

Review Essay

WHY WE MIGHT ALL BE
ABLE TO LIVE TOGETHER:
AN IMMANENT CRITIQUE OF
ALAIN TOURAINE'S
*POURRONS-NOUS VIVRE
ENSEMBLE?*

Jeffrey C. Alexander

Alain Touraine has occupied a unique position among the leading theorists in the world. For all the great terms and ideas he has thrown our way – the new social movements and post-industrialism, the sociology of action and the return of the actor – what has really preoccupied Touraine is changing the world. Alone among the ‘grand sociological theorists’ of the post-war period, it is only Touraine who took seriously Marx’s dictum that the reason to understand the world is to change it. This became particularly clear after Touraine ‘gave up’ his early interest (learned from his teacher, George Friedman) in blue collar workers. Reframing them, and Marxist materialism, as significant but misunderstood objects of ‘19th-century theory’, he began, in the mid-1960s, to try to develop a theory that was quintessentially 20th century.

Touraine was the only important theoretical sociologist to take the conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s seriously and systematically. Indeed, he identified with these new social movements just as strongly as Marx had identified with the old ones, and with the same intellectual ambivalence. He invented his method of ‘sociological intervention’ not only to study these movements but also to set them right. Applying the spirit of Marx’s theory more than its

letter, Touraine tried to develop a grounded theory of the contradictory, anti-human forces and dynamics of post-industrial society, and to identify, on the basis of these structural strains, social groups that were bound to overturn them. What was at first the new working class soon became the 'new social movement,' fighting against the elitist power monopolies of the information age. Like many people in those times, Touraine was convinced that it was possible to carry out this revolutionary change. What made him different from others was that he had developed a highly original theory of why.

It should not be surprising, however, that when history changed, this deeply historical and political intellectual would change his mind, too. As the 1970s turned into the 1980s, Touraine came to understand that the contradictions he had identified were not fundamental, in the sense of Mao's famous essay 'On Contradiction,' and that the movements responding to them were not necessarily either powerful or radical. As state communism was demolished and democratic socialism emptied out, Touraine observed closely. As ideas of modernity and universalism revived and democratic theory was reborn, Touraine, as always, read widely. The results were the two very new and different books he published in the first half of this decade: *Critique de la modernité* (1992) and *Qu'est-ce que la démocratie?* (1994). Touraine was still leftist and radical, but he was becoming more a radical democrat than a social democrat. He was paying closer attention now to the differential influence of what Weber called the rational-legal framework of modern authority and particularly to the fact that it was only the continuing existence of this framework, not its transformation, that offered possibilities for the deepening equality and intensifying democracy.

Pourrons-nous vivre Ensemble? – a title that for Americans cannot help but recall Rodney King's plaintive question, 'why can't we all get along?' – carries further this scarcely noticed but significantly affecting transformation in Touraine's thought and, in a certain important sense, brings it finally to fruition. It does so by crystallizing Touraine's new sense of the fundamental dynamics of contemporary societies, the contradictions that threaten to tear them apart, and the social forces, stimulated but not controlled by these dynamics, that are emerging to reconstruct these societies in a more egalitarian and democratic way.

Touraine remains motivated by the extraordinary effervescence of normative theory. 'Philosophical reflection,' he writes, 'has happily found its vigor once again, compensating for the continuing weakening of sociological thought.' He adds that 'today it is from political and moral philosophy more than from the description of new forms of production, exchange, and redistribution that the renovation of theory proceeds' (p. 368). Yet Touraine continues to believe that sociology holds the key for any critical theory, and this is what he aims to provide. 'It is urgent', he asserts, 'that intellectuals propose a representation of the world, of the changes in it and of the actors who can transform the spontaneous tendencies that defend and affirm the Subject into

conscious actions and movements which will give some sense back to the idea of political action' (p. 367).

This time around, Touraine defines the good society's enemies, not as industrial capitalists or self-interested monopolizers of information and decisions, but as the globalizing marketeers, on the one hand, and fanatically particularistic communitarians, both inside and outside developed societies, on the other. The resolution he describes points neither to socialism nor to radical political participation per se but to multiculturalism, the recognition of difference, and a suspiciously Kantian and Durkheimian conception of solidarity. In the course of making these arguments, Touraine acknowledges that the old 'new social movements' have died, and he implicitly lets the theory that once seemed so brilliantly to comprehend them slip away as well. He is not looking any more for a theory of the 20th century but for a framework that can comprehend the 21st century. The challenge, in his words, is 'to discover a society and a culture in formation' (p. 56).

