

# Introduction

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## **Prophet: the one who speaks before**

Movements in complex societies are disenchanted prophets. The charmed universe of the *heroes* has definitively dissolved under the impact of an era taking cognizance of itself as a planetary system riven by molecular change, as a system which constantly generates tensions and then in turn adapts to them by striving to control them. Movements are a sign; they are not merely an outcome of the crisis, the last throes of a passing society. They signal a deep transformation in the logic and the processes that guide complex societies.

Like the prophets, the movements 'speak before': they announce what is taking shape even before its direction and content has become clear. The inertia of the old categories may prevent us from hearing the message and from deciding, consciously and responsibly, what action to take in light of it. Without the capacity of listening to these voices, new forms of power may thus coalesce, though multiple and diffuse and no longer reducible to any linear and easily recognizable geometry.

Contemporary movements are prophets of the present. What they possess is not the force of the apparatus but the power of the word. They announce the commencement of change; not, however, a change in the distant future but one that is already a presence. They force the power out into the open and give it a shape and a face. They speak a language that seems to be entirely their own, but they say something that transcends their particularity and speaks to us all.

This book was born over the last twenty years as an attempt to listen to the voices and read the signs of precisely that which collective action is proclaiming. But the mind that sets about to regard the societal actors today must in a similar manner proceed within a disenchanted framework. The

## 2 Introduction

intellectuals who claim to represent the good conscience or the true ideology of a movement have always participated in preparing the way for the advent of the Prince, only to end up as either his victims or his courtiers. The contemporary transformations of social actors paralleling the shift in the focus of conflicts and the changes in the forms of power have rendered the situation even more problematic. Both passionate and critical, involved and detached, the analysis of collective action is confronted with new challenges it itself must recognize, lest 'those who speak before' should go unheeded and the walls of stone or of silence muffle their message.

When looking at contemporary movements, we can assume one of two different attitudes – that of 'resolving' or that of 'listening.' Modern technology with its practice of intervention, wherein success is measured in terms of the efficacy of the given technique, claims victory for the 'resolutive' approach and renders listening impossible. Under the influence of the general predisposition to immediate remedial action, social movements are taken into consideration solely on account of their capacity (or lack thereof) to modernize institutions or to produce political reform. But this is to forget, or to ignore, that the reduction of contemporary social movements to their political dimensions alone is tantamount to solving the 'symptom', to suppressing the message contained in their specifically communicative character ('symptom' literally means 'to fall together') and simply moving about the problem in the background.

Reflection on the analysis of social movements, however, is not warranted for the sake of scholarship only. At the same time, it may become a topical antidote in society: the work of analysis can contribute to the culture of the movements themselves, enhancing their resistance to the illusion that the word they bear is sacred and undermining the urge to totality that will swiftly turn them into churches or new powers that be. Heightened awareness of the possibilities and constraints of action can transform the word of the movements into language, culture, and social relationships, and may out of collective processes build a practice of freedom.

The continuum which ranges from protest and rebellion by a social group to the formation of a mass movement and a large-scale collective mobilization comprises a huge variety of intermediate forms of action, and any attempt to classify them seems at first sight all too formidable an undertaking. Indeed, one doubts whether such an operation might even reward the effort, since it remains questionable whether any continuity or homogeneity among the phenomena considered can actually be found. Here, more than in any other field of sociology, misunderstandings reign supreme. Terms such as 'collective violence', 'collective behaviour', 'protest', 'social movements', or 'revolution' often denote diverse phenom-

ena and generate ambiguities, if not outright contradictions. It is not by chance that this confusion rotates around phenomena which closely involve the fundamental processes whereby a society maintains and changes its structure. Whether wittingly or not, the debate on the significance of collective action always embraces the issue of power relationships, and on closer examination derives its energy from defending or contesting a specific position or form of dominance. But the increasing prominence of the problem does not first and foremost stem from an ideological confrontation. It is social reality itself which presents us with a variety of collective phenomena, of conflictual actions, of episodes of social revolt which evade interpretation guided by traditional political categories, thus calling for new tools of analysis. Behind random protest or manifestations of cultural revolt in our complex planetary society – which by now also includes the developing societies of the ‘South’ – there of course always lie diverse problems and social structures. In this situation, the increasing diffusion of these phenomena and their diversification is, paradoxically, matched by the inadequacy of the analytical tools available to us.

