

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 grips: 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,