One can only admire Touraine's vast intellectual ambition, which deserves even more praise because we live in such a conservative, relativist and resolutely anti-foundationalist age. Yet, while I agree entirely with Touraine's sense that the cunning of history has struck once again, that we are now, as he says, in a 'cultural' rather than industrial or post-industrial age, I do have some problems with the way he explains this transition and with how he defines this new age. What bothers me is that there seems to be only an attenuated, tenuous relationship between the structural contradictions Touraine identifies as so dangerous and the counteracting social forces he describes as bringing a new and better society into being.

In his delineation of the structural contradictions of this new historical period, Touraine is, as he acknowledges himself (p. 70), rather dark and pessimistic. Observing the increasingly imperial, unabashedly materialistic and hard-hearted IMF-USA-global market complex, he sees abstract universalism run wild, with fragmenting and atomizing results. At the same time, he observes an equally frightening upsurge in ethnic particularism and communalism. He terms such 'social anti-movements' communitarianism because he means to refer not only to Serbs and fundamentalist Muslims, but also to radical multiculturalists who believe that 'living together' is not a good idea in itself. These forces feed on each other, producing what Touraine calls *demodernization*.

Both of these demodernizing developments, Touraine argues, undermine the possibility of living together or, to be more specific, they undermine the communication and mutual understanding that living together in a democratic way requires. The new capitalism brings about the 'desocialization of mass culture', such that 'we live together only in the sense that we make the same gestures and use the same objects, but without being capable of communicating among ourselves' (p. 14). There has, moreover, been a vast separation of this global economic culture from national and local social

structures, with the result that 'our culture no longer orders our social organization, which in turn can no longer direct technological and economic life' (p. 14). Yet when groups of people react to this economic demodernization by 'becoming closed on themselves, and by giving more and more priority to values over techniques, [and] to traditions over innovations', this is a recipe for disaster. It seems that interdependence and mutual understanding are increasingly at odds: 'When we are all together, we have almost nothing in common, and when we share some beliefs and a history, we reject those who are different from us.' In this dire situation, 'we live together only by losing our identity; inversely, the return to community brings with it the call to homogeneity, to purity, to unity, [with the result that] communication is replaced by war among those who offer sacrifices to different gods' (p. 15). Touraine believes that this destructive dialectic is most of all true for the nation 'which everybody is looking at today' – the United States 'is at one and the same time the principal center of world markets and an ensemble of more and more fragmented communities . . . and ghettos' (p. 62).

This is not just a 'dilemma' (p. 17) but a 'double degradation' (p. 51), a 'rupture more profound than that which pitted the social classes against each other in the industrial revolution' (p. 71), a split between 'two separate orders of existence', between 'the instrumental world and the symbolic world', between 'technique and value' (p. 17). To govern a country today, Touraine ruminates, 'consists above all in rendering its social and economic organization compatible with the existences of the international economic system' (p. 18). 'How can one still speak of citizenship and representative democracy', he asks, 'when the elected look only at the world market and the electors look only at their private life?'

Touraine devotes the first half of *Pourrons-nous vivre Ensemble?* to elaborating the destructiveness of this situation. At the macro level, 'deinstitutionalization' has occurred: 'The weakening or dissolution of norms that are codified and protected by legal mechanisms' or, 'more simply, the disappearance of judgements about normality which are applied to actions by institutions' (p. 54). What corresponds to this at the micro-level is 'desocialization.' Families have surrendered to mass communication, schools no longer exercise socializing control, and the self has become deeply fragmented.

The formation of the young is more and more chaotic . . . Their experiences are not integrated with each other . . . The idea that it is by the interiorization of norms or even of constraints that the individual acquires the consciousness of his own liberty is being undermined to the point of disappearing . . . The personality . . . no longer has a point of integration (p. 74) . . . Eroticism, a la Bataille or Bacon, has destroyed the social order just as the return of ethnic and religious identities have destroyed the pretension of Western man to identify his history and his interests with the universal (p. 76).

