Cultural politics of proximity

by
Alain Touraine

Alain Touraine told his Spanish colleagues he was touched by the death of Jesus Gómez. In an email he sent to CREA he also explained he kept beautiful memories of him and a great esteem, as well as of the rest of CREA researchers. Also in this email he said that the lecture he was going to give in Barcelona could be published in this issue of IJCP in the memory of Jesus Gómez. The lecture was given in the framework of the Conference "Interacció'06", organized by the Diputació de Barcelona, in October 2006. The talk was given in Spanish, and recorded, transcribed and translated into English. This is an excerpt from the English translation and has not been revised by the author.

Globalization means a lot of things for economists. As I am not an economist, it means something else, which is internationalization. What we are living now is that the economic system as a whole is beyond the reach of any social or political institution. The consequences of this globalization are that it is not currently possible to repeat what we had already done several times: employers walk ahead, capitalism develops and afterwards along comes an effort to control this from society, sometimes a type of social-democratization or nationalization, we can use different words to name it. We were used to this movement of coming and going, of allowing the employers, the capital, to move freely along, and later on to redistribute the resources – which is indispensable, but perhaps impossible.

We are in a one way process, we are developing what I would call extreme capitalism, in which there is an extreme disengagement of economic activity in relation to the interventions of any social institution, either from churches or the

family, the government, the unions, etc. Then, the result is that what we still call society, the social, institutions, they are going down, I would say that they have already fallen. We are still talking about the city, but we know that there is no longer such city; there is an urbanized area or destroyed area, an area of migrations or concentrations… We talk about the national state, and we do not really know what it means, especially in the European case. We talk about political life, about the democratic system, about representative democracy, and we all know that democracy is limited and not very representative. We are talking about the crisis in schools; who thinks that schools are not in crisis? Families are in a better situation because half of them are broken and the other half are more or less okay.

As a whole, the idea that there is an economy, a social life, a political life and a cultural life, which are interrelated, has disappeared. There is a super-social world, while the social is wiped out. What are left are the markets, the wars, mass consumerism, mass culture, which are not social, but financial. Faced with this situation, what is left for us? Nothing, apart from each one of us. Nothing apart from the individual, with his or her body, with at least an ear and an eye to listen and to speak, who is alone, abandoned, somehow de-socialized. Then, our problem is to know how to build something based on this individual. If one cannot talk more about societies, about institutions, what interests us is how to do something from the bottom up, how to reconstruct elements of interaction, of social life. What are the dangers and what are the advantages and the potential for success?

In all parts of the world we are facing two big paths, which are in some ways complementary but are even more contradictory. The first one, which sociologists think is the biggest problem in their work, is how to recreate social links. The idea is that the self-esteem, this consciousness of oneself, depends on the relationships with the close community. The positive image one has of oneself depends on the responses one receives from one's own close community in response to one's interaction. The "self" is therefore deeply linked to the ties with the community, the neighbours. Because of this, in this case, sociologist should not use the word society, but rather community, not in the sense of communitarianism but a community which can be very small but it can also be very big. Thus, if the oneness of every individual is extended, it transforms into the oneness of a community, for instance the oneness of a linguistic community, or of a religious, ethnic or territorial community.

However, there is a problem that comes in, and which cannot be avoided: when we talk about community, one is almost always talking about the search for hegemony from homogeneity, or the search for "identity". And when we say "identity," it means that there are people who do not have this identity because, for instance, they are from other countries; they are not evil necessarily, but people one cannot communicate with. One is oneself and the other is "other," and so there is a tendency, in the best of cases, towards an idea of multiculturalism, which allows separate units and separate identities to live together. As long as we see communities as being stronger, bigger, this illusion can more clearly be seen

as dangerous, because if there is a type of social life which is based on identities, how will they communicate?

Twenty years ago there was a very positive and generous movement in some Western countries that multiculturalism had to be respected, because the colonizing countries must respect the cultures they have destroyed or attempted to destroy. However, a few years later conflicts began. English people, for instance, started to change their mind when some incidents happened in London. Quickly one realises that it is impossible, based on the concept of identity and community, to build a type of communication between the identity groups. In fact, some people have said that when there are cultures or societies which are separate and different, the most efficient means of communicating is war. It is one identity against another identity, I am French, I am German, I am Spanish… If we all define ourselves through our identity, which is not the identity of the other, this identity tries to impose itself on everyone and to destroy the "other" one. This is how the world works; there is no fact which is more present than war.

