9 Conclusion: A Critical Theory of Social Movements?

Outline

By way of a conclusion, the present chapter identifies some elements of a critical theory of social movements. Critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition has the ambitious goal of combining social analysis and normative critique with a practical orientation towards the transformation of contemporary society. Although it can benefit from the formal and empirical approaches discussed in chapter 7, a critical theory has more affinities with the substantive approaches of chapter 8. Like those theories, it attempts to steer a path between, on the one hand, dogmatic (‘modernist’ or ‘totalizing’) claims to knowledge of society and, on the other hand, an ultimately unhelpful postmodern scepticism. Finding a way between these extremes involves recognizing the *concrete* and *contingent* (rather than abstract and universal) limits of theoretical knowledge. At the same time, elements of a common set of values for contemporary movements emerge from consideration of the approaching environmental limits to the further material expansion of human societies. With limits of both kinds in mind, critical theory can be seen to have an essential but always corrigible role in social movements and societal transformation.

9.1 Introduction: Social Movement Theory Between Modernism and Postmodernism

The aim of this final chapter is to outline some essential elements of a critical theory of social movements. This task follows directly from the discussion of the last chapter. All the theorists discussed there have some affinities with the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory. In
other words, they seek to combine empirical knowledge of society and politics with an emancipatory vision of social transformation. Rather than simply describing or seeking to explain social reality, they aim to illuminate and facilitate the progressive transformation of society. Marxism provides the prototype of critical theory in that sense, as it combines sociological observation, economic theory and a political programme in an allegedly scientific socialism, which is designed to both inform and advance the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. At the same time, the theorists discussed in the last chapter depart in significant ways from Marxist assumptions. They develop a series of differing accounts of contemporary society, albeit ones of recognizably Marxian provenance. Within this set of approaches, there is a broad contrast between modernist and postmodernist tendencies.

Modernist theorists of new social movements such as Habermas and Touraine still conceive of a substantial alternative to present society as the destination of a historical process of modernization. By diagnosing the contemporary social pathology, they also posit a single remedy. They are sometimes accused, as a result, of being too close to Marxism or, at least, guilty of modernism. They are also accused of pre-empting the diverse social creativity of social movements, which are left only with the task of discerning their allotted transformative task. However, as we have seen, the alternatives both Habermas and Touraine envisage are in fact in significant respects formal and abstract, leaving considerable scope for creativity and diversity. Although their visions imply a possible alternative society, it is one where the determinism of social structure would be largely replaced by more self-conscious human direction. Marx, after all, saw communist revolution as the way of escaping a human prehistory constrained by economic scarcity and class domination into a ‘realm of freedom’, where history would in future be made by human beings freely and self-consciously. Touraine and Habermas similarly see the progressive potential of modernity as preparing the way for a society of communicatively rational and individually autonomous self-determination: in Habermas’s words, a society in which human beings make history ‘with will and consciousness’.

Postmodern theorists, on the other hand, criticize the remaining modernist commitment of theorists like Habermas and Touraine. Indeed, strict commitment to postmodern assumptions would seem to

1 See above, sections 8.1, 8.3–4, and cf. chapter 8, note 26.
imply a radically different position. If we can achieve neither reliably objective knowledge of existing social reality nor generally applicable norms and values, then political theory can hardly make a significant contribution to social and political emancipation. On these assumptions, even the methodical description of social movements, as pursued by empirical social sciences such as political science and sociology, is strictly impossible since there can be no description of reality independent of theoretical assumptions. We are left, on these strict postmodernist principles, with an endlessly proliferating array of interpretations and perspectives. In this spirit, Foucault and Deleuze reject all ‘totalizing theories’, which they associate with modernism, and advocate instead a view of political theory as a ‘local and regional practice’. The critical theorist should avoid the ‘representative’ and totalizing pretensions of the Marxist intellectual. She should refrain from prescribing any substantive goals, let alone devising detailed utopian blueprints. A critical theory of social movements can never aspire to the status of absolute or ‘totalizing’ theory. A critical theory can never justifiably support the kind of authoritarian political projects that complacent modernists have sometimes hatched. More positively, the critique of the authoritarian uses of theory is itself an essential element of any critical theory.

Rather than aiming for a single and seamless, ‘totalizing’ theory of society, the theorist should be committed to acknowledging multiple perspectives, experiences and voices. Theory should provide a ‘political toolbox’ for social movements. Foucault’s ‘archaeology’ and ‘genealogy’ of discursive practices and institutions contribute to this task by uncovering hidden or ‘masked’ and ‘subjugated knowledges’ and discourses, contributing in this way to the ‘efficacy of dispersed and discontinuous offensives’. Theorists can at best look to the experiences of social movement activists in order to uncover what Sarah Maddison and Sean Scalmer call ‘activist wisdom’, the practical knowledge required to pursue political action. In its most sceptical form, a strictly postmodern approach would mean abandoning the substantive commitments to liberation characteristic of critical theory. The ‘political toolbox’ of ‘activist wisdom’ is in principle available to all movements and activists, however unattractive their goals and values.

In practice, however, postmodern theorists do typically propose some substantive positions, which are based on norms and values that


turn out to be surprisingly close to those of their modernist opponents. The authority of conceptions of freedom and autonomy inherited from humanism and modernism may be undermined, but it is difficult not to see the more radical substitutes proposed by postmodern theorists as expressions of a similar underlying stance. The ban on ‘totalizing’ theories and universal normative frameworks typically co-exists with (whilst not being allowed to ground) commitment to something like the ‘radical and plural democracy’ espoused by Laclau and Mouffe. Broadly left-wing commitments to social justice and material equality (or at least redistribution) are frequently invoked as well. Postmodern social theorists differ mainly in their greater sympathy for non-discursive and non-rational modes of discourse and engagement, their embrace of popular culture rather than ‘high’ or ‘intellectual’ culture and art, and their appreciation of symbols, imagery and emotion as well as argument. In that sense, they offer useful correctives to the excessive intellectualism of a modernist theorist like Habermas, who places too much trust in the reasoned discourse of citizens susceptible only to the ‘unforced force of the better argument’.

