

SPEECH BY
PROF. ALAIN TOURAINE

Paris, 11 May 2007

**A retrospective look at the thought
of the author of my work**

Circumstances, or, rather, the active friendship of Manuel Castells, have allowed me to receive the distinction that you have just awarded me at this particular point in time, when I have completed a long series of works – so long in fact, that it might well be said that I have just submitted to my publisher my last book, the last book of my life. And it makes me happy that it is in Barcelona, in this Catalonia that I have known for so long, since its struggle against Franco's dictatorship, that this twin event occurs. I have never stopped coming to Barcelona, a city that, alongside Santiago de Chile, Sao Paulo, New York, Montreal and, also, Milan and Rome, forms part of that real estate of my life that an American painter once defined for me, as she did for others, with the idea that one's personality is best seen in the sum of their journeys and, therefore, in where they carry on their activities. I also admire the vigour and intelligence with which this city, which previously turned its back to the sea, has finally turned to face it. Let me tell you that, here, I do not feel like a stranger, but instead a neighbour, a friend, an admirer.

As I have finished the last book of my second life, I feel the need not to enlarge upon my biobibliography, but instead to show it, how I have lived it and how, at the same time, it has borne witness to the changes in my thinking. A single biographical note, because it deals with something that occurs so infrequently. After having worked on and published about the problems of work and social movements or the evolution of Latin America for 40 years, and after a long interruption due to illness, which struck me very close to home, I threw myself into my second life of work and existence in general. When the first book of this new series, which now totals close to ten, was published, I was 67; when the book that have just now finished is published, I will be 82. I do not believe that it is at all often that a significant part of an author's activity and publications occur so late in his life. The explanation for this curious fact is probably that, despite appearances to the contrary,

I am self-taught, and have wasted a good deal of time in orienting myself and also in freeing myself from the education that I had received – of good quality, to be sure, but also completely incapable of allowing me to understand the world I would be living in. I kept until very recently, and perhaps still do, a deep imprint from this period of my adolescence and young adulthood, so remote from my subsequent life, an imprint that I am gradually discovering is more positive than negative. Above all, however, it has taken me a great deal of time to rid myself of that industrial society into which I had launched myself. In 1969, I published a book titled *La société post-industrielle*, but even I, aware though I was of the transformations that had occurred, remained tied to many aspects of the industrial society, be this to an inclination for modern methods, to the central importance given to the workers' movement or to the references to economic history as the main explanatory factor. This latter resistance had been strengthened due to my relationship, as a history student, with the historians of the so-called "School of the *Annales*".¹ To use a less official vocabulary, I would say that, during this first stage of my life, I was what is sometimes called a "Braudel boy"², something that helped me to be appointed professor at the *École des Hautes Études* at the age of 33, thanks to the support of Fernand Braudel himself. Historians, as a whole, had to distance themselves from this economic concept of history to become increasingly involved in social and cultural aspects and, subsequently, to rediscover political history. In my case, in fact, I distanced myself almost immediately from this concept and can see in my work, even at the very beginnings, a general orientation which has, since then, never stopped strengthening and has triumphed in the latter part of my work, from the nineties on, and continues to today.

Allow me to give you a brief summary of this evolution. The work that marked the beginnings of my intellectual and personal life was a study of working-class consciousness which took me a number of years and which was based upon both a broad survey and direct fieldwork. Could a more significant subject matter be found when it was the industrial society that received the lion's

1 Created in 1929 around the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* by a group of innovative historians which included Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre.

2 Reference to historian Fernand Braudel (1902-1985), who revolutionised modern historiography and who held a management position at the *École des Hautes Études*.