By coincidence I was living in New York in 2003. Since then, people talked about the economy, about technology and there were debates. Suddenly they decided to have this war. No one knows why but they did not talk economy and technology anymore, people were talking about religion and war, and public opinion disappeared. The rupture between communities, between identities, is the central and most dramatic moment in history. Then, I contend that without eliminating the process of reconstruction of the social link, there is a danger of confrontation, war and of a lack of communication.

The second path is the individual, who is the only strong and practical thing that is left to us. We are accustomed to define the references, territories or universes in which the individual is formed. However, this individual does not have any more bases of legitimacy than the individual himself. We find ourselves in a "reflexive" world – using a term that came from the UK initially. We are all the time thinking about what we are doing. We are always reacting, and redefining ourselves based on the experience we have of living in a world that has been created by ourselves and by other human beings. Following this idea, one necessarily arrives at the conclusion that this individual needs to create or protect a distance from him or herself, that is, a distance between the empirical self and the moral self. For this reason, and in order to avoid confusion, I contend that in the same way the individual is transformed into "self," the individual I am talking about is transformed into a subject. Because a society of "selves" is one thing, and a society of subjects is another thing, it is not about the fact that there are identities, cultural groups, etc, but about trying to maintain this distance at a higher level, which in reality is what we call freedom.

Freedom means that there is an aspect of my individual life which is above the social, and after all, our civilisation, our political culture is still based, and I hope it will continue to be based, on the idea of human rights, which may be questionable to some extent but which is also fundamental in human life. I think the

most famous text is the one presented on the 26th of August in 1789 in Versailles, but also the United States Declaration of Independence, as well as other texts, including the English revolution in 1688, and the Universal Declaration of 1948. This means that there is something more important than what we think, or what I think, or what you think, something above the social being, the person from a member state, the powerful being, above the member of any kind of group, there is something which is not social, which is absolute, universal. The type of society in which we live is based on universal principles, which are above the social, above the cultural, and these have to be in charge. Reason is not Spanish or Guatemaltecan, reason is universal. You may talk about Greek medicine, or Catalan medicine, but there is a universal scientific truth anyhow. Nevertheless what is even more important is that there are individual rights, which are non-communitarian, non-social, and therefore universal. Every person has the same rights; every man is born into and lives with the same rights.

Obviously these individual rights have been obtained through collective action. There is no question than unions made it possible that every single worker can have a working contract, but this contract is his or her individual right. We have achieved the becoming of free citizens – and the concept of citizenship is crucial – through revolutions, collectively fighting to break free from kings, from employers absolute power, from colonizers, and if we are women, from men's power, who denied women's capacity to say "I," to have a subjectivity. This is the most profound aspect; the great struggle for freedom is for the right to say "I."

I believe that while it is true that we must struggle from below, there are two ways of going about it. One is going from the individual to the collective identity, the community, and finally to war or universal peace. We can instead create a series of rules, which are some limitations from the state, on which democracy is grounded. There may be a process that goes from the bottom up, but at some point the state says: "you cannot do this, there are laws, there are constitutions, you must act within this framework". This means that if I am a citizen, I am not simply a worker, a young man, a rich or a poor man, I have many more rights which are the right to be an individual or, as Hannah Arendt would say, the right to have rights. Then, the construction of proximity, the small social unit, it is not a small community but a small society, in the sense of a system of guarantees and limitations and ways of strong defence of the right that any individual has to affirm their existence as individual, and their capacity to say yes or no.

To conclude, I might say that we must reverse everything. The problem does not come from the top but it rises from the bottom up. We need to start from below, from the individual, rather than the institutions or the power structures (we must acknowledge that there are good and bad ways to act from the top, for instance, totalitarian regimes and class liberation movements, which are very different). In order to promote bottom-up actions, we must define what are the positive aspects and the difficulties in the different ways to go about it. I tried to define the opposition between two main principles: one is the re-integration of the social, the

communitarian, and the identity, and the other one is to create the conditions of separation between the empirical individual and the universal rights. We can – and should – make steps forward in the process of reconstruction of the social space which have been destroyed. Because if we remain with a destroyed social space, then our life will be dominated by what is non-social, that is, by violence.