New perspectives on social movements: an interview with Alberto Melucci*

Q: Most of your sociological research during the past two decades has focused upon the growth and significance of social movements in contemporary modern societies. Much of this work is still unavailable to English-speaking readers. Could you therefore tell us what experiences - personal, intellectual and political - have most attracted your interest in these movements?

Several personal and intellectual experiences have shaped my understanding of social movements. I was born into a working-class family and raised in a left-leaning Catholic culture. I studied at the Catholic University in Milano, where I completed a master's degree in philosophy. By 1968 I had become a university assistant - and a disenchanted young intellectual. I was dissatisfied with my involvement in the Catholic youth movement - with the contradiction between the spiritual side of my religious experience, which I did not reject, and the highly traditional social and political practices of the Italian Catholic Church.

This mood was strengthened by the growth of the student movement in 1968. As a young university assistant, I was sympathetic towards the movement. Yet I quickly realized that the student mobilizations were afflicted with the same kind of intolerance and yearning for integralism that I had already encountered - and rejected - in my previous commitment to Catholic youth activism. Precisely because I had been involved deeply in a communal experience, I was sensitive to its reappearance in the student movement and 'vaccinated' against its charm. What troubled me about integralism is its rejection of a pluralist and 'disenchanted' attitude to life. Under the influence of integralism, people become intolerant. They search for the master key which unlocks every door of reality, and consequently they become incapable of distinguishing among the different levels of reality. They long for unity. They turn their backs on complexity. They become incapable of recognizing differences, and in personal and political terms they become bigoted and judgmental. My original encounter with totalizing attitudes of this kind has stimulated a long-lasting interest in the conditions under which integralism flourishes. And to this day I remain sensitive to its intellectual and political dangers, which my work on collective action attempts to highlight and to counteract.

My early contacts with the PCI and the 'real socialist' world reinforced my allergy to integralism. I never joined the Communist Party, although some of my friends and colleagues had done so. I participated in certain political campaigns - against the Vietnam War, for instance - and I became aware of the extent to which the Communist experience in Italy closely resembled Catholic fundamentalism. My distance from both was deepened by several research visits to Poland. In 1968 I received a fellowship to enable me to work with Leszek Kolakowski at the Polish Academy of Sciences. I arrived in Warsaw one week after he had been fired for political reasons. Since he was a persona non grata, I had this very strange and unnerving Kafkaesque experience of being somebody with whom nobody wanted to talk. Each day I had official meetings with people who might have been police, intellectuals or university administrators - it was impossible to tell - and yet the ritual was always the same 'Well, now that you are here, Mr Melucci, what are your plans?' I usually explained that I had a grant to work with Kolakowski. The typical reply was 'Well, of course, we'll see what we can arrange.' I never met Kolakowski, but in this way I experienced at first hand the reality of life under totalitarianism. My doubts about socialism, classes and Marxism -

*An interview conducted by John Keane and Paul Mier in Milano, Italy, on 26 and 27 February 1988.
NOMADS OF THE PRESENT

which in the Italian context meant the PCI - were reinforced, and I realized more clearly the fundamental difference between everyday life in 'real socialism' and democratic countries.

My personal experiences were not the only sources of my later interest in social movements. I was also dissatisfied intellectually with the dominant sociological paradigms, Marxism and functionalism, which had influenced me most strongly during the 1960s. As a young graduate student in the early years of that decade, my philosophical and sociological interests had focused upon the relationship between Marxism and religion. In Italy, there was at that time considerable debate about this subject among intellectuals. I explored some of its aspects in my master's dissertation, which attempted - it now seems very remote - a case study of the Polish system and proposed some answers to two key questions. Which kind of class divisions exist in a socialist country? And how does Polish culture coexist with socialism? My questioning of both religion and Marxism deepened my interest in sociology. I went on to complete a two year postgraduate programme in sociology at the State University of Milano. I studied with the best Italian sociologists, including Gallino, Pagani and Pizzorno. They deepened my knowledge of the sociological tradition, Parsonian functionalism and empirical research methods. At that time, sociology in Italy was influenced deeply by American sociology. In opposition to the influence of philosophical idealism, which was still dominant in Italian culture, including even Marxism, Italian sociology attempted to legitimate new concepts and methods. Yet I felt trapped between the functionalist theoretical framework, which structured my empirical interest in contemporary social reality, and the Marxist approach, which seemed to me incapable of looking empirically at conflict and other social phenomena.