Postmodernism is less useful, however, to the extent that it encourages a generalized scepticism about the possibility of objective knowledge and universal values and norms and, as a result, under-mines commitment to political action. Paradoxically, a generalized scepticism of this kind serves only to divert attention from the concrete limits of both knowledge and ethics. It is, after all, only unreconstructed modernists who would claim that it is possible, for the purposes of a critical social theory, to establish an absolutely objective and ‘totalizing’ theory on the basis of definitive knowledge and universal moral values. It is, indeed, relatively easy to show that it is impossible to establish universal, absolute and eternal foundations for empirical knowledge and morality in the ambitious sense that such a goal would require. Radical postmodernist sceptics are tempted to conclude (at least in theory) that the only alternative is some form of relativism: that there can be no objective science, only rival interpretations of the world; that there can be no universal moral truths, only rival and equally valid moral and ethical world-views.

It is possible, however, to abandon the ambitious claims of unreconstructed modernists without relapsing into the undifferentiated ‘grey’

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4 See, for example, Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*; W. E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995). It is worth noting, though, that poststructuralist and postmodernist philosophers such as Foucault and Lyotard maintain the high modernist commitment to serious art as opposed to mere entertainment.

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on grey’ of cognitive and moral relativism. In order to do so, we need to settle for a less ambitious model of knowledge and morality. We can accept the anti-modernist point that the goal of a timeless and universal social theory is indeed unattainable. But the timeless philosophical and epistemological grounds for this impossibility should not divert us from the concrete and contingent limits of our knowledge and theories. The crucial further point is that we can only determine these concrete limits once we have denied the radically sceptical position. If we remain at the level of generalized scepticism, we are not in a position to identify the substantive limits to any critical social theory, because only knowledge of social and political reality can inform us of these limits. Our tendencies to moral and ethical absolutism should likewise be constrained by our recognition of the differing ethical values of others. But a thoroughgoing scepticism would undermine the latter just as much as the former. As critics of postmodernism have pointed out, absolute relativism is as compatible with the ‘might is right’ philosophy of Mussolini as it is with a sensitivity to moral difference and otherness.6 Generalized scepticism undermines focused critique.

A similar conclusion can be reached by a somewhat different path. Critical theory is designed to apply to the contemporary context and to serve the needs of existing and future movements of emancipation. From the practical perspective of these movements, it is decidedly not a question of whether we can achieve absolute and eternal truths and universally valid norms. Still, social movements face certain problems that only theory – empirical knowledge, critique of ideology and moral innovation – is able to resolve. Movements need to avail themselves of some sort of theory, even if that theory cannot be validated absolutely from an epistemological point of view. Gramsci makes the related point that it is not possible to live without some philosophy of life, some set of assumptions and values, even if they are often largely unconscious, not always consistent and impossible to ground in absolute and incontestable rational terms. Some philosophy is implicitly adopted, even if its status is always less than certain.7 The task of the critical theorist (like the task of the life-philosopher) is surely not to refuse all involvement and responsibility until the time – distant, if not infinitely so – that absolute knowledge can be guaranteed. Rather it is the task of the theorist to engage with the actually existing theories and values of agents, in the hope that critical reflection and investigation will at least make them more adequate and more effective.


Laclau and Mouffe point in the right direction with their notion of ‘articulation’, which is consonant with this less ambitious, more situated and contingent understanding of the role of theory. The role of an articulating theory is to undertake the linked and interdependent tasks of both constituting particular social and political interests and providing links between them. An articulating theory makes connections between the concerns of different movements, for example finding common values or principles, conceptions of rights and entitlements, which permit the construction of broader ‘counter-hegemonic’ blocs of activists and movements. Only such a counter-hegemonic bloc is able to contest the dominant or hegemonic array of interests and ideology. Whilst it seeks to accommodate the needs of a variety of social movement actors (though, of course, by no means all), the articulating framework must renounce potentially authoritarian claims to absolute, general and authoritative truth.

Theory understood as articulation is always contingent, just one of a number of possible alternatives. This implies, crucially, that the role of theory is to supplement rather than to displace the different critical discourses associated with particular movements. A totalizing theory such as Marxism (at least in its orthodox incarnations) claims to account for all other theories and discourses: all social conflicts and ills are deduced from class struggle and, in the contemporary context, the capitalist mode of production. By contrast, an articulating theory sets out to form links and relays between diverse theoretical perspectives without absorbing or reducing them to a monocultural vision. In concrete terms, an articulating critical theory should not aim to replace or encompass the theoretical insights of feminism, queer theory, post-colonial theory and so on. At the same time, an articulating theory – as well as those discrete and diverse critical theories that it seeks to articulate – must surely still be based on some substantive material and evaluative claims, however tentative and corrigible. Whilst rhetoric and discursive innovation clearly play an important role in political discourse and social transformation, they are hardly sufficient. A critical theory that is purely rhetorical would surely, in the end, be inadequate even as rhetoric. Rhetoric is powerful only when it maintains some rational and cognitive purchase on both material reality and the moral and ethical values of those it addresses.

9.2 The Concrete Limits of a Critical Theory of Social Movements

In order to operate on the more fruitful terrain that lies somewhere between absolute objective certainty on the one hand and subjectiv-

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ism and relativism on the other, a critical theory of social movements must be able to negotiate the concrete or substantive limits and possibilities of knowledge. The concrete limits of social theory derive from a number of considerations.