share of the attention? Oddly enough, the subject had not received much coverage, probably because a subjectivism was seen in it that was not especially appreciated by classical Marxists. Many rather vague studies had been carried out on the effects of the future of capitalism, and above all on its progress towards a generalised crisis, studies in which worker conduct was really always considered as crisis conduct. However, what my lengthy work demonstrated — and I believe I can use this word — is that class consciousness reached its peak when the professional autonomy of skilled workers, especially in metalworking, was impinged upon by so-called scientific work organisation methods, that is by increasingly strict subordination of working conditions to profit-based imperatives. I showed with some accuracy that it was during the period from 1900 to 1914, and in the case of France, particularly during the great Renault strike of 1913, that this consciousness of the conflict between the autonomy of labour and the logic of capital become especially acute. I was also able to show that there was a need to distinguish between this class consciousness and an economic defence consciousness, which was much stronger, especially in the case of the miners, but which did not in itself mean a consciousness of domination at work and, above all, of the loss of an autonomy that, in reality, only a very small number of miners enjoyed. So it was that, from the very beginnings, it was not the *system* that interested me, but rather the *actor*, and it was here that I sought an explanation for conduct. I was convinced that, in social sciences, and particularly in sociology, the explanation always lay in finding the convergence between an “objective” analysis, which places conduct in a situation, and a “subjective” analysis, concerned with the meaning an actor gives a situation, an actor who, by the way, is only so insofar as he or she has built this consciousness, which cannot be reduced to economic conducts that question, in some way, the very existence of the actor as such, and his/her freedom, dignity and rights (in the broadest sense of the word). This idea, which was clear to me from the start of the sixties, was the principle from which my progress and thought have developed.

This focus received considerable strengthening, both for me and for others (few enough, in truth), because we lived through the events of May ‘68 and because, during the period from 1964 to 1968, I had the opportunity to study at American universities.

I was soon convinced that the powerful workers' strike of May 1968 was, in fact, of only secondary importance, since it lacked creative dynamism, whilst the often erratic behaviour of the students contributed something entirely new. This was more difficult to detect because the students themselves had a workers' and, more generally, Marxist ideology, and were convinced that their role was, in their own words, to pass the standard of revolution from their own weak hands to the stronger hands of the proletariat. The sense of their actions was, however, exactly the opposite: that is, above and beyond the reasons or collective memory that were manifested at the time, what the students did was to introduce culture into the field of politics and even to give it the leading role. In the same way that, in 1848 in France, and at around the same time in Great Britain, economic problems invaded the political sphere, in the sixties it was cultural problems that invaded it, from the women's movement to the defence of homosexual minorities, or that of regional movements or the first strikes by immigrant workers. I believe that, today, this interpretation cannot be questioned. May '68 transformed almost every aspect of French society — except for the university world, which isolated itself into an ideological archaism that went against the practices of 1968. Immediately after these years of crisis, French universities succumbed to "Althusserian" ideology, which was very similar to a small-scale Cultural Revolution and which marked the most difficult period of my professional life. There were other difficult periods, too — that between 1981 and 1983, and that of the important strike of 1995. This explains why I have constantly sought social actors — individual or collective — whose actions are oriented towards the choice or affirmation of causes that go beyond the defence of material interests and that question general concepts of justice or freedom. It was not without difficulty that I found — in many ways — in the Chile of the *Unidad Popular* and, much later, in the Zapatista movement in Mexico, cause not only for hope but above all for confidence in my own career, in that it was so clear, for anyone who knew how to see, that actors arose, here and there, for shorter or longer periods, who were not only guided by interests or strategies, but by the will to affirm their freedom or dignity. I felt I could see in *Sub-Comandante Marcos* and the Mexican Zapatistas the opposite of rural guerrillas from within whose ranks certain elements of the urban middle class sought to create a crisis to reveal the weakness of a dependent

state. In contrast to this, Marcos has guided an action directed by the four Maya nations of the Lacandon Jungle in defence of their peoples, and has added to it a constant cry for the democratisation of Mexico, which would involve the coordinated action of all its indigenous people. History has not brought about, by a long way, what he wished to see happen, but I believe that his thoughts and actions have great value by way of example. Nevertheless, the best time of my life as a researcher was undoubtedly when I lived with my friends François Dubet and Michel Wieviorka in Poland, where we stayed for nearly a year, working not only with the leaders of Solidarity, but also with groups of militants, workers and company technicians. We were the only ones to carry out this task, which brought me very close to some leading Solidarity figures, such as Bronislaw Geremek and Tadeusz Mazowiecki.

