to live autonomously. This intricate collage of different meanings and forms of action within ecological mobilizations is further complicated by evidence that they are keeping ever greater distance from institutional politics. Initially, the ecological movement was engaged mainly in political action, whereas today it gives greater emphasis to an ‘everyday ecology’ and to the transformation of individual identity.

Q: Any analysis of contemporary social movements is only complete if it addresses the vital question: ‘What do they achieve?’ Your writings argue that to answer this question in terms of ‘success’ or ‘failure’ (as is traditionally done) is fundamentally inappropriate. You say that movements operate primarily in the field of culture. Your argument is concerned mainly with the shift of emphasis in complex societies from the management of economic resources to the production of social relations, including symbols, identities and needs. Corresponding to this shift, you claim, are changes in the nature of contemporary conflicts – away from production-based conflicts. Are you saying that ‘new social movements’ are concerned essentially with ‘post-material questions’, that is, with redefining cultural codes? And is this what is ‘new’ about new social movements?

I was among the first writers to introduce the term ‘new social movements’ into English, and so I must also be implicated in the misunderstandings it has created! I am not opposed to the continued use of the term, but – as Nomads of the Present tries to explain – I have become dissatisfied with its reification and convinced of the need to clarify and specify its meaning. The term is often used loosely in a chronological sense to refer to the growth, since the early 1960s, of forms of action which diverged from the then dominant types of collective action. But this sense of the term wrongly assumes that the ‘new’ movements are unified entities. My main theoretical objection to the literature on ‘new social movements’ is that it fails to recognize their composite character. It therefore neglects a vital question: given the differentiated nature of contemporary social movements – the fact that they contain a plurality of levels, including very

traditional forms of action – do they nevertheless display novel types of action which cannot be explained by the traditional analyses of class conflict or political struggle?

Q: An answer to this question presumably requires not only empirical research along the lines of your Milano project. In analytic terms, it also forces a clarification of the various dimensions of present-day social movements as well as requires a definition of the meaning of ‘novelty’.

Yes. In my view there are new dimensions of action and meaning within contemporary movements. But I am convinced that this novelty can be explained only by introducing fresh hypotheses – terms different than those used to analyse the workers’ movement. A key hypothesis is that there are four novel structural characteristics of today’s movements. The first is the central role played by information resources within some sectors of these movements. Today’s movements operate primarily as ‘signs’. They are not preoccupied with the production and distribution of material goods and resources. They are instead concerned mainly with information – in both the narrow sense of demands for ‘factual information’ about, say, the siting of a nuclear power plant, and in the broader sense of struggles over symbolic resources, as in the challenge of the women’s movement to sexist advertising. Second, parts of the movements invest much time and energy in constructing forms of organization which are not considered instrumental for the achievement of social and political goals, but are viewed primarily as a way of experiencing collective action itself. Networking within the European peace movement and consciousness-raising groups within the women’s movement are model examples of this new trend. Participants within contemporary movements act in the present tense. They are not driven by grandiose visions of the future; their organizations are not vehicles for the implementation of such visions. Rather, those who participate within the organizations of a movement view their participation as an end in itself. Their ‘journey’ is considered at least as important as their intended destination. A third novel feature of contemporary movements is their integration of the latent and visible dimensions of collective action. In the tradition of socialist and
working-class politics, particularly among militants, there tended to be a split between private life and public life. The emotional investments, cognitive frameworks and patterns of life within each sphere were different. This is not the case in contemporary movements. There is instead a complementarity between private life, in which new meanings are directly produced and experienced, and publicly expressed commitments. Living differently and changing society are seen as complementary. Within the new movements there is a more balanced sense of the proper relationship between the latent and visible dimensions of action. Involvement in public-political action is perceived as only a temporary necessity. One does not live to be a militant. Instead, one lives, and that is why from time to time one can be a public militant. Finally, contemporary movements display the seeds of a new awareness of the global dimensions of complex societies. This ‘planetary’ consciousness is broader than the more limited ‘internationalism’ of the working-class movement. It involves an awareness of living as a member of the human species in a fully interdependent human and natural world system. I was reminded of its fundamental significance several years ago when white middle-class American students mobilized against apartheid in South Africa - despite the fact that they had no direct political connections with apartheid. This new sense of totality is also strongly evident in the peace and ecological movements, which emphasize the connections between humanity and the wider global universe.