In the first place, human societies are made up of highly complex patterns of action and interaction that are unpredictable in practice and, almost certainly, even in principle. This idea should not be too surprising; indeed, it has been defended by a wide range of social theorists. Even many natural systems – the objects of physics, chemistry and biological sciences – are complex in ways that make them impossible to predict. The movement of fluids and the behaviour of weather systems are just two examples. They are unpredictable even though it is possible in principle to quantify all the relevant variables. As the development of the mathematics of chaos theory demonstrates in a rigorous way, some non-linear systems are subject to ‘catastrophic’ transformations, whereby an infinitesimal change of initial conditions results in a disproportionate and non-linear difference of outcome. A further infinitesimal change of initial conditions in the same direction might bring about the opposite outcome just as abruptly. This is what makes the prediction of climate change as a result of global warming so uncertain: a gradual increase in global mean temperature may translate into diverse and chaotic climatic shifts in different parts of the world.

Social systems are surely at least as complex as natural systems like the climate. For example, in the realm of economic behaviour, a small shift in sentiment can lead to a catastrophic loss of confidence, triggering perhaps the collapse of share and financial markets or even the onset of economic depression. A similarly small shift in a different direction might contribute to the return of what Alan Greenspan described as ‘irrational exuberance’, a similarly resilient commitment to optimism. We have seen over previous chapters that social movements sometimes involve similarly ‘catastrophic’ events, which may be beneficial or harmful to the movement’s prospects. An uprising against an oppressive regime may suddenly and unexpectedly occur, leading to the overthrow of that regime. Centuries-old prejudices may erode over the course of one or two decades, as has occurred in attitudes to homosexuality, ethnic and ‘racial’ differences and the position and capacities of women.

Social systems, however, display further dimensions of complexity and potential non-linearity in comparison to natural systems. Even though natural systems such as the climate are complex and often chaotic, they are based on relatively simple and unchanging physical laws. By contrast, the regularities or ‘laws’ of social systems are

9 Popper, The Poverty of Historicism.

themselves subject to change. Social ‘structures’ are, as theorists like Touraine, Melucci and Giddens emphasize, in fact made up of only relatively stable patterns of action and interaction. Structures may persist for many years and have seemingly substantial effects. Slavery blighted the lives of many generations. The capitalist economic system is driving the world towards environmental collapse. But in fact both slavery and capitalism depend on the actions of many individuals who, knowingly or unknowingly, deliberately or unintentionally, reproduce those structures. This means that social systems can change in at least two different ways. They can change as a result of the complex dynamics of the social system, of the functioning of its existing structures. Or they can change because those structures (and associated ideas and actions of social agents) are themselves transformed.

Further layers of social complexity and unpredictability result from the role of social theory itself. The self-understandings of social actors – their beliefs about their interests, needs, values, capacities and so on – are evidently important factors in the ongoing self-reproduction and variation of society. But these self-understandings are sometimes influenced by thinkers and theorists, including critical social theorists. This point is, once again, quite a familiar one. Theorists of the social sciences have long pointed to the possibility of self-fulfilling and self-negating predictions. Predictions based on current understandings of human behaviour may, if they become known to those to whom they apply, provoke changes of behaviour which either reinforce or contradict the theorists’ expectations. Empirical studies show, for example, that students of neo-classical economics, which assumes that economic agents are ‘self-interested maximizers’, behave in more self-interested ways than other people. Marxist theory has had an enormous impact on twentieth-century history, inspiring both revolution and reaction. Closer to home, the strategies and ideology of new social movements reflect widespread awareness – deriving from critical studies and theoretical argument – of the deficits of the ‘actually existing socialism’ to which Marxist-inspired revolutions gave rise. It may be an exaggeration to claim that every 1960s activist carried a copy of Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man* (1964) or, as David Halperin has suggested, that every anti-AIDS activist in the 1980s brandished a copy of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. But it is certainly impossible to understand either of these


waves of activism without taking into account the broader climate of ideas to which these works contributed.

Beyond acknowledging these mutually reinforcing levels of complexity and unpredictability, it is important to recognize that political action is itself unpredictable at a deeper level. This is because, as Hannah Arendt has emphasized, human action, whether individual or collective, implies the possibility of creation and innovation. Here, in effect, Arendt transposes to the social and political domain the existentialist insight that for human beings ‘existence precedes essence’. In other words, human individuals and societies do not simply realize a pre-given nature and fixed interests, but rather in acting and living they redefine their nature and form new interests.14 At the political level, Arendt discusses the American and French revolutions as each founding a new institutional order – a *novus ordo saeclorum*. The Hungarian uprising of 1956 is another inspiring but ultimately unsuccessful example of revolutionary innovation.15 Of course, innovation occurs within the realm of institutional politics as well, but it is inescapable in the extra-institutional domain. More generally, although the actions of social movements are inevitably constrained to varying degrees by existing realities and the actions of other agents, as social movements they always strive to transcend these constraining and conditioning factors. This tendency to surpass current social and political realities corresponds to the transformative potential of extra-institutional politics.

This raises the question of what form of knowledge, if any, is appropriate to political action. The fact that there can be no epistemologically well-founded prediction of future actions implies that we can only have knowledge of political actions retrospectively or, in other words, as history. In fact, according to Arendt, it was the unfolding of the French Revolution as a seemingly unstoppable process that quickly escaped the control of its leading actors which gave rise to the Hegelian and Marxist philosophies of historical necessity. The problem with such ‘grand meta-narratives’, which according to Lyotard are characteristic of modernism, is not that they present historical events in the context of a meaningful story, which is surely legitimate. It is rather that they project that story into the future. A meaningful narrative of past events should not be mistaken for the uncovering of a necessary course of events, let alone one whose future course can be anticipated in advance.16


