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Q: There is a long sociological tradition - which has its political supporters - which stresses the importance of cultural tradition in weaving together the members of a complex differentiated society. Lacking tradition, said Edmund Burke, individuals are naked, isolated and miserable creatures, who are as frail as flies at the end of summer. This old warning about the dangers of anomic has been repeated more recently by Daniel Bell, who defends the need for cultural conservatism in the face of atomizing, hedonistic challenges to everyday life. How would you respond to the claim of cultural conservatives that movements are enemies of tradition, that they foster cultural breakdown and anomic?

It is curious that the conservative claim is sometimes countered with exactly the inverse point: that the movements are too tradition-bound and backward-looking, and not progressive and modernizing enough. I prefer to think differently about the relationship between tradition and contemporary forms of collective action. In my view, systemic trends in complex societies are slowly destroying traditions. The processes of increasing differentiation and complexity characteristic of these systems is gradually eliminating the barriers of tradition that hindered the growth of capitalist systems. Yet what is interesting is the simultaneous growth of a sensed need for roots. This need, as I've explained already, is stimulated by the uncertainty and insecurity which accompanies the increased opportunities for individualization fostered by complex systems.

The attempt to fend off insecurity and to preserve and develop memories is most evident in regionalist or ethnonationalist movements. In our study of nations without a state, "Nazioni senza stato," Diani and I tried to show how these movements contain elements of traditional resistance to state-building and modernization processes as well as attempts to draw upon the particular linguistic and cultural traditions of a region and its people in order to symbolically express new and different things. We found that these movements are not simply orientated to the past. Rather, they orient themselves to the present system in order to preserve and develop their particular cultural traditions against the generalized pressure towards

conformity and homogenized cultural patterns. They indicate how traditions, far from being static, can be developed in novel ways. And they indicate why the nineteenth-century distinctions between 'progressive' and 'conservative', and Left and Right are inadequate for understanding this innovative development of traditions by contemporary movements.

Q: There is an additional sense in which contemporary movements re-tie the threads of historical memory. They also feed upon the themes and patterns of organization of previous movements. They keep alive and cultivate traditions of collective action. This is one of the paradoxical features of present-day movements: while they diverge in many ways from older social struggles (such as the workers' movements), at the same time they rekindle a whole series of past experiences of struggle. They bring these experiences back to life and give them a new shape.

There are certainly pre-modern experiences which contemporary movements retrieve and develop. Gerlach and Hine's work on the organizational form of the new movements makes this point by drawing on Marshall Sahlins' writings on hunting and gathering tribes. They argue that the reticular and segmented structure of contemporary movements can be understood as a functional response to conditions of uncertainty and complexity, and that in this limited sense they have a pre-industrial form reminiscent of so-called primitive tribes, which duplicated and multiplied their group functions in order to deal with the uncertain environment in which they moved.

Q: But there are also continuities between contemporary movements and early modern forms of collective action. Many examples come to mind: the infusion of 'red' and 'black' themes within the Green movement; the deliberate efforts of social movements to rescue and develop endangered democratic traditions in the central-eastern half of Europe; and the ongoing references within the women's movement to earlier mobilizations of women.

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Don’t these examples refute the conservative claim that today’s movements raze tradition?

Yes.

Q: But then your earlier claim that there are some things which are ‘new’ in contemporary social movements is jeopardized. In the workers’ movements of the nineteenth century, for example, all four of the features which you consider to be novel were already evident. The workers’ movements were certainly concerned with information resources – as is evident in their agitation against the ideology of classical political economy. These movements also experimented with new forms of organization, such as the co-operative, mutual aid society and trade union. They also operated through invisible networks, especially in countries in which these movements were illegal and under constant harassment by the political authorities. And the early threads of a planetary awareness are evident in workers’ attempts to organize underneath and across the boundaries of nation-states. Doesn’t all this suggest that contemporary movements have revived and extended forms of action already evident in early modern movements? That they are active ‘agents’ of a modern tradition of collective action?

