

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