However, the time has come to move on from these experiences of mine, however significant they were to me, to the line of work that was suggested to me and into which I threw myself, never to stop. Every time one speaks of a social movement or of human rights, be these political, social or — increasingly nowadays — cultural rights, the essential point is that they always consist, I believe, in opposing social, interest—, power- or influence based logics, the basic claims for existence and for rights of what I call the *Subject*, i.e. the rights-based being that is at the heart of our own being, and which has replaced God or the philosophies of history — liberal or revolutionary — in a world in which our capacity for technological and administrative (and even armed) action over ourselves is so great that we can no longer define ourselves by the defence of citizens' or workers' rights, but rather by claiming our most universal right to be human beings, that is, beings that have, as Hannah Arendt would put it, the right to have rights. This logic, this call for rights in the face of social organisation, is what, without doubt, has formed the guiding principle of my thought throughout the second half of my life. In this way, I threw myself into a process of thinking, which has only continued to deepen, about what the subject is, a notion with which I have associated that of *modernity*, precisely because I have defined modernity as a call for reason and rights, two key aspects of that which is *universal* about all situations and, above all, about all human conduct.

It is therefore in the name of reason and of rights against all allegiances, groupings and communities, that I have fought to rebuild a sociology that, following its time of greatness, had increasingly deteriorated to adopt the form of ideologies that had grown distant from a reality from which they rapidly shied, speaking of alienation of false consciousness. I will not now enter into a detailed analysis of these matters, which have been very important to me, but I would like to make just two points. The first refers to the experiences through which I have lived. My intellectual and professional life has accelerated over the course of recent years, in such a way that my most recent books have been written in a kind of compressed time, as if it was vital for me to reach the end of my ideas before I disappeared. The other aspect has to do with the content of this thought. This I had already announced in my analysis of May 1968, and have explained more fully in my recent book *Un nouveau paradigme: pour comprendre le monde d'aujourd'hui* ['A new paradigm for understanding today's world'], where I stated that the socio-economic interpretation of our collective realities had already been substituted by a more cultural interpretation, in the same way as when, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the previously-dominant political interpretation was substituted by an economic one. We have, for a long time now and increasingly comprehensively, entered into an interpretation or construction that can be dubbed social experience in terms of the creation or, contrarily, of destruction of the subject: that is, in the aspiration of every human being to be recognised as a being with rights.

In this fundamental transformation of my thought, I have placed key importance on the analysis of the action of *women*. This may be surprising, bearing in mind that the great majority of studies on women, particularly in Europe, consider them to be victims — simultaneously — of inequality, violence and dominant masculine power. Having spent a great deal of time studying such matters, in both France and the United States, I reached the conclusion that this view, which had become almost a truism, was very far from the truth. Here, once again, the sociologist finds in direct fieldwork solutions that a reading of the analysis and interpretations of others does not always provide. The fact is that the combination of individual interviews and working and discussion meetings showed us that women do not see themselves as

victims but, to begin with, as women, giving this definition a positive sense, so positive in fact that it defines the great issue of their lives, which leads them to gauge whether they have succeeded or failed in life: the construction of themselves as women. The great majority of them also stated that this construction of themselves as women occurs above all in the field of *sexuality*. These results led me to a reencounter with my general themes and to see how women, because they had been dependent (that is, denied subjectivity from the start), were today the standard-bearers of this great cultural upheaval that has already led us from the conquest of the world to the building or conquest of ourselves. We know, through long-enough experience, that our kind of society is not guided by the conquest of the outside world or of nature, but is aimed inwards. This search for the discovery and affirmation of oneself assigns a key role to a person's relationship with themselves, a relationship that is deemed to be more central than even the most important relationships with others. All this, far from constituting a specific subject matter, seemed to me the best way to define the nature of the society and the culture in which we live, which led me to title my academic seminar of last year *On the sociology of women as general sociology*.