16 H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London
One important contribution of critical theory to action (which avoids the temptation of prediction or prophecy) is essentially phenomenological. A political theory or discourse is, in other words, what enables us to recognize a particular category of experience and related situations, events and actions as political. Such a theory thereby also helps us to identify the ways in which we can act – and, indeed, may already be acting – politically. From this perspective, the fundamental goal of theory is politicization. This goal is evidently closely related to the extra-institutional emphasis of social movements. Social movements politicize previously ignored issues and identities, enabling otherwise isolated and unorganized constituencies (who may even be unaware of their oppressed or exploited condition) to achieve consciousness, solidarity and collective action. They thereby bring about cultural shifts, which substitute active and empowered identities for subordinate and disempowered social positions. Feminist consciousness, for example, involves the realization that many aspects of woman’s ‘condition’ are really the effects of women’s contingent and alterable political situation. That realization is essential to women’s active transformation of that situation. In that sense, too, the first task of theory is not to put political tools or instruments into the hands of already formed political actors, but rather to transform the passive human victims of inherited social structures into self-consciously transformative agents. At the same time, political thought must always struggle to counter its own and broader countervailing tendencies to depoliticization. It is difficult for people to maintain the surprise and intensity of becoming-aware. To persist with the example of feminism, now that gender issues highlighted by feminism are recognized within institutional politics, it is easy to forget the politicizing achievement of the women’s movement. An exclusively institutional focus on politics encourages such forgetfulness. A focus on extra-institutional politics, by contrast, not only encourages us to remember the formative role of social movements, it should also make us more receptive to new and emerging issues and constituencies, which are only just in the process of becoming political.

Further insights into the substantial but limited scope of a critical theory of social movements derive from a fundamental feature of the politics of identity. As we saw in chapter 4, essential to the politics of identity is the claim that particular constituencies have ultimate authority in defining their own experience and interests. Even a sympathetic and empathetic external observer can never claim to know the interests of an oppressed constituency with certainty. In fact, even within a particular movement it is dangerous to assume that a shared


Revolution, ch. 1, section 5, pp. 47–57. 17 See above, chapter 4, p. [xx].
core of oppression can be identified by leaders or intellectuals of the movement. Any such assumption is liable to inspire an authoritarian style of leadership, which overrides the expressed wishes of its constituency for the sake of their ‘real interests’. The politics of liberation is thus best understood in terms of notions of autonomy and authenticity that exclude in principle the possibility of a neutral and objective knowledge of personal interests and identity. Identity and interests should reflect, instead, emancipatory discourses which are specific to particular movements and which remain subject to challenge and revision even there. These insights support a further core principle of liberation movements: since only the oppressed can really know the nature of their own oppression, in the end the oppressed must always define their own liberation and then liberate themselves.

9.3 The Potential Contributions of Theory to Practice

The substantial contributions to practice of a critical theory of social movements stem from the practical political needs of the movement. In the first place, the very identity and unity of any movement depends on a related movement discourse and theory – or, more likely, a series of such discourses and theories. Once we refrain from reifying – or, in other words, treating as a thing – the fluid, diverse and cross-cutting patterns of activity that make up ‘a’ or ‘the’ movement, we are more likely to see that the unity and identity of any movement is never simply given by supposed facts or any ‘reality of the situation’. Rather, unity and identity are important achievements, ones owed in considerable part to associated movement discourses and theories. The movement’s internal relations are just as much contingent achievements as are its relations with, and impact upon, the broader society. Just as there is no given, thing-like movement, there is no pre-existing guarantee of mutual intelligibility and shared truths amongst its members. It is movement discourses that help to establish mutual comprehension, agreement and (just as importantly) characteristic disagreements amongst members. In these terms, feminism, queer theory, anti-racism and ecology are prominent examples of movement discourses which, for all their internal differences and tensions, are inseparable from the existence and effectiveness of the corresponding movements.

It follows that a critical theory of social movements must allow for, and co-exist with, an irreducible plurality of movement identities and discourses. Critical theory thus exists, in the first place, at the level of the distinct critical theories of particular movements. Feminism, queer theory, post-colonialism and green theory can be recognized as

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18 See above, chapter 4, and cf. West, *Authenticity and Empowerment*.
so many critical theories combining empirical observation, theoretical analysis, normative critique and political engagement. These theories have an irreducible place in any overarching critical theory. They are essential to any understanding of the nature, directions and possibilities of new social movements, which can be found only by attending to their diverse narratives and experiences, values and history, literature, music and art. In these terms, the discourses of women, lesbians and gays, ethnic minorities and indigenous people, greens and peace activists have surely served to enrich the political, cultural and moral universe of both western and non-western societies over the past decades, even in the absence of any convincing overall (or ‘totalizing’) theory. What is more, at the level of the socially embodied and concrete critical discourses of new social movements, the mutual relations between oppression and liberation, between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, are less problematic than at the level of a more general theory. Movement discourses are developed in the context of an ongoing movement and both inherited and improvised strategies and tactics. The dialectic between theory and practice takes place, in the first instance, within the ongoing activism (or practice) of the social movement; at the same time, as we have just seen, the movement itself would not and could not exist without its associated discursive and theoretical claims. Recognizing the concrete critical discourses of existing social movements thus helps to resolve the otherwise problematic relationship between critical theory and emancipatory practice.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to regard plural social movements and discourses as radically incommensurable entities without any common or connected interests and concerns. This would be to remain arbitrarily at a level of analysis just as abstract as that which would reduce differences between movements to some overarching unity. It would be to ignore the fact that movements themselves are made up of potentially unique individuals, who have cross-cutting identities and correspondingly diverse interests.19 People typically participate – or, at least, have an interest in – a variety of movements and identities. So, even though we must accept that the relations between movements do not follow inevitably from some objective structural basis – the variety of conflicts cannot, for example, be reduced to the single contradiction of class – we nevertheless cannot avoid constructing some relations between different struggles. The movements’ discourses and concerns must be to some extent commensurable in practice, if not in terms of strict structural relations or

abstract theory. Politics in a complex society inevitably depends on the articulation of logically independent but contingently interdependent movement discourses.20

The limited authority of any general critical theory vis-à-vis specific movement theories reflects the principle of autonomous organization affirmed by new movements.21 Different dimensions of oppression can no more be reduced to some overarching formula than can the corresponding critical discourses. Any links between identities, interests and movements are contingent rather than necessary, constructed rather than given in advance. Such links can only be the products of theoretical innovation and political action. There can thus be no universal primacy of class as asserted by Marxism; neither can gender, sexuality, ethnicity or religion be posited as primary contradictions in the place of class. There is no overarching logic of exploitation and oppression, which could support such assertions of primacy. Rather, the diverse dimensions of subordination, exploitation and oppression are contingently ‘entangled’ in ways that depend on the variable historical circumstances of particular societies. In Northern Ireland there are complex relationships between religious denominations and socio-economic opportunities, which create particular possibilities for alliance and conflict. Similarly, ecological issues play a different role in developing as opposed to developed economies: there are evidently different relationships between subsistence and consumption, conservation and development, resources and risks in these different settings.

