Carnets

A series of reports and methodological reflections focusing on the key players and initiatives in the youth support sector

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DISENGAGEMENT: A RELEVANT CONCEPT FOR YOUTH POLICY?

ANALYSIS - JACQUELINE FASTRÈS AND EMILE SERVAIS

DISAFFILIATED YOUNG PEOPLE?

INTRODUCTION

In June 2011, the Nivelles District Youth Support Council (CAAJ) invited the sociologist Robert Castel to ask him whether his concept of 'disaffiliation', developed for adults, could be applied to the situations of young people in the care of youth support services. The meeting, during which professionals from the sector were able to discuss the matter with him, was filmed. We would like to supplement this video here by attempting to provide some further insight into the concept, drawing on Castel's writings.

Robert Castel prefers the term 'disaffiliation' to that of 'exclusion'. In his view, exclusion implies a clean break from the world, as well as a static, permanent state. Most of the time, people are not strictly speaking excluded, but rather vulnerable, in the process of becoming disaffiliated. He finds this concept interesting because it allows one to 'trace back' through situations and analyse what promotes or exacerbates factors of vulnerability before disengagement occurs. It enables us to address the question of trajectory – the path that leads one to sink deeper into disaffiliation, or to emerge from it. Finally, it also helps to account for a wide variety of situations of precariousness arising from different or cumulative causes, thereby moving away from a categorisation-based approach (such-and-such a social group, such-and-such a structural cause) towards a *"cross-cutting* approach to the definition of these specific groups, and one that is *qualitative* or comprehensive rather than quantitative. What do the long-term unemployed, the young jobseeker on a string of work placements, the isolated adult claiming income support, the 'single' mother, and the young couple struggling to pay their mortgage and rent have *in common*? I shall put forward the hypothesis that they express a particular form of disconnection from the social fabric, which I shall call *'disaffiliation'*."[1]

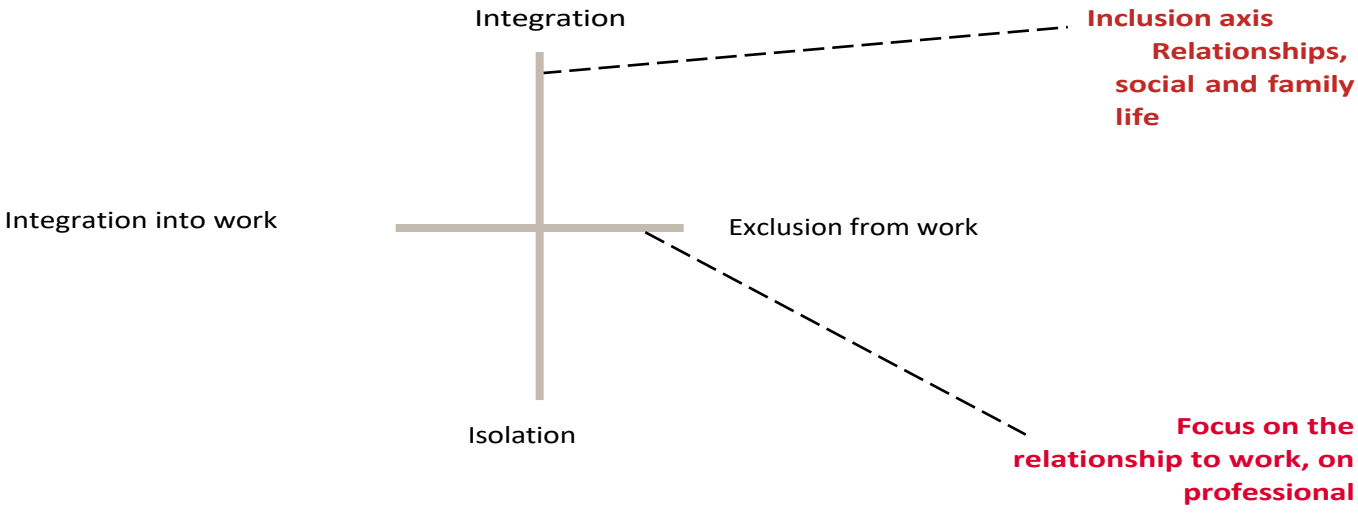
These words were written twenty years ago, which may already seem a long time ago, given the socio-economic changes in society. But these very changes only serve to make Castel's analysis even more relevant. We therefore propose to base our discussion on this article by Castel because it has the advantage of being highly instructive and allows us to outline the concepts, so that we can then assess whether they can be adapted to the problems facing young people and what lessons we should draw from them in terms of youth support, particularly in the area of prevention. In a second stage, we will draw on recent writings to inform our discussion.