I agree that the ‘new’ social movements preserve these traditions of collective action. But they do not simply preserve them as if they were on display in a museum. They use these traditions to confront new problems, to ask new questions and to offer new answers. Historical continuities are always observable within present-day social movements. The crucial question is how and to what extent contemporary actors render these elements of tradition meaningful by synthesizing them with completely new elements.

Q: Not everybody within movements experiences challenges to cultural codes as a discovery and a liberating, joyful struggle. Arguably, most people feel it as a disorientating and sometimes painful crisis. They feel nostalgic for the certainties of times past. They worry about the loss of friends and acquaintances; feel inadequate in political discussions; feel guilt at what they are doing; and they feel compelled to conform to new norms which they neither comprehend fully nor accept. Has your research uncovered this kind of reaction? If so, how do actors in movements cope with this? Is it a potential source of fragmentation and decline in movements, the stony ground upon which actors’ appeals can and do fall?

Involvement in collective action always entails the experience of disruption and disorientation you describe. In the contemporary movements it is especially acute. These movements are filled with many different processes and tensions and conflicts, all of which makes individuals’ commitment to them risky and uncertain. As I have explained, the image of movements as a character or personage is misleading, precisely because in sociological terms the experience of being involved in a movement is both temporary and highly fragile. The quality and length of individuals’ commitment depends very much on the resources available to them. In the Milano research project, for instance, I observed among groups within the youth movement wide discrepancies in the availability of resources. Some groups were marginalized by their inability to translate their emphasis upon internal solidarity and expressive drives – guitar playing and smoking joints – into public action. They suffered implosion because their limited personal skills and resources prevented them from translating their guitar playing and opposition to the system into a viable activity in the outside world. Other groups fared better. Young people working with video, for example, developed certain technical skills within their group. This linked them with the outside world of information production, and in turn enabled them to have a public presence, or even to become professionals and to abandon the movement altogether.

Q: Given these internal tensions and wide discrepancies of resources within the movements, why do people join them in the first place? Why do they submit themselves to
forms of collective action which are multi-layered, fragmented and highly precarious?

This is a very important - but enormous - question. Let me try simply to summarize the three different levels of explanation which must be acknowledged if a plausible answer is to be given. First, individuals participate in collective action because they belong to a specific social sector which is exposed to the contradictory requirements of complex systems. This structural explanation is not sufficient, however, because not all individuals who belong to a self-contradictory social sector actually participate in collective action. A second type of explanation - emphasized by resource mobilization theorists - is therefore also required. This concerns the availability of specific resources to individuals who engage in calculations about the costs and benefits of involvement. Resources such as prior membership in networks are of course never 'neutral'. They are always conditioned by the specific social sector to which an individual belongs. For example, while all women are exposed to contradictory pressures and obligations, their participation as women in collective action depends upon such resources as their level of education, their access to employment and their previous membership in leftist political groups.

A third level of explanation - to do with the psychology of individual commitment - is often underestimated and sometimes forgotten. Yet it is fundamental, because individuals ultimately participate for highly personal reasons, and not only because they are 'students' or 'women' or 'young' or 'black' or 'urban dwellers'. I tried to show the importance of individual variables in Corpi estranei (Extraneous Bodies). Based on my clinical work, this book analyses the deep psychological reasons why individuals withdraw from movements and seek therapeutic advice. It illustrates how individuals sometimes confuse the three different levels of explanation of why they get involved in collective action. It shows that the analytical separation of these interdependent levels can help individuals to recognize that their commitment to collective action is based in part on deeply personal reasons. And it suggests, on that basis, that those individuals can resume their social activities, and even their involvement in collective action.

Q: One of the formal criteria you use to define a new social movement is its emphasis upon internal solidarity. Doesn't this neglect the chronic internal divisions within movements? Such divisions can sometimes be productive. In the United States, for example, the rebirth of the women's movement (as Sarah Evans and others have pointed out) derived largely from the civil rights movement and the New Left. But divisions can also be paralyzing. For example, within the Green movements of western Europe there are serious paralyzing divisions about the very meaning of 'green politics'. Doesn't such heterogeneity and conflict contradict your definition of social movements as based upon solidarity? Isn't it more accurate to say that they are at best only ever defined by a dynamic and contested solidarity? Don't you yourself recognize this when you emphasize, against those who speak of movements as characters, that movements are invertebrate phenomenon - heterogeneous, fragile, complex?

