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## **THE NEW GLOBAL CONTEXT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

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This book explores the dynamics of modern social movements, their origins, historical setting, ideologies, internal development, popular constituencies, and, above all, their political trajectories. Throughout the advanced industrial world a rather novel historical conjuncture has given rise, over the past two decades, to literally thousands of local movements bearing almost every conceivable description and enlisting the participation of millions of people: neighborhood groups, environmentalists, women and gays, peace and anti-intervention activists, youth and students, the unemployed, and those involved in the urban struggles of minorities, welfare recipients, tenants, squatters, and the generally disenfranchised. On the contemporary landscape of North America and Western Europe such movements constitute the social basis of recurrent mobilizations for progressive change. Insofar as they are the outgrowth of what Alain Touraine calls the "crisis of industrial culture," they can be understood as potentially decisive agents of historical transformation.<sup>1</sup> From this viewpoint social movements of the "new" variety—that is, movements that are not primarily grounded in labor struggles—do not appear as exceptional or dramatic events but lie permanently at the core of a transformed political universe. They are clearly distinct from the momentary or "primitive" upheavals observed during earlier phases of capitalist development. Contemporary social movements are thus hardly marginal expressions of protest but are situated within the unfolding contradictions of a rapidly changing industrial order, as part of the historic attempts to secure genuine democracy, social equality, and peaceful international relations against the imperatives of exploitation and domination.

Although these movements have roots in earlier (even preindustrial) traditions, as possible transformative agencies they have barely emerged from infancy. And even though they have yet to conquer significant bastions of institutional power in any country, they have begun to lay the groundwork for a new paradigm of oppositional discourse. Their success accordingly cannot be easily measured or quantified. Hence, the fact that they have nowhere overturned the status quo should not obscure their historical importance in posing new issues, shaping consciousness, and opening new areas of political discourse. Indeed, many time-honored debates have already been fundamentally recast in both substance and tone—for example, over the meaning of socialism, the tension between reform and revolution, the ways of viewing political strategy, and, ultimately, the value of Marxist theory itself. The new movements (and their theoretical articulations) have amply illuminated the problematic character of inherited intellectual and political belief systems.

These new circumstances are the expression of a disintegrating world capitalist system in which new economic conditions are undermining traditional social and political forces. The proliferation of social movements at the metropolitan core of an extensive global network can be seen as part of a conflict between a declining but still vigorous system of domination and newly emergent forms of opposition. Ruling blocs in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan have naturally tried to reverse impending decline through a variety of ambitious strategems. These include state and regionally directed modes of capital accumulation, technological restructuring, and (notably in the United States) rekindling of the arms race. The goal appears to be nothing short of a comprehensive commodification and rationalization of the world. From the vantage point of the mid-1980s these efforts seem to have strengthened the power structures of the leading capitalist nations, while mass depoliticization is perhaps more widespread than at any time since the 1950s. Yet the very interests that seek to universalize their control over all spheres of human existence have simultaneously produced counter-tendencies in the form of economic stagnation, ecological crisis, the erosion of pluralist democracy, a decaying bourgeois culture, and, most ominously, the nuclear threat to global survival. Poverty, repression, social violence, and a pervasive sense of alienation are the fate of increasingly large numbers of people subjected to this regimen in societies conventionally regarded as democratic and affluent.

Of course, depoliticization is typical of a cultural milieu in which cynicism and withdrawal—not to mention the more destructive realities of alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, and suicide—are widespread. But the multiple and far-reaching structures of domination in the West have at the same time generated collective forms of resistance, embodied mainly in the new social movements that have flourished largely outside the established political system. In their most mature expression, these movements constitute counterhegemonic struggles in the Gramscian sense to the degree they can lead to an alternative ideological framework that subverts the dominant patterns of thought and action, that challenges myths surrounding the vulnerability of the status quo. Surely the undeniable fact that the new movements initially appeared on the periphery of the political system does not by itself call into question their radical meaning or potential.

Still, it would be foolish to pretend that such movements are free of the contradictions and ambiguities endemic to the social world itself. The very forces and conditions that permeate the structures of domination also shape the nature of resistance and revolt. Social change occurs through a long, uneven historical process that is governed by no linear or lawlike patterns. Even if it could be shown that successive popular mobilizations since the 1960s have established the basis of a subversive political culture, their structural presence is still partial, fragmented, and dispersed—all the more so, given the tide of conservatism sweeping many of the advanced countries in the 1980s. The obstacles to further expansion are many. Probably the most intractable roadblock concerns the capacity of these mobilizations to achieve a generalized (and effective) political impact. It is precisely this—the struggle for a political translation of the new movements—that motivates and gives definition to this study.

Liberalism, which in one guise or another has shaped the European and American political tradition for more than two centuries, today stands far removed from the orbit of the new movements. A hegemonic ideology well into the postwar period, liberalism has since the 1960s steadily disintegrated in the wake of the Vietnam defeat, the new left, economic stagnation, expansion of the authoritarian state, and cold-war mobilization. By the 1980s it had degenerated into a corporate liberalism, the main function of which is to legitimate an outmoded power structure.

This historical reality runs counter to the long-standing claims of the American pluralist heritage. After all, the liberalism of Locke, Jefferson, Bentham, and J. S. Mill had celebrated the virtues of open debate, individual freedom, pluralism, and democratic participation. Tocqueville saw in the liberal political culture of nineteenth-century America a truly civic spirit and sense of involvement that corresponded to a unique blend of community and freedom. The highly visible flaws of "protective democracy," to use C. B. Macpherson's term,<sup>2</sup> were gradually rectified by the extension of citizenship as new social groups entered the political arena. Over time, minorities, workers, women, and others were eventually able to win basic political rights. In its period of ascendancy, liberalism represented, perhaps more than any other tradition, a secular challenge to the feudal legacy of state religion, an ethic of tolerance and individualism directed against all forms of authoritarian control, and a commitment to personal and social autonomy in opposition to the conformist impulses of both right and left.

