looking conservatism of the Right. It stands for the expansion of human rights, legal guarantees for citizens, greater equality and democracy, and the toleration of political differences. The difficulty is that these criteria cannot be applied to social movements. The heterogeneity of contemporary forms of collective action cannot be contained in these simplifying categories. Moreover, as I've tried to explain to you, many features of the new social movements are simply not describable as progressive or conservative, forward-looking or backward-looking. These old terms are obsolete in a sociological sense.

Q: But there are a number of contemporary movements which articulate some key themes of the political Right. Religious fundamentalism, racialist and nationalist movements (e.g., Le Pen's Front Nationale), and the 'right to life' movement also have all of the formal qualities of new social movements as you understand them. Why then doesn't your analysis deal with these 'right-wing' movements? Doesn't your research implicitly assume that the new movements are (potentially) democratic? Don't you thereby understate the fundamentalist or anti-democratic 'dark side' of movements?

It is true that my research has not concentrated on these movements, although in the Milano project I experienced at first hand the neo-religious movement. In the Italian context, this movement comprises an eclectic network of groups attempting to develop a new spiritual experience. These groups are situated mainly on the fringes of the established churches, and some of them are guided by orientalist themes. I personally found this neo-religious movement highly troubling. It raised many conceptual problems and political doubts. In particular, it forced me to reflect upon the deeply ambiguous role played by 'spiritualism' in several of the new movements. For some collective actors, spiritualism is highly attractive because it provides an alternative to the allegedly flat one-dimensionality of present-day reality. It is a means of denouncing and transcending the given reality – of developing a radically different vision from a standpoint 'beyond' that reality. But the embrace of spiritualism does more than create a sense of difference for its believers. It also defines itself in opposition to a reality which pretends to be without limits. In the realm of sexual experience, for example, complex societies emphasize the right to pleasure as if it were an Eleventh Commandment. This produces new obligations and controls: we are supposed to get our pleasure by following the rules of the sex manual. Spirituality feeds upon and reacts against this reduction of sexual experience to techniques and gymnastic exercises. It offers a transcendent perspective of the kind found in certain forms of radical feminism and eco-feminism. Spiritualism provides the important reminder that we cannot live without ethics, even in a disenchanted world. But it supposes – incorrectly, in my view – that the dilemmas of life in complex societies can be overcome by taking refuge in higher 'ethical' principles such as love and harmony.

Q: Spiritualism certainly originates as a reaction against the perceived homogenization of life in complex systems. But there are other forms of fundamentalism – evident in Le Pen's Front Nationale – which are prompted by the inverse experience of fragmentation. For example, the Front Nationale in France draws some of its support from manual working-class voters, some of them ex-Communists, who feel threatened by de-industrialization, unemployment and 'foreigners'. These nationalists embrace a transcendent ideology not because they feel that they are living in a flat, homogenized reality. They rather feel the earth to be shaking under their feet. They yearn for certainty in the face of uncertainty, and that is why they are intolerant of difference and fascinated by unifying symbols such as 'France'.

Yes. This is the other face of fundamentalism in its reactionary or fascist form. It embraces the myth of a de-differentiated society in order better to impose it upon others.

Q: You have mentioned several times that you are troubled personally by the spiritualist tendencies within the new social movements. Is this because spiritualism is intolerant of diversity – a lapse into the very same
integralism which you found originally in both Catholicism and Marxism?

More than this is at stake. I think that transcendent perspectives - spiritualism is not exactly the right word since it is often associated with formal religions - are as necessary as they are dangerous. The issues and problems with which we are confronted today cannot be addressed simply on the basis of an appeal to the private interests of people. Consider the issues raised by the ecological movements. Certainly, people become concerned when a nuclear power plant is built near their homes or when the seaside where they live becomes polluted. But what interest do they have in the fate of forests in the Amazon Basin or aboriginals in Australia? Why should people be concerned about the fate of the planet? They can only become interested in such matters on the basis of an overriding set of ethics which motivate them into action. Hence my discomfort: movements cannot survive on rational calculation alone, and yet their necessary resort to supra-ethical standards easily risks turning them into a church preaching a new gospel.

Q: This brings us to your claim that the new social movements keep their distance from politics, that they have a deeply anti-political quality. Why is it that these movements are suspicious of parties, governments and state institutions?

