Marxian class analysis is that it relies upon a particular view of history, in which a subject is privileged and destined to transform society through revolution. As Marx and Engels say in *The Holy Family*: 'It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do'. Didn’t this view rest upon metaphysical assumptions peculiar to the age of revolution? Isn’t the very idea of a social movement – which Marx certainly embraces – an invention of this period? Doesn’t its employment condemn its users to fictional images of technical mastery, struggle, revolution and progress which are now obsolete?

My doctoral dissertation in sociology examined the ideology and practice of nineteenth-century French entrepreneurs. France underwent industrialization later than England, with the result that French entrepreneurs openly debated fundamental questions concerning the nature of progress and industrialization. Their discourse was saturated with the images of a world in motion – of progress, industrial revolution, railways, machines, global conquest and the domination of nature by human beings. What struck me about this dominant entrepreneurial discourse was its similarity to that of its socialist opponents. The work ethic is common to each discourse. So too are metatheoretical assumptions about the teleological course of history and the belief that a particular actor is capable of recognizing and fulfilling the truth of this historical process. The concept of a social movement belongs to this shared constellation of metaphysical images. It expresses the idea that there is a central actor whose every action is caught up in a linear process of motion towards a final destination. The concept of a social movement is difficult to disentangle from the concepts of Progress and Freedom, and I therefore find myself uncomfortable with its use in the present period.

Q: You remark in *Nomads of the Present* that contemporary movements are no longer guided by the sense that they are completing a universal plan. You claim that they don’t even have long-term goals, that their mobilization is limited to specific times and places, and that they resemble nomads who dwell entirely in the present. Is this why you consider the concept of a social movement no longer plausible?

Yes. But my discomfort with the concept is further reinforced by its association with grandiose political programmes which have in practice resulted in violence and totalitarianism. This tragic scenario presently appears to be repeating itself in the Third World. The vision of a new system of transparent power replacing the old and unjust system has claimed too many victims in our century. At the very least, respect for these victims obliges us not to feed such grandiose and dangerous illusions any longer.

Q: The view of history as destiny, upon which Marxism rests, is arguably problematic for another reason. It turns a blind eye to other, often important types of collective action which coexisted, not always peacefully, with the working-class movement. For example, Craig Calhoun has pointed out in *The Question of Class Struggle* that the conventional view, defended by E. P. Thompson *et al.*, of the early British workers movement is quite misleading. According to Calhoun, the movements of the 1810s were not primitive or backward-looking nor should they be treated as part of the linear development of the workingclass movement. Rather, this decade saw the formation of populist movements which acquired distinct and different forms of protest and collective action. The social basis for this movement, according to Calhoun, lies in their communal foundations. In other words, the radicalization of this movement was inspired by the uprooting of traditional communal life, and not by the new factory system of class exploitation. Not only was this early social conflict not a class movement in Calhoun’s view; it was more radical by virtue of not being a class movement. Calhoun’s thesis has wide and important implications. It suggests that the classical Marxian view of collective action was highly one-dimensional. It also raises the
question of whether other non-class forms of action such as the early movements of women, citizens and struggles against slavery - were significant features of the age of "industrial capitalism". In the light of Calhoun's claims, doesn't a contemporary theory of collective action need to fundamentally rethink their roles and importance against the narrowness of the original Marxian approach? Aren't you too faithful to classical Marxism?

I am unsure whether there were forms of action more radical than the working-class movement. But I agree that even during the period of industrial capitalism collective action had a multidimensional quality. The tendency to unify the heterogeneity of collective action by means of either a key concept - such as class struggle or the objective historical role of the proletariat - or through empirical generalizations is rooted deeply in the whole tradition of research on social movements. This tendency is misleading because collective action always has a composite and plural quality. It contains a multiplicity of levels, meanings and forms of action - even when in particular contexts certain types of action are most efficacious and eye-catching - and for this reason collective mobilizations cannot be summarized in simple formulae, such as progress or reaction. Charles Tilly's writings vividly illustrate this point. The historical research presented in his The Rebellious Century and From Mobilizations to Revolution is very informative and provides much empirical evidence of the heterogeneity of collective action. But in theoretical terms he still works within a basic Marxian framework. His claim that interests motivate people into action is founded upon the Marxian idea of class interests. His framework of analysis is further burdened by its heavy emphasis upon the political dimensions of collective action. This bias - which again obscures the multidimensional character of social movements - is evident in Tilly's preoccupation with the effects of collective action upon the political system, as well as in his reliance upon public data sources, which probably are biased towards types of action which impinge directly on the political authorities. While this type of political analysis of social movements is important, it obscures their complexity.

