New perspectives on social movements: an interview with Alberto Melucci*

Q: Most of your sociological research during the past two decades has focused upon the growth and significance of social movements in contemporary modern societies. Much of this work is still unavailable to English-speaking readers. Could you therefore tell us what experiences - personal, intellectual and political - have most attracted your interest in these movements?

Several personal and intellectual experiences have shaped my understanding of social movements. I was born into a working-class family and raised in a left-leaning Catholic culture. I studied at the Catholic University in Milano, where I completed a master's degree in philosophy. By 1968 I had become a university assistant - and a disenchanted young intellectual. I was dissatisfied with my involvement in the Catholic youth movement - with the contradiction between the spiritual side of my religious experience, which I did not reject, and the highly traditional social and political practices of the Italian Catholic Church.

This mood was strengthened by the growth of the student movement in 1968. As a young university assistant, I was sympathetic towards the movement. Yet I quickly realized that the student mobilizations were afflicted with the same kind of intolerance and yearning for integralism that I had already encountered - and rejected - in my previous commitment to Catholic youth activism. Precisely because I had been involved deeply in a communal experience, I was sensitive to its reappearance in the student movement and 'vaccinated' against its charm. What troubled me about integralism is its rejection of a pluralist and 'disenchanted' attitude to life. Under the influence of integralism, people become intolerant. They search for the master key which unlocks every door of reality, and consequently they become incapable of distinguishing among the different levels of reality. They long for unity. They turn their backs on complexity. They become incapable of recognizing differences, and in personal and political terms they become bigoted and judgmental. My original encounter with totalizing attitudes of this kind has stimulated a long-lasting interest in the conditions under which integralism flourishes. And to this day I remain sensitive to its intellectual and political dangers, which my work on collective action attempts to highlight and to counteract.

My early contacts with the PCI and the 'real socialist' world reinforced my allergy to integralism. I never joined the Communist Party, although some of my friends and colleagues had done so. I participated in certain political campaigns - against the Vietnam War, for instance - and I became aware of the extent to which the Communist experience in Italy closely resembled Catholic fundamentalism. My distance from both was deepened by several research visits to Poland. In 1968 I received a fellowship to enable me to work with Leszek Kolakowski at the Polish Academy of Sciences. I arrived in Warsaw one week after he had been fired for political reasons. Since he was a persona non grata, I had this very strange and unnerving Kafkaesque experience of being somebody with whom nobody wanted to talk. Each day I had official meetings with people who might have been police, intellectuals or university administrators - it was impossible to tell - and yet the ritual was always the same 'Well, now that you are here, Mr Melucci, what are your plans?' I usually explained that I had a grant to work with Kolakowski. The typical reply was 'Well, of course, we'll see what we can arrange.' I never met Kolakowski, but in this way I experienced at first hand the reality of life under totalitarianism. My doubts about socialism, classes and Marxism -

*An interview conducted by John Keane and Paul Mier in Milano, Italy, on 26 and 27 February 1988.
which in the Italian context meant the PCI – were reinforced, and I realized more clearly the fundamental difference between everyday life in ‘real socialism’ and democratic countries.

My personal experiences were not the only sources of my later interest in social movements. I was also dissatisfied intellectually with the dominant sociological paradigms, Marxism and functionalism, which had influenced me most strongly during the 1960s. As a young graduate student in the early years of that decade, my philosophical and sociological interests had focused upon the relationship between Marxism and religion. In Italy, there was at that time considerable debate about this subject among intellectuals. I explored some of its aspects in my master’s dissertation, which attempted – it now seems very remote – a case study of the Polish system and proposed some answers to two key questions. Which kind of class divisions exist in a socialist country? And how does Polish culture coexist with socialism? My questioning of both religion and Marxism deepened my interest in sociology. I went on to complete a two year postgraduate programme in sociology at the State University of Milano. I studied with the best Italian sociologists, including Gallino, Pagani and Pizzorno. They deepened my knowledge of the sociological tradition, Parsonian functionalism and empirical research methods. At that time, sociology in Italy was influenced deeply by American sociology. In opposition to the influence of philosophical idealism, which was still dominant in Italian culture, including even Marxism, Italian sociology attempted to legitimate new concepts and methods. Yet I felt trapped between the functionalist theoretical framework, which structured my empirical interest in contemporary social reality, and the Marxist approach, which seemed to me incapable of looking empirically at conflict and other social phenomena.