Rather than speak of the anti-political quality of contemporary movements, I would prefer to discuss their pre-political and metapolitical qualities. Movements operate in the pre-political dimensions of everyday life. Within its informal networks, collective actors collaborate in the laboratory work of inventing new meanings and testing them out. But movements also contain a metapolitical dimension. They publicize the existence of some basic dilemmas of complex societies which cannot be resolved by means of political decisions. They reveal that we are confronted by general problems for which there are at best only partial and temporary solutions.

Q: Would you give some examples of these metapolitical issues raised by social movements?

We know for instance that the elimination of currently available knowledge of nuclear energy is impossible - except of course by means of a final and ultimate global disaster. Given the manifest dangers of nuclear power and weaponry - which the peace and ecological movements have well publicized - it follows that neither the elimination nor the free use of nuclear knowledge is feasible. This is an example of a dilemma which will remain no matter what decisions are taken by the political authorities. Another example is the crucial dilemma resulting from the growing technological power we as human beings exercise over ourselves and our environment. This power is becoming virtually infinite even though at the same time we remain rooted inescapably within the boundaries of human biology and our natural eco-system. We cannot choose either human omnipotence or a regression to a fully 'natural' existence. We are caught necessarily between these two extremes, which political decisions can never resolve fully. The contemporary movements have helped us become aware of these kinds of dilemmas. They remind us that politics has its limits, that not everything is reducible to negotiation, decision-making and administrative control, and that non-political forms of action must therefore be kept alive as a reminder of this fact.

Q: To what extent do your views on the pre-political and metapolitical character of movements reflect the high degree of 'closure' within the Italian political system?

My early thinking about the relationship between movements and parties was certainly influenced by the peculiarities of the Italian political system. An especially important fact is the inherited pervasiveness of the state in nationalized industry, the media, the arts and many other spheres of Italian daily life. Nearly every single problem is dealt with or refracted through the political system. Social action is hyperpoliticized. The scope for autonomous civil initiatives is comparatively limited. The political system therefore tends to be viewed as illegitimate and blocked. This feeling that the state is omnipresent yet unresponsive is reinforced by its malfunctions: the system of justice works clumsily, the universities are overcrowded and the health service is highly inefficient.
During the 1970s in particular, the hyperpoliticization and under-representation of social action in Italy resulted in the suffocation of the demands of the new social movements. The Radical Party was the political party most sensitive to these issues raised by civil society, and this resulted in two important social reforms, which swept away laws against divorce and abortion. Other questions raised by the new mobilizations were ignored by political actors. This resulted in clashes with the governmental authorities, who often responded with authoritarian and repressive measures. Every attempt was made to contain the new social demands within the established political equilibrium. The PCI, which aspired to the ranks of government, did not play the role of a left opposition in a democratic two-party system. It failed to represent the new radical demands; until the late 1970s, its policies and public statements concerning students, women, and ecology poorly acknowledged the legitimacy of their demands. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that the New Left groupings embracing the tradition of revolutionary Marxism were temporarily successful. The student movement in particular fed small political organizations and parties, such as Lotta Continua, Il Manifesto and Avanguardia Operaia. Although they were sensitive to the new themes and demands of the social movements, they tried to translate them into Leninist political terms, thus failing to recognize their novelty as social phenomena. This is the background against which the non-political forms of action of the 1980s emerged.

Q: One of the most troubling developments of the past two decades has been the growth of terrorist organizations in complex societies. You locate the development of terrorism in Italy in the processes of distorted modernization and the institutionalization of the Left. You say that the expectations of the new movements were thwarted by the newly modernized institutional arrangements; and, as the example of Autonomia demonstrates, the movements thus became disillusioned and felt betrayed. Your view is that terrorism is the result of the decomposition of social movements. Could you explain this point, perhaps with reference to the Italian developments you have just sketched?

When I began writing on social movements in the mid 1970s, there were two prevailing interpretations of the growth of violence and terrorism in the Italian political system. Either these phenomena were seen as an effect of the irrationality and madness of the individual terrorists, or they were viewed as the necessary outcome of social and political phenomena which contained seeds of violence from the outset. In opposition to these interpretations, I tried to show, in the Italian case, that there was a link between the wave of modernization which affected civil society from the end of the 1960s, the growth of social movements and the malfunctioning of the political system. I tried to show that terrorism was the resultant of these three processes.