This discomfort with the two irreconcilable sources of my intellectual formation persisted until I encountered the writings of the Frankfurt School, especially Habermas, and until I went to Paris in 1970 to do my doctorate with Alain Touraine at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (as the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales was called at that time). Meeting Touraine was intellectually very important for me. I realized that Touraine's approach escaped the shortcomings of both the

economics of the Marxist tradition and the ideology of functionalism. It emphasized the importance and autonomy of social action, and this has had a lasting impact upon my work. Intellectually speaking, the theme of social movements developed by Touraine helped me come to terms with all my previous sociological work on conflict and classes.

A final source of my concern with social movements is my interest in psychology and clinical practice. While I've always had an interest in the psychological dimensions of individuals, I found myself at first mainly attracted to social problems. I never considered becoming a professional psychologist. But partly by chance I became one. For personal reasons I entered psychotherapy, and I developed a deep commitment to the field. I also discovered that I had certain personal qualities and skills, such as intuition and the ability to communicate with others and to make contact with their deep inner realities. For these reasons, during the 1970s I continued my training in clinical practice and I completed a second doctorate, this time in psychology at UER Sciences Humaines Cliniques at the University of Paris. All of this is highly relevant to my interest in social movements because it has sensitized me to the ways in which collective action effects not only social change but also transformations of individual experience.

My training in psychology also sharpened my understanding of some of the important methodological and epistemological issues in the study of personal and social life. I went through psychoanalysis. I also carefully studied psychoanalysis. However, I was unsatisfied with its theoretical foundations - with its causal and sometimes mechanistic explanations of psychic life. In the clinical situation, psychoanalysis often searches for the past causes of an individual's present problems. I found myself more attracted to the phenomenological and existentialist approaches, including the humanistic psychologies - such as Gestalt therapy and body therapies - which were developing at that time. I came to see the importance of the phenomenological attitude, which is not centred on causal explanations, but which is more concerned with how people act and how they can change their lives if they so wish. It is a process-oriented approach which, in contrast to psychoanalysis, is therefore less fixated on the contents of experience, particularly those from the past. My
preference for the phenomenological approach is evident in my empirical research methods and indeed in my whole attitude towards social movements.

Q: During the past two decades, there has been considerable debate among social scientists about the changing nature of western societies. Older terms such as organized capitalism, industrial society and monopoly or advanced capitalism have been replaced by new terms such as post-industrial society, technocratic society or, as you have suggested, complex society. Much of your analysis of social movements rests upon assumptions about the novelty of contemporary societies. It seems important to explicate them, if only because an essential ingredient of your definition of a social movement is that it is a type of collective action which breaks the limits of the social system in which it operates. What do you mean when you say that contemporary western societies are complex? What kind of system are we living in?

This question is important and unavoidable in research on social movements. But the fact is that nowadays nobody has a convincing answer. There is a general reliance upon metaphors, adjectives and prefixes to describe the nature of the system in which we are living. And – as the use of such terms as neo-capitalism and post-industrial society suggests – the two leading models of modernity, the Marxian theory of capitalist society and the Weberian theory of industrial society, are undergoing modification. Most people feel that our systems have changed, but very few admit that we lack a language to describe the way in which they have changed. I prefer to acknowledge this impasse, to declare it openly in order to make possible its resolution through different questions and answers. This is why all the terms you mention are used rather indiscriminately in my more recent writings.

Q: Are you saying that you intentionally deploy these various concepts in an undisciplined way, in the hope that this will produce dissatisfaction with them and encourage the formulation of new concepts?

Yes. I'm convinced that we are entering an era qualitatively different from both the capitalist model of modernity and socialism as we've known it historically. At least three main processes are taking place, the acknowledgement of which can help broaden the discussion about the nature of our society – and its limits. First, within this system information has become the core resource. Our access to reality is facilitated and shaped by the conscious production and control of information. 'Forms' or images produced through perception and cognition increasingly organize our relationship to the material and communicative environment in which we live. The transformation of natural resources into commodities has come to depend on the production and control of these cognitive and communicative 'forms'. Power based upon material production is therefore no longer central. Second, this system has become planetary, a completely interdependent World system in which nothing or nobody is external to its boundaries. In this respect it differs from the capitalist system, which only laid the foundations for planetarization. A third development is individualization, the fact that the main actors within the system are no longer groups defined by class consciousness, religious affiliation or ethnicity, but – potentially at least – individuals who strive to individuate themselves by participating in, and giving meaning to, various forms of social action. I really don't know what kind of system we are entering. But I would say that if these three processes are indeed significant then, correspondingly, the questions we ask about the present system must also change. So also must our understanding of the disequilibria and social conflicts within the system, which I do not assume to be monolithic and totally administered.

