People within movements invest a great deal of time and energy in the creation of groups, centres and communities. Such action is not simply defensive, for it is also the means through which they experience personal growth and develop a sense of security — against the (threatened) manipulation of large-scale organizations. Paradoxically, such action is facilitated by the phenomenon of colonization itself.

Q: Are you saying that Habermas understates the way in which the colonization process turns unwittingly against itself?

I'm sure of that. Colonization is a deeply ambiguous process. It entails the (attempted) domination of the life world as well as the injection of resources which can be used by people to transform the conditions of everyday life. The health policies of the welfare state are a typical example. Health information and sickness prevention policies — as the campaign against AIDS illustrates — invade everyday life more than any other policy field. Health care services manipulate and control people in the most intimate sense. And yet at the same time people acquire through these channels new information about the conditions of health and a new awareness of their health needs and rights. This enables people to organize themselves in new and more meaningful relationships. Of course, this process of inventing new forms of action is always frustrated by inequalities of power and resources, and this is why conflicts and movements are a fundamental aspect of the colonization process. Nevertheless, the colonization of everyday life by large-scale organizations is not a one-dimensional process. It extends forms of administrative control and encourages new meanings and forms of sociability.

Q: All that you've said so far indicates your dissatisfaction with the whole nineteenth-century and twentieth-century theoretical tradition of analysing social movements. You've clarified your disagreements with previous approaches — such as Marxian class analysis, resource mobilization theory, and Habermas's structural theory. We'd therefore like to explore your own positive contributions to the understanding of the main features of new social movements. One intriguing argument in Nomads of the Present is that all previous approaches have relied upon dualistic thinking, and have therefore neglected the complex processes through which collective action is produced. Could you explain this point?

Dualistic thinking emphasizes either the objective or subjective dimensions of social life. It stresses either the powerful forces inscribed in the structures of society — such as its laws of motion in the sphere of economic production and exchange — or the importance of actors' beliefs, intentions, representations and cultural productions. Such thinking is evident in the whole of modern social science and especially in the philosophies of history which have so far guided the analysis of social movements. These philosophies typically assign social movements a revolutionary role; or they assume that the capture of state power is the principal goal of collective action; or they embrace the conservative myth that collective action is subversive of social order. My broad objection to dualistic thinking is that it fails to understand the ways in which social action is constructed and 'activated' by actors who draw upon the (limited) resources offered by the environment within which they interact. Structural theories have something to contribute to the explanation of the environmental limits of action. But social action is never a given fact. It is always socially produced. Within the boundaries of certain structures, people participate in cognitive, affective and interactive relationships and creatively transform their own social action and to a certain extent their social environment as well. I am aware that this is at best a preliminary formulation — something like a first step in transcending dualistic analyses of collective action. But I think it is an important step to take in both a theoretical and empirical sense.

Q: Your empirical research on various movements in the Milano area is one of the distinctive — but least well known aspects of your work. What methods have you used to study collective action? What are the aims of this empirical research?
The Milano research project extended over a four-year period. It was conducted by a team of ten researchers and it involved spending a considerable amount of time with groups of movement activists in four different areas: among women, urban youth groups (such as punks and social centres [centro sociale]), ecologists and neo-religious groups which operate outside the official churches and have a strong spirituallist orientation. The overall aim of the project was not merely to enhance our general knowledge of contemporary social movements, but also to examine how the process of constructing collective action actually takes place.

Q: This is arguably one of the most central – but least explored – issues in the field of social movements research. It touches upon the simple but fundamental question of why individuals become involved in social movements.

Precisely. And it raises some difficult methodological problems, which remain unresolved in the two dominant types of empirical research into collective action. One approach tries to show the empirical links between the location of actors in the social structure and their patterns of belief and action. Through surveys and interviews and other means, it collects data on the social origins and attitudes and activities of groups such as workers, students or movement militants. This approach tries to explain the relationship between the structural and behavioural variables of collective action. Another approach concentrates instead on the ideologies of social movements, that is, on what social actors say about themselves and their social reality in their documents and speeches.

Both approaches are very useful, in my view. But neither tells us anything about how people come together and construct something called a movement. My empirical research has concentrated on this problem and attempted to develop an appropriate methodology for examining it. Basically, the research methodology involved three phases. Initially, we conducted a survey of the wide spectrum of groups involved in collective action in the Milano area. This first phase rested on the empirical assumption that these groups belonged to a social

movement by virtue of their self-definition as active members of one or other movement. During a second phase, we conducted in-depth interviews with all these groups. Here the immediate aim was not merely to gather information about the group, but to establish a working relationship between us as researchers and the group itself. This phase, which involved much hard work and intensive training by the research group, was methodologically very important, precisely because it enabled us to pass to the third and final phase of research. In this final ‘experimental’ phase the prior relationship established during the in-depth interviews was deepened and extended. From each movement, we selected one group for observation. In this experimental phase, the members of the group acted for themselves as well as for us in video-recorded sessions. This provided us with information about their action. It also provided the members of the group with an opportunity to activate their relationships, to reflect on what they were doing, and in this way simulate the processes through which they create new meanings and produce a collective identity, that is, come to define themselves as participants in a movement.

