

## After the society?

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Alain Touraine: *After the Crisis*.  
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Alain Touraine's *Après la crise*,  
originally published in 2010  
and translated into English four  
years later, takes on the task of  
investigating what becomes of

social life when a crisis splits the economy from the rest of society. As of now, the book enters the scene already populated with a plethora of studies of the 2007–2008 crisis and its aftermath. What would be the particular takeaway from Touraine's contribution?

The short book consists of two parts. The first one outlines the historical context of the recent social and economic turmoil, framed through the idea of the crises of capitalism as systemic rather than cyclical. The second part focuses on elaborating the potential implications of the crises at the level of social action.

What *After the crisis* seems to be after is not so much the financial crisis of 2007–2008 as an *economic* crisis or even the emerging economic situation more generally. Rather, the crisis provides Touraine a backdrop for the analysis of what he sinisterly refers to as “the end of the social”: a violently polarized world inhabited by humans incapable of even being “actors” in the sense that they could articulate collective interests, let alone defend them in the form of social movements. As the social domain detaches from the socio-economic categories (such as social classes), so he argues, subjects are forced to articulate their interests in a political atmosphere marked by a

“religious individualism” where the principles of legitimate action are only to be found within each human being (p. 117).

Touraine, with his book *La société post-industrielle* (1969) – along with Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973) – was among the first authors to discuss the notion of the “post-industrial society”. The industrial society, characterized by the development of manufacturing and improvements in productivity, has undergone a gradual decline from the 1960s onwards. The post-industrial society does not abandon the social and socio-economic foundation of the previous phase but simply manifests the ideals of industrialism in the most advanced form: as a society based on communication (pp. 17; 94–95).

Currently, the book argues, we are witnessing a pronounced transformation to a “post-social situation”: to a fragmentation of social categories, and to the deepening disentanglement of the “actors” from the “system”. The crisis of 2007–2008 serves as a case in point of how the economic realm is torn apart from its social backdrop. It signals a “decay of society defined as a social ensemble,” where actors, their conflicts, and all forms of mediation are obliterated (pp. 38; 73).

The post-social situation implies the withdrawal of the productivist values of the industrial society. According to Touraine, financial speculation is not about creativity or innovation, but merely about the meaningless cycle of making more money with money. Financial capitalism does not “produce” anything in the sense that industrial and post-industrial capitalism did. Touraine mentions the examples of Microsoft and Apple, who, “almost without money,” managed to produce digital technologies that have had a profound impact on the whole human experience. In stark contrast, financial capitalism is only capable of producing “the poisonous proximity of immense wealth, financial collapse and social crisis.” (p. 16).

It is difficult not to hear a lamenting – even moralistic – undertone in Touraine's notion of how the “real” economy is withered by the supposedly illusory domain of financial operations. The insistence on maintaining a rigid dichotomy between real (productive) and speculative (non-productive) economy is, however, not very fruitful in elaborating the logics of contemporary capitalism. It remains largely unclear why a highly complex financial instrument would be any less “creative” an innovation in the post-social situation than

the steam engine was for the industrial era or mobile communications for the post-industrial society. Still, Touraine believes that those opposing the capitalist economy would do better by concentrating on “the reconstruction of a capitalist society based on production” (p. 31).

What will, then, become of the post-social situation with its religious individualists? The post-social situation will make room for new actors who could be described as “moral” rather than “social” (p. 4). These actors will be marked by fundamental cultural tendencies, but they can also begin to transform the crisis-prone economic landscape towards a “generalized conflict between cultural demands and a vision of a society reduced to purely economic dimension” (p. 21). Thus, the times of crisis might nourish the birth of new kinds of collective organization. But on the other hand, the destructive forces of a crisis also act as a “barrier to the formation of a new society” (p. 73). This is why Touraine warns against the temptation of a complete breakdown, as “the end of the past does not guarantee the birth of the future” (p. 99).

As a manifesto on the topic that has already seen a plenitude of analyses, *After the crisis* leaves the reader with an odd mixture of pessimism and optimism, of

which the former seems more convincingly argued. On the optimistic side, Touraine proposes a political agency based on the recognition of the individual but simultaneously universal human rights – “the rights of human beings to be recognized as the arbiters of their own choices” (p. 69). The task given here to sociologists – to introduce new ideas on how “to reconstruct society, to end the domination of the economy over society” (p. 2) – is not a modest one, if certainly desirable. However, the means of attaining the goal still lack some elaboration.

### **Juhana Venäläinen**