In a certain sense, then, this book constitutes a venture into the uncertain terrain of a theory still to be constructed. In this search – which at the present stage can only proceed by trial and error – the capacity of a theory to rely exclusively on its own analytical foundations is necessarily limited. From this fact derives the importance of the growing body of research into cases of social movements and episodes of collective action, which in recent years has enriched theoretical analysis with a large quantity of empirical material relating to actual behaviour in society. From this point of view, the nonlinear progress of any analysis that attempts to come to grips with the theme of social movements and collective action is also understandable, obliged as it is to rely upon overspecific observations to fill gaps in the theory, just as it is, by the same token, forced to run the risk of general hypotheses where empirical material is scarce or nonexistent on the other hand.

In the last thirty years, analysis of social movements and collective action has developed into an autonomous sector of theory formation and research within the social sciences, and the amount and quality of the work in the area has grown and improved. Not incidentally, the autonomy of the conceptual field relating to the analysis of social movements has developed parallel to the increasing autonomy of noninstitutional forms of collective action in complex systems. The social space of movements has become a distinct area of the system and no longer coincides either with the traditional forms of organization of solidarity or with the conventional channels of political representation. The area of movements is now a ‘sector’ or a ‘subsystem’ of the social.

## 4 Introduction

Recognizing this autonomy forces us to revise dichotomies like ‘state’ and ‘civil society’, ‘public’ and ‘private’, ‘instrumental’ and ‘expressive’. The crisis of such polar distinctions signals a change in our conceptual universe. The notion of ‘movement’ itself, which originally stood for an entity acting against the political and governmental system, has now been rendered inadequate as a description of the reality of reticular and diffuse forms of collective action.

Contemporary ‘movements’ assume the form of solidarity networks entrusted with potent cultural meanings, and it is precisely these meanings that distinguish them so sharply from political actors and formal organizations next to them. We have passed beyond the global and metaphysical conception of collective actors. Movements are not entities that move with the unity of goals attributed to them by ideologues. Movements are systems of action, complex networks among the different levels and meanings of social action. Collective identity allowing them to become actors is not a datum or an essence; it is the outcome of exchanges, negotiations, decisions, and conflicts among actors. Processes of mobilization, organizational forms, models of leadership, ideologies, and forms of communication – these are all meaningful levels of analysis for the reconstruction from the within of the action system that constitutes the collective actor. But, in addition, relationships with the outside – with competitors, allies, and adversaries – and especially the response of the political system and the apparatuses of social control define a field of opportunities and constraints within which the collective action takes shape, perpetuates itself, or changes.

Contemporary forms of collective action are multiple and variable. They are located at several different levels of the social system simultaneously. We must therefore begin by distinguishing between the field of conflict on the one hand and the actors that bring such conflict to the fore on the other. In the past, studying conflicts implied analysing the social condition of a group and submitting what was known of that condition to deductive reasoning in order to wrest the causes of the collective action from it. Today, we must proceed by first singling out the field of conflict, and then explain how certain social groups take action within it.

Since no actor is inherently conflictual, the nature of action assumes a necessarily temporary character, and it may involve different actors and shift its locus among the various areas of the system. This multiplicity and variability of actors makes the plurality of the analytical meanings contained within the same physical phenomenon even more apparent. The totality of a given empirical collective action is usually attributed a quasi-substantial unity, when it is instead the contingent outcome of the interaction of a multiple field of forces and analytically distinct processes.

The inner differentiation of action is reinforced by the fact that in a planetary system social reality becomes synchronic: in the contemporaneity created by the media system, all the ‘geological strata’ of human history are simultaneously present. In the unity of the present, movements thus contain in one problems and conflicts that have different historical roots. Adding to this, movements attract the forms of discontent and marginalization that the social system generates, while the forming elites exploit conflict to seek opportunity to affirm themselves or to consolidate their positions.

An analytical perspective that draws on these insights helps us clarify one of the issues recurrently debated over the last decades. It concerns the ‘newness’ of contemporary conflicts: What is ‘new’ in the ‘new social movements’ is still an open question. Bearing the responsibility of the one who introduced the term ‘new social movements’ into sociological literature, I have watched with dismay as the category has been progressively reified. ‘Newness’, by definition, is a relative concept, which at the time of its formulation in the context of the movements research had the temporary function of indicating a number of comparative differences between the historical forms of class conflict and today’s emergent forms of collective action. But if analysis and research fail to specify the distinctive features of the ‘new movements’, we are trapped in an arid debate between the supporters and critics of ‘newness’.

On the one hand, there are those who claim that many aspects of the contemporary forms of action can be detected also in previous phenomena in history, and that the discovery of their purported newness is in the first place attributable to the bias shown by numerous sociologists blinded by emotional involvement with their subject matter. On the other hand, the defenders of the novel character of contemporary movements endeavour to show that these similarities are only formal, or apparent, and that the meaning of the phenomena is changed when they are set in different systemic contexts.

