that of the social classes who suffer inequality. The debate is not about protection versus opportunity, but instead about the integration of both models in France, which in turn requires a consideration of the respective limitations of each model.

The comparative approach is helpful for precisely this kind of consideration because it forces us out of a self-centered perspective. I write in the book’s conclusion (I am forced to quote myself thanks to Castel’s reading, which does not acknowledge what I contribute): “If *we* (the French) have a problem with opportunity, *they* (the Americans) have a problem with social protection, as evidenced by the debates about health-care insurance in 2009, in which the primary issue was the federal government involvement. [...] But in the US, as in France, national mythologies are at the heart of the debates, and they permeate the rationality of the arguments, illustrating the power of the ritual dimensions of social life and of the logical training that is inherent in having been socialized into a particular national society” (p. 342). The United States and France represent two *poles* of individualism, one that emphasises opportunity, and the other protection. “In the United States, public (i.e., federal) intervention must remain subordinated to the moral responsibility of the individual. In France, on the contrary, the appeal to individual responsibility must, in order to have positive value and to garner general approval, be subordinated to the protection of the State, which constitutes an expression of society’s collective solidarity” (p. 343).

The concept of capability, particularly as defined by Amartya Sen and, somewhat differently, by such sociologists as Esping-Andersen (Danish) and Jacques Donzelot (French), helps us to redefine social solidarity in the world of labor mobility and generalized competition. And, if I am the supposed “*liberal*”, the free-market thinker that Castel thinks I am, what

indeed is the orientation of these authors? “Capability” provides ample space for individual responsibility, one of the themes of the political right in France, but it also serves as a resource for the left in implying collective responsibility by displacing the primary emphasis from protection towards equal distribution of the means for action. This shift indicates a way to renew solidarity with the weakest members of society, a way to create an enabling state that empowers individuals, as Donzelot has said for years. There are without a doubt few issues that are as decisive in clarifying the quest for the public good in a global context in which the concepts used for industrial societies can no longer cope with the human dilemmas created by the course of the world. This approach constitutes the language of political action that we all need in order to act in the name of the betterment of society.

The issues that I have raised in this essay are formulated quite clearly and precisely in my book’s conclusion, but Robert Castel, assuming that he even read it, is a prisoner of the French collective psychology that he reproduces. I do not for one moment regret that my conclusion emphasizes the urgent need for sociology to clarify the relationship between social protection and opportunity. Instead, my one true regret is that Robert Castel did not contribute his own perspectives to this important problem for the field. I am afraid, however, that he lends credence to my argument that many of France’s intellectuals have succumbed to a « paradigm of affliction » (p. 145 in my book), and that they exploit a very real fear by supplying ostensibly knowledgeable justifications for it, while neither adding to our understanding of the subject nor opening up new paths of action.

In my opinion, Castel’s critique is in fact symptomatic of a broader crisis in contemporary sociology, which has extreme difficulty in articulating a vision of what life in common consists of today. Indeed, the main thrust of my book is precisely an attempt to shed light on what life in common is in a society defined by generalized autonomy, whether we like it or not. I am compelled to add a few words to this assertion, since Castel is silent on this topic of the utmost interest to sociology.

### **An Alternative to the discourse of discontent and to individualist sociology**

It is preferable to address this question by returning to the opposition between institution and person. For current French sociology, the concept of the person is generally defined according to a series of associations in which “personal” is identified with “psychological” (the psychologization of social relationships) and with “private” (the privatization of exist-



ence). Sociologies that subscribe to this view are individualistic; they are prisoners of the basic problem that dooms individualism to confusion, the opposition between the individual and society.

The book's goal is to move away from *individualistic* sociology and towards a sociology of *individualism*. To this end, I propose an alternative conceptualization that simultaneously takes on the topics of discontent in society and individualism, because these two concepts operate in tandem.

Individualistic sociology can be formulated using an equation that has recurred for two centuries: « the rise of individualism=the decline of society », or of society's equivalents: the social bond, solidarity, community, benchmarks, politics, and so on, all of which pertain to life in common, which is the condition of man. Today, psychic suffering and mental health are the test that measures the degree of this decline. The fear of the collapse of society is a particular characteristic of individualistic sociologies, but this is because this fear is also a widespread idea, *a social idea*, and it must consequently be both integrated as a feature of society and transcended, as a sociology of individualism.

