

Doesn't real estate capital really contribute to inequality?

By [Guillaume Allègre](#) and [Xavier Timbeau](#)

[In a response to *Capital in the twenty-first century*, Odran Bonnet, Pierre-Henri Bono, Guillaume Chapelle and Etienne Wasmer \(2014\)](#) attempt to show that the book's conclusions regarding an explosion in wealth inequality are “not plausible”. The authors point out an inconsistency in Thomas Piketty's thesis: the model of capital accumulation is implicitly a model of the accumulation of productive capital, which is inconsistent with the decision to include real estate capital at its market value in measuring capital. If valued correctly, the ratio of capital to income would have remained stable in France, Britain, the United States and Canada, which contradicts the thesis of Piketty's work.

In [OFCE Briefing Note, no.9/2015 \(“Does housing wealth contribute to wealth inequality? A tale of two New York”\)](#), we respond that the authors minimize the contribution of housing to inequality. In particular, we do not believe that trends in real estate prices have “second order effects (actual distributional effects) that are attenuated”. As is often the case, the disagreement is due in part to a lack of consensus about what kind of inequality actually matters: inequality in wealth? Income? Consumption? The potentially divergent dynamics of these inequalities? The disagreement is also due to the type of model used. The authors use a dynastic model in which property is passed from parents to children and grandchildren. In this model, changes in real estate prices do not have any real effect. This model is not relevant to accounting for inequalities generated by property in a society where people are mobile and have different life projects from

their parents.

The housing bubble could fuel the development of inequality. Home ownership in the world's metropolises is more and more becoming a closed club for the wealthy, which partitions young people between those with social, educational or financial capital, who can acquire property, and those who can only rent or move to less prosperous areas, with the consequence of further reducing their access to different types of capital. Would it not be better to build enough for everyone to find housing at a price that is in line with the amenities offered? Isn't it apparent that this latter situation is more egalitarian than the former?

For more on this, see: [Allègre, G. and X. Timbeau, 2014 : "Welcome to Nouillorc : Le capital-logement ne contribue-t-il vraiment pas aux inégalités?", Note de l'OFCE, no. 42 of 25 June 2014.](#)

The critique of capital in the 21st century: in search of the macroeconomic foundations of inequalities

By [Guillaume Allègre](#) and [Xavier Timbeau](#)

In his book *Capital in the 21st Century*, Thomas Piketty offers a critical analysis of the dynamics of capital accumulation. The book is at the level of its very high ambitions: it

addresses a crucial issue, it draws on a very substantial statistical effort that sheds new light on the dynamics of distribution, and it advances public policy proposals. Thomas Piketty combines the approach of the great classical authors (Smith, Ricardo, Marx, Walras) with impressive empirical work that was inaccessible to his illustrious predecessors.

Thomas Piketty shows the mechanisms pushing towards a convergence or divergence in the distribution of wealth and highlights how the strength of divergence is generally underestimated: if the return on capital (r) is higher than economic growth (g), which historically has almost always been the case, then it is almost inevitable that inherited wealth will dominate built-up wealth, and the concentration of capital will reach extremely high levels: "The entrepreneur inevitably tends to become a rentier, more and more dominant over those who own nothing but their labour. Once constituted, capital reproduces itself faster than output increases. The past devours the future."

The book thus seeks the basis for inequality in macroeconomics ($r > g$), whereas the usual suspects are found at the microeconomic level. In [OFCE Working document no. 2014-06 \[in French\]](#), we argue that this macro-foundation for inequality is not convincing and that the same facts can be interpreted using a different causality, in which inequality arises from the operation of (imperfect) markets, scarcity rents and the establishment of property rights. It is not $r > g$ that turns entrepreneurs into rentiers, but the establishment of mechanisms that allow the extraction of a perpetual rent that explains the historical constancy of $r > g$.

