

Book Review

Défense de la modernité. By **Alain Touraine**. Éditions du Seuil. 2018. 384pp. €24.00.

It is an invitation to politics, both active and responsible. An ode to history, as an act of creation, something to reflect on as well as a starting point with the aim of consciously generating new history. Without a shadow of a doubt, this is the defining character of Alain Touraine's *Défense de la modernité*.

Having dedicated years of study to the subject of work and social movements, with the publication of *La fin des sociétés* (2013) and of *Nous, sujets humains* (2015), the author seems to have entered into a reflection that simultaneously searches for the best way to rethink social ideals in both individualistic and universal terms. Above all, Touraine's general inspiration is his interest in the sociology of actors (with their liberty, equality and dignity) in comparison to the sociology of systems (with their interest groups, profits and powers). His profound conviction continues to be that the end of social sciences is identifying the rules of the individual and collective behaviour of human beings.

As in *Critique de la modernité* (1992), his trust in human nature is given the name 'modernity'. In Touraine's reflection, aspects tend to change and become more specific: the elimination of the unity imposed by the sacred, the abolition of the distance between instrumental action and self-awareness, and the progressive creation of a society of citizens who are the custodians of rights.

Alain Touraine's modernity is defined, in particular, through the interdependence of three elements: the creation of material civilisation and the existence of social conflict between those who possess goods and those who do not. He refuses to search for explanations for the historical changes based on exclusively economic or cultural or political terms, but rather he affirms the unbreakable link, characterising any modern society, between material civilisation, collective interpretation of one's own creativity, and the social conflict between the dominator and the dominated within the labour context.

However, the author's deep trust in human beings' capacities should not be confused with a sort of fideism: the possibility of inadequacy regarding future challenges is firmly present, especially because of the incapacity of dominant political regimes to make decisions.

In general, what worries him most is not the difficulty of these decisions but rather the widespread attitude of mistrust in the possibility for intervention by social actors. This lack of trust is identified, for example, even in the definition of 'liquid modernity' given by Zygmunt Bauman, which proves to be more nihilist and impressionist than critical and militant. It is as if hope in social science were to be, finally, completely abandoned by him. The experience of totalitarianism, suggests Touraine, should not be discouraging but rather should invite one to find in 'hypermodernity' the strength with which humankind might liberate itself, understanding the new cultural opportunities offered by new creative capacities.

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In a hypermodern society, power – before being economic and political – is cultural, since the communication of information changes the behaviour of individuals, their attitudes and their representations of the existent.

In conflict with the prophets of the ‘crisis of modernity’, ‘postmodern society’ and ‘liquid society’, Touraine describes the advent of a new society, which he calls ‘hypermodern’. The modern world that we live in is conscious of its own modernity and, therefore, is transforming itself from an inhabited space of creatures into a place generated by creators. The society that we are building (abandoning industrial society) is distinguished, according to the author, by a hypermodern civilisation, definable by the ‘full and direct’ consciousness of being its own creator. The aim of this new civilisation is not to create new tools of creativity, but rather to create creativity. Hypermodern society produces creativity: this is exactly the reason why the role of education should be – according to Touraine – on the same level of importance as industrial production was in the preceding society. In hypermodern society, the ‘full, complete and above all direct’ consciousness of human creativity constitutes the basis for social action.

In the first part of the work, the author dedicates himself to the dissolution of the type of determinism that – because of its religious, economic or functional nature – enchains the possibility of the human being’s creative action. In the second part he turns to describing the traits of hypermodern society. In the final part, reflecting on the passage from an industrial to a hypermodern society, he observes how the movement and political forces should necessarily act at the global level, defending the fundamental rights of liberty, equality and dignity of human beings – even above their own personal interests – with the end of resisting total cultural powers.

The world of the twenty-first century – divided into three geopolitical areas corresponding to authoritarian, identity and capitalist regimes – is becoming, according to the author, a place of confrontation between subjectivism (respect of fundamental human rights) and de-subjectivism (the progressive negation of these rights). In order to steer the world politically, we need to place our trust again in the social sciences and to construct new social movements with both cultural and democratic aims. The objective is the acknowledgement of rights through the subordination of all institutions to this process of subjectivism. Against those who are limited in affirming that the new technologies create new powers and forms of domination, Touraine reminds us that the human sciences should make us understand the possibility of the subjects’ victory over a system presented as inescapably determined.

Specifically, he wants to criticise the predominant line of thinking fed by economic determinism, because in reality our situation and our behaviour are not dictated by the laws of economy. On the contrary, the injustices and inequalities are affected by laws that we ourselves have written and enacted. According to Touraine, who shares the position expressed by Joseph Stiglitz, the origin of the problem lies in public policies that have led us to commodify and corrupt our democracies. In order to clear the field of deterministic economic laws, only the historic outlook turns out to be valid.

Touraine therefore hopes for the advent of a new humanism, dominated by a new *homo faber*, able to assume the responsibility that transforms itself from individual into social and to communicate with the other in order to understand

and make oneself understood inside a mutually educative dynamic. *Homo deus* of Yuval Noah Harari is thus substituted by the *sujet humain* of Alain Touraine, who searches for his own dignity inside history and creates himself and his own rights. Human nature, in fact, consists above all in generating history. We are natural creatures but at the same time also created by history and creators of history.

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