

# Sociology and the roots of protest: a critique of the "new social movements" problematic

*Summary*

## Introduction

This paper makes three related arguments against the way in which the literature on contemporary social movements (1) conceptualises its subject. It argues, firstly, that the problematic developed in the literature represents a political reductionism within which the ascription of a specific form of instrumental rationality to these movements appears both as premise and as conclusion.

Secondly, it undertakes an immanent critique of the substantive analyses developed within the literature; here it argues that the effects of this reductionism are to systematically block the literature from effectively theorising the areas that are taken as important. In this context, neither the scope (boundaries, spectrum of issues, range of activities) of movements, nor their "social bases", appear as adequately theorised in relation to the internal demands of the literature.

Finally, the paper argues that this blockage can be resolved by an approach which treats the modes of rationality operative in these contexts as an open question, which can only be resolved by an interaction between the local rationalities of social researchers and movement activists, rather than by the ascription of one to the other. This, however, implies an escape from a problematic which remains, even with the most "culturalist" authors, ultimately a form of political reductionism.

## Methodological rationalism and instrumental rationality

The most basic difficulty of the literature is its implicit reliance on a rationalist methodology, here contrasted both with empiricist and critical realist approaches (McLellan 1981). The effect of this is that the dominant approach treats the theorist's own local form of rationality as universal, rather than taking the question of the modes of rationality in operation in "new social movements" as an open question for research. Here the assumptions of an affirmative modernism confirm the mirror-image arguments of postmodernists in treating instrumental rationality as identical with rationality *tout court*, despite the arguments levelled against this position by Habermas (1987) and the alternative forms of rationality identified by Weber (1984) and Habermas (1984). More generally, a rationalist approach amounts to taking the nominal subject of research for granted in its total subordination to the theorist's discourse; the methodological difficulties entailed - including the question of the relevance of the material selected - are exemplified in a discussion of Giddens (1990) and Scott (1990). Much of this represents a confusion between methodology and ontology; the rationally constructed ideal type, which for Weber was a heuristic device, to which reality should be compared, is taken as representing, or even substituting for, that reality (Weber 1984, Sadri 1992).

Within the literature, then, a specific kind of (individual, collective, societal) rationality is ascribed, unexamined, to the contexts in question; the result of this is a political reductionism within which only those meanings and practices which correspond to the theorist's perception of what is instrumentally rational are admitted (Raschke 1985: 17). This is sometimes, as in RMT, an explicit methodological presupposition (see Cohen 1985: 674 - 676 for a critique); "European" approaches effectively offer a discourse of rationality at a collective or societal level. This problematic then places the focus is on political action in pursuit of given interests, and other forms of activity are treated as *a priori* irrelevant. In this problematic (Althusser 1969), sociology is effectively reduced to variants of political economy. Furthermore, the exercise is circular: the author's definition of rationality appears not only as a methodological premise but also as a substantive conclusion. This is exemplified in relation to Alan Scott's (1990) approach.

## Political reductionism as a self-defeating exercise

The "new social movements" literature is highly vulnerable to immanent critique: its political reductionism systematically prevents it from tackling much of its nominal subject. A preliminary, and largely unexamined, problem is the (idealist and even "empiricist") procedure of defining "movements" by their relation to "issues" (Bagguley 1992); this procedure effectively offers a "black box" means of relating interests and action. The resulting treatment of a multiplicity of discrete "movements" is, however, undermined by the simultaneous assumption that these movements share a single social basis.

Leaving this aside for the moment, there is a disjuncture in the literature between those "movements" which are mentioned as relevant, listed in introductions, appear in definitions, etc. and those which are systematically examined. While introductions commonly mention movements with a sociocultural orientation, the movements of the 1960s and relatively small movements, analysis is heavily concentrated on the large political movements of the 1970s and 1980s: the women's movement, the peace movement and the ecology movement; even within these, the women's and peace movements appear to present such difficulties for the dominant problematic that the ecology movement dominates the discussion. Where such procedures explicitly justified, it is because of its political significance (Brand 1982: 8-9) or the difficulties in discussing other movements (Giddens 1990: 161-2): in other words, the operation is self-confirming. More importantly, the conceptual tools available appear incapable of dealing with the range of movements which are nominally to be addressed.