1 Robert Castel, 'From Poverty to Exclusion: Disaffiliation. Job Insecurity and Relational Vulnerability', in Jacques Donzelot (ed.), *Confronting Exclusion*: *The French Model*, Paris, Editions Esprit, 1991, pp. 138–139. The terms in italics are in the original.

1. THE CONCEPT OF DISAFFILIATION

Robert Castel distinguishes two constituent elements of affiliation, and therefore decisive factors when it comes to disaffiliation: work, which enables integration into society and which remains, in his view, the primary integrator; and sociability, which encompasses relational aspects and connects individuals through social ties.
In his view, the issue of social exclusion is not merely economic. 'Whilst [poverty] may be interpreted as a condition whose forms are defined in terms of deprivation (lack of income, housing, healthcare, education, power or respect…), I would, for my part, like to view situations of deprivation as an *effect* resulting from the convergence of two factors: an axis of integration
/failure to integrate through work; a focus on integration / failure to integrate into a social and family network. According to this model, populations likely to require social intervention are not only threatened by a lack of material resources, but also made vulnerable by the instability of their social networks; they are not only in the process of becoming impoverished, but also in the process of disaffiliation, that is to say, a breakdown in their social ties. By the end of the process, economic precariousness has become destitution, and relational fragility has become isolation. These are two sides of the same *condition* [...].' [2]

We can therefore summarise Robert Castel's reasoning using a framework in which two axes intersect:
'one running from integration to exclusion in the labour sphere, and one running from inclusion to isolation in the socio-relational sphere.'[3]



