

Invention of the present

Being young: choice or destiny?

Why is there a 'youth question'? Why has there developed a particular interest in studying young people? The answer, in terms of the sociology of knowledge, is relatively simple: young people are recurrently involved in forms of conflictual *action*, and for this reason an investigation of their *condition* is a frequent concern of sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists. In what follows, I want to challenge the line of analysis investigating a condition in order to explain an action. The way the issue of youth in contemporary societies is engaged exemplifies the procedure that is frequently used in addressing the theoretical problem of social movements in general. Once the presence of collective action has been ascertained, analysts move on to an examination of the social condition of a specific social category (in this case, young people) in order to deduce from this the causes of its action. Collective action is never studied on its own; it is discounted as a meaningful object of investigation, and related to the 'structural' or 'cultural' determinants of the social condition of the actor involved. The case of young people, like that of women, provides a good illustration of the procedure. Analysis of the condition of youth or women may be an important element in the description of contemporary social structure, but by itself it tells us nothing about their action.

Never before has it been as necessary as it is today to draw a methodological distinction between the analysis of a social condition and the analysis of collective action. The question implicitly present in the numerous studies of the condition of young people is, in fact, whether young people are potential actors in antagonist collective conflict. It is claimed, or hoped, that deeper understanding of the condition and culture of youth in metropolitan society will resolve the issue. This hope, however, is bound to become frustrated, as it will inevitably run against an insoluble problem we

have already addressed: how does one move from condition to action? How does a particular movement of young actors take shape and develop out of a general condition?

The only way out of this *theoretical* impasse is to reverse the terms of the problematic. Since action is not deducible from social conditions, the sequence of the analytical procedure must be reversed. We must identify, at the systemic level, the issues that lie at the core of social conflicts, the arenas in which the struggle for control over crucial resources takes place. Only after this we can ask ourselves which are the elements in the youth condition that, under certain conjunctural circumstances, are liable to activate collective action; that is, what are the elements that are likely to turn this particular group into a conflictual actor. This raises a number of problems of empirical nature: which elements of a social condition facilitate or prevent conflictual action? Which categories within a given social group are most susceptible to conflictual mobilization?

Problems such as these can be resolved only by careful empirical study using all available information on the condition of the young. Such information is crucially important for a sociology of youth movements. Nevertheless, as stated, it must reverse its procedure so that the analyst moves from the field of conflicts to the actors, not the other way around. In this manner, analysis of the condition of young people should reveal how pressures for individuation and the processes by which identity is expropriated are rooted in the condition of the young people, and how, consequently, their mobilization takes place. In epistemological terms, this reversal of the analytical perspective is a research programme, and as such it lays down conditions and establishes categories that only empirical study can fill with content. Within the limits of the present context, however, it is only possible to single out those elements in the condition and culture of young people that are most likely to trigger conflict.

In complex societies, an autonomous life-space for the younger age categories is created through mass education. It is the mass schooling that delays entry into the adult roles by prolonging the period of non-work. It also creates the spatio-temporal conditions for the formation of a collective identity defined by needs, lifestyles, and private languages. The market intermeshes with these needs, both fostering them and offering symbols and a space for consumption practices (Yiannis and Lang 1995) separated off from those of adult people (clothes, music, leisure). The youthful condition, the phase *par excellence* of transition and suspension, is protracted and stabilized so that it becomes a mass condition which is no longer determined by biological age. The imbalances between school and the labour market swiftly add a note of stifling precariousness to the extended period

of transition: delayed entry into the adult roles is not just freedom, but reflects also imposed and lived marginality, characterized by unemployment and lack of any real economic independence. In complex societies, the condition of the young – homogeneous in many respects, but also differentiated by social and geographical belonging – is marked by this stable precariousness, by this lack of limits, to such an extent that it turns into a void, a hiatus that is known to be bogus and controlled from outside.