However, both the critics of the ‘newness’ of the ‘new movements’ and the proponents of the ‘newness paradigm’ commit the same epistemological mistake: they consider contemporary collective phenomena to constitute unitary empirical objects, seeking then on this basis to define the substance of their newness or to deny or dispute it. When addressing empirical ‘movements’, one side in the debate sets out to mark out differences with respect to the historical predecessors, the other stresses continuity and comparability.

The controversy strikes one as futile. In their empirical unity, contemporary phenomena are made up of a variety of components, and if these

## 6 Introduction

elements are not analytically separated, comparison between forms of action that belong to mutually distinct historical periods becomes an idle activity. It will be extremely difficult to decide, for instance, the extent of the 'new' in the modern 'women's movement', as a global empirical phenomenon, compared with the first feminist movements of the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, the result of the debate on 'new movements' has been the accelerating decline of the image of movements-as-entities. Through comparative work on different historical periods and different societies, we know now that contemporary movements, like all collective phenomena, bring together forms of action which involve various levels of the social structure. These encompass different points of view and belong to different historical periods. We must, therefore, seek to understand this multiplicity of synchronic and diachronic elements and explain how they are combined in the concrete unity of a collective actor.

Having clarified this epistemological premise, we may however still ask ourselves whether a new paradigm of collective action is not at the moment taking shape: not in the empirical sense – that is, in terms of the observed phenomenon as a whole – but analytically, in terms of certain levels or elements of action. It is thus necessary to inquire as to whether there are dimensions to the 'new' forms of action which we should attribute to a systemic context different from that of industrial capitalism.

This question is dismissed by critics of 'new movements', who trace such phenomena on an exclusively political level. The resulting reductionism dispenses with the question of the emergence of a new paradigm of collective action without, however, having first provided any answers as to its pertinence. Moreover, it ignores those specifically social and cultural dimensions of action that feature so significantly in the 'new movements'. This gives rise to a different bias, to the exclusive concentration on the visible and measurable features of collective action – such as their relationship with political systems and their effects on policies – at the expense of the production of cultural codes; but it is the latter which is the principal activity of the hidden networks of contemporary movements and the basis for their visible action.

Do contemporary collective phenomena comprise antagonist conflicts that are systemic in nature, or do they rather belong to the phenomena of social emargination, of aggregate behaviour, of adjustment by the political market? So general a question can only be answered by first exploring alternative explanations of collective action, formulated for example in terms of dysfunctions or crises, or with reference to political exchange. Many of the contemporary conflicts can be explained through recourse to the workings of the political market, commonly as the expression of excluded social

groups or categories pressing for representation. Here, however, there is no antagonistic dimension to the conflict; there is only the pressure to join a system of benefits and rules from which one has been excluded. When the confines of the political system are rigid, such a conflict may even turn violent. However, this needs not necessarily entail antagonism towards the logic of the system; it may, instead, express a simple demand for a different distribution of resources or for new rules. Similarly, a poorly functioning organization may be subject even to an intense conflict, the aim of which, however, is not to dismantle that organization but rather to restore it to its normal state.

After exhausting the explanatory capacity of these dimensions, it, still remains to be asked – and this is important – whether there is anything left to account for. And here we must preserve a sufficient theoretical space in which to formulate the question of systemic conflicts; otherwise the issue will be glossed over without answers being provided or the questions themselves having been shown to be pointless. Today, we refer to the changes under way in contemporary systems using allusive terms (complex, post-industrial, postmodern, late capitalist society), the implicit assumption being that they follow a logic significantly different from that of industrial capitalism. But to do so is to neglect or to suppress the theoretical problems this very assumption raises.

The question of the existence of antagonistic conflicts of systemic scope, however, keeps open a number of issues with which theoretical analysis must now come to grip: for example, whether one can conceive of a dominant logic that disperses itself over a variety of areas of the system, producing thereby a great diversity of conflictual sites and actors.

‘If God gave me the choice of the whole planet or my little farm, I should certainly take my farm’, wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. Today we can no longer take the farm, since we have already been obliged to take the whole planet by virtue of the fact that the planet has become a whole. The Gulf War of 1991 has been the most recent and shocking demonstration of the global interdependence of our destiny as human beings on this planet and of the crucial role of information in shaping our reality. While we might not yet be fully aware of the reality of this fundamental change, contemporary social movements act as signals to remind us that both the external planet, the Earth as our homeland, and the internal planet, our ‘nature’ as human beings, are undergoing radical transformations. The reality in which we live has in its entirety become a cultural construct, and our representations of it serve as filters for our relationship with the world. For the first time in the history of the human species, this assertion is also true in a literal sense. In fact, the world of which we speak today is a global world of planetary scale,

## 8 Introduction

and this is made possible only by information, or the cultural processes with which we represent our world to ourselves. The consequences of this change are enormous. But the emergence of the transnational dimension to issues and social actors, more than a political question, is in the first place a sign of the fact that human action by now is capable of culturally creating its own space. The planet no longer designates just a physical location; it is also a unified social space which is culturally and symbolically perceived.