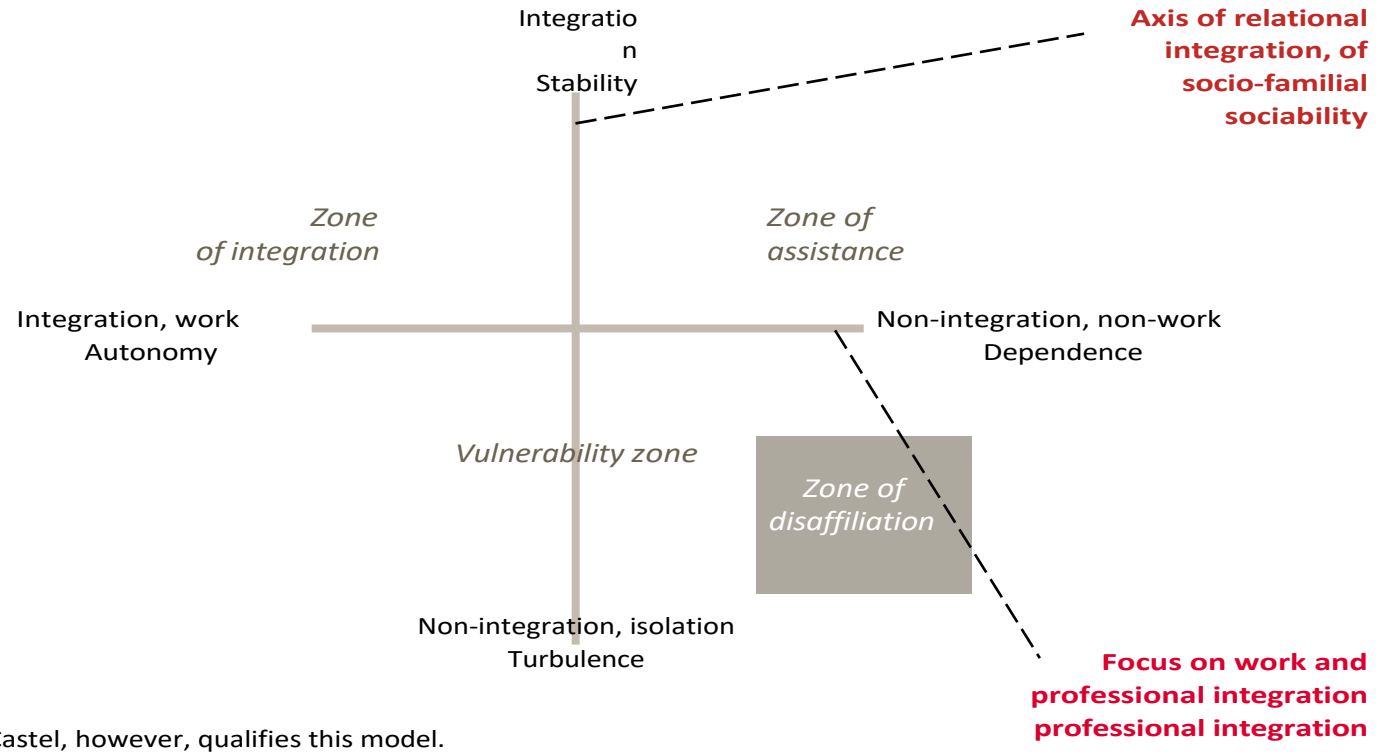
To illustrate his point, Castel presents the emblematic figure of the vagrant of yesteryear, whom he situates 'at the culmination of the dual process of which it represents the extreme case. On the axis of the relationship to work, there is a spectrum of positions ranging from attachment to stable employment to a complete lack of work, including participation in precarious, intermittent, seasonal, and other forms of employment. On the axis of social integration, we can also identify a spectrum of positions ranging from membership of strong social networks to total social isolation. The intersection of these two axes delineates different zones of social space according to the degree of *cohesion* they

2 *Ibid.*
3 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

provide. To put it simply: being in the *integration zone* means having the security of permanent employment and being able to draw on strong social networks; the *vulnerability zone* combines job insecurity with fragile social ties; the *disaffiliation zone* combines unemployment with social isolation."[4] The vagrant is therefore the marginal figure in the zone of disaffiliation.

Castel adds a fourth category: that of *welfare recipients*. This is characterised by the combination of non-employment due to an inability to work and a high degree of social integration. He illustrates his point by drawing on society under the Ancien Régime: the disabled pauper (who had no work due to incapacity) was helped ('assisted'), albeit in a piecemeal or paternalistic manner, whereas the able-bodied pauper (the vagrant, who had no work but was not incapable of working) was regarded as a danger to society and was subject to strict controls.

"The intersection of the two axes—work/non-work and social integration/non-integration—thus defines four zones, that is to say, four modes of social existence along a spectrum ranging from a pole of autonomy to a pole of dependence, or from a pole of stability to a pole of maximum turbulence."[5]



Castel, however, qualifies this model.

1. The boundaries between the zones are porous, and in particular the disengagement zone draws from the vulnerability zone.
2. A good score on one axis can compensate, at least partially, for a poor score on the other axis, and vice versa. This is why the assistance zone is an important element, fostering solidarity which offers a strong alternative to the risks of vulnerability.
3. Whilst the economic dimension is by no means insignificant, it is not the only determining factor.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 147–148.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

Castel drew on the society of the Ancien Régime to construct his model. He then used this to explain the current situation.

In terms of work and social integration, the widespread adoption of paid employment, the near-full-employment market conditions experienced during the 'thirty glorious years', and the introduction of compulsory insurance to address the issue of what was once known as disability-related poverty, enabled as many people as possible to live within the sphere of social integration. However, since what is commonly referred to as 'the crisis' of the 1970s, we have witnessed a significant rise in vulnerability.
Rising unemployment and the growth of precarious employment, characterised by fixed-term contracts, have not only created a 'precarious periphery' but have also contributed to the 'destabilisation of the stable'[6], with growing disparities in circumstances, status and pay, and increased reliance on social protection (and thus on the welfare system). Among those left behind, there is a growing number of young people.