This discomfort with the two irreconcilable sources of my intellectual formation persisted until I encountered the writings of the Frankfurt School, especially Habermas, and until I went to Paris in 1970 to do my doctorate with Alain Touraine at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (as the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales was called at that time). Meeting Touraine was intellectually very important for me. I realized that Touraine’s approach escaped the shortcomings of both the

economics of the Marxist tradition and the ideology of functionalism. It emphasized the importance and autonomy of social action, and this has had a lasting impact upon my work. Intellectually speaking, the theme of social movements developed by Touraine helped me come to terms with all my previous sociological work on conflict and classes.

A final source of my concern with social movements is my interest in psychology and clinical practice. While I’ve always had an interest in the psychological dimensions of individuals, I found myself at first mainly attracted to social problems. I never considered becoming a professional psychologist. But partly by chance I became one. For personal reasons I entered psychotherapy, and I developed a deep commitment to the field. I also discovered that I had certain personal qualities and skills, such as intuition and the ability to communicate with others and to make contact with their deep inner realities. For these reasons, during the 1970s I continued my training in clinical practice and I completed a second doctorate, this time in psychology at UER Sciences Humaines Cliniques at the University of Paris. All of this is highly relevant to my interest in social movements because it has sensitized me to the ways in which collective action effects not only social change but also transformations of individual experience.

My training in psychology also sharpened my understanding of some of the important methodological and epistemological issues in the study of personal and social life. I went through psychoanalysis. I also carefully studied psychoanalysis. However, I was unsatisfied with its theoretical foundations – with its causal and sometimes mechanistic explanations of psychic life. In the clinical situation, psychoanalysis often searches for the past causes of an individual’s present problems. I found myself more attracted to the phenomenological and existentialist approaches, including the humanistic psychologies – such as Gestalt therapy and body therapies – which were developing at that time. I came to see the importance of the phenomenological attitude, which is not centred on causal explanations, but which is more concerned with how people act and how they can change their lives if they so wish. It is a process-oriented approach which, in contrast to psychoanalysis, is therefore less fixated on the contents of experience, particularly those from the past. My
preference for the phenomenological approach is evident in my empirical research methods and indeed in my whole attitude towards social movements.

Q: During the past two decades, there has been considerable debate among social scientists about the changing nature of western societies. Older terms such as organized capitalism, industrial society and monopoly or advanced capitalism have been replaced by new terms such as post-industrial society, technocratic society or, as you have suggested, complex society. Much of your analysis of social movements rests upon assumptions about the novelty of contemporary societies. It seems important to explicate them, if only because an essential ingredient of your definition of a social movement is that it is a type of collective action which breaks the limits of the social system in which it operates. What do you mean when you say that contemporary western societies are complex? What kind of system are we living in?

This question is important and unavoidable in research on social movements. But the fact is that nowadays nobody has a convincing answer. There is a general reliance upon metaphors, adjectives and prefixes to describe the nature of the system in which we are living. And - as the use of such terms as neocapitalism and post-industrial society suggests - the two leading models of modernity, the Marxian theory of capitalist society and the Weberian theory of industrial society, are undergoing modification. Most people feel that our systems have changed, but very few admit that we lack a language to describe the way in which they have changed. I prefer to acknowledge this impasse, to declare it openly in order to make possible its resolution through different questions and answers. This is why all the terms you mention are used rather indiscriminately in my more recent writings.

Q: Are you saying that you intentionally deploy these various concepts in an undisciplined way, in the hope that this will produce dissatisfaction with them and encourage the formulation of new concepts?

Yes. I'm convinced that we are entering an era qualitatively different from both the capitalist model of modernity and socialism as we've known it historically. At least three main processes are taking place, the acknowledgement of which can help broaden the discussion about the nature of our society - and its limits. First, within this system information has become the core resource. Our access to reality is facilitated and shaped by the conscious production and control of information. 'Forms' or images produced through perception and cognition increasingly organize our relationship to the material and communicative environment in which we live. The transformation of natural resources into commodities has come to depend on the production and control of these cognitive and communicative 'forms'. Power based upon material production is therefore no longer central. Second, this system has become planetary, a completely interdependent World system in which nothing or nobody is external to its boundaries. In this respect it differs from the capitalist system, which only laid the foundations for planetarization. A third development is individualization, the fact that the main actors within the system are no longer groups defined by class consciousness, religious affiliation or ethnicity, but - potentially at least - individuals who strive to individuate themselves by participating in, and giving meaning to, various forms of social action. I really don't know what kind of system we are entering. But I would say that if these three processes are indeed significant then, correspondingly, the questions we ask about the present system must also change. So also must our understanding of the disequilibria and social conflicts within the system, which I do not assume to be monolithic and totally administered.