Because of these features – as amply described by the sociological literature on youth culture (Hall and Jefferson 1979; Hebdige 1979; Chambers 1985, 1986; Willis 1990; Ziehe 1991; Mitterauer 1992; Fornas and Bolin 1995) – youth becomes a mirror held up for the whole of society, a paradigm for the crucial problems of the complex systems. It reflects the tension between the enhancement of life chances and diffuse control, between possibilities for individuation and external definitions of identity. Incompleteness, as openness to the possible, as the changeability and reversibility of choices, is transformed into destiny and becomes a social limbo for those who refuse to comply with the codes of normalcy. Young people therefore become actors in conflicts, since they speak the language of the possible; they root themselves in the incompleteness that defines them, and they call on the society at large to create its own existence rather than merely endure it. They demand the right to decide for themselves, and in doing so they demand it for everyone.

Youth culture gives manifest expression to several of the themes that define the field of contemporary conflicts. In this connection, we must above all consider silence, the repudiation of the word. In the world of words, images, and sounds, it seems that young people find coherent discourse impossible to assemble. They resort to fragmentary, disjointed stuttering, to the inarticulateness of spastic utterance, to an erratic combination of sounds and noises striking in rock or rap music (Chambers 1985; Frith and Goodwin 1990; Shusterman 1992): the faltering language of youth borders on aphasia. Yet in this word that is not the word and that can become a pure sign like in graffiti (Castleman 1982), in this incoherence and inconclusiveness that arouses the indignation or the sarcasm of the paragons of good sense, there is something more than the mere absence: There is the affirmation of a word that no longer wishes to be understood independently of the emotions; there is speech that seeks to root itself in being rather than in doing, so as to prepare for a return to the essentiality of emotional experience, to the discontinuity and uniqueness, to the ineffability of inner life.

Its antithesis is the formalized language of systems governed by instrumental rationality, of systems which preserve a rigid distinction between

discourse and image on one side, and actual pleasure of the experience on the other. The cold rationality of the apparatuses makes no concessions to emotions; it banishes them to the isolated enclaves where alone regulated discharge of eros and outbreaks of frenzy are condoned under the system's supervision. The time and place of emotional, affective, and bodily experience is carefully circumscribed, rigidly demarcated apart from the sphere of 'rational' language and action.

The absence or the poverty of youthful discourse challenges the enforced compartmentalization of experience, the dichotomization of meaning. As a plea for rebuilding the human experience, as a search for an alternative voice and language, it acquires connotations of resistance, even of conflict, as it clashes with the canonical word of the apparatuses and with the monopoly they exercise over discourse.

There are those who promptly denounce the young for their apparent conformism, their indifference to power. Although such behaviour often eludes the grasp of the observer and shows itself bordering on marginality, it in fact disguises a radical change in attitudes to power and in the nature of conflicts: power, as the asymmetry which, in some form or other, is a characteristic of all social relations, is no longer denied but becomes openly acknowledged. By force of its own existence, youth behaviour symbolically addresses the constitution of (adult) authority, demonstrating where the foundation of authority lies and why imbalances tend to reappear even in the most egalitarian of relationships. Power is counterposed with responsibility, as the subject's autonomous capacity to respond. The opportunity to occupy an autonomous space in social relations without denying their disparities becomes a condition for action, for initiative and change. What youth culture asks is not that power disappear altogether, but that it should become visible and confrontable: young people make their distance from the adult world even more manifest, but they are not ready to accept authority as self-evident. They ask for a power capable of displaying its roots.

Thus, youth culture takes on antagonistic connotations in its relation with the systems of regulation and control that give power its increasingly invisible, impersonal, and aseptic character. In complex societies, the message is that, apparently, power does not really exist: to the public eye, it either resides at too great a remove from the everyday experience to seem noteworthy, or it is so finely interwoven within the structures of the daily life as to become practically imperceptible. In both cases, the call for the power to be rendered visible, for the asymmetry of social relationships to be laid bare, becomes thus charged with antagonistic tone.