A similar transformation is taking place in **the realm of social integration**. 'It will be less easy to demonstrate,' says Castel, 'because what I have termed this does not exhibit the homogeneity inherent in integration through work. We would need both to distinguish and to link at least two registers: the family variable and the, shall we say, cultural variable, in the sense that Richard Hoggart speaks of the 'culture of the poor' [7], the sharing of ways of life rooted in tradition, and participation in concrete values which, through investment in shared practices and the solidarity generated by a sense of belonging to the same community, structure daily life and give meaning to its reproduction."[8]

- Families that are shrinking

As regards the family dimension, we are witnessing a transformation in family structure that is leading to its decline as a vehicle for social integration. This is not a normative statement; it simply observes that isolation, whatever the reason (divorce, singlehood—whether willingly embraced or not—widowhood, etc.), always represents a decline in social support networks. There is a shrinking of family networks, not in the moral sense of the term, once again, but in the practical sense: 'A small family is a family without extended relatives, without an "uncle in America", and, particularly in working-class circles, without access to social and professional networks, except those of the father, and possibly the mother [relationships which, traditionally, would open the doors to employment]. For families
"single-parent families", the outlook is even more limited. (...) The weakening of the family structure, as measured by the preceding indicators, defines an area of relational vulnerability, particularly for the most disadvantaged families, which need not be universal to have destructive social effects. It represents a current which, mingling with other waters, feeds the breeding ground for social disaffiliation."[9]

- 'Cultural' relationships that no longer provide a 'safety net'

The 'cultural' dimension refers to a way of inhabiting a space and sharing common values based on a shared set of circumstances. Castel draws on Richard Hoggart to describe this organisation of working-class culture into a closed system of values and behaviours with a strong integrative function, producing powerful forms of solidarity, enabling the world to be structured into two poles: 'them' and 'us', with 'us' – however dominated they may be – being conscious of their unity. This working-class culture has lost its legitimacy, and with it popular solidarity has dissolved.

For Castel, young people in the suburbs are the most striking illustration of this dual disintegration, that

6 Castel borrows the expression from D. Linhart and M. Maruani, 'Precarisation and destabilisation of blue-collar jobs: some hypotheses', in **Work and Employment*,* no. 11, cited by Castel, *op. cit*., p. 154.
7 R. Hoggart, *The Culture of the Poor*, Paris, Ed. De Minuit, 1968.
8 R. Castel, *op. cit.*, p. 157
9 *Ibid*., pp. 160–161.

the family structure and popular culture. 'They reveal that disaffiliation is not merely a state but a way of being (an "ethos") experienced in this relationship with time that is both eternal and fleeting, with a very thin past, for little has been passed on through family, school or culture, and very little future, for there are only weak foundations upon which to build a trajectory: *no future*. " [10]

He adds: 'I would like to avoid painting an apocalyptic picture. After all, one might say, these young people number barely a few hundred thousand. They are, however, on a knife-edge and represent one of the vanguards of disaffiliation, revealing its limits: a way of being and of knowing that one is 'useless to the world', to borrow a term originally applied to vagabonds in the Middle Ages."[11]

And Robert Castel concludes his 1991 article with these words: 'The practical implication of these remarks is thus to suggest that a dual social policy might be possible, or at least conceivable: one, predominantly *preventive*, would consist of controlling the zone of vulnerability through general measures; the other, predominantly *remedial*, would aim to reduce the zone of disaffiliation through concrete integration measures."[12]

2. AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE DISCONNECT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SUBURBS: BEING ON THE MARGINS AND LIVING IN NEGATIVITY