Q: Would you describe for us these processes in more detail?

The details are complex and difficult to summarize accurately. From the mid-1950s onwards, the Italian economy was transformed in ways comparable to other neo-capitalist economies. New forms of industrial organization, expanding markets, and the growth of middle-class consumption patterns were not matched, however, by corresponding changes in the cultural and institutional life of civil society. At the end of the 1960s, this contradiction erupted in demands for the reform and democratization of industrial relations, the education system, the judiciary, and the health system. I use the term modernization to refer to all these dramatic changes which affected economic and cultural life in Italy during this period. A second factor in my analysis of the origins of terrorism was the emergence of new demands from within the new social movements, which we've already discussed. The third important factor was the blocked political system, which was controlled by the Christian Democrats, the dominant party in the governing coalition. The political system tried to contain the new social demands. It left behind much unfinished business and dissatisfaction. The fate of student demands well illustrates this trend. The most vocal demand of the students was for a different university system. The universities became marginally more democratic as a result. But other student demands – to do with war, the role of science,
the international system, the need for a lessening of authoritarianism in interpersonal relations and other issues common to student movements around the world—were ignored completely. This resulted in widespread disillusionment and a radicalization of the student movement in a Leftist political direction. The factory unrest produced by economic modernization had facilitated changes in the industrial relations system, but it also produced disillusioned, fundamentalist fringe groups. The New Left organizations, whose ideological and political framework was Leninist, but who in practice acted as a ‘wildcat’ democratic opposition, were unable to satisfy both the fundamentalists and those people searching for personal and cultural change. Some militants therefore concluded that political violence was the only solution. In this way, the terrorism of the 1970s synthesized the disillusionment produced by the half-successful institutionalization of social demands and the repression and neglect of the claims of new groups of urban youth.

Q: You have explained, at least for the Italian case, how the systematic use of violence grows out of social movements. But isn’t it also important to explain why violence is so rare within contemporary movements? Compared with the early years of this century, when parts of the workers’ movement were driven by fantasies of violent confrontation with employers and the state, contemporary movements rely almost exclusively on civil disobedience and other non-violent forms of action. Why is this?

There are several reasons. First, the over-use or crude use of violence by political authorities in the past normally provoked counter-violence by their opponents. To some extent, this old rule has been learned by present-day pluralist political systems. Political power has become shrewder. A related factor, second, is the democratization of political systems by the struggles and violence of the past. Open and violent confrontations between movements and western states are today less common because there are alternative means available for negotiating their differences. Finally, the inner culture of today’s movements is decidedly against the use of violence. The contrast with traditional socialist and working-class culture is clear. That culture considered violent confrontation with employers and the state legitimate. Its theories sometimes even supposed violence to be necessary and inevitable. Contemporary movements distance themselves from these old assumptions. They have an aversion to grandiose plans and political ideologies—they dwell within the present tense—and they therefore emphasize pacifism, personal experience and the need to avoid frequent open confrontations with the state. Having said this, I doubt whether we are seeing the withering away of violence. Violence will probably continue to be the shadowy underside of movements. Paradoxically, the weakening links between violence and social movements might make terrorist campaigns by disillusioned and impatient individuals and isolated ‘grouplets’ even more likely.

Q: Your writings emphasize that the demands of new social movements are not negotiable, even though they require political mediation. A similar point has been made by Manuel Castells. In his study of urban social movements, The City and the Grassroots, Castells suggests that there is a contradictory relationship between dominant urban life and the alternatives offered by social movements. Yet he argues that urban social movements, in their quest for an alternative city, cannot provide a political alternative because the image they project cannot be linked with an alternative mode of development, nor to a democratic state. He concludes that urban social movements are directed at transforming the meaning of the city without being able to transform society. They are a reaction not an alternative. You also recognize this problem. What the movements require, you suggest, is the formation of new intermediate public spheres within civil society. Would you elaborate this point?

I am convinced that the expansion and official recognition of public spaces is essential for protecting contemporary movements—and for enriching democracy as we know it at present. A new process of ‘post-industrial’ democratization based on the widening and consolidation of public spaces would build on the principles of rights, citizenship and equality of the early modern