Interest in cultural analysis has grown in the last two decades alongside the extraordinary cultural transformation of planetary society. We are witnessing, with mixed feelings of amazement and fear, the impressive development of communication technologies, the creation of a global media system, the disappearance of historical political cleavages, the collision of cultural differences within national societies and at the world scale. Never before have human cultures been exposed to such a massive reciprocal confrontation, and never has the cultural dimension of human action been as directly addressed as the core resource for production and consumption. It therefore comes as no surprise that social sciences are rediscovering culture, that a new reading of the tradition is taking place through the lens of this key concept, and that a wave of interest in cultural analysis is bringing a new vitality to theoretical debates in sociology.

Social movements too seem to shift their focus from class, race, and other more traditional political issues towards the cultural ground. In the last thirty years emerging social conflicts in complex societies have not expressed themselves through political action, but rather have raised cultural challenges to the dominant language, to the codes that organize information and shape social practices. The crucial dimensions of daily life have been involved in these conflicts, and new actors have laid claim to their autonomy in making sense of their lives. Contemporary society with its tightly woven networks of high-density information requires for its proper functioning the development of a distinct degree of autonomy of its component parts. It must presuppose and depend on individuals, groups and subsystems, which act as self-regulating units capable of sending, receiving, and processing information. To this end, development of formal skills of action, decision-making, and continuous learning is encouraged. However, increasing systemic differentiation simultaneously threatens social life with fragmentation, lack of communication, atomized individualism, and calls for deeper integration of individual and collective practices. The key focus of control shifts from the manifest forms of behaviour to motives and the meaning of action, to those hidden codes that make individuals and groups predictable and dependable social actors.

Social conflicts tend to emerge in those fields of social life which are



directly exposed to the most powerful and intense flow of information, and where at the same time individuals and groups are subject to the greatest pressure to incorporate in their everyday behaviour the requirements and the rules of systemic normality. The actors involved in these conflicts are transient, and their action serves to reveal to and caution the society of the crucial problems it faces, to announce the critical divisions that have opened up within it. Conflicts do not express themselves through action taken in accordance with the purposive norms of efficacy. The challenge is made manifest in the upsetting of cultural codes, being therefore predominantly formal in character.

In contemporary systems, signs become interchangeable and power operates through the languages and codes which organize the flow of information. Collective action, by the sheer fact of its existence, represents in its very form and models of organization a message broadcast to the rest of society. Instrumental objectives are still pursued, but they become more precise and particular in their scope and replaceable. Action does still have effects on institutions, by modernizing their culture and organization, and by selecting new elites for them. At the same time, however, it raises issues that are not addressed by the framework of instrumental rationality. This kind of rationality is devoted to the effective implementation of whatever has been decided by anonymous and impersonal powers operating through the apparent neutrality of technical expertise.

Actors in conflicts recast the question of societal ends: they address the differences between the sexes, the ages, cultures; they probe into the nature and the limits of human intervention; they concern themselves with health and illness, birth and death. The action of movements deliberately differentiates itself from the model of political organization and assumes increasing autonomy from political systems; it becomes intimately interwoven with everyday life and individual experience.

Increasing control is applied to people's routine existence by the apparatuses of regulation which exact identification and consensus. Conflicts involve the definition of the self in its biological, affective, and symbolic dimensions, in its relations with time, space, and 'the other'. It is the individual and collective reappropriation of the meaning of action that is at stake in the forms of collective involvement which make the experience of change in the present a condition for creating a different future. Movements thus exist also in silence, and their presence is fundamental for the vitality of information societies. The challenge embodied in the movements' action keeps raising questions about meaning, beyond the technical neutrality of procedures which tends to install itself in institutions and governs their role in the society.

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Excerpt

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This dimension, however, does not exhaust the significance of collective action. Contemporary collective action weaves together its different roots in multiple meanings, legacies from the past, the effects of modernization, resistances to change. The complexity, the irreducibility, the intricate semantics of the meaning of social action is perhaps the most fundamental theme of this book. Only a society that is able to accommodate the thrust of the movements by providing an unconstrained arena for the fundamental issues raised by collective action, as well as democratic channels of representation and decision-making, can ensure that complexity is not ironed out, that differences are not violated. Keeping open the space for difference is a condition for inventing the present – for allowing society to openly address its fundamental dilemmas and for installing in its present constitution a manageable coexistence of its own tensions.