In 2005, riots broke out in Clichy-sous-Bois and spread to a large number of French suburbs. Robert Castel examined in particular the situation of young people in the suburbs, who were at the forefront of the rioters, and whom Nicolas Sarkozy's all-too-famous term 'scum' has etched into the collective memory.
As part of this discussion, Castel dispels certain clichés that distort our understanding of the situation in the suburbs by 'focusing all the problems on them'; indeed, he does not shy away from appearing somewhat provocative. "And in any case, one cannot account for the state of neglect in which certain troubled neighbourhoods actually find themselves solely by the fact that they have been left to their own devices and have become 'lawless zones', urban jungles at the mercy of gang leaders and thugs, if not Islamist extremists. This police version of the ghetto, often echoed by the media, justifies treating the issue of the suburbs as a quasi-military reconquest, as if it were enough to eradicate 'the scum' to restore civil peace and social harmony. It is contradicted by observations on the ground as well as by all those (and they are often the same people) who try to understand the complexity of the problem. »[13]
The suburbs are not a ghetto because the authorities are present there:

- through urban policy and the presence of social services;
- through access, albeit imperfect, to public services and public institutions such as schools;
- and finally through the presence of these two representatives of sovereign functions, namely the judiciary and the police, although in the case of the latter, it is the excess of presence rather than its absence that must be noted.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 164.
11 *Ibid.*
12 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
13 Robert Castel, *Negative Discrimination: The Citizenship Deficit of Young People in the Suburbs*, EHESS Press/Annales. History, Social Sciences, 2006/4, available online at http://www.cairn.info/revue-annales-2006-4-page-777.htm, p. 786.

The suburbs are therefore not a neglected no man's land, and, as Castel points out, whilst it has been said that the ring road separating Paris from its suburbs functions as a border, 'it is by no means the Berlin Wall'.

Castel adds: 'Just as the suburbs are not a "ghetto", so too are young people from the suburbs not "excluded", provided that we give the concept of exclusion – which is not often the case given the current overuse of the term – the somewhat precise meaning of establishing a clear-cut divide between two categories of the population, with the 'excluded' finding themselves completely cut off from social life because they lack any of the rights, attributes and resources necessary to participate in community life."[14]
Indeed, according to Castel, most young people in the French suburbs enjoy the fundamental rights and privileges that come with being part of the French nation.

- Most are French citizens and will therefore, upon reaching the age of majority, obtain the same political rights as all other French people.
- In terms of social citizenship, they enjoy the same benefits as others: protection against the main social risks, accidents, illness and total lack of resources.

Nor are young people in the suburbs excluded in the sense that they are cut off from the prevailing culture. They largely share the values and aspirations of society as a whole and aspire to a 'normal' life, consistent with middle-class values. Innovations stemming from street culture, such as rap, are, moreover, part of mainstream culture.

"Thus, the problem facing these young people is not that they are on the margins of society, neither in terms of the space they occupy (the housing estate is not a ghetto) nor in terms of their status (most are French citizens, not foreigners). But neither are they part of it, since they occupy no recognised place within it and do not appear likely to be able to carve one out for themselves" [15] . Speaking of the 2005 housing estate riots, he adds: "If there was a revolt born of despair, it was because they were convinced they faced a dead-end future, deprived of the resources needed to be recognised as full members of society. Their exile is an internal exile that leads them to live in a state of deprivation, in the form of broken promises and the denial of rights, a deficit in relation to the opportunities and values that French society is supposed to embody. It is this paradoxical situation—of being both within and outside society—that must be accounted for in order to grasp the specificity of this type of revolt. [16]

If this line of reasoning were to inform youth policy, it would naturally lead to the following questions.

- How can we restore a view of young people that is more in line with reality (and avoid stigmatisation that justifies what they endure)?
- How can we promote policies that would move away from a categorisation-based approach and, as Castel recommends, towards a *'cross-cutting* approach to the definition of these specific groups, one that is *qualitative* or comprehensive rather than quantitative'?
- What policies could preventively and on a large scale tackle areas of vulnerability?
- What alliances should be forged to defend social gains in the area of welfare support?
- What practical measures could help reduce the number of young people dropping out of school (at a time when we seem to be accepting that this figure is rising)?

14 *Ibid.*
15 *Ibid.*, p. 788.
16 *Ibid.*