Q: Many of your views on complex societies are at odds with a Marxist approach, which attempts to establish the causal links between the macro-structures of capitalist society and its conflicts. Some of the key themes of recent Marxist analyses of the present system - such as the fiscal crisis of the state, the restructuring of the global capitalist economy and corporatism - are virtually absent in your analysis of 'complex society'. Why? Is it because you think that this type of macro-analysis is inappropriate in
complex societies? That it belongs to a past era - that of industrial capitalism? Or that it is fundamentally unhelpful in analysing the formation of social movements?

Macro-structural analyses of the Marxian type are unavoidable, as I’ve tried to explain in my criticisms of recent American analyses of social movements. These market-based analyses, such as resource mobilization theory, dispense with conceptions of structural boundaries and macro-power relations and reduce everything - illegitimately - to calculation, bargaining and exchange. I therefore accept as a strong working hypothesis the Marxian point that we live within a system which has a definite logic and definite limits - even if these limits are presently obscure and difficult to specify. This is why recent Marxian analyses of the system in terms of fiscal crisis, corporatism and economic restructuring are interesting and stimulating. They help to explain certain important mechanisms of the system. But my objection to these analyses is that they present their particular account of contemporary society as a general theory. They appear to be explaining the universe, when in fact they are presenting ‘regional’ explanations of only certain key mechanisms of present-day society. No doubt, these theories can provide us with a sense of intellectual and emotional security, they help to close our circle of uncertainty by incorporating new phenomena into pre-existing intellectual frameworks. But in my view they constitute a form of intellectual reductionism. They deny the need to creatively declare the impasse I’ve spoken of already. Instead of openly admitting the limits of our present understanding of the system and our inability to explain the complex problems confronting us, they resort to totalizing concepts which are simplistic and incapable of embracing reality as such.

Q: There is a strong ambivalence in your earlier work about the use of class analysis. A central feature of the Marxian project for analysing collective action is its focus upon class struggle. While you argue that such analysis is inadequate for examining collective action, your earlier writings nevertheless refer to the ‘class relationships’ which lie at the root of the new social conflicts. Why this ambivalence? What is wrong with Marxian class analysis?

My earlier work certainly displays an ambivalence about class analysis. As I’ve mentioned already, my original research considered the subject of class divisions and conflicts in terms influenced by the Marxist tradition. It became evident to me during this research that the Marxian discourse of class in fact specifies two different sets of phenomena which are often confused. The term class refers both to the patterns of social differentiation and stratification within a society and to the conflictual relationships defined by the production and distribution of the basic resources of a society. The Marxian analysis of social stratification considers classes as real social groups, but it also utilizes the concept of class relationships to analyse the dynamics of social production. I further realized that the latter sense of the term - the thesis that there are conflicts generated by the relationships through which social actors produce and appropriate their basic resources - is crucial for the analysis of collective action. I still retain the originally Marxian idea that the production of a society’s basic resources is riddled with conflicts. But I am not convinced that we need the term class to describe and analyse all of these conflict-ridden relationships. Class relationships are only one very specific historical form of production relationship; they are unique to modern capitalist society, in which they assume the form of struggles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, that is, between social groups defined by their position in the economic system.

The Marxian model of class analysis is inadequate for a second reason. Since the classical era of industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century, patterns of social differentiation and social conflict have altered. No doubt, in sociological terms class divisions in certain fields of contemporary society continue to be evident; they have not disappeared completely, and therefore the concept of class should not be dismissed from sociological analysis. But since the phase of industrial capitalism, the social structure has become ever more flexible and subject to change. The relationship between social position and collective action has also become more contingent, while social conflicts concerning basic resources can no longer be adequately understood in class terms.

Q: A more serious, if less obvious objection to the
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 metaphysical 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 working-class 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 Rebellions 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 lead 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 western European collective action. American social movements have always been intertwined 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 behaviour 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 ‘invade’ 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.
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 same 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, the 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 spiritualist 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 not 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—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*,

Touraine argues that the workers' movement has lost its role as the central social movement, and that it has become institutionalized politically. Do you accept this view?

Although I agree basically with Touraine that the working-class movement in Western Europe and North America has been drawn more and more into the institutionalized political arena, there are still examples of working-class conflict in the traditional capitalist sense. And new types of collective action specific to post-industrial forms of production — actions by women, youth, immigrants and other groups defined by their social existence outside the workplace — appear to be emerging and merging with more traditional industrial conflicts.

Q: In *La Prophétie anti-nucléaire* Touraine claims that anti-nuclear struggles are crystallizing into the central social movement of our times. According to him, other struggles remain within the paradigm of modern industrialism, whereas the ecological movement is a revolutionary force. It questions the dominant images of modernity, fundamentally challenges the dominant economic and political structures and forces public debate about how we want in future to work and to live. Do you also have reservations about this view of the ecological movement?

Term 'movement' — which at best is only a conversational tool—risks exaggerating the degree of (possible) unity of this form of collective action. As Touraine himself points out, the ecological movement in Europe contains different levels of action, ranging from political conflicts to defensive reactions and challenges to the codes of everyday life. The movement also contains a variety of meanings. Consider the example of a mobilization against the proposed siting of a nuclear power plant near a rural community: for the peasants of this community, the plant may represent a threat to the traditional ways of life. But for a group of young people who studied in the capital city and who have returned to their rural community, the proposed plant may symbolize something quite different, for instance a threat to their attempts
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
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?
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 statebuilding 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’s 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-easter half of Europe; and the ongoing references within the women’s movement to earlier mobilizations of women.
Nomads of the Present

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 paralysing. For example, within the Green movements of western Europe there are serious paralysing 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 reticent 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-
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, racist 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. Spiritualism 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
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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 hyper politicization 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, II 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 effected 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 effected 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,
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the international system, the need for a lessening of authoritari-anism 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 ‘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
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era. It would also enable the movements to live more fully their double existence within the invisible networks of civil society and in the temporary mobilizations through which they become publicly visible. The consolidation of independent public spaces would help the movements to articulate and publicize to the rest of society the themes and dilemmas which they consider to be important. And it would enable political actors to receive the messages of the movements more clearly.

Q: Would you give some examples of the new institutions of representation which you have in mind?

These public spaces already exist to some extent. But their further development would be especially important in three areas of complex societies. Among the most important would be knowledge-producing institutions, such as universities, cultural foundations and research institutes. Knowledge is a key resource of complex societies. It is produced by professionals and appropriated by corporate and state power as well as by the general public. These actors could negotiate more openly with each other through bodies set aside for their purpose within the knowledge-producing institutions themselves. Public spaces could also be strengthened within the field of collective consumption — in the areas of transportation, housing, health and other public services where the everyday needs and demands of civil society could interface more freely with the established policy-making bodies. Finally, public spaces could also be strengthened within the field of communications media. I am aware of the enormous difficulties here, and I don’t have any ready-made solutions. But attempts to create spaces of confrontation and negotiation among various actors within the media would help to ensure their greater accessibility and responsiveness. The public spaces I have in mind for each of these three policy areas would not necessarily function as arenas of conflict. They would neither be dominated by political parties nor would electoral success be their guiding criterion. Since they would not be burdened by the pressures of reaching final decisions, they might resemble neutral territory, in which different interests could interact without necessarily clashing head on. They would require legal protection. And they certainly would include task forces, committees, and other temporary forms of representation – ‘bio-degradable organizations’ as the Italian Greens call them — which matched the sporadic mobilizations of the new social movements.

Q: Wouldn’t the development of these public spaces suppose a radical break with conventional views about the primacy of political parties in relation to social movements?

It certainly implies a dramatic change of attitude among traditional political actors, including political parties, who could not expect immediate electoral or political gains from these spaces.