Q: An unusual feature of your view of contemporary social movements is the claim that their form is itself a message – an idea that seems to closely parallel McLuhan’s thesis on the ‘medium is the message’. Are you saying that the form of a movement is not only a vehicle for achieving certain goals, but that it is also a goal in itself, an alternative experience (or naming) of reality as such?

Yes. My claim that movements operate as a ‘message’ or a ‘sign’ – a claim which certainly draws upon McLuhan – is designed to highlight the way in which they express something more and other than the particular substantive issues for which they are usually known. From their particular context, movements send signals which illuminate hidden controversies about the appropriate form of fundamental social relations within complex societies. An important example is the way in which the movements help ensure that difference - the possibility for particular individuals or groups to affirm their specificity - is a controversial issue in complex societies. In this way, movements increase the already high learning capacity or ‘reflexivity’ of complex systems. They initiate and publicize new fields in which society acts upon itself. But this in turn generates an evident tension within the movements between the particularism of their participants’ claims and fields of operation and the general formal problems which they raise. This tension is inescapable, because actors are always prisoners of the particular language, actions, contexts and resources upon which they draw. The women’s movement, for example, addresses issues specific to women as well as prompts consideration of the importance of difference in a complex society. Women speak of themselves by drawing upon the particularity of their condition as women in a gendered society; and they struggle for the difference which is denied or repressed by the dominant culture. But women do more than this. They also speak of the difficulty of dealing with difference in a society which is becoming ever more integrated and differentiated at the same time. They show that in complex societies the need for communication – for solidarity, love and compassion – increases along with the need for recognizing and affirming differences.

Q: You’ve observed that an important characteristic of recent social movements is their ‘invisibility’ – their operation through subterranean networks of mainly part-time membership. You imply that this invisibility is one of the movements’ strengths. This view is surprising, if only because others have seen this characteristic of new social movements as a sign of their decline, loss of momentum and impotence. Far from ‘breaking the limits of the system’, these observers claim, social movements are (compared with a decade ago) presently in decline – in the process of slowly burning themselves out. How do you respond to this pessimistic view?
Mobilizations and whole movements can and certainly do disappear. But the pessimistic view fails to understand that a great deal of important activity takes place during the invisibility phase. The submerged networks of social movements are laboratories of experience. New problems and questions are posed. New answers are invented and tested, and reality is perceived and named in different ways. All these experiences are displayed publicly only within particular conjunctures and only by means of the organizing activities described by resource mobilization theory. But none of this public activity would be possible without the laboratory experiences of the submerged networks. The pessimistic view which you described misses this essential point because it concentrates narrowly on the political effectiveness of movements. In the extreme, it ends up embracing the Leninist view that only intellectuals and political organizers prepare the new experiences which are later displayed in public form.

Q: Your emphasis on submerged networks also seems to rest upon a conception of power which is quite at odds with that underlying the view you are criticizing. Isn’t it true that this pessimistic view fails to recognize that large-scale organizations, such as state bureaucracies and capitalist corporations, rest upon complex, molecular networks of everyday power relations? Doesn’t it therefore underestimate the ways in which the transformation of these molecular powers by social movements necessarily induces effects upon large-scale organizations?

You’re right. In complex societies, power relations become subject to ‘microchipization’. In other words, actors become aware that changes in everyday life have institutional effects, and that is why the small subterranean networks of the movements resemble laboratories in which experiments are conducted on the existing relations of power. My understanding of power differs in this respect from that of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari and others. They share a one-dimensional view of power – as the construction and administration of subjects – whereas reality as we experience it in complex societies is in my opinion the resultant of powerful organizations which attempt to define the meaning of reality and actors and networks of actors who use the resources of these same organizations to define reality in novel ways.

