

What Can New Social Movements Tell About Post-Modernity?

How is it possible to account for the fact that in the heart of an epochal enclosure... certain practices are possible and even necessary, which are not possible in others?... How does it happen, in other words, that a domain of the possible and necessary is instituted, endures for a time, and then cedes under the effect of a mutation?

Schürmann, “‘What Must I Do?’ at the End of Metaphysics”¹

The purpose of this study is to examine whether “new social movements” correspond to the possibility of an epochal transformation. If the postmodern designates the questioning and rejection of foundational thought, and if the new movements, in contrast to the “older” social movements, generally involve nