

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 'revolutionary' 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.