

The rise and fall of social movements: A tribute to Alain Touraine (1925–2023)

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journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Frédéric Vandenberghe** *UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

Alain Touraine died in Paris on 9 June 2023, at the age of 97. Along with Pierre Bourdieu, his antipode, competitor and colleague at the Ecole des Hautes Études in Paris, he was France's most prominent sociologist. Whereas Bourdieu would insist on class domination and social reproduction, Touraine would underscore the production of society, the conflicts that traverse it and the social movements that struggle to redefine the central values of society. For him, human beings make society, but they do so through social conflicts and on the basis of cultural choices. In double opposition to Talcott Parsons' structural-functionalism, which dominated American sociology in the 1950s and 1960s, and Marxist structuralism, which became hegemonic in Europe in the 1970s, Touraine defended 'actionalism' as a comprehensive theoretical perspective for the analysis of large-scale social change. In the 1960s, from within the field of the sociology of work, he proposed a distinctive analysis of the transition from the industrial to the post-industrial society. In the 1970s and 1980s, he theorised the 'new social movements' as successors to the workers' movement and invented 'sociological intervention' as a method and a form of action research. From the 1990s onwards, he proposed a critique, a diagnosis and eventually also a defence of modernity along classical liberal lines.

Touraine was not only a grand theorist and a field worker, he was also a public intellectual on the Left, fully engaged in the struggles of his time. May 1968, Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, the Solidarity trade-union movement in Poland, Sarajevo during the civil war in Yugoslavia, the strike of 1995 in Paris, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, the controversy about the Islamic veil in France, the election of Emmanuel Macron (whom he supported), at all important junctions in Europe or

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Latin America, he would take a stand and defend his modernising positions with charisma and verve.

Coming from a bourgeois background in North-West France, Touraine was trained as a historian at the famous École Normale Supérieure. Early on, he worked in the coal mines in the North of France and did research on automation at the Renault factory in Boulogne-Billancourt. In the early 50s, he attended Talcott Parsons's sociology courses at Harvard. After 2 h, he realised that normative functionalism represented everything he rejected. He was not interested in consensus, but in conflict, not in the social order but in social change and social movements. Influenced by the Hegelian Marxism of Georg Lukács and the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, he would go on to develop the theory of action as a non-functional sociology of conflict and social change. From Parsons, he inherited the analytic approach, the voluntarism and the emphasis on culture as steering mechanism of society. Touraine was always looking for the central conflict and a historical subject that would be able to bring society to a higher level of consciousness and make it advance to a new stage of development. As a post-Marxist, he incorporated modes of accumulation into his theory, while reorienting class conflict towards the control of the symbolic representations of society. His stay at the University of Chile in 1956, where he met his first wife, and his research on working-class consciousness in Santiago and São Paulo were also momentous. In close contact with Fernando Henrique Cardoso, his interest in Latin America would give significant impulses to 'dependency theory' and find its culmination in *La parole et le sang* (1988), a panoramic interpretation of the 'national-popular' model of collective action in South America in which social actors remain subordinated to political power and the state is not sufficiently differentiated from the political system. The Cadis, the research lab on social movements he founded at the EHESS in Paris in 1981, was always teeming with researchers and visitors from South America.

In a long career that spans three quarters of a century, three phases can be distinguished: the sociology of action (1960s to 1970s), the sociology of new social movements (1970s to 1980s) and the reflection on the Subject (from the 1990s onwards). The three phases correspond to three successive forms of society (the industrial society, the post-industrial society and the 'end of society') he lived through and tried to understand. The first period was devoted to the study of technological changes in the sphere of production and their impact on the workers' consciousness. In his thesis, *Sociologie de l'action* (1965), which was heavily attacked by Raymond Aron during his viva, and its sequel, *La production de la société* (1973), he laid the groundwork for a grand historical sociology in which the workers' movement appears as the historical subject of the industrial society. Working at a high level of abstraction with concepts that are rather loosely defined and a lot of rhetorical flourish, Touraine conceptualises action as work, and work as the collective capacity to produce social relations. Society is not an actor, but a system of action in which various actors with conflicting interests struggle to define the cultural orientations that supposedly guide the transformation of society. The workers' movement is the first movement in history that operates without 'metasocial guarantees' (God, Reason, History) and is conscious of its 'historicity', that is, the capacity of a society to act on itself and transform society by creating its own cultural orientations that define the central struggle of an epoch. Historicity commands both the

institutional or political system and the organisational system of society that are situated at a lower level in the cybernetic hierarchy of control. The historical subject is neither a transcendental subject nor a historical actor. Rather it is an analytical construct that represents the highest level of consciousness of social actors who aim at the conscious direction of society and seek to impose their vision of development against their adversaries.

Following May 1968 and the relative decline of the labour movement, Touraine re-oriented his research towards the 'new social movements' and the production of new type of society: the post-industrial or programmed society in which information, communication and knowledge define the mode of development. In *La voix et le regard* (1978), the central book of the second period, he defines a social movement as the organised collective behaviour of an actor who struggles against an adversary for the social direction of historicity in a given society. As instantiation of the historical subject, a social movement is defined by the combination of three principles: identity, opposition and totality. Absent one of the defining elements and the movement will not be able to determine the new cultural model of society and the stakes of the conflict. Identity (I) refers to the self-consciousness of actors. It does not pre-exist the conflict but is formed in and through the collective organisation of the actor. Opposition (O) refers to the definition of the adversary. There is no social movement without adversary or, as resource mobilisation theorists will say later, no social movement without counter-movement. The opponents are class adversaries in an antagonistic relation of dominance, not enemies. Whether they want to preserve the existing order or transform it, they are both part of a shared cultural field. What is at stake in the conflict is the historicity itself, the capacity to define an alternative social order (T) through articulation of a cultural model and social relations in a new type of society. When social movements operate at the highest level of the historical system of action, they are engaged in a structural class conflict that contests the existing relations of domination and a culturally oriented struggle that aims to control historicity, thereby defining the future direction of historical change.