Q: A serious objection to your thesis that the new movements issue important challenges to the dominant cultural codes is that they sometimes become infused with narcissistic impulses that are essentially apolitical. This point has been emphasized, for instance, in interpretations of the decline of the American Movement of the 1960s. The impulse of self-fulfilment, the desire ‘to move personally’ (Keniston) was strongly evident in that movement. Arguably, it put excessive emphasis on personal gratification, on achieving intimacy, expression and freedom. This trend was evident in the decline of political commitment and the advance of ‘political tribalism’ (Castells). drug culture, sexual experimentation, the cult of Eastern religions, rock music, ‘drop outs’ and ‘hippies’. Woodstock and Altamont gradually replaced Port Huron and the Siege of Chicago as the Movement’s defining moments. But this search for challenging the codes of everyday life – a search for what Norman O. Brown called the Dionysian ego – led to the fading political commitment of thousands of young people, thereby undermining the Movement. Doesn’t this example illustrate the danger of narcissistic withdrawal in all of the new movements?

The dangers of narcissistic withdrawal which you illustrate are real, and they can produce tragic results. But I think that the argument conflates two different aspects of the phenomenon of narcissism. One aspect is the desire for individualization. Each individual has the potential to become a unique and self-determining being. Within contemporary movements, and in the society at large, this desire for self-realization is very strong, and it is encouraged by the production and distribution at the systemic level of such resources as education, technical skills and universalistic codes.

Narcissism has another aspect: the yearning for communal identity, or ‘political tribalism’ as you called it. Paradoxically, this yearning for solidarity is encouraged by the possibility of
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individualization. The more we are exposed to the risks associated with personal responsibility for our actions, the more we require security. We actively search for supports against insecurity. This is why the desire for self-realization can easily turn into the regressive utopia of a safe and transparent environment which enables individuals to be themselves by becoming identical with others. This utopia was certainly evident in the movements of the 1960s in the United States and elsewhere. It tended to get the upper hand over the more creative need for individualization, which was frustrated by restrictive youth policies, weak educational reforms and other inadequate responses of the system. This overpowering of self-realization by communal solidarity could be prevented, and a new relationship between personal needs and a commitment to shared human responsibilities could be ensured by creating or strengthening a civil society which enabled individuals to satisfy their needs for self-determination.

Q: What about the oft-heard claim that contemporary movements cannot achieve this goal of self-determination because they do not question the existing property system? According to this view, movements may raise important cultural questions, but they leave untouched the fundamental questions – to do with property and its private appropriation – addressed by the workers’ movement. This reaction has been summarized by Ralph Miliband: ‘the “primacy” of organized labour in struggle arises from the fact that no other group, movement or force in capitalist society is remotely capable of mounting as effective and formidable a challenge to the existing structures of power and privilege as it is in the power of organized labour to mount. In no way is this to say that movements of women, blacks, peace activists, ecologists, gays, and others are not important, or cannot have effect, or that they ought to surrender their separate identity. Not at all. It is only to say that the principal (not the only) “gravedigger” of capitalism remains the organized working class.’ How do you respond to this plea for the continuing strategic importance of struggles centred on property?

RETHINKING DEMOCRACY

The fundamental issue to be clear about is what we mean by property. In the era of industrial capitalism, property took the form of natural resources, material goods and capital. The form of property was externalized, and its ownership conferred upon human beings the power to control external nature. Property in this sense has not disappeared from complex societies. It probably remains one of the problems confronting us today. But Miliband’s reaction overlooks the fact that there is another kind of property – property in our biological and psychological existence – which is becoming more and more important. The form of property is becoming ‘internalized’. What is at stake is not who owns what, but who owns whom and whether that ownership is legitimate. This trend is evident in the legal and political controversies aroused by genetic engineering, reproductive technologies, medical research and other direct interventions in our internal nature. It is also evident in the debate generated by the ecological movement, which has broadened the old concern about controlling material property into new questions concerning attempts to control both outer nature and the inner nature of human beings.

I therefore agree with Miliband that struggles centred on property remain important. But I understand property to include much more than property in material goods and capital. It would be interesting to explore this difference by comparing the contemporary conflicts about property in my expanded sense with the controversies about property in goods during the era of capitalist development. Such comparison might show up the inadequacy of traditional definitions of property as well as deepen our understanding of contemporary forms of property. It could enrich and extend the debate, which has developed since the 1930s, about ownership versus control of property, the growth of collective consumption and the changing nature of capitalism. It would probably show, for instance, that the power of multinational corporations is problematic not only because they privately appropriate common goods, but because they interfere deeply with both our natural environment and the biological and psychological existence of individuals – with their sense of genetic destiny, sexual choices, and patterns of consumption.