

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.