This attitude towards power can account for an apparent contradiction

in the features of youth culture that various observers have reported. In fact, youth culture simultaneously displays a susceptibility to integration and a tendency to segregate itself from public life and institutions. The paradox, however, is only apparent if one thinks of the pattern of distance/confrontation assumed by its relationship *vis-à-vis* power. Youth culture gives forceful expression to communicative needs, but it also claims the right to decide when, and with whom, to communicate. It is in this sense that the pattern of outward/inward, openness/closure, communication/loss of speech is the mirror image of the demand for power to be drawn out in the open. In complex societies, we are forced to communicate by the imperatives of the system which must multiply interactions and the relations for the exchange of information in order to perpetuate itself. Young people oppose this 'obligation to communicate' by claiming the right to silence, to isolation, to apartness. Parallel to the completion of the irresistible and ubiquitous circulation of information, however, the action of the system also atomizes personal relations, standardizes messages, and denies culturally and affectively rich communication. As a reaction, youth culture claims for itself the freedom of unrestricted communication and endeavours to exploit all the networks of sociality that make it possible, to explore all the expressive and communicative channels that society makes available. Thus the mirror of youthful experience indirectly reveals openness and closure, integration and separateness as profoundly individual and collective needs in complex societies, and, by the same token, as potential fields for conflict.

Another frequently noted feature of youth culture is the unplanned and provisional nature of its interests, aggregations, and choices. We spring from a culture which viewed history teleologically, as an end-directed grand design where the present stood for only a transitional point of passage. Present action acquired meaning with reference to its final outcome, its purpose projected in the future. This paradigm was common to both liberal theories of progress and Marxist theories of revolution. In complex societies, where change has become the routine condition of existence, the present, however, acquires an inestimable value. History, and therefore the possibility of change, is oriented not by final ends but by what is happening now. Youth culture directs society's attention to the value of the present as the sole yardstick of change; it demands that what should be relevant and meaningful is the here and now, and it claims for itself the right to provisionality, to the reversibility of choices, to the plurality and polycentrism of individual lives and collective values. For this reason it inevitably enters into conflict with the requirements of a system centred around the need for predictability, reduction of uncertainty, and standardization.

All the features of the youth culture I have described are highly ambiva-

lent. They may act as triggers for conflict, but they may just as well serve to help integrate youth culture into the vast market of mass culture; or, alternatively, they may function as markers of an institutionalized marginality. This is a common feature of the emerging cultures (Coupland 1991; Nava 1992). Young people in themselves are not conflictual actors. Their mobilization can only be explained if analysis identifies a systemic field of conflict and the presence of conjunctural factors that facilitate the emergence of a critical situation; only then may the youth condition translate into antagonistic action. But when this happens, youth movements probe into the society's deep-rooted demands, problems, and tensions, and bring them to the surface. Within the time and space circumscribed by the conflict, young people do not speak for themselves alone. Being young is thus more than just destiny; it is a conscious decision to change and to direct one's own existence.

Time and the culture of the possible

Experience of time is a core issue in complexity (Melucci 1996), and young people, particularly the adolescents, are key actors in the ways in which time is lived and defined in our culture. The growing interest in this issue (for an overview, see Adam 1990; Hassard 1990) is a sign of the changes affecting the modern conception of time (Elias 1993; Luhmann 1987; Novotny 1992) and its social organization, governed by the standards of masculine rule and Western rationality (Zerubavel 1981; Fabian 1983; on women and time, see Davies 1989; Shelton 1992; on the logic of measurement in work and society, see Sirianni 1988; Young 1988).

Adolescence and youth, it is said, are the phases of life when time is suspended and the words to express the unfolding experience of change are so difficult to come by. Thus it had better be left for others to speak on behalf of the youth – adults, institutions, the media, advertising. Society seems ever more preoccupied with the question of the youth and, in an unprecedented fashion and force, brings to our everyday awareness the image and the voice of the troubled actors burdened by the intensity of their existential crisis.

Instead of becoming self-appointed experts claiming the privileged access to the knowledge of the young, adults should inquire into the changes themselves that have rendered the youthful experience problematic. Beyond the alarm of those safeguarding the outward calm of our streets and institutions from the unpredictability of the young actors, what adults share in common with young people is the experience of the wider changes occurring today. Young people are the primary subjects of

dramatic transformations that affect contemporary society, and they also experience them most immediately. By listening to their sharp voice, adults can learn about themselves.

The fundamental question affecting individual and collective existence in today's society is given in the unrelenting interrogation directed at the self: 'Who am I?' In traditional societies the question of identity, most delicate and critical at the moment of passage from childhood to adolescence, was principally answered by others – the parents, the family, the community. What was involved in this was the adoption of a member of the society still without the effective characteristics of societal membership, and ensuring her/his transformation from a sort of natural residue within society – almost a biological accident – into a rightful social subject. The social life in the past contained a certain moment when children became effective members of the community upon completion of the predetermined passage between childhood and adolescence, acquiring thereby an identity through the affirming function of various tests or rites designated for the purpose ('rites of passage' or of initiation). Such tests, which were different for males and females, consisted of stern and sometimes very painful examinations through which were learned the basic skills and responsibilities pertaining to the adult life in the society in question. Having proved to themselves and to others that they were in fact able to exist as elementary parts of the group, the young were accepted into the community as its fully entitled members.

Today, some remains of the initiation rites can still be observed in rural societies (festivals, departure for military service) even if they have lost much of their previous social prominence. In the traditional peasant community, the distinct and uniform phases of passage were made possible by the relative stability of social positions: most individuals were born, grew up, and died in the same place, destined for a certain trade and family life. The future was in a certain sense already assigned: except for emigration, war, or epidemics, individual lives unfolded along relatively predictable paths without major changes affecting their course. A person, as it were, was channelled into a relatively stable trajectory, with clearly demarcated stages and fixed deadlines marking the organic transitions in life.

What distinguishes contemporary society is its multiplication of memberships. Individuals no longer belong to any single community that characterizes the acquisition of their identity and its substantive contents. We participate simultaneously in a number of areas of social life: we are consumers, we use services, we are members of associations and groups of various kinds. In each of these settings only a part of our selves, only certain dimensions of our personalities and experience are activated. A

place of residence or a certain job no longer univocally avails in the definition of a person's individual identity. Contemporary societies are characterized by the frequency of their internal geographical migrations and by the self-recycling of great numbers of people into other professional and affective roles during a single life course. It thus becomes less easy for individuals to forecast their progress through life: no one can confidently predict even the basic events that will shape our futures far more open to the range of possible and unforeseeable outcomes than ever before in the past. While this cultural experience has today come to concern all social categories and all age groups in differing ways, it is the young people who are more immediately exposed than others to the pluralization of life opportunities.

There is, however, another general phenomenon affecting the younger generation in particular. Our society has enormously expanded the field of symbolic possibilities. The fact that we today relate to the entire world in a planet-wide interaction and that our culture is marked by an ever-increasing quantity of messages and information in flux translates into an explosion of symbolic opportunities for individual experience. Even the universe of those living in a remote rural village has by now been incorporated into a planetary system based on its constituent commonality of information, life models, and cultural referents. As a consequence, the life-horizons within which experience is constructed are no longer charted solely or even primarily by the material conditions of life, but also, and more significantly, by systems of signs, by the imaginative stimuli to which we have irreversibly become exposed. This is true of everyone, but it is manifested in particular in the life of young people, and for two reasons: because of their age, they have always shown the greatest receptivity to the imaginary, and today a specifically designed flow of messages is aimed at them by the media and the market which nourishes it.