This different interpretation of the same phenomena has consequences for public policy. The *ex post* taxation of capital, where necessary, can only be a second-level choice: first the constraints of scarcity have to be removed and the definition of property rights and the rights of owners and non-owners must be defined. Are landlords going to be free to

charge any rent they like? Can they limit other construction around their property? How much protection is labour law going to give workers? To what extent can they influence managerial decisions within the company? In our opinion it is the answers to these questions that determine the relationship between economic growth and the return on capital, as well as capital's weight in the economy. The point is to prevent owners of capital from exploiting a favourable balance of power. In this respect, while its shape has changed, capital in the twenty-first century is much like it was in the late nineteenth century. Dealing with it will require more than a tax on capital.

For more information, see: "La critique du capital au XXI^e siècle : à la recherche des fondements macroéconomiques des inégalités", [Document de travail de l'OFCE, n°2014-06](#).

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.

The middle class: baseless fears or genuine hardship?

By Louis Chauvel

The term “middle class” is one of those social science concepts that provoke controversy due to its complex definition and dynamics and the political debate it generates. The fact that it is surrounded by sharp controversy should not therefore come as a big surprise. [In a note by the OFCE](#) – where a multifaceted definition of the middle class is proposed [1] – we review several dimensions of the social malaise afflicting this social group, which is often considered to be relatively privileged, in an effort to understand the actual situation.

Two theses are considered here:

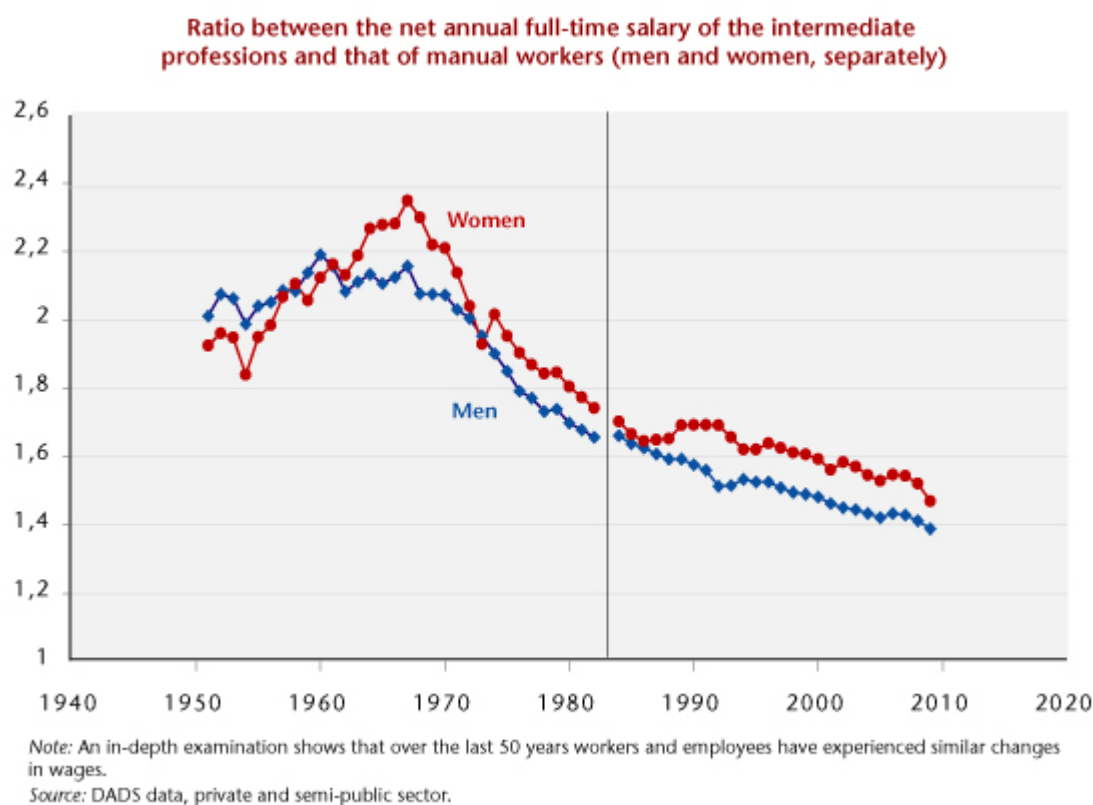
- on the one hand, the thesis of the middle class maintaining its former status, the strengthening of the protection its members enjoy and confirmation of their economic ascent [2] – a thesis that makes the “fear of decline” that haunts them a paradox;