But liberalism in practice departed increasingly from this original vision. In the United States, its realization depended in great measure upon a self-regulating market, abundant territorial space and natural resources, dynamic community life, and, later, prospects for seemingly endless material growth. It also required a world order in which American economic interests had more or less unlimited room for maneuver. By the 1960s, however, none of these conditions prevailed any longer, with the result that liberalism was finally transformed into a ritualized belief system barely masking a highly centralized and expansionist corporate system. In economic terms liberalism failed to generate any new priorities that could encourage a shift away from outmoded patterns of production, work, and consumption. Moreover, Keynesian efforts to counteract the severe repercussions of capitalist cyclical decline through state-management techniques only reproduced more of the same—varying mixtures of unemployment, inflation, and instability—alongside a swollen bureaucratic apparatus.<sup>3</sup> Politically, the social and institutional pluralism applauded by liberal theorists collapsed into a rigid corporatist framework of bargaining among competing interest groups. The cherished two-party system atrophied to the point where the parties lost any real capacity to mobilize popular constituencies or carry out imaginative programs. Such closure of the public sphere coincided with the emergence of a depoliticized citizenry that Tocqueville would surely never recognize.<sup>4</sup> At the level of foreign policy, liberalism

sought to coexist with an aggressive militarism designed to protect U.S. interests in far-flung areas of the world. Behind the rhetoric of freedom, democracy, and national self-determination it furnished ideological cover for right-wing dictatorships, apartheid in South Africa, military intervention in the Third World, and an unprecedented arms race.<sup>5</sup> Differences between Republicans and Democrats in all of these areas, as the 1984 presidential contest between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale reflected once again, were blurred beyond recognition.

In this context liberal ideas inevitably lost their relevance to social change, having become obliterated by an institutionalized corporate-military network that bears no resemblance to classical liberal designs. Liberal states, if such phenomena can be said to exist, are no longer capable of ideological renewal and political innovation. They preside over bureaucratic centers of power, tied to a declining economic order, in which the historical tension between capitalism and democracy has been weighted decisively in favor of the former, thereby laying the basis for something akin to state capitalism. Thus liberalism, whatever its claims, is now compromised by a state system with ever-shrinking ideological boundaries at a time when popular movements are striving to broaden those boundaries. The two forces—liberalism and the new movements—occupy polar extremes.

The antagonism between Marxism and social movements is of a different sort, although the larger political consequences are in fact quite similar. Of course, the crucial ideological difference is that Marxism presents itself as a revolutionary theory appropriate to the transition from capitalism to socialism—a theory that, from its inception, clearly sided with those class forces opposed to the dominant order. Much like liberalism, it embraced a secular, modernizing ethos tied to the process of industrialization. The problem was that Marxism contained two rather disparate and contradictory strains: a commitment to popular self-activity as the basis of social transformation, and a rationalizing impulse that gave primacy to a Jacobin-style political mobilization from above. Over time, the guiding practice of Marxist parties and states resolved this tension in the latter direction, epitomized by the centralizing dynamics of Leninism, the Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet state socialism, and virtually the entire subsequent Communist tradition. The other political variant of early Marxism, European Social Democracy, assumed a less vanguardist character but still shared many of the same statist and bureaucratic premises; indeed, Lenin's emphasis

on the dominant role of Marxist intellectuals as bearers of scientific theory was consistent with the outlook Karl Kautsky brought to German social democracy at the turn of the century. It is perhaps worth observing here that Robert Michels' famous analysis of oligarchical tendencies as the natural outgrowth of internal party processes—tendencies conspicuously at odds with proclaimed SPD goals—were in many ways consonant with the party's theoretical premises.

Although Leninist parties typically rode to power on the crest of broad insurgent movements, the relationship between the party organization and local struggles has commonly been tense if not hostile. Once in power, the Bolsheviks in Russia quickly moved to subordinate all popular organs—soviets, factory committees, trade unions—to the imperatives of party control. The left opposition, including the postrevolutionary anarchist rebellions, was either dismantled or repressed by military force. This conflicted pattern recurred in the 1930s when the Spanish Communists mobilized to crush a broad-based anarchist movement, in May 1968 when the French Communists made every effort to disrupt the mass revolt of new leftists and workers, and more recently when the political distance between Marxist formations and the new movements has widened despite momentary points of convergence. As for social democracy, its evolution since the 1920s has been steadily rightward; in postwar Western Europe it has given rise to parties of capitalist rationalization where in power and parties of loyal opposition where out of power. Social Democrats have been the main heirs of left Keynesianism and an expanded welfare state—at least until the recent phase of austerity—which today is equally remote from Marxism and the new movements, and which is absorbed into the very logic of capitalist development.<sup>6</sup>

If Marxist theory has lost a good deal of its critical and radical thrust because of its assimilation into official party or state doctrines, its growing legitimation within institutions of higher education poses a different range of dilemmas. Insofar as the struggle for recognition and acceptance pushed academic Marxists toward the professional norms of the university, the theory itself has taken on many of the characteristics of established, mainstream currents within the various disciplines: professionalism, positivism, and even the archenemy functionalism. Marxism, in this setting, readily degenerates into a conventional ideology, emptied of political content. To the extent this is so, Marxist scholarship in the universities—like the depoliticized forms of scientific and