Young people feel the effects of such widening of the range of possibilities in the most direct manner: the seemingly limitless expansion of the field of experience (everything can be learned, everything can be attempted); the provisional character of any choice (everything can be changed); the substitution of symbolic representations (images, computer-assisted communication, virtual reality) for the physical dimensions of experience (everything can be imagined) (on the expansion of these dimensions of experience, see Woolley 1992; Benedikt 1991; Featherstone and Burrows 1995). The opening up of the horizon of the possible, the potential of young people to be anything whatsoever seemingly at whim, is not an abstraction but affects experience in its full concreteness. The media, advertisers, and information engineers not only supply young people with

the material with which to construct the image of their present and future, but also the languages with which they can design their experience in all of its aspects. Experience is overtaken by the symbolic appeal of possibility and new forms of suffering, the new pathologies of young people, are often tied to the risk of a dissolution of the temporal perspective. Presence, as the capacity to make sense of one's actions and to populate the temporal horizon with connections between different times and planes of experience, becomes fragile and threatened.

In such a cultural context, then, how does the passage to the adult world come about? In today's society, the clear-cut boundary line between childhood from adulthood has dissolved; either the passage from the one to the other takes place almost unnoticeably or the juvenile existence continues without a socially effective arrival at the end of childhood. Both cases are likely to be anchored in the reality of the situation of an entry without passage in the adult world. Youthfulness has ceased to express a biological condition and has become instead a cultural one. People are no longer young only because they are of certain age, but rather on account of their forms of adherence to common styles of consumption or codes of behaviour and dress. Adolescence is now prolonged far beyond its biological boundaries and commitments of the adult life are postponed past twenty-five or even thirty years of age. The lack of clear signals of passage indicating the transition from one condition to another has two kinds of effect: on the one hand, it prolongs the youthful condition even when the biological conditions for it no longer exist; on the other, it impedes actual entry into adulthood, which itself requires a relatively stable identity. The adult must be able to provide for her/himself some kind of a definite answer to the question 'Who am I?'; that is, s/he must be able to identify what work s/he does, who s/he lives with, describe the affective relationships and responsibilities towards others that characterize her/his personal life.

Today it is difficult in youthful experience to take one's measure against such obligatory passages; that is, to gauge one's own capabilities, what one is, what one is worth; for this means measuring oneself against the limit, and ultimately against the fundamental experience of being mortal. Initiation awakens the person from the juvenile dream of omnipotence and confronts him/her with the powerful experience of pain and suffering, even the possibility of death. Today's wide range of symbolic possibilities is not matched by concrete experiences that test individuals to their limits. The indeterminateness of choice, and the attempt in any case to postpone it as much as possible, keep young people in the amorphous, comfortable, and infantile situation of the maternal womb, where they can feel at ease with everything seemingly possible. Drug use allows one extreme way of per-

petuating the need for omnipotent well-being: it removes the onus of having to really measure oneself against the limit, and constructs the dramatized, bogus experience of a mortal challenge, a deliberate gamble with death. Yet even when the experimentation with the substance, and other instances of comparable forms of risky behaviour, such as dangerous driving, turn into a very concrete threat to life, they provide but the possibility for a fake challenge which does nothing to modify the deep weakness of the personality and leaves intact the condition of indeterminateness – that is, the position of standing before the threshold of the test without entering into the world of the limits and risks of the adult life.

Youth as a mirror

If all this is true, how can we conceive of a passage to adult life which will not induce us to imagine an impossible return to a low-consumption society, to a society of abstinence and deprivation outside our horizon? It is here where the need to encounter the limit and to measure oneself against that part of human experience which shows us that we are not omnipotent attains its full importance. In a society which opens up the field of possibilities far beyond our actual capability for experiencing them, it is left up to us to recognize our limits. Those same limits which were perceived in the past as uniquely imposed by biology and the social structure can today become a matter of individual and collective responsibility.

First of all, we are brought up against the limit of pain and death, those enduring properties of human experience which we try to ignore and remove from the scenario of our everyday life. Our culture has indeed progressively eliminated the experience of pain by confining it to separate and, where possible, hidden enclaves where it disturbs no one. Maintaining contact with this part of human experience, however, is an important way of keeping the sense of the limit alive.