Not surprisingly, Touraine concludes that 'in the state of demodernization in which we live, the rupture . . . between the actor and the system is complete'

(p. 58), observing that 'the temptation is great to allow the death of the subject and its demand for universalism' (p. 76).

Against this desolate portrait of post-communist late modernity, Touraine's insistence that he will not give up on the human possibility of 'getting along together' is scarcely reassuring. It recalls Cervantes more than Marx. When he suggests that 'what we are looking for must be at once a force of reintegration of the economy and culture, a force opposing the power of strategic action' (p. 27), we want to say, good luck! If the facts really are as Touraine has described them, how could we find such a way out? Our fears are confirmed when Touraine offers 'the Subject' (capital 's') as the stand-in for the proletariat, the entity produced by this destructive system that will prove to be its gravedigger in the end. Touraine acknowledges that, as the true product of the debilitating system he has described, 'the Subject has no other content than the production of itself' and that it 'serves no cause, no value, no other law' than its own needs and desires (p. 28). He believes, however, that such an 'affirmation of personal liberty' is enough, that 'the subject is also and at the same time a social movement' for justice and mutual understanding.

Confined by his hypercritical and pessimistic empirical theory, Touraine can provide precious little in the way of sociological reasoning to explain the subject's emancipatory interests; his logic eerily resembles Lukács' dialectical reasoning about why, despite massive reification, the proletariat must and will become the universal class. Touraine insists, however, that 'the Subject is not a simple form of reason'. It exists 'in memory and solidarity, and especially in struggling, in indignation, in hope, and in inscribing its personal liberty in social combat and cultural liberation' (p. 80). To make real on this claim, Touraine introduces the idea of 'subjectivation', which seems built on the rather flimsy notion that 'the Subject *is* the desire of the individual to be an actor' (p. 78, emphasis added). In a society of such repressive contradictions, it seems to Touraine, simply wanting to be free is enough to see that negative liberty is not enough. In a peculiarly Sartrean move, Touraine suggests that 'the anguish created by an experience [of life] that is more and more contradictory' (p. 81) leads the Subject to a more positive sense of liberty, to the understanding that the Other must be free as well, and, eventually, to 'recognition of the Other' in a multicultural sense.

The sociological thinness of this argument for an expansive subjectivation can most clearly be seen in Touraine's insistence that the Subject must not be understood as 'a member of a collectivity (nation state, town, religious, ethnic, linguistic or any other such group) which feels itself responsible for the common good and for maintaining moral principles on which the community rests' (p. 87). He must be insistent about this, I believe, because of theoretical and not empirical, logic. If the Subject were to be understood as the member of a collectivity, Touraine would be contradicting himself, casting doubt on the validity of his earlier empirical arguments about desocialization and deinstitutionalization. Yet if Touraine is compelled to be consistent, we

are not. Why would the Subject, or even the subject, respond to anguish by moving closer to the Other if he cannot refer to common, shared, and more universalistic values?

I wish to argue, in fact, that in the process of trying to substantiate his argument for the emancipatory subject, Touraine is eventually forced to move beyond the hyperbolic and starkly one-sided analysis of system-versus-actor he lays down in the first part of his book. '*Comment vivre ensemble?*' Touraine asks. '*Comment combiner la liberté ou l'identité avec la participation à la vie sociale?*' In order to instantiate his normative claims, Touraine is compelled to acknowledge, *malgré lui*, that global capitalism and communitarianism are not the only powerful new forces in contemporary society. The 'relation to the Other', he admits, 'is achieved by sympathy, even empathy and understanding' (p. 106). In other words, Touraine's Subject is rooted in strong and intensifying civil commitments, not only in instrumental and primordial ones. 'The construction of the Subject is not possible', he suggests, 'outside of the reference to collective action' (p. 102). Touraine says he agrees, in fact, with Cohen and Arato that what 'unites the social movement and the Subject' is the phenomenon of 'civil society', but he worries that this concept is 'more easily handled by political philosophy than by the contemporary sociologist' (p. 126). Perhaps it is in order to facilitate the sociological translation of this philosophical idea that Touraine decides he must speak of 'cultural movements' in contemporary societies, rather than of 'social' movements. He defines cultural movements as 'collective actions tending to define or transform the figure of the Subject' (p. 133) and devotes a great deal of discussion to feminist and ecology movements, and to movements to defend ethnic, national and religious minorities. At the base of these discussions is the argument that the focus of these new movements is cultural, not economic or even directly political.