At the same time, the authority of experience can never be totally self-enclosed either. Once it is constituted (or is able to represent itself) as a distinct constituency and ‘subject position’, no movement can simply act in isolation according to its own particular perspective without relating to the broader society. Or, more precisely, to do so would be to abandon politics for the sake of separatism. Political action involves acting to change society and institutions, which inevitably involves engaging in relationships with those who do not share and may even oppose the movement’s interests. To follow the path of separatism by confining one’s action to an autonomous or autarkic community of like-minded people is to make political action in that sense impossible. Separatism cannot even provide a microcosm of genuine liberation, which might serve as an example or prototype for the wider society. As we have seen, specific movement discourses do not account for all of the interests and potential liberation of movement members. Individuals have their own unique experiences and may have multiple, cross-cutting and even conflicting identities; they have corresponding allegiances to diverse movements and discourses. Any

20 On Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of articulation, see above, p. [xx].

21 See above, chapter 3.
single movement’s discourse is thus inevitably both partial and pro-visional in relation to its members and, as a result, always subject to criticism and revision.

The political effectiveness of any movement thus always depends on its engagement with a broader framework of values, interests and related discourses. The authority of personal experience and suffering must be mediated with more general orders of value, with some generalizable framework of norms and laws, if the movement is to achieve its goals in the broader society. The varied claims of social movements inevitably both resemble and conflict with analogous claims by other constituencies. Parallels and synergies between them offer the possibility of co-operation and sometimes alliances with other movements in pursuit of these generalizable norms and rights. At the same time, if conflicting demands and rights-claims are to be resolved, they must be able to be calibrated against some common standard. One contribution to resolving these differences is through recourse to discursive resources – for example, discourses of rights and autonomy or equality and solidarity – developed by earlier movements. Movements sometimes generate new normative structures and institutional designs; sometimes they give novel interpretations to ones inherited from earlier waves of activism. Discourses of equality, freedom, rights and social justice developed by liberal, democratic and socialist movements have been extended to constituencies that were, until recently, ignored or rejected by them. Gay and lesbian movements have succeeded in extending notions of privacy, freedom and equality to formerly prohibited sexual acts and relationships. The women’s movement has successfully extended to women a norm of equal citizenship previously confined to men – and originally only wealthy or property-owning men at that.

At the same time, movements also need to determine those ‘enemies’ who can never belong to any mutually advantageous alliance or co-operation and whose demands can never be accepted or accommodated. Fascism, racism and religious bigotry are surely incompatible with any defensible alliance of emancipatory social movements, not least because these ideologies pride themselves precisely on opposing the demands of women, sexual, ethnic and religious minorities. This does not mean, however, that people who support such ‘reactionary’ movements should simply be ignored. An emancipatory alliance should be able to offer alternative interpretations of the situation and needs of people who may suffer genuine hardships, albeit not for the reasons they put forward. Poor whites are indeed deprived, even if their deprivation has nothing to do with their fantasies of privileged black people.

Alliance and co-operation around a common framework of values is also essential for the institutionalization of movement goals. Social movements cannot afford to ignore altogether the institutionalized
domain of politics, including both the nation-state and global institutions of governance. We have sought to understand extra-institutional politics as the formative or creative dimension of politics. But this perspective captures only one essential dimension of politics. The fact that social movements are extra- and often anti-institutional surely means that they can only be understood by reference to the institutional order. Extra-institutional politics is usually anti-institutional in the sense of opposing and attempting to change existing institutions. Only a minority of extra-institutional activists are against institutions as such. Some radical anarchists, for example, reject all forms of authority on the unlikely assumption that, in the absence of state oppression and capitalist exploitation, spontaneous human sociability would guarantee a peaceful and harmonious society. In fact, even most anarchists assume that, in the absence of state authority, social life would be regulated in some way by informal social norms and authority. And, as critics of anarchism have pointed out, informal norms can be just as oppressive as formal ones.

The institutionalization of movement goals – whether through laws and core state institutions or more broadly through societal norms – requires some form of shared normative or ideological framework. Different constituencies and interests may ‘agree to differ’ about some things – for example, religious beliefs, dietary practices and cultural values – as long as they do not have a negative impact on others. But these differences in ‘private’ or ‘self-regarding’ affairs still leave substantial public matters over which agreement must be reached. What is more, in an era of intensified globalization, the institutional domain is no longer confined to the national context, which raises issues of cosmopolitan justice as well. The need for some degree of unity or articulation is particularly apparent at the level of electoral politics. Political parties seek majority electoral support by means of platforms or programmes of broad appeal, whether these are based on some ideology or some more pragmatic rationale. By contrast, most social movements represent only a minority of the electorate. Short of abandoning the sphere of state and electoral politics altogether, movements must seek both some kind of alliance with other constituencies and some basis for appeal to the broader electorate. In these terms, green parties can be understood as attempts to ground broad electoral appeal in the concerns of a range of new and alter-globalization movements.