Touraine was a historicist and an epochal thinker. He wanted to figure out the contours of the new society and the social movements that would bring it about. Having witnessed first-hand May 1968 at the University of Nanterre, which he supported enthusiastically, he heralded the advent of a new epoch beyond industrial civilisation. His central question was 'which type of social movement will assume in the post-industrial society the role which the labour movement had in the industrial society?' Or, in post-structuralist parlance, which movement will be able to hegemonise the class struggle and bring about a new democratic society? While the old social movements defined the stakes of the struggle in economic terms, the new social movements define them in cultural and even in personal terms. The struggle is less about interests and more about values and ideas, less about redistribution and more about participation, less about strategy and more about identity, less about exploitation and more about alienation. While many sociologists in Europe were studying the new social movements (civil rights, feminism, eco-pax, etc.) that had emerged in the wake of the 'world revolution of 1968', Touraine was the only one who had developed a general theory of society to make sense of them. In his vision, the new social movements were not centrally concerned with the production of goods, but with the self-production of society and the

transition to a new form of society in which collective autonomy and personal authenticity would be pivotal.


To investigate whether existing social movements were able to realise the maximum capacity of historical action, Touraine invented an original method of action research, called 'sociological intervention'. Partly inspired by Freud's psychoanalysis and Paulo Freire's pedagogy of liberation, it consists in organising regular meetings in which analysts (sociologists) and participants (activists) come together in focus groups to discuss the meaning of their action. The idea is that with the help of sociologists who act as midwives, the participants will be able to make the meanings of their actions explicit and raise their reflexivity. In the ideal case, they would be able to define not only their identity (I) and their opponents (O) but also what is really at stake (T) in their struggles. Although the method of sociological intervention may seem at first like a mere transposition of the theory of historical action systems into the consciousness of the actors, it should be noted that in his research with François Dubet and Michel Wieviorka, Touraine failed to find the social movement he was looking for. The student movement did not transcend the crisis of the universities and remained stuck in revolutionary rhetoric. Instead of attacking technocracy, the anti-nuclear movement tended to reject science and technology as such. The regionalist movement in the South of France tried to transcend the narrow defence of their language but failed to link up cultural demands to economic demands of regional development. In 1981, Touraine and his team spent a year in Poland studying the trade-union Solidarity. While it would succeed in toppling the communist regime, the movement was traversed by tensions between a syndicalist-socialist, a liberal-democratic and a populist-nationalist logic. Unfortunately, 30 years later, the national-populist tendencies got the overhand, not just in Poland but also in other 'illiberal democracies' in the region. In his opinion, only the women's movement was able to imprint its mark on the whole of society and define a cultural project for the twenty-first century.

Confronted with the fragmentation of social movements, none of which was able to act as successor to the working-class movement, and the further decomposition of the industrial society of organised modernity, Touraine's work took a diagnostic turn during the third and last phase of his career. Following the death of his wife in 1990, a sense of resignation set in. *Critique de la modernité* (1992) is qua tone and theme reminiscent of Max Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*. With a sense of hyperbole, it announces the end of society and defends 'the Subject'. The old world in which society formed a nested system of a culture, an economy, a politics and a subjectivity, organised by a nation state, is gone for good. Parsons' and Bourdieu's sociologies are like those fading pictures of the past on the wall. They are dated. When we look at them, we realise that we now live in a different world and that the old world has been decomposed by the advance of globalisation and individualisation. In late modernity, the system and the life-world can no longer be united, according to Touraine. The tension between the economy and culture has become extreme. The global economy is driven by a logic of instrumental rationalisation that seeks to enhance the efficiency of the system, while cultures start to fragment as collectives and individuals are increasingly seeking their identity. Touraine sees no way out of the opposition between globalisation and tribalisation. Instead of pinning his hopes on a new social movement that would recompose society, he now

seeks solace at the level of individual existence. Perusing the history of ideas, giving special attention to Montaigne, Descartes and Kant, he rediscovers the existentialism of his youth and invokes ‘the Subject’ who produces his or her own existence by affirming the values of freedom, and responsibility as the principle of authenticity. The Subject is non-social; defined negatively, it is free, creative and dissident: A singular existence seeks its identity and finds its coherence in its protest against society.

Touraine continued to teach, read and write until the very end of his life. Year after year, he published his books, commenting on current affairs, like an elder statesman. His last book, *Les sociétés modernes*, was published in 2022. While claiming to analyse the social and political situation, he adopted a purely normative position. Until the end, he remained lucid. ‘Nobody read the books I wrote in the last years. No one is interested in an old man of 90 years. So I write to write, because that’s how I leave my mark’.

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Frédéric Vandenbergh is professor of sociology at the Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. He has published widely in the field of social theory. In English, he published *A Philosophical History of German Sociology* (2009), *What’s Critical about Critical Realism?* (2014) and, co-authored with Alain Caillé, *For a New Classic Sociology* (2021).