

## FEATURE REVIEW

### Can We Live Together? Equality and Difference

Alan Touraine (translated by David Macey)

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Living together was always a problem for all sorts of 'us' and 'them', supposed to be different, at cross purposes and uneasy in each other's company. For 'us' if left alone undisturbed living together came naturally; in fact, 'we' meant in the ultimate account a group for which living together was not a problem and asking the question 'can we live together' was neither necessary, nor likely to occur to any of 'us'. This, by historical standards, is a bizarre question, and the fact that such a question is being asked by a leading social analyst of our times itself signals unusuality of our present condition. Our times, that fact suggests, are unlike the past—known or remembered. What casts our times apart from the past is that 'living together' is not a *given*, not a 'fact of life', an assumption that may stay tacit, but a *task*. It will not come on its own; it may not come at all unless we do something to help.

Talcott Parsons's 'system' was like divinely manufactured clockwork: imperious and majestic, indomitable, rust-, □ ood-, shock- and time-resistant, self-sustained, self-propelling and self-winding. Everything that was in the system . tted the rest and nothing that failed to . t was let in or allowed to stay there for long. The 'system' was well equipped with tools to keep things that way for ever and ever: slick and eminently effective ones, like tension-management and pattern-maintenance. One could contemplate its works in awe, one could try to follow and record its exquisite logic (Parsons himself practiced both), but there was little else one needed, or indeed could, do.

It is the breakdown of the system 'as we knew it' (or believed to know), or rather the ever more evident absurdity of seeking anything like that system in the world of our daily experience, that forced questions like 'can we live together?' on to thinking people's agenda. It also made the self-ful. lling prophecy of the impossibility of 'living together' into a guideline of many acting people's strategies—thereby adding urgency to the questioning. Things that used to . t together like hand and glove and cooperate without friction are, today, conspicuously, out of joint. If Parsons's favourite keyword was 'articulation', it is *disarticulation* that crops up ever more often whenever the description of our present state of affairs is attempted.

Touraine notes the 'break between the instrumental world and the symbolic world, between technology and values' that 'runs through the whole of our experience, from individual life to the world situation. We are at once here and everywhere, or in other words nowhere? He writes of 'the divorce between networks and collectivities', of 'desocialization of mass culture'. The task that we . nd ever more harrowing and perplexing is, Touraine suggests, one of ' . nding a . xed point of reference in a changing world in which our experience is fragmented' and 'the place that was once occupied by institutions' and thus, presumably, as solidly entrenched as the institutions that supported it is nor more certain, let alone insured against rapid and unannounced change. 'The era of

order is coming to an end; this is the beginning of the era of change'. The keywords in Touraine's story, alongside 'desocialization', are 'deinstitutionalization' and 'demodernization'. The first two account for the presence of the third: 'whereas "modernization" meant using the idea of a national society to manage the duality of rational production and the Subject's inner freedom, demodernization is defined by the breaking of the links that bound together personal freedom and collective efficacy.'

It is from that gap that opens between 'personal freedom' and 'collective efficacy' that the question 'can we live together' draws both its meaning and its urgency. As Claus Offe had noted already in 1987, 'on the one hand, nearly all factors of social, economic, and political life are contingent, elective, and gripped by change, while on the other hand the institutional and structural premises over which that contingency runs are simultaneously removed from the horizon of political, indeed of intellectual choice'. In the result, 'complex' societies have become rigid to such an extent that the very attempt to reflect normatively upon or renew their "order", that is, the nature of the coordination of the processes which take place in them, is virtually precluded by dint of their practical futility and thus their essential inadequacy.'<sup>1</sup>

Utter toughness and rigidity rule 'up there'; everything flows with little hope of casting anchor 'down here'. The two radically opposite conditions are, however, intimately related: paradoxically (or perhaps not that paradoxically after all), it is precisely their interdependence that bears responsibility for the gap which separates them. 'Strength of the object' and the 'weakness of action' are but two alternative/complementary ways of reporting the experience of their mutual inadequacy. The steak is tough for the toothless (and diners with no knives); 'institutional and structural' determinants of the condition under which actions are conducted look overpowering, stiff, resistant and immune when the hands of actors are too short to reach them (or are never stretched in their direction for the lack of tools). There would be no stiffness 'up there' were it not for the fluidity 'down here', and vice versa, and the two are intertwined in the sinister logic of Gregory Bateson's 'schismogenetic chain' that tends to relentlessly exacerbate each one of them or a vicious circle that clamours to be cut. But can it be cut and how?

There must be something in the form which freedom has taken in our deregulated, de-institutionalised individualised society that cuts individual actions well short of the task. The interests, the concerns, the objectives of individuals seem to be averse to accumulation and synthesis. The space in which the forces that decide what actions can be reasonably contemplated operate is unstoppably enlarging, while the scope of collectivities that the individuals tend to form for shared actions goes on shrinking; globalisation of interdependence is responded to by the crumbling of totalities and fragmentation of agents and their actions. Solidarity of fate is not matched by solidarity of sentiments and actions. As Touraine puts it, 'we do live together at a planetary level, but it is also true that throughout the world there are more and more identity-based groupings and associations, sects, cults and nationalisms based on a common sense of belonging, and that they are becoming stronger'. As a self-defence against the gathering tide of globalisation, the identity shelters strengthen the hand of the aggressor and deepen, instead of mitigating, the uncertainty that triggered their search—a circumstance that makes the identity obsessions all the more overwhelming and the prospect of an adequate response to the invasion of global forces all the less promising.

It is this situation that makes the question 'can we live together' (and *how*) so crucial to our common fate (commonality of fate, let me repeat, is not a matter of choice—but an already

accomplished fact). It is our apparent inability to answer that question in the positive that (to quote Touraine again) we no more dream of the future, that concerns with a different today have elbowed out the concerns with a better future, and that conscious of our own impotence 'we cannot even define the mutation that is occurring as the birth of a future'. Hopes tend to be located in the future when there is self-confidence and the trust in the other and in the institutions jointly formed and protected. With self-confidence gone and trust free-floating and seeking anchorage in vain, the future is no more a site for hope. It is, rather, a matter of indifference, as focusing attention on things one cannot do anything about anyway would be a sheer waste of time and energy that could be better used elsewhere. Living together in a solidary fashion, a continually refreshed and replenished solidarity of thought and practice is the sole conceivable way that may lead to the resurrection of self-confidence and trust in collective powers that in its turn could lay foundation for the new solidarity made to the measure of our global interdependence.

It is for this reason that the publication of Touraine's book needs to be seen as an event of utmost importance; let us hope that it will be recognised as such, that the book will be widely read and debated. Touraine confronts point-blank the central issues of our times. The book is rich in diagnoses of the ailments and in suggestions of therapeutic regime; as one would expect given the scope and the gravity of the issues, the first tend to be more convincing than the others and are uncontentious (let alone realistic). It is, however, the task of the debate which will surely follow to fill the gaps and correct mistakes. The rest will be a matter of political practice, for which Touraine's analysis clears the site and supplies a few preliminary signposts.

## Note

1. Claus Offe, 'The Utopia of the Zero Option: Modernity and Modernization as Normative Political Criteria', *Praxis International*, No. 1 (1987), pp. 1-24.

<http://www.esnips.com/doc/2daebb66-8d05-41d8-8173-e21d207f3ac9/Bauman,-Zygmunt--Can-We-Live-Together---Equality-And-Difference>