In addition to these normative and ideological issues, contemporary social movements also depend on shared knowledge of the world. Modern science and technology, with associated ‘manufactured risks’ of nuclear war, environmental collapse and global warming, raise

22 A classic formulation of this distinction in the liberal tradition is J. S. Mill’s *On Liberty*. 
factual as well as moral issues. We share a common world, which deter-
mines both possibilities and limits for human activity. Even if nature is no longer an absolute given, in the sense that natural processes are now increasingly subject to human intervention, there is little doubt that there are objective requirements for human survival, even if we cannot always know with certainty what they are.23 Once again, the value of a sceptical awareness of the limits of scientific expertise should not be confused with radical scepticism (recently associated with postmod-
erism) about the value of scientific method as such. Radical scepticism undermines the more useful distinction between well-
established and merely speculative or tendentious scientific claims. As past debates about the dangers of smoking and current debates over the reality of anthropogenic climate change make clear, a generalized scepticism about science simply leaves more space for self-serving campaigns of disinformation by affected commercial interests. A more focused scepticism, on the other hand, relies on concrete ways of differentiating between scientific claims by assessing the relative strength of competing theories and their supporting evidence. So, for example, we can only decide between the science of climate change and those who deny it on the basis of concrete empirical evidence.

Problematic as the science of climate change may have become, the difficulties raised by the social sciences are even more complex. The social sciences of individual and social psychology, sociology, political science, history and economics are no less essential sources of common knowledge for political agents, but they are undoubtedly more controversial and disputed than any natural sciences. The previous section outlined the limits to any predictive knowledge of society, which rule out both a predictive social science modelled on the natural sciences and determinist versions of Marxism.24 At the same time, there is no reason to abandon the epistemological standard of objectiv-
ity altogether. In this context, Roy Bhaskar’s critical realism and critical naturalism, where the latter emphasizes the more fluid and complex nature of the social, represent promising approaches to the philosophy of social science.25 From the perspective of political actors, knowledge of society is never purely disinterested; and partial knowledge is always potentially misleading. The accumulated wisdom of tradition may be a better guide than disconnected empirical observations which, as in the case of nutrition and the findings of medical science, are often contradicted by other findings and, taken by themselves, imply

23 See Giddens, Beyond Left and Right, esp. ch. 8.

24 See above, pp. [xx–xx].

misleading advice. But such criticisms presuppose the possibility of judging – rather than simply dismissing – any social scientific claims to knowledge.

Social movements thus need both a shared normative framework (albeit one that incorporates considerable diversity) and a shared but similarly differentiated and self-critical knowledge of physical and social reality. Both normative framework and factual knowledge may well be contentious, but that is precisely because ‘agreeing to differ’ cannot go ‘all the way down’. If the commonness of our shared world did not matter, then it might be just a matter of relative values and rival cognitive frames – although it would then no longer be obvious why we still insist on talking of values rather than preferences, and cognitive frames rather than imaginative fictions. Because our shared world is indispensable, we have no choice but to strive for some kind of agreement around normative framework and knowledge of reality. This is a feasible goal, as long as the limits to both normative and factual agreement are understood as contingent and specific rather than as the general consequences of an abstract philosophy and epistemology.

9.4 Ideology Through the Looking-Glass

In the modern period, the function of a common framework for social movements has been fulfilled by a variety of ideologies, which fuse values, norms and beliefs with commitment to specific political goals and strategies. Some of the most familiar and persistent of these have been liberalism, socialism, Marxism, conservatism and democracy. However, all of these ideologies share a common feature, which is no longer tenable, namely a fundamental assumption that history has an inbuilt direction of progress and that progress involves economic growth. Both liberalism and socialism, in their different ways, affirm this anticipated direction of development and adjust their political claims and strategies accordingly. As we shall see briefly in what follows, they differ mainly over the role of the state, their interpretation of values of freedom and equality and their view of the ultimate destination of development.

Liberal democrats welcome progress and think it best secured by avoiding excessive state interference whilst subjecting the state to democratic accountability. They look forward to the inevitable spread of freedom and democracy, sometimes disagreeing amongst themselves about the relative importance of these values. Freedom is interpreted mainly in negative terms as being left alone. Equality is understood as equality before the law and, more recently, as equality of opportunity. These positions imply a limited role for the state. Socialists agree that progress is inevitable but anticipate a different destination. Socialist
think that progress will eventually lead (either abruptly through revolution or gradually through a series of reforms) to a socialist state, which will administer the economy in the interests of all workers. The socialist ideal reflects different basic values. Freedom is understood more positively to involve access to material and sometimes cultural resources. More than equal citizenship and equality before the law, equality for socialists requires either greater material equality or a more radical version of equality of opportunity.26 Both imply a more extensive role for the state. Of the major modern ideologies, conservatism is obviously less favourable to modernity. But still, like other modern ideologies, conservatism still assumes a given direction of history or development, albeit one that must be resisted or slowed down. An influential formulation of conservative ideas was penned by Edmund Burke in response to the French Revolution. Far from being an unthinking avoidance of political ideas – the sources of descriptions of Conservatives as the ‘stupid party’ – Burke’s conservatism was a self-conscious attempt to preserve what he saw as valuable and even sacred in the ‘old order’ (or ancien régime) that was being obliterated by the revolution. In contrast to ‘pre-modern’ societies, where traditional values and institutions are largely accepted without serious question or challenge, conservatism responds to the perception that society is changing and traditional values are in danger. Traditional society is something that must be actively preserved.27

However, a common framework for contemporary social movements can no longer be premised on the direction of history posited by the familiar ideologies of liberalism, socialism and even conservatism. The material expansion of human civilization is now surely coming to an end and, as a result, ideological assumptions of progress are no longer plausible. As environmentalists and climate change scientists argue, human society is rapidly approaching material limits, which constrain the further expansion of both the human population and its use of natural resources. These material limits do not signal the end of history, in the sense of continuing and significant changes to human society, culture and life. The narrative of humanity will (it is to be hoped) continue for some time. But these limits do imply that our material civilization cannot continue to expand indefinitely according to an internal logic of unconstrained, rapid and even accelerating growth.


consumption and waste. By the same token, political ideologies can no longer afford to conceive of the state and politics as mere regulators (more or less intrusive) of an essentially unquestionable and unstop-pable engine of growth. However, limits to the material expansion of human civilization do not imply a retreat from radicalism. On the contrary, considerable radicalism is required if we are to reconfigure politics, economy and society so as to live within them.