The second aspect confronting us with the factuality of the limit is the irreducibility of our situatedness in an ecosystem. Environmentalism represents not merely a fashion; it serves as a reminder of the finiteness of our capacity for action, of the natural limit that extends within and around us. The destruction of the forests of Amazonia and their inhabitants, for example, touches our human condition at its deepest level because it reminds us that we are not omnipotent, that respect for the surviving part of Nature and its custodians means respect for the Nature within ourselves – an acknowledgement of finitude of the powers of our technological society.

There is, finally, a third facet to the sense of limitation which affects our

ability to choose: we encounter it in relationships. Today we are growing increasingly more aware of the fact that we are different individually and we belong to different and intersecting cultures. Thus, our communal living does not evolve as a spontaneous and automatic process; it has as its precondition our responsibility, the acceptance of the difference of others. The establishment of social relationships entails the experience of limitation in a society which must continue to be diversified, open to the widest possible range of personal realization, but which must nevertheless learn day by day to recognize the fact that we are not sufficient unto ourselves.

Youth, because of its biological and cultural condition, is the social group most directly exposed to these problems – the group which makes them visible for the society as a whole.

By addressing the problem of passages, the problem of choice, uncertainty, and risk, young people live for everyone, as sensitive receptors of our culture, the dilemmas of time in a complex society. By challenging the dominant definition of time the youth announces to the rest of the society that other dimensions of human experience are possible. In so doing, they moreover call the adult society to its responsibility – that of recognizing time as a social construction and of making visible the social power exerted over time. By reversing the adult definition of time, the adolescents launch a symbolical challenge to the dominant patterns of organization of time in society. They reveal the power which hides itself behind the technical neutrality of temporal regulation accomplished by society. Often at a great price of personal and collective suffering, they remind us that the time of too many possibilities can be a possibility without time, without limits, without choices.

It is as if society has appointed young people to live this global situation in the most intense and dramatic of forms. We are surrounded by change and in this unfolds the drama of the choice which must always sacrifice some possibilities in order to bring others into being. We know that we must choose, and we cannot not choose since even not choosing is by choice. Choice is our destiny; we are thus obliged to be free, we choose willingly or unwillingly. Choice has become a requirement we cannot avoid, yet we know that it is no longer necessarily once and for all, that it is partial and temporary. Keeping this awareness to oneself is not to shun reality but to know that other possibilities remain open if we pass entirely, consciously through the gauntlet of choice. We may therefore conceive of adult lives as a progress through various metamorphoses or changes of form. In adult life the need to transform one's personal situation into a question escalates, exposing identity to many risks: there is the terror of the definitive, but there is also the great consolation of the definitive that enwraps and soothes us.

Change means calling certainties into question, but people still continue to need what they recognize as ideals and hope, simply in order to act. To what motives, then, can we appeal to renew hope and passion, when we no longer can count on the force of the confident faith in that 'what is to become will be better than today', on the once great myth that has nourished the entire culture of modernity with its assurance of the future society that will sweep away the restrictions and injustices of the present one? In youth cultures we find the birth of a desire to experiment in the present with the possibility of change. The observable decline of political action of contemporary youth movements in the long term cannot be explained away as a reflux, an ebbing of energy; today they are rather altering the ways in which they express hope and passion to match them with the conditions in societies that differ from those in which the ideals of the egalitarian, classless, transparent society first sprang up. These ideals of the yesteryear postponed the fulfilment of everything to a postulated perfect future and thereby in effect sacrificed the present. Today, however, hope flows through different channels: there is a need for passion, but our hopes cannot be pinned on what is to come.

Hope, as a motivating force, must relate to the now-time: this is what young people affirm through their specific forms of action. All current forms of youth social and civil participation, of voluntary action, of cultural innovation, as they are born and grow, proclaim the following: We want to experience now what it is possible to accomplish and what we do must be meaningful in itself, not for some distant future; we want what we do, even if we act on the small scale in a circumscribed local context, to create meaning within a more general compass, as part of a global dimension. If goals are no longer projected into the future, then they are to be specified principally as the ability to adopt an authentic relation to oneself and to the others. Here it should be the task of adults to meet the young and recreate the space for initiation.

Where have all the flowers gone?