This "narrowing of issue breadth" is paralleled by a "lessening of social depth": the range of activities which are initially taken as phenomena to be explained by the literature are then in practice reduced to those which fit into the model of a political transmission from interests to action. Hence the question of what contemporary movements consist of is rarely practically theorised (Diani 1992: 2 - 3). Instead, attention focuses on the questions of what their meaning is or how they "work". Once again usage is narrower than definitions; and the operation is both self-confirming and unexamined in any wider terms. It is here that the effects of the new social movements "problematic" are most visible: what is not visibly "political" remains undertheorised. This is consistent with a definition of "movements" in terms of "issues" and with the narrowing of issue breadth.

Perhaps the most dramatic disjuncture is that of the discussion of the "social basis" of contemporary movements. The assumption of instrumental rationality leads to the attempt to discover an appropriate relationship between the social interests of this basis and the action of contemporary movements on the polity. This takes various forms: universal interests, straightforward structural determinisms, and

constructivist accounts; all of these point away from a phenomenological analysis of movements and towards a deduction of the nature of the movements from macro-theoretical assumptions about the nature of contemporary society in terms of a discussion of class structure, of the nature of modernity, and so on. However, this means that the relation between "basis" and "movement", posited as a premise and appearing as a conclusion, fails to find the kind of confirmation that is implied by the argument.

Instead, the most convincing discussions in this area (Melucci 1989; Clemens 1990; Freeman XX; Diani 1992) point away from an exclusive focus on "movements" and "issues" to wider socio-cultural contexts which are neither exhausted by an account of "interests" nor organised in terms of instrumental rationality; furthermore, these contexts appear as both more stable and less "issue-" specific than the "movements" that develop out of them. Nevertheless, the literature systematically avoids taking the next logical step and treating these contexts as the object of analysis; this distancing from goal-rational assumptions is not sustained. Instead, these contexts are taken simply as preconditions for movement activity; this can only be explained in terms of a definition of relevance for which only (directly or indirectly) political events are "real". Within the "social movements" problematic as currently constructed, in other words, even the most "culturalist" authors are ultimately contained within an assumption of the "last instance" priority of political goal-rationality.

## Towards a more adequate account of ecological meanings and practices

What is lost is the possibility of an approach which would start from (but not be exhausted by) an investigation of the "life-world" contexts of movement activity, would have the potential to resolve the disjunctures of the "new social movements" problematic, in other words to offer a more adequate account of the interaction of social being and social consciousness in the formation of movement activity; to replace this activity within the total lived experience of those involved in such a way as to avoid privileging those elements which are relevant to an ultimately teleological account of instrumental rationality; and hence to offer a place for the different forms of action of the 1960s - and indeed the 1990s -, the different emphases of apparently "cultural" activity, and the smaller-scale modes of organisation of other contemporary movements. Even if the ultimate focus of interest is on the political impact of social movements, an adequate conception of their roots is a prerequisite for any effective discussion of the nature of the movements in question. Such an approach would make it possible to exploit the distinction drawn by Habermas (1984) and Offe (1985) between instrumental and communicative rationality, within the latter of which social movements are positioned or which they aim to defend and expand, as well as taking account of the arguments by authors such as Melucci (1989) and Sulkunen (1992) of the presence in these or related contexts of radicalised forms of reflexivity, which undercut instrumental rationality by turning forms of organisation, for example, into an end in themselves rather than simply a means to an end.