Q: Your attempt to develop a sociological theory of social movements is not only critical of the Marxist tradition. It is also at variance with the received mainstream sociological theories of collective action. Among the most influential of these mainstream theories during the post-world war period is the view - associated with the work of Kornhauser, Smelser et al. - that collective action is pathological reaction to the strains produced by modern society. Emphasis is given to the non-rational, even irrational components of collective behaviour. Collective behaviour is seen to result from structural changes, which trigger a breakdown of the organs of social control and legitimation. The resulting strains, discontent and aggression drives anomic, frustrated and maladjusted individuals into collective behaviour, which itself feeds upon volatile goals and rumours, propaganda and other crude forms of communication. What are your objections to this view?

The belief that social movements are a pathological reaction to the stresses and strains of modern society was influenced understandably by the experience of Stalinism and Nazism, which prompted intellectuals' fear of insurgent masses and their manipulation and control by totalitarian parties and leaders. Considered from our quite different historical situation, it nevertheless becomes clear that the analytical foundations of this view are very weak. To begin with, this view makes the questionable assumption that social order is a normal state of affairs. Collective action is therefore seen as a form of social pathology which is produced by the disequilibrium within a social order. This view also ignores the constructive or creative dimensions of collective action. Even in less structured forms of collective behaviour, people do not act in a void. They are always enmeshed in relations with other actors, and through this interaction they produce meanings, express their needs and activate their relationships. Collective action is never a purely irrational phenomenon. It is always to a degree socially constructed and meaningful to its participants, even when it appears to be anomic or marginal behaviour. This point is actually implied in Smelser's important contributions to a theory
of collective behaviour, which diverge in this respect from Kornhauser's and others' view that collective action is pathological.

Q: Since the early 1970s, resource mobilization theory has dominated research on social movements. In contrast to traditional theories of collective action, this approach claims that grievances and deprivations are not a sufficient (or very important) condition in explaining the rise of social movements. Resource mobilization theory accepts your criticism of the traditional view that a low-level of organization is a feature of social movements. It points instead to the crucial importance of pre-existing organizations in the rise and growth of social movements. Resource mobilization theory emphasizes the fundamental importance of factors such as the availability of resources - recruitment networks, the costs and benefits of participation, organizations, funding, and the availability of professionals - in analysing the recent growth of social movements. This approach seems plausible and helpful in analysing, for example, the successes of the American civil rights movement. According to some writers, resource mobilization theory nevertheless de-emphasizes the grievances and injustices that normally motivate protest movements. Isn't your critique of resource mobilization theory subject to the same objection?

My own research has drawn upon resource mobilization theory and extended it in ways not intended by its proponents; in a sense, I have tried to push this approach beyond itself. Resource mobilization theory attracted me initially because - as you say - it calls into question the naive premise, evident in the whole Marxist tradition, that 'interests' are the motivating force of collective action. It also rejects the common-sense assumption that suffering and social inequality leads necessarily to collective action. Resource mobilization theory adopts a sceptical attitude towards these views. It suggests that pre-existing injustices and grievances are not sufficient conditions of explaining action, and thereby it opens up an important theoretical space in which questions can be asked about how movements produce themselves. It suggests the need to analyse the complex and dynamic relationship among three dimensions: a pre-existing social problem; the development of a shared sense of common interests among actors; and collective action itself. I have tried to incorporate these insights into my own understanding of the formation of social movements, for I am convinced that people do not decide to act together simply on the basis of injustice or commonly shared or ascribed interests.