Collective action among the youth has apparently disappeared after the 1970s. Apart from some short waves of mobilizations in different countries during the 1980s and early 1990s, such as the anti-apartheid movement in the United States, the short waves of student mobilizations in France, Italy and Spain (Larana 1995) youth action seems to be in the process of transforming itself into exclusively expressive 'countercultures' (centred around music, dressing, creation of new languages, as with rappers, for instance). The question has been asked: crisis or transformation of youth aggregations?

By comparing the recent waves of youth and student mobilizations with the model from the 1960s and 1970s (Larana 1995; Flacks 1967; Fraser *et al.* 1988; Stryker 1994), analysis shows that the structure of youth mobilizations is significant at two levels:

1 The poverty of the instrumental outcomes of action conceals a metabolic richness of stimuli, relations, and exchanges. Mobilizing against racism, heroin, or the mafia in Italy, or marching for peace may not directly affect the phenomena themselves, but it promotes the creation of a solidarity network essential for the structuring of individual and collective experience of youth. The criteria of rationality operating in the political market are usable for this purpose only in part, since they can at best cover only some of the meanings embodied in the action.

2 The apparent fragmentation of today's youth as a collective phenomenon conceals the operation of a process structured around alternating phases of visibility and latency. All that is required for an effective, rapid, and wide-spread mobilization to take place is the propulsive role of some media internal to youth culture, of young opinion leaders who gain access to the general media, of participants of previous mobilizations now partially professionalized in the cultural or media market, often though their interaction with public institutions after the mobilization phase.

Precisely because effectiveness, rapidity, and extension are parameters which measure the organizational capacity in a mobilization process, to interpret youth action solely in terms of fragmentation is inappropriate: although segmentation, networking, diffuse forms of leadership may put into question the model of a youth movement as homogeneous actor, they also ensure the survival, sedimentation, and cyclical emergence of youth collective action.

Besides proceeding by campaign mobilizations, youth action integrates a manifold set of belongings, identities, and interests. Youth networks react to a highly differentiated system in their own fashion, apparently with a determination to play the game of complexity to its fullest extent, reserving the right to change its rules or not, according to circumstances. Young people respond to the multiplication of interests and identities, and to the acceleration of time, either by joining the system or by evading the spread of control through the constant redefinition and indistinctness of their choices of belonging. Being part of a youth network means keeping open the range of opportunities for recognition through symbolic exhibition of signs or through overt conflict. Interests are not ascribed, they do not pertain to a stable condition; they are a matter of decision – one is part of the 'movement' because one acts. One belongs to it out of choice.

The accelerating alternation of campaigns and apparent lack of collec-

tive action focuses mobilizations on mutable goals, whose priority depends on their practicability. The alternation sequence is also a way to address the problem of the multiplication of the loci of power and the difficulty to establish a permanent hierarchy of interests in society. Given the heterogeneity of the social basis for mobilization, the choice of increasingly more general goals enables the reticular fabric of the 'movement' to become effective. These goals, even if they are embodied in universalistic values (peace, human rights, poverty and so on), are pursued on a short-term basis and with reference to specific issues, allowing an immediate but equally transitory aggregation.

Should one then speak of one or different youth conditions? The social definition of 'youth' today comprises biological, cultural, and sociological dimensions. Although biological youth is a short-term condition, it still provides a strong foundation for the feeling of belonging to the youth as a social group. But it is increasingly substituted by a cultural definition of being young, chosen on the basis of symbolic identifications (ways of dressing, consuming, relating, behaving independently from the biological age). Sociological definitions of youth get therefore blurred and construct very often statistical categories, to which it is easier to attribute an 'objective' identity. The youth condition is then, on the one hand, an enduring primary datum based on biology, but, on the other, it increasingly patterns itself according to cultural choices (or even to statistical attributions, which are in fact institutional choices). The co-occurrence of these definitions with blurred features calls for an analysis of *several* possible conditions. The particular patterning and emergence of these diversities alter the features of youth collective action, which recover and adapt previous mobilization patterns, mixing themselves with models of collective action common to other social movements.