Castel confuses my critique of the category of suffering with a contempt for social situations of distress, exclusion, injustice, and inequality. "Let the poor fend for themselves", this is my supposed "liberal" message. To the contrary, my point is to sociologically clarify the new status granted to affects, emotions, and individual subjectivity in the social life. It implies avoiding stereotypes like the "loss of reference point", "global capitalism", "post-modernity", and other such slogans/concepts.

My general hypothesis about psychic suffering is the following: we are witnessing a change of the social status of psychic suffering—and not a *psychological aggravation* of the condition of individuals in "depressive society", which is a recurrent misinterpretation of my previous book, *The Weariness of the Self*. If one agrees on the simple idea that we are simultaneously the agents and the patients of social life, I then develop the idea that changes in the ways of acting that are inherent to autonomy correspond to changes in the ways experiencing affect, which the concept of psychic suffering expresses: We have witnessed a generalization in mental health in the use of personal idioms to give form to and to resolve conflicts in social relations. This means that expressions of social problems, conflicts, and dilemmas in the

terms of suffering constitute a claim that has sufficient value that it is a motive to act in itself. Disagreements must be expressed using this language game, because it has gained authority. It is an expected expression of emotions and feelings (note here a reference to Marcel Mauss' seminal article). Misfortune, unhappiness, distress, and illness are the basic ingredients of this language, which relates personal misfortune to troubled social relations or places common misfortune under the banner of "psychic suffering". Ultimately, it is a language of adversity. Such a language is not specific to individualistic society, it is present in every society. That is why I examined two ways of talking about adversity in my book, as well as the problems that these languages help us to solve.

The language of affect functions within our societies by allowing the formulation of what I call « individualistic anxiety», which is specifically linked to societal fragmentation. This claim implies clarifying what we mean when we say "individualism". We use the word individualism as if it were something individual, whereas it is in fact a common mind-set. In short, the term individualism describes a way of making up a society that ascribes the same value to every individual, the same *to oneself as to another person*, because equality makes all human beings of equivalent value.

But we have to explain the belief in fragmentation, because it tells us something fundamental in underlying the destructive face of individualism. The difficulty of making up society is structurally inherent to the concept of individualism, but that does not imply that individualism inevitably threatens to destroy it. Why? Because we cannot have an *individualistic* society, in other words, a society that attributes the same value to every human being, can only exist if it breaks the bonds of interdependency between people, and therefore offers the opportunity to make something of himself to everybody. But we cannot have a society *in general* if it separates people from each other by an unbridgeable chasm of individual freedom. It is this specific democratic tension that is formulated in the opposition between individual and society.

The consequence of this change in reasoning is very concrete. The discourse of discontent confuses a false problem—social coherence—with a real problem—social cohesion. It is a discourse that envisions an incoherence in modernity because it conceives of social life in the individualistic terms of an opposition between individual and society. Louis Dumont's hierarchical reasoning offers an alternative in suggesting as a basic given that the concept of

individualism encompasses its polar opposite, holism, which is placed in a subordinate position. This reasoning enables us to perceive our societies as equally coherent as any so-called traditional society. The institution of social meanings that grants every individual with supreme value implies the subordination of the value of interdependence. This subordinate position can lead social actors and observers to lose sight of it, an extremely frequent occurrence, but that is a far cry from being sufficient reason to believe that interdependence has disappeared and that we are no longer making up society.

Allow me to conclude on a political note. I am not calling for an autonomy fashioned according to « the American model » (and which model, anyway—Bush’s or Obama’s?). Instead, I am pleading for an understanding of the *reality* of this condition that forces us not so much to dismantle the welfare state as to try to transcend its limitations via a newly defined welfare state. In contradiction of the assertion contained in the abstract that introduced Robert Castel’s review of my book, my argument conceives of autonomy as totally dependent on social context<sup>6</sup>. Could there have been a more grievous misunderstanding?

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<sup>6</sup> How indeed could I analyze social meanings, as his abstract suggests, in the absence of social conditions ? This is a mystery of logic. (NDLR : The abstract that introduced Robert Castel’s article was written by *La Vie des Idées*).