Q: Many of your views on complex societies are at odds with a Marxist approach, which attempts to establish the causal links between the macro-structures of capitalist society and its conflicts. Some of the key themes of recent Marxist analyses of the present system – such as the fiscal crisis of the state, the restructuring of the global capitalist economy and corporatism – are virtually absent in your analysis of 'complex society'. Why? Is it because you think that this type of macro-analysis is inappropriate in
complex societies? That it belongs to a past era - that of industrial capitalism? Or that it is fundamentally unhelpful in analysing the formation of social movements?

Macro-structural analyses of the Marxian type are unavoidable, as I've tried to explain in my criticisms of recent American analyses of social movements. These market-based analyses, such as resource mobilization theory, dispense with conceptions of structural boundaries and macro-power relations and reduce everything - illegitimately - to calculation, bargaining and exchange. I therefore accept as a strong working hypothesis the Marxian point that we live within a system which has a definite logic and definite limits - even if these limits are presently obscure and difficult to specify. This is why recent Marxian analyses of the system in terms of fiscal crisis, corporatism and economic restructuring are interesting and stimulating. They help to explain certain important mechanisms of the system. But my objection to these analyses is that they present their particular account of contemporary society as a general theory. They appear to be explaining the universe, when in fact they are presenting 'regional' explanations of only certain key mechanisms of present-day society. No doubt, these theories can provide us with a sense of intellectual and emotional security, they help to close our circle of uncertainty by incorporating new phenomena into pre-existing intellectual frameworks. But in my view they constitute a form of intellectual reductionism. They deny the need to creatively declare the impasse I've spoken of already. Instead of openly admitting the limits of our present understanding of the system and our inability to explain the complex problems confronting us, they resort to totalizing concepts which are simplistic and incapable of embracing reality as such.

Q: There is a strong ambivalence in your earlier work about the use of class analysis. A central feature of the Marxian project for analysing collective action is its focus upon class struggle. While you argue that such analysis is inadequate for examining collective action, your earlier writings nevertheless refer to the 'class relationships' which lie at the root of the new social conflicts. Why this ambivalence? What is wrong with Marxian class analysis?

My earlier work certainly displays an ambivalence about class analysis. As I've mentioned already, my original research considered the subject of class divisions and conflicts in terms influenced by the Marxist tradition. It became evident to me during this research that the Marxian discourse of class in fact specifies two different sets of phenomena which are often confused. The term class refers both to the patterns of social differentiation and stratification within a society and to the conflictual relationships defined by the production and distribution of the basic resources of a society. The Marxian analysis of social stratification considers classes as real social groups, but it also utilizes the concept of class relationships to analyse the dynamics of social production. I further realized that the latter sense of the term - the thesis that there are conflicts generated by the relationships through which social actors produce and appropriate their basic resources - is crucial for the analysis of collective action. I still retain the originally Marxian idea that the production of a society's basic resources is riddled with conflicts. But I am not convinced that we need the term class to describe and analyse all of these conflict-ridden relationships. Class relationships are only one very specific historical form of production relationship; they are unique to modern capitalist society, in which they assume the form of struggles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, that is, between social groups defined by their position in the economic system.

The Marxian model of class analysis is inadequate for a second reason. Since the classical era of industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century, patterns of social differentiation and social conflict have altered. No doubt, in sociological terms class divisions in certain fields of contemporary society continue to be evident; they have not disappeared completely, and therefore the concept of class should not be dismissed from sociological analysis. But since the phase of industrial capitalism, the social structure has become ever more flexible and subject to change. The relationship between social position and collective action has also become more contingent, while social conflicts concerning basic resources can no longer be adequately understood in class terms.

Q: A more serious, if less obvious objection to the