The forms of youth aggregations confirm their tendency towards heterogeneity and non-specificity. There are different components which converge in youth mobilizations: leisure and cultural centres partly connected to governmental and local policies directed towards emergent youth interests (music, theatre, expressive arts, international voluntary action, leisure and travel, radios); some of these agencies have a well-established relationship with the institutions or professionalized sectors of the market; houses occupied by squatters which act as local points of aggregation; subcultural bands with more or less distinct and stable territorial points of reference; students who find their immediate referent for aggregation in the school or university.

Each of these components comprises different actors. Very few identify themselves solely on the basis of an ideological choice or a clear-cut polit-

ical commitment. House squatters, apart from their evidently instrumental objective, act to fulfil needs centring on integration and solidarity, which are particularly intense in the case of immigrants. Those who have found an occupational outlet through previous mobilizations thereby fulfil the need to lend continuity to their experience by combining an identity as 'opponents' with a choice of 'new professionalism'. Those who opt for image as the immediate referent of belonging find the meaning of action in the scrambling of the messages and symbols broadcast by the system. Those who act as students use the fact that they share the same structural ambit to gain a collective identity which legitimates their citizenship in the system.

The heterogeneity of these positions translates into differentiation of action, ranging from a ritualized inaction to professionalized action, from symbolic challenge to constant wavering between one objective and another, from one belonging to another.

Heterogeneity of condition and non-homogeneity of action shatter the unitary nature of young people's mobilizations but give greater specificity to their individual identities. Mobilization is not based on totalizing principles or values, which today cannot provide a sustainable youth identity; it is instead framed by the conjunction of global concerns and the ever narrower horizons close to individual everyday experience. The model that thus emerges appears congruent with the requirements of collective action in highly differentiated societies. It allows, on one hand, precise specification of the contradictions emerging in different areas of the system where young people experience their exposure to new resources and new forms of domination; it, further, allows rapid passage from one area to another. On the other hand, discontinuity of action and dependence of collective action on temporary interpersonal bonds are the risks that follow it.

Universalism of the issues and specificity of the grounds for action seem to facilitate the passage from latency to visibility in collective action. The most ideologized components seem increasingly destined to a marginal role; for the others, the option of public action is still open and bound to the contingent and external enabling factors. The criteria for this choice, which is not considered a necessary condition for the existence of the group culture, depends on constantly redefinable opportunities and on the nature of local and governmental policies towards youth.

The time of difference

Women's voices and silences

More than any other contemporary movement, the women's movement has interwoven reflection on the female condition with its conflictual role within society; and more than any other it has based its collective action on an appeal to difference. Because it is rooted in the ancestral experience and nature of the species, this difference is irreducible; and this is why it is so difficult to disentangle women's struggles from the history of womanhood itself – from the awareness of a subjugation imbibed into the most archaic memory of human societies. Be that as it may, we must again resort to the method outlined above: our analysis must distinguish between the female condition and the women's movement; it cannot deduce one from the other.

Women have for a long time struggled for the equality of opportunities, and this struggle based on the common biological and historical condition has also helped focusing collective energies against an external enemy (Evans 1980; Rupp and Taylor 1987). But from the 1970s on, the women's movement has moved on to follow different routes in pursuit of its goals (Freeman 1975; Buechler 1990; Ryan 1992); similarly, reflection on woman's condition has also concentrated on the plurality of the modes and meanings of being a woman (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982; Fraser 1989; Skevington and Baker 1989; Lorber 1994). Mutated by time, diversified by social membership and life-course, the female condition is today even more strikingly marked by difference. The speed of change, the prolongation of the life-cycle, and the strains involved in the passage from one stage of the reproductive cycle to another heighten this potential for diversification. Naturally, fundamental features common to all women still persist. Their resistance against subordination and oppression – resistance expressed in forms that are not those of masculine struggle – continues. There is, furthermore, the necessity of women to come to terms with motherhood as the