If history, understood as an inevitable process of development, can no longer be the source of a common ideological framework, then perhaps the concept of nature can fulfil that role? The obvious candidate for shared framework might seem to be ecology or green ideology. Green ideology certainly has some obvious advantages, not least because ecology directly addresses the relationship between nature and society, which is an unavoidable issue in the contemporary context. The success of green parties in a number of countries testifies to the appeal of green ideas, particularly for activists of new social and alter-globalization movements. Crucially, though, the general appeal of green ideas is the result of contingent historical factors; there is nothing in the concept of nature itself that provides an adequate basis for a common ideological framework.28 The preservation of nature is obviously essential, in the sense that human survival depends on basic natural processes and resources. But, as Giddens emphasizes, nature can no longer be treated as a fixed external horizon of human life.29 For one thing, there is no reason why we should preserve every aspect of the non-human world, which includes harmful substances and processes. It is, in any case, much too late, since there is little remaining wilderness or ‘nature’ in the sense of ecosystems entirely unaffected by human intervention. Human beings have already transformed nature through their ability to manipulate chemical, physical and atomic processes. We have an increasing ability to transform nature further by means of genetic and nano-technologies. It does not obviously make sense actively to preserve harmful viruses and bacteria simply because they are there; of course, we may wish to preserve them for the sake of their genetic material, which might contribute to new pharmaceuticals or antibiotics. Human beings have no choice but to exercise independent judgements in their interactions with nature.

Even more clearly, the concept of nature does not provides the basis for unambiguous moral and political norms and values, which might govern relations between human beings or even between human beings and the rest of nature. Natural examples of complex interde-pendence, stability and harmony offer only one side of nature which, from another perspective, is ‘red in tooth and claw’. Many species that

28 See above, chapter 4.

human beings should certainly aim to preserve only exist by preying on other animals. Social Darwinists have derived harsh norms of ‘survival of the fittest’ and elimination of the weak with as much justification (that is to say, with no justification) as more benign derivations from the concept of nature. And if the concept of nature does not provide a philosophical basis for a common ideological framework, there is no guarantee that problems resulting from our mistreatment of nature will reinforce a benign, green ideology. There is no guarantee, in other words, that, however urgent and disruptive ecological problems may become, they will automatically generate support for benign green values of social justice, gender equality, sexual diversity and grassroots democracy. If anything, environmental collapse is more likely to lead to some kind of authoritarian or elitist response.

A number of thinkers have suggested another possibility, namely a reformed version of conservatism. Conservative ideology does indeed resonate with central environmental concerns, not least the value of conservation; conservatives did, as we saw earlier, resist the Enlightenment’s uncritical enthusiasm for progress. But eighteenth-century conservatives who wished to preserve the ‘old order’ were defending social hierarchy and property rights, inherited religion and traditional values concerning the family and sexuality. What is more, whilst the ideological heirs of these conservatives remain committed to these values, they have in the meantime become wedded to the neoliberal project of unfettered capitalism and unending economic growth. They have abandoned the original meaning of conservatism with its defining ethos of resistance to change. Put another way, progress and development have become almost sacred values that contemporary conservatives seek to preserve. Self-styled (capital-C) Conservatives are no longer really conservative in the broader or original sense. Conversely and paradoxically, the (in some sense) conservative goal of conserving the material and cultural achievements of human civilization now requires substantial and even radical changes to the prevailing societal model. Radicalism is now necessary if we are to preserve what is valuable in society, institutions and the natural world. It is in that sense – and in that sense alone – that contemporary radicals should adopt a conservative stance. We must take the radical step of abandoning assumptions of unending material progress and limitless economic growth in order to have a chance of preserving our common world. A conservative stance of this kind does not mean that we should preserve existing inequalities of wealth and privilege.


archy. On the contrary, these traditionally right-wing commitments make even less sense in the current situation which, as we shall see in the next section, demands instead a revival of egalitarian values and the ideal of social justice.

9.5 Notes Towards A Common Framework for Contemporary Social Movements

Once the untenable commitment to an unending process of material progress is given up, the values traditionally associated with modern ideologies can be reconsidered. Freed of their now obsolete developmental baggage, they can be combined or articulated in new ways more suitable to our present situation. What follows are a few speculative and sketchy remarks on one possible basis of a common ideological framework.

In the first place, the era of unconditional individualism is now surely over. Individualism was initially justified as the socially beneficial unleashing of selfish wants. Liberal economists take Adam Smith to have argued, in effect, that the individual’s unfettered pursuit of private interests would result in greater public benefit thanks to an ‘invisible hand’, which leads him ‘to promote an end which was no part of his intention’. A burgeoning ‘wealth of nations’ would improve everyone’s economic position, even if some would benefit much more than others.32 In the present situation, however, the unlimited pursuit of self-interest understood in this way has become dangerous, threatening to degrade nature and disrupt social harmony. The endless expansion of wants in today’s affluent societies belies Marx’s expectation that the burgeoning productivity of the economy would eventually be able to satisfy every need and so put an end to both scarcity and class struggle. We now have no reason to believe that there is any absolute limit to the creation of new wants, once existing wants have been satisfied. In any case, individualism as pursued in a consumerist society is a dubious form of individualism. Far from being encouraged to develop and express their individual selves, people are persuaded to want products promoted by advertising, to seek status by acquiring products that others have already obtained.