Q: Shouldn't this point be extended? Perceived grievances and injustices are not simply a point of departure for collective action, as you imply. Their recognition by actors as grievances and injustices is always in part an outcome of interaction itself. During the past ten years, for example, the west European peace movements did not merely react to a pre-existing nuclear threat. They also helped construct and heighten the public sense of a nuclear threat. Isn't this typical of all recent movements?

That's certainly true. Actors' definition of a grievance as such presupposes that they have cognitive and interactive skills which enable them to recognize that an objective problem is problematic for them. Objective problems don't exist in themselves. They come to exist as problems because people are capable of perceiving and defining them as such within processes of interaction.

Q: It is a striking fact that resource mobilization theory has enjoyed considerable popularity, particularly in American social science. One could almost say that resource mobilization theory is an American phenomenon. Why is this? Is it to do with specifically American intellectual traditions? The different nature of American social movements? Or perhaps the predominance of 'business thinking' (Perrow) or the emphasis on 'entrepreneurial' models (McCarthy and Zald)?

Resource mobilization theory is indeed an American phenomenon, and in three ways. First, its focus upon the availability of social resources as a key factor in the life of social movements
expresses an important difference between American and west European collective action. American social movements have always been interwoven more closely with civil life and, hence, founded upon pressure groups and voluntary associations. By contrast, European social movements have always been tied more closely to class actors and political parties and much more concerned to transform class interests into political goals. This important difference probably reflects the contrasting social structures and patterns of state intervention in Europe and the United States. The relative openness of American society and the absence of centralized state structures has permitted more dispersed and non-political forms of mobilization, whereas in Europe centralized state structures have operated as something of a magnet for collective action. In countries such as Italy and France, every articulated social grievance is confronted by the omnipresence of state power. The temptation has therefore been strong to rely upon parties and other political organizations which can interact with or oppose state power. An extreme historical example of this general trend was the Bolshevik strategy of confronting the bureaucratic and centralized Czarist regime with a professional revolutionary organization.

Resource mobilization theory is also a product of the specific patterns of intellectual life within the United States. In that country, there has been an unprecedented development of organization theory in the analysis of business and administration. Resource mobilization theory is in this sense an American phenomenon because it has managed, in intelligent and fruitful ways, to translate concepts and insights from the paradigm of organization theory into the field of social movements research. But the resource mobilization approach is a specifically American intellectual phenomenon in another sense. In the United States, Marxist and radical thought has not strongly influenced the sociological tradition. In the field of social movements research, resource mobilization theory has therefore played the role of an ersatz radicalism. It appears to be a form of radical opposition to the conservative orientations of American sociology. But its critique of the older theories of collective behavior we've discussed is rather restrained. Resource mobilization theory has in fact become a new orthodoxy. It is a form of institutionalized radicalism: it is, for instance, the dominant paradigm in the new section on social movements in the American Sociological Association. In terms of intellectual legitimation, resource mobilization theory has been a big success. It has even begun to conquer the world academic market in the field of social movements research.

Q: In Western Europe so called structural theories continue to be more influential in the analysis of social movements. Structural theories focus upon the socio-economic and political levels of the present system in order to explain collective action as a response to crises or adjustments in the macro-levels of the system. For example, Habermas has claimed that the new social movements are best understood as a by-product of the colonization of the life world by economic and political mechanisms that operate in abstract and reified ways and 'inve' and consequently destroy spheres of social life in which individual and collective identities are constituted and defended. Movements - with the exception of the women's movement, which is seen as genuinely universalistic - are interpreted by Habermas as a defensive reaction against the bureaucratization of everyday life. Arising in areas of cultural reproduction - at the interface between the life-world and the political economy - the new movements are engaged primarily in resistance and retreat, in the search for personal and collective identity. Why do you have reservations about this type of analysis of the origins of new social movements?

The colonization of the life world is certainly an observable trend in complex societies. But I have theoretical and empirical reservations about Habermas's thesis. Theoretically speaking, its analysis of contemporary movements is not differentiated enough. It treats these movements as unified entities. It thereby conceals the different realities - the variety of actors and orientations - within contemporary movements. This theoretical objection to Habermas's thesis is reinforced by some empirical doubts. The evidence suggests that forward-looking and proactive forms of resistance are at least as evident within these movements as backward-looking and reactive forms of action.