Along with the terms conflict and breaking the limits of the system, the concept of solidarity was used in my early writings to define a social movement as a specific form of collective action. At the time, it seemed to me important to overcome the theoretical confusion which plagued discussions about collective action. I was troubled particularly by the tendency of researchers to conflate different forms of collective action - to define everything as similar to everything else. But I soon realized that solidarity is not a given state of affairs, and that a social movement is a multifaceted reality. I therefore became convinced of the need to clarify how collective actors come to define themselves as a unity. So when I now use the term solidarity I use it as an ideal-type. It refers to a dynamic and unstable reality, to the product of intense interaction, negotiation, conflict and compromise among a variety of different actors.

Q: It seems to us that the phrase contested solidarity is still more appropriate for expressing, in an ideal-typical manner, the permanently contested sense of collective identity within social movements. And it also serves as a healthy reminder that it is usually the leaders of particular
movement organizations who emphasize, against their opponents, the appearance of unity within the movement.

This is what I also wish to emphasize. We know, and my research confirms, that it is normally the spokespeople, the ideologists who speak on behalf of other participants, who place most emphasis on unity. But careful observation reveals the chronic tensions and differences within the fabric of the movements. Collective actors invest an enormous quantity of resources in the on-going game of solidarity. They spend a great deal of time and energy discussing who they are, what they should become and which people have the right to decide that. This on-going process of construction of a sense of ‘we’ can succeed for various reasons: for instance, because of effective leadership, workable organizational forms or strong reserves of expressive action. But it can also fail, in which case collective action disintegrates. The task of sociological analysis is to understand how and why the game of solidarity succeeds or fails.

Q: Your work plays down the importance of analysing the social background – e.g. the social class – of those who participate in new social movements. Isn’t it nevertheless an important dimension to understand? For instance, sociological analysis indicates that support for the Greens is strongest among young people, women, metropolitan dwellers, groups with higher levels of formal education and workers in key sectors of the information economy. Doesn’t this type of analysis tell us about the degree to which the new movements are (capable of) drawing upon sectors crucial for the functioning – and therefore the transformation – of the present system? And doesn’t it therefore help us estimate the mobilization potential of the movements?

This kind of research is very important in generating knowledge of how social movements function. Even though I don’t do this research myself, I find its results very useful for understanding certain features of contemporary movements. But it is limited by its supposition that collective action derives spontaneously from

social conditions. We’ve already discussed the serious weaknesses of this view.

Q: One of the characteristics of the new social movements, you claim, is their refusal of a certain type of revolutionary politics – the Leninist model of capturing and transforming state power – as well as more conventional Left political strategies. Could you explain this point? Are you saying that the conventional distinction between Left and Right is obsolete in thinking about the cultural and political potential of the new social movements?

The dream of many nineteenth-century utopias was to harness social actors to the project of transforming the state. At one and the same time, social actors were viewed as the motor of civil society and the creators of a new form of political power. Today, in my opinion, this view is obsolete, because there is a growing divergence between the patterns of social action within civil society and political action within state institutions. Political action involves making and implementing decisions through processes of selection and, hence, by means of pressure, competition, calculation and representation. By contrast, social action is a reticual and multifaceted experience, which is more and more concerned with the meaning of individual, interpersonal and collective life. The problem with Leninism is that it reduces everything which is social to political matters; social actors, social judgements and knowledge of social phenomena are compressed into political terms. This is an extreme form of reductionism, but it has been highly influential. Still today we usually judge collective action in terms of its impact on the political system. This short-circuiting of the relationship between social movements and political power and conflict is best avoided. It weakens our understanding of the independent processes at work within social movements as well as their impact upon the political system.

My dissatisfaction with reductionism of the Leninist kind indicates why I am doubtful about applying the traditional distinction between Left and Right to social movements. This distinction probably remains valuable in the political arena. To be on the Left in political terms is to oppose the backward-