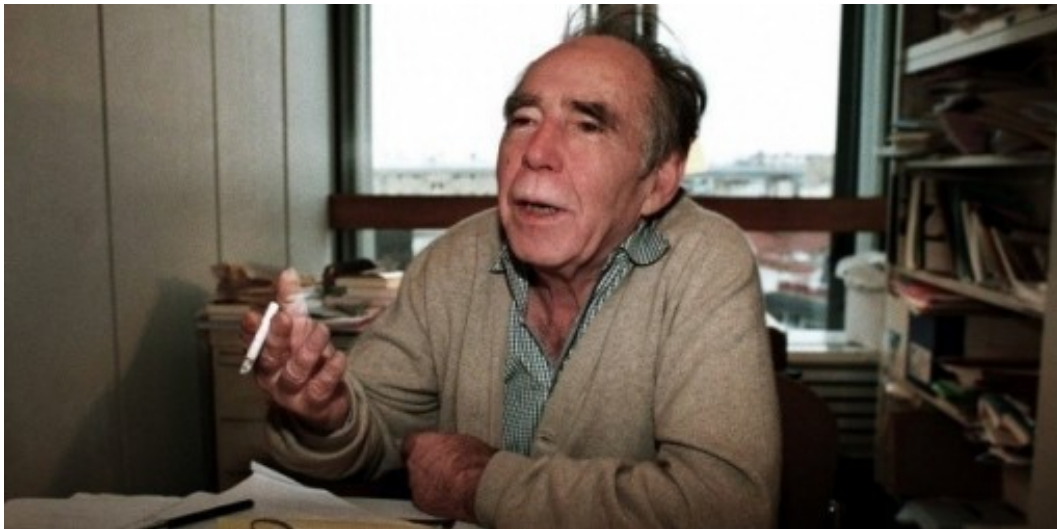


<http://somatosphere.net/2013/03/robert-castel-1933-2013.html>

Robert Castel - 1933 - 2013

2013-03-24 14:39:05

By Nicolas Henckes and Anne Lovell



A French-language version of this piece, written by [Nicolas Henckes](#), first appeared on [h-madness](#). It has been translated into English by [Anne Lovell](#) and is also being posted simultaneously on h-madness.

French sociologist and historian Robert Castel passed away on March 12, 2013, at the age of 79. An important figure in French intellectual life over the past two decades, he was an acute observer of the transformations of the relationship between contemporary societies and their vulnerable populations. But Robert Castel is most probably best known to readers of this blog as the author of some of the most fertile analyses of the transformation of French and American psychiatry in the 19th and 20th centuries. Originally trained as a philosopher, Castel turned to sociology thanks to the influence of Pierre Bourdieu, but soon forged an independent path. From the mid-1960s until the early 1980s, a period when he was close to Michel Foucault, Castel went on to develop a highly original and coherent research trajectory around a sociological understanding of psychiatry, characterized by his capacity to seize with great precision social processes and their temporal boundaries, but also by his attentiveness to the very texture of the underlying discourses that became the material for his analyses. The strength of the work he published during this period lies partly in his sensitivity to transformations in real time in the very fields he was observing.

At first, and like most observers and actors within psychiatry at the time,

Castel's preoccupations concerned the question of the psychiatric institution. In *Le psychanalysme* (1973), he showed how the institution itself shaped French psychoanalysis in the 1960s, while *L'ordre psychiatrique* (1976, English translation: *The Regulation of Madness*) traced the origins of the French psychiatric institution in the genesis of the Law of June 30, 1838, with its dual roots in criminal justice and psychiatry and its loose criteria for commitment, which remained in effect until the 1990s. He then focused his analytical gaze beyond institutional psychiatry, on the new means of constituting and governing the normal and the pathological in the "psy" world of the end of the 1970s (*La société psychiatrique avancée*, 1979, co-authored with Françoise Castel and Anne M. Lovell, and published in English as *The Psychiatric Society*, 1983 ; and *La gestion des risques*, in 1982). Castel's analysis of the strategies developed through French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's new social policies for managing populations at risk influenced British works on the forms that governmentality through risk took in advanced liberal societies (e.g. Nikolas Rose's work). Castel's perspectives on the means through which psychotherapeutic practices and psychological discourse after 1968 constituted a "social world within a world without the social" contributed to the emergence of a new form of "asocial sociability" is still one of the most relevant analyses about the contribution of "psy" disciplines to contemporary individualism.

Beyond his academic involvement, Robert Castel was moved by a certain idea of how psychiatry should be practiced, a view he defended along with his wife Françoise Castel, a public psychiatrist, and with the Italian radical psychiatrist, Franco Basaglia. The untimely death of both undoubtedly influenced his decision to take on new subjects in the second half of the 1980s. After a study of how problem drug users exit from drug dependence (*toxicomanie*), he began a ten-year project which was to become the second great moment in his *oeuvre*. *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale*, published in 1995 (English translation, *From manual workers to wage laborers: transformation of the social question*, 2011), gained a broad readership, from social scientists to elected officials and activists from all points along the political spectrum. This historical sociology analyzes the constitution and transformations of the wage-worker (*salarial*) as a social and political condition, a process which broadens the forms of vulnerability and disaffiliation already revealed in Castel's earlier analyses of mental illness.

Always extremely lucid about his own trajectory, Castel devoted his last years to penetrating analyses on the future of the social critique hewn by sociologists from the generation of the Sixties in a world marked by the end of utopian possibilities and of voluntaristic positions on social integration. The totality of Castel's objects of analysis may raise numerous questions; those regarding psychiatry certainly call for a

re-evaluation of the body of his work. Yet that body of work constitutes an impressive ensemble, which any historian or sociologist interested in contemporary transformations of psychiatry and the social must confront at one moment or another.

Selected Bibliography

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