Q: The empirical research method you’ve sketched here is clearly at odds with Touraine’s method of sociological intervention. Touraine sees the role of the sociologist as truth-teller of social movements: the researcher views social movements as a potential unity, whose highest meaning is open to causal explanation. The research programme consists in intervening by ‘incitement’ or ‘hypothesis’ in the actors’ self-analysis of their struggle. The researchers’ ultimate aim is to achieve successful conversion – to formulate hypotheses which enlighten movement participants about the ‘highest possible meaning’ of their action and, hence, to help the young social movement find its true identity. What’s wrong with this methodology?

Touraine’s methodological contributions to the analysis of the self-production of action – of action in action – have been very important. Certainly, some of the methodological problems involved in observing action were posed long ago by Kurt
Lewin. Awareness of these problems is also evident in the
disciplines of psychology and social psychology, but in both
cases – as my training in psychology has made clear – the
methodological techniques are only applicable to individuals or
small groups. To my knowledge, Touraine was the first to point
out the need for a specific method for analysing the field of
action of social movements. This is no small achievement:
awareness of this methodological lack is already the first step in
overcoming it. In this respect, my own techniques of empirical
research have been influenced by Touraine’s method of
intervention sociologique. But I’m critical of two aspects of his
research methods.

One objection concerns Touraine’s supposition that there is a
‘highest possible meaning’ of social movements. The idea of a
‘highest possible meaning’ rests upon the value-laden assumption
that there is one central social movement in any given historical
period. It follows from this assumption that all other forms of
collective action are ‘lower’. My research method avoids this
normative assumption. It does not suppose that it knows the
truth of collective action, nor does it presume to know what is
good for actors. It does not set out to save anyone’s soul. My
research method instead acknowledges and accepts the different
levels and meanings of collective action. It tries to understand
these differences without supposing that they are hierarchically
ordered. This is the point of the experimental phase of
investigation described above. It encourages all these different
meanings of collective action to surface. In the experimental
phase, my only assumption is that actors know the meaning of
their action, even if never completely so. As individuals, we
always partly know what we are doing. Of course, when we
become confused or involved emotionally in what we are doing
we don’t see certain things – until we become aware of our
actions by analysing their different meanings. Something similar
occurs within collective action. Since collective actors participate
in a system of knowledges, exchanges and relationships which they
control only in part, they tend to act ideologically. But since
collective actors also know something of the meaning of their
action, they are therefore capable of recognizing the need to
know more about their action. And this is why there can be a
contractual relationship between researchers and actors. The
researcher needs information in order to complete his or her
scientific research. The researcher possesses certain kinds of
skills and resources – of knowledge, for instance – which the
actors can recognize as valuable for clarifying their own action.
The researcher never has a monopoly on these resources, but he
or she can offer analyses to actors who cannot be actors and
analysts of themselves at the same time. In this way, the
researcher can pursue his or her own scientific goals as well as
facilitate actors to heighten their awareness of the interactive
nature of their action. The researcher can facilitate actors to
locate themselves in their patterns of action, and hence enable
them to take greater responsibility for their choices and actions.
But this possible outcome is not inspired by the missionary role
of the researcher. It is rather a by-product of the contractual
relationship between researcher and actor, each of whom
pursues his or her particular goals.

Q: This is very different from Touraine’s techniques of
‘conversion’, which both imply the need for an hierarchical
relationship between researchers and actors, and
concentrate on altering the content rather than the form of
collective action.

Yes, although I don’t think that this hierarchical relationship is
necessarily implied by Touraine’s methodology.

Q: What is your other methodological objection to
Touraine?

It is a technical point to do with the logic of his procedures for
achieving ‘conversion’. Let’s for a moment ignore the previous
criticism and suppose that a researcher wants to know – and
transmit to a movement – the ‘highest possible meaning’ of its
actions. The problem is that the researcher can never be sure
whether or not the observed action is the product of his or her
interventions. Touraine’s research procedure is unable to
control its own effects. It cannot know whether or to what extent
the conversion process is simply the product of its own
interaction with the group it is observing. Our research in
Milano tried to overcome this difficulty by concentrating, during
the experimental phase, on the formal, phenomenological level
of action. In other words, we tried carefully not to introduce any interpretative contents into our exchange with the groups under observation. We attempted only to feed back to the groups information about the how and not the why of their action. In this way, we were able to control to an acceptable degree the effects of our presence upon the actors being observed. We were thus able reasonably to assume that what the group actually revealed to us was the product of the group itself and its conscious interaction with us. In the final stage of research, we were then able—separately from the actual interaction with the groups—to interpret our observations through explanatory hypotheses.

Q: There seems to be another important disagreement with Touraine. He claims that in any society there is only one central social movement, and he therefore continually poses the question: which new social movement will tomorrow assume the central role that the workers’ movement held in industrial society? You seem uncomfortable with this line of questioning. Is this because of your objections to holism?

Yes. Touraine’s idea of the central movement still clings to the assumption that movements are a personnage—an unified actors playing out a role on the stage of history. This idea simply doesn’t correspond to present-day conditions in complex societies. As I’ve explained already, it is wise not to turn our backs on the task of analysing the dominant structures and limits of the system—and, hence, the way in which its key resources are produced, appropriated and struggled over. But this type of analysis neither implies that the system is monolithic nor that collective action within this system is expressed as a unified movement. Within complex societies, as Touraine himself recognizes, collective action is highly differentiated. It shifts from one location to another, depending on the resources and issues at stake. It thus becomes difficult to explain why it is that certain conflicts become core conflicts, but only for a limited period and in relation to certain issues.

Q: In La Voix et le regard and Le Mouvement ouvrier,