I would like to conclude by asking myself what place thought of this kind has in our society and, therefore, what influence it has (or doesn't, but aims to have), modestly and indirectly, on all those arenas in which public opinion is formed and even those in which public decisions are taken. I have the feeling of that I have swum against the tide in my own country and that I have been better accepted in other ones, such as those of Latin America, Spain and Italy. I have been able to testify to the truth of the famous proverb that nobody is a prophet in their own land. Recent trends in political life and, more generally, public life in France has led me to assess the need for the thought that I struggle to elucidate and, at the same time, the difficulty it has with being accepted in certain political circles that resist an *aggiornamento* that is already being imposed in this field as in all others. This consciousness, this experience, can sometimes be disheartening, but gives me, rightly or not, great awareness of my responsibility, that of a man who makes an effort to speak on behalf of human rights in a society that appears almost completely given over to the large-scale manoeuvres of money, propaganda and war.

Where does this great transformation of our culture come from? That which I have dubbed “the end of the social” means, firstly, that all social, political and other types of controls over economic activities have broken down, particularly due to globalisation, which places the economy above all control and management bodies. This triumph of globalisation has often been accompanied by a redeployment of actors towards local or community activities. In this institutional vacuum, which all of us formulate when talking about the crisis of representative democracy, urban organisation, the family or the school, we only find one guiding principle for our conduct: that of defending the right of every individual to be recognised as the bearer of universal rights. However, we must immediately shy from the naively imperialist ideology that has made many hold up the Western world as the perfect and only expression of modernity. This kind of claim must be condemned and rejected. Neither should one yield to cultural relativism, the extreme point of a multiculturalism that would make impossible any kind of communication between cultures and would leave no room for anything other than war, for that famous clash of civilisations that Samuel Huntington has so successfully spoken of.

I will take the liberty to express before you my wish that the work on which I have spent the greater part of my life may contribute to laying the groundwork for a renewal of social thinking. Others are making their contribution, from similar or different points of view. There is work for everyone when it comes to cultivating this land which has been left so fallow. This immense task knows no boundaries, and neither can goals be set for it in the short term. It is not we who put into practice the ideas we develop, but it is a noble task, that of giving form to the manifestations of the social, collective and individual life that will nourish — either sooner or later, but more actively than we might imagine — institutions, forms of social relationships and our own consciousness of ourselves.

I am happy to have been able to present to you this short summary of my professional life and thank your university for inviting me to receive this expression of your appreciation and, at the same time, for giving me the opportunity to express my hopes and fears, my joys and troubles. I hope I have managed to explain to you the

reason for my having attached such importance to something that may appear slight and ever-changing, but upon which an important part of our future depends: ideas.

Alain Touraine

VOLVER A LOS DIECISIETE

Lyrics and music: Violeta Parra

Volver a los diecisiete
después de vivir un siglo,
es como descifrar signos
sin ser sabio competente.
Volver a ser de repente
tan frágil como un segundo,
volver a sentir profundo
como un niño frente a Dios.
Eso es lo que siento yo
en este instante fecundo.

Se va enredando, enredando
como en el muro la hiedra,
y va brotando, brotando
como el musguito en la piedra.
Como el musguito en la piedra,
Ay, sí, sí, sí...

Mi paso retrocedido
cuando el de ustedes avanza
el arco de las alianzas
ha penetrado en mi nido,
Con todo su colorido
se ha paseado por mis venas,
y hasta la dura cadena
con que nos ata el destino.
Es como un diamante fino
que alumbra mi alma serena.

Lo que puede el sentimiento
no lo ha podido el saber,
ni el más claro proceder,
ni el más ancho pensamiento.
Todo lo cambia el momento
cual mago condescendiente.
Nos aleja dulcemente

de rencores y violencias,
sólo el amor con su ciencia
nos vuelve tan inocentes.

El amor es torbellino
de pureza original,
hasta el feroz animal
susurra su dulce trino.
Detiene a los peregrinos,
libera los prisioneros,
el amor con sus esmeros
al viejo lo vuelve niño,
y al malo sólo el cariño
lo vuelve puro y sincero.

De par en par la ventana
se abrió como por encanto,
y entró el amor con su manto
como una tibia mañana.
Y al son de su bella diana
hizo brotar al jazmín.
Volando cual serafín
al cielo le puso aretes
y mis años en diecisiete
los convirtió en querubín

Piano: Carmen Paz
Voice: Gabriela Ahumada