Q: Even when that point is granted, your proposal still seems to understate the reasons why movements are compelled — even if only to survive — to directly enter the party-political arena. The point is that competitive, democratically organized political parties can perform several functions which the public spaces you have in mind cannot. For example, parties can help crystallize disparate opinions into stable coalitions of interests; they can develop, under pressures of time and circumstances, policy programmes; and they can help citizens to defend their social interests while keeping an eye on state power. These functions of democratic political parties have often been ignored within the new movements. But there are signs, awareness of the necessary dependence of movements upon parties. Daniel Cohn-Bendit is a case in point. In 1968 Cohn-Bendit remarked: ‘To bring politics into everyday life is to get rid of the politicians.’ He now accepts the need for movements to get involved in party politics: ‘The problem with the social movements is that they are not obliged to institutionalize and protect themselves. They have spread rapidly, sure, but we have learned . . . that you can spread very fast and then get beaten back very fast. That is what happened to us in ’68. What we are now concerned to do is to give a presence to what has been achieved, and that is very, very difficult now . . . . I want to be able to say that we can try to achieve this with a political
party, but a political party is by definition a bureaucratic organization. The thing is that the Greens are pushed by the social movements which force them to bargain with their political power. With a party like the Greens we can begin to change the institutions of the country. I now accept that this is as important as anything else. How do you react to Cohn-Bendit’s change of heart?

I would emphasize that the functions performed by political parties are also performed by other organizations. Trade unions, pressure groups and voluntary associations can also stabilize opinions, represent social demands and formulate long-term policy programmes. I would also stress that the functions performed by social movements are not reducible to those of political parties. This point should be clear from our discussion. Political parties and other political bodies mostly exercise power at the macro-levels of complex societies. The role of public spaces is different. They permit movements to articulate the demands of civil society and to render the power relations of complex systems more visible. Given that power in these systems tends to conceal itself behind a veil of allegedly neutral or technical decision-making procedures, this critical function of public spaces is indispensable and probably of primary importance in the present period.

Q: Sympathetic observers and supporters of the new social movements often express alarm about their fragility and vulnerability to political and social repression. For example, this fear is presently evident within the gay and lesbian movements. Everywhere these movements are being subjected to a wave of cultural, legal and political harassment. Your writings don’t address this problem of the forcible elimination of movements. In fact, you say in Nomads of the Present that the new movements have a permanent and non-conjunctural nature — that they are a stable and irreversible component of complex societies. What is the basis of this conviction? Isn’t it overly optimistic?

Some might consider my view hopelessly Italian — as somehow based on voluntarist and optimistic assumptions. This judgement would be unfair, since I am aware that considerations of the future of social movements should not be reduced to questions of optimism or pessimism, personal taste or political preference. Moreover, our conversations during the past two days have emphasized the fragile and ephemeral character of contemporary social movements. Their existence evidently depends on conjunctural factors, such as the degree of political democracy in a country, and their normal destiny is either to become institutionalized — to produce new elites and to introduce cultural changes in everyday life — or to disappear into the streams of daily existence.

I grant these points. Nevertheless, I maintain that social movements are permanent and irreversible features of complex societies. This is partly because these societies produce — as well as require — the forms of individual participation and collective mobilization generated by these movements. In functionalist terms — which I normally don’t use — a sub-system of movements is a permanent feature of complex systems. What I mean is that these systems, which are both highly centralized and complex, encourage the development of spaces in which collective action becomes possible. These systems resemble an organization equipped with several mainframe computers, which are linked together and accessed by a network of terminals. The central computers require the periphery of terminals as a condition of their own operation. Without the information resources provided by the terminals, the computers simply couldn’t operate. The same is true of complex societies. They require for their functioning constant inputs of individual and collective motivation. This requirement is the soil in which social movements grow. They exploit the fact that there is a deeply ambivalent relationship between the ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ of complex systems, and that the centres of these systems cannot impose their power, but must exercise it in cooperation with the peripheries. This structural tension lies at the heart of complex systems, and that is why social movements are likely to continue to play a role in questioning their cultural codes and power relations.

There is another reason why social movements are unlikely to disappear. This has to do with the fact that life cannot be
reduced permanently to the level of simple reproduction. Human beings want more than to eat, sleep, procreate and to stay alive. They are also motivated to transcend their given forms of existence. Awareness of this fact is growing in our times because metasocial principles, such as the Will of God or the Laws of History, are losing their grip on society. For the first time ever, society itself senses that it is contingent and in need of continuous reconstruction. Social movements feed upon this sense of contingency as well as reinforce it. They have heightened our awareness of our own ability to create and to destroy ourselves as a species. We live in an unprecedented situation. No previous form of society has exercised such power over itself. Our future now depends almost entirely on our own choices and decisions. Social life has never been so risky. That is why social movements are unlikely to disappear. They are a sign of this awesome power we have over ourselves – and of our enormous obligation to exercise this power responsibly.