A further implication of approaching limits to growth is the need to abandon the increasingly invasive culture of materialism. The dominant conception of progress, shared by both liberal, socialist and social

democratic traditions, has largely relied on a definition of happiness or ‘welfare’ as the satisfaction of material wants. This connection is made explicit by utilitarianism and welfare economics, which assume that increasing material wealth translates reliably into happiness. Accordingly, success in contemporary institutional politics is judged largely by the ability of governments to promote growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But the materialist account of welfare rests on shaky foundations. Ideological claims that a growing economy always benefits the poor are questionable. The increasing gap between rich and poor leaves the poor worse-off in terms of relative (rather than absolute) poverty. In any case, ecological limits to growth mean that even if the poor do slowly become better-off with increasing GDP, they are unlikely to be able to reach a decent level of material well-being.33 At the global level, the ever-increasing consumption of affluent societies is possible only at the expense of the world’s poor, who are unlikely to be able to achieve western levels of affluence within currently projected ecological limits. Individual happiness can be combined with social harmony – both within and between countries – only if happiness is detached from the competitive pursuit of material goods. Material security is, of course, still an urgent goal for the majority of the world’s population, which lives in relative and often absolute poverty, as well as for a minority in the West. But this only reinforces the need to abandon a materialist and consumerist outlook. Given the fact of limited resources, the poor will only be able to escape from poverty on a global scale if the rich are prepared to give up their never-ending pursuit of wealth. Absolute poverty can certainly be addressed within current ecological limits: it is possible to supply every human being with the basic means of survival. But the increasing wealth of the affluent continues to generate relative poverty and so spur further competition for scarce resources.

There is, in any case, mounting psychological and sociological evidence that material wealth leads to greater happiness only up to a certain threshold, one that the majority of people in rich societies have now passed. Not only are reported levels of happiness no longer increasing, but some of the least satisfied people are the most well-off. Finally, and paradoxically, the nature of consumerism itself tends to contradict materialist assumptions about human happiness. The consumerist pleasures offered by more and more goods – and not only luxury ones – are not really material at all. They depend instead on the consumption of symbols, images and fantasies, which are produced by the designers and advertisers of products. The ‘discreet charm’ of many consumer goods derives more from their ability to convey status or to

exude an aura of freedom or transgression than from any satisfaction of strictly material needs.34

The compatibility of individual happiness with social harmony depends on reviving values of social justice and equality, which were regarded as redundant by the major ideological traditions of modernity. The liberal tradition is hostile to the ideals of social justice and material equality, because redistributive measures are seen to violate property rights and encourage a potentially authoritarian expansion of the state. Even social democrats have accepted that there is no need to adjust the gap between rich and poor, because an expanding economy would increase everyone’s wealth (even if some would become much wealthier than others). As a result, for social democrats the value of equality of opportunity – memorably described as an equal opportunity to become unequal – has largely displaced the value of material equality. A similar intuition underlies Rawls’s ‘difference principle’, which regards material inequalities as justified provided they are part of a scheme of incentives that improves the productivity of society and hence the wealth of even the worst-off.35

Now that an endless expansion of material consumption is no longer an option, both liberal and social democratic assumptions are no longer persuasive. The most likely outcome of unfettered economic growth is increasing inequality between rich and poor and the increasing dissatisfaction of those who see themselves as permanently impoverished. The values of material equality and social justice must be seriously considered once again. Social movements should promote a genuinely autonomous formation of needs for the sake of real happiness and human flourishing. The pursuit of these goals depends on the revival of an ethical discourse, which need not claim universal truth or absolute authenticity. There are many ways to combine genuine happiness with a small ecological footprint. The Slow Food movement rejects the emphasis on the quantity of food and its speed of delivery, focusing instead on its quality, enjoyment and the social conditions in which it is enjoyed. Less well known is the fact that the slow movement advocates slowness in other activities as well, including sex, walking, reading and conversation. These and other forms of enjoyment are – unlike the competition for status and positional goods – not zero-sum enjoyments but rather pleasures that are enhanced by the participation and enjoyment of other people.36


35 Rawls, Theory of Justice.

The replacement of self-interested materialism and individualism with a just social order would favour – and be made more likely – by a shift to a more activist and responsible, or what is sometimes described as a republican, conception of politics, citizenship and freedom. The individual freedom and rights championed by liberals and social democrats, which are taken to include the freedom not to participate in politics, should be supplemented by values of civic engagement and responsibility for our common world. We should take action, in Arendt’s republican terms, for the sake of *amor mundi* or ‘love of the world’. Arendt associates this commitment with a richer and, above all, more public conception of both the self and its happiness. She points to the experience of the American and French revolutions and other episodes of political activism, in which actors are able to identify with their public selves and enjoy, as a result, a more enduring public happiness. Psychological studies confirm that happiness is best achieved through identification with something larger than one’s self, whether this is a community, a cause, an institution or a movement. Significantly, the value of civic engagement supplements but does not replace liberal freedoms. Republican liberty is compatible with the negative liberty of citizens, who can still choose to pursue their private concerns without interference from the state. But such private freedoms are only likely to survive if we are able to regain control of the material development of our civilization; and that goal evidently depends on concerted and responsible political action. The republican turn from the private to the public world has, once again, some affinities with a Burkean conservatism, which values social order and the continuity of tradition either in preference to, or as the necessary conditions for, individual freedoms and rights. But recognition of the value of tradition does not, let us repeat, imply commitment to hierarchy and inequality.

If impending environmental crisis requires us to abandon our commitment to unending material progress, we should also abandon the related optimism that, come what may, things will in the end turn out well. To the extent that it encourages complacency, faith in progress discourages action. Exposing the dangerous illusion of automatic progress leaves us, on the other hand, with the challenge of improving society through a deliberate and, it must be said, difficult course of action. In the end, we have no alternative but to engage in widespread, continuing and inventive political action for the sake of our common world. In the absence of appropriate action from governments and other institutions, we must turn to the extra-institutional action of social movements. It would of course be naïve to assume that social movements will inevitably succeed where institutions have failed. But pessimism about our future prospects is equally misplaced. Pessimism

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discourages action that is deemed futile when, as we have seen in previous chapters, action to change the future is always possible even if (but also because) its outcome is necessarily uncertain. Both optimism and pessimism are inappropriate reactions to our current situations, because the future will depend on what we now collectively decide to do.

Further Reading