The relative weakness and especially the weak organization of these new societal movements should not hide the fact that they constitute a more direct and stronger appeal to the Subject than all earlier movements. We see forming, in the most central domains of postindustrial society (health, education, information), protests, debates, and proposals that have for their objective the defense of the Subject against technological and market logic. (p. 142)

This focus on communication and symbolic reconstitution reflects a shift in the institutional and cultural framework of contemporary society. 'Associations occupy the place', Touraine observes, 'that was once occupied by unions and, above all, by parties' (p. 143). This shift, however, reflects a much more basic transformation still.

Public life becomes less and less formal. Actions are so much more discontinuous and diffuse that a growing importance is given to the media . . . Currents of opinion, formed, amplified, and also deformed by the media, often draw attention today to more fundamental problems than do the parties or the

unions, and the latter know this so well that they voluntarily withdraw, trying not to direct but only to support movements which are motivated not only by economics but by morality. (p.143)

It seems pretty clear that Touraine believes we are moving, or have already moved, from a post-industrial, vertical society to a civil, much more horizontal one. It is neither global capitalism nor primordial reaction that explains the specificity of the emancipatory movements of our time; rather, it is the expansion and deepening of the culture, institutions, and face-to-face interactions of the civil sphere of society. Much more can be found in *Pourrons-nous vivre Ensemble?* to buttress this interpretation, but I will conclude this all too brief argument by asking you to engage in a thought experiment while I close with one final passage from this fascinating and important book. As you read, I want you to ask yourself whether the following is written by Emile Durkheim or by Alain Touraine:

The acceptability of a measure or a practice is decided more and more at the level of public opinion and less and less by institutional elites. If there is a supreme court or constitutional counsel that demands respect for the fundamental liberties inscribed in the Constitution, it is public opinion, carried by media, that accepts or rejects what appears as a defense or an attack on personal liberties. It is public opinion that sustains the demands of feminists [and others] . . . This public opinion carries moral judgments; it looks for those who are responsible. One can see this in France in the scandal about contamination and in the many other affairs that have produced public victims. Jurists are worried about such a return to the idea of culpability, but it cannot be otherwise in a civilization whose principle of integration is no longer institutional but moral. (p. 181)

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Note

In the above reconstruction of Touraine's theoretical writings, I am drawing from the extended overview I offered in Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Collective Action, Culture and Civil Society: Secularizing, Updating, Inverting, Revising and Displacing the Classical Model of Social Movements', pp. 205-34 in M. Diani and J. Clarke, eds, *Alain Touraine*. London: Falmer Press, 1996.

Review Essay

‘TO GAZE, TO SEE; TO SEE:
PERCHANCE TO LOOK. . .’:
ON VISION, SURREALISM AND
OTHER FRENCH INSIGHTS

John Lechte

What was and still is at stake as far as I am concerned is the necessity to ensure that one form of awareness of the world will prevail over another, which, in any case I reject as such, in spite of its pretensions. The latter . . . could be said to correspond to the realist vision and the other one to the poetic (surrealist) vision of things. (André Breton, ‘Oceania’ in *Free Rein*, 1995)

INTRODUCING VISION

Postmodern society, together with the sensibility of this epoch, is often deemed to be essentially visual – and everyone is writing about it.¹ Whence comes such lucidity on a topic as complex and difficult as the character of the era and its effects? Whence come the insights, the illumination, the brilliance – again, the vision – enabling observers to see clearly what is at stake? Now, we are told, the visual or ‘pictorial turn’ has taken over from the ‘linguistic turn’ as the dominant epistemological paradigm at the end of the millennium (see Jay, 1996).

If this all sounds a little too narcissistic for comfort (vision knowing itself as illumination, vision illuminating itself as the key to illumination), the books under review are much more measured and subtle on ‘seeing’ and the ‘look’. The books in question are André Breton’s *Free Rein* (1995), a collection of Breton’s occasional essays translated for the first time; Mary Ann Caws’