In relation to "green" movement activity, this allows a more satisfactory theorisation of the relationship between party and movement activity, a more sensitive account of the communicative rationalisations and disembedding mechanisms which transmit "green" ideologies, images and artefacts beyond the originating life-world context, and (most importantly) the reintegration of such varied forms of activity as communal living, alternative economic organisation, New Travellers, neo-paganism, the alternative press, Third World solidarity groups, and so on. At the

same time, it challenges the isolation of the "green movement" from, for example, the alternative economy, the women's movement, the peace movement, and so on. This implies, not an atheoretical empiricism, but a mode of critical realism which interrogates the ethnographic evidence of face-to-face contexts and the internal documentary evidence of disembedding modes of interaction for its relation to less accessible areas of social reality. Here the local rationality of the researcher neither pretends to absent itself (as in empiricism) nor claims self-sufficiency (as in rationalism); a better model is Gramsci's (1971: 5-23) arguments about the relationship between "traditional" and "organic" intellectuals - arguments which might perhaps better be transposed to the relevant modes of intellectual activity. It could then be argued, following Habermas (1984) and McLellan (1981), that local modes of rationality are not incommensurable but can be transcended through critical evaluation of validity claims, in this case those of the researched and of the researcher.

This is most easy to do in terms of a model of the generation of skills and knowledge in these contexts as the practical expression of local modes of rationality, whether communicative or instrumental; in a further step, it can be asked how the objects of communication (about which understanding is to be reached) or instrumental action are conceived within these contexts. On this account, environmental action would be interpreted, not in terms of the points at which it reaches a form familiar to the researcher, but at the points where it is generated. The questions of "reception" within the wider society are then naturally important ones, but they cannot be taken to exhaust either the "intentions" of their "authors" or, more importantly, the articulation of their authors' own life-activity (2). Such an approach can go some way towards bridging the gap between accounts of contemporary social movements and the theorisation of "old" social movements (Thompson 1968, Wilde 1990) as well as some cultural studies perspectives on youth culture (McRobbie 1994).

This approach may make possible not only an alternative account of the sources of ecological action but also an alternative account of the nature of ecological ideology (Eagleton 1991); in place of accounts of false consciousness (Eder 1985), self-interest (see above), simple correspondence (Giddens 1990) and so on it could be argued that this ideology finds its deepest roots in the modes of rationality of the life-worlds from which contemporary movements develop (3).

Taking as an example the concept of sustainability, a number of illustrations from different contexts suggest that its practical force comes from the attempts to realise an "alternative society", based around a withdrawal from "the system", hence necessarily aiming at "self-sufficiency", and aiming to realise a different mode of (communicative, substantive) rationality within which sustainability represents the combination of a number of ethical and cognitive assessments of rational modes of behaviour.

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Sociological Association of Ireland's annual conference in Clonmel (May 1995).*

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## Footnotes

(1) The paper deals mostly, but not exclusively, with the "European" social theory tradition rather than the "American" tradition, dominated by resource mobilisation theory. However, it does not make what is in any case an increasingly artificial distinction between those authors who make use of the phrase "new social movements" and those who prefer a different language: a programmatic commitment to the newness of the movements in question is now less common, while much of the literature which rejects the concept of "new" movements nevertheless retains the same focus of interest.

(2) This can be put in more "instrumental" terms; in Weber's (1984) account, a clear distinction is drawn between intentional action oriented towards the action of others (Weber's definition of "social action") and the *outcomes* of this action in the "strategic" environment where others are also behaving in this way. One implication of this is that it is not sufficient to treat the appearance of electoral activity, consumerist environmentalism, "green" styles, and so on as a simple confirmation of the universality of instrumental rationality. In a first stage, these are *responses* to perceived external situations, or the perceived activities of others, and hence less "representative" for the life-worlds of ecological activists than of their perception of the external world - within which the very emphasis on the perceived instrumental logic of the social totality underlines the perceived difference of the life-world. In a second stage, however, the social totality can itself more usefully be seen as *constituted* by its active fields of struggle (Touraine 1981); the implications of this for any simple instrumentalism are far-reaching.

(3) Here I am taking it as read that Weber's concept of "elective affinity" (Weber 1958) is a necessary starting point for any account of how the writings of "traditional intellectuals" (Gramsci 1971) become taken up and redeployed in alternative discourses, even though a number of authors (Redclift 1987) seem content to offer the *existence* of the Club of Rome report as a sufficient reason for the development of an alternative movement. This tendency to ascribe a completely independent role to "high" culture has a long history in this area (e.g. Roszak 1969).