- on the other hand, the thesis of an objective increase in social problems that were previously limited to people in lower strata (employees and workers, two social groups whose hourly wages are similar), with the upwards diffusion of the problems through capillary action now less blocked [3].

Proponents of the optimistic thesis, that of maintenance, argue that “contrary to popular belief”, the fall in status of the middle class is a “fiction”, as this social group “simultaneously embodies a ‘France holding its own’ and a ‘France that’s rising’” (Goux and Maurin). In this view, fear

of decline is a psychological reaction of the middle class with no real cause.

In the Note, which upholds a different view, we review several aspects of this analysis to understand the objective basis for the malaise of the middle class. We show that the increasing difficulties faced by lower strata – for example, the risk of unemployment – are seeping into the intermediate middle classes, who can no longer be said to be protected. This is an element of the “theory of the lump of sugar at the bottom of the cup of coffee”: while the upper and middle parts of society still seem intact, erosion is continuing through the capillary-like action of the immersed part and, if nothing is done, it threatens inevitable deterioration.



The relative standard of living of the intermediate middle class peaked in what the French call the “Trente glorieuses”, the three decades of post-war prosperity: since the end of this golden age, stagnant wages and incomes, the reduction of wage differentials with the lower classes holding jobs (see chart), the unprecedented risk of unemployment, the numerical

expansion of diplomas to numbers that go well beyond the space available in the intermediary professions, and the consequent devaluation of education, etc., were a number of the problematic issues analyzed in this paper that highlight the existence of a very real malaise. It is thus possible to show that, in terms of diplomas, the intermediate middle class population increasingly consists of a share of potential managers (based on their level of education) who have not actually managed to enter the upper middle class, due to a lack of sufficient places, and on the other hand survivors of the intensified competition, a reflection of the growing number of people with the same level of education who have fallen into the lower classes.

In this note, we therefore consider the cause of the destabilization of the project of “middle class civilization” (Alexandre Koyré) that had emerged in the context of the growth and modernity that marked the 1960s to 1980. The corresponding social dynamics were not based simply on the numerical expansion of the intermediate middle class, but also on a coherent social and political project that has now become unstable. What are the ways to reconnect with this dynamic? How would it be possible to escape the vicious circle whereby the middle classes disintegrate and we develop policies targeted at those most in need without seeing that they feed the fall of groups that were previously better situated but that haven’t been supported? The answer lies in productive investment in sectors with long-term promise. Without coming to terms with the real causes of the malaise of the intermediate middle class and dealing with the root problems, we may be preparing ourselves for a difficult decade.

[1] The middle class is defined in their plurality as falling into the upper middle classes, comparable to the “executives and intellectual professions” who make up about 10% of households, and the intermediate middle classes, which corresponds to the 20% located immediately below, and thus

close to the intermediary professions as defined by the INSEE.

[2] D. Goux and E. Maurin, 2012, *Les nouvelles classes moyennes*, Seuil, Paris. Most of these ideas were already presented in S. Bosc, 2008, *Sociologie des classes moyennes*, La Découverte.

[3] L. Chauvel, 2006, *Les classes moyennes à la dérive*, Seuil, Paris.

Women's Day

On the occasion of 8 March, we would like to remind our readers that, together with Sciences-Po, the OFCE has developed the specialist Research Programme for Teaching and Knowledge on Gender Issues ([PRESAGE](#)).

A number of posts on this blog have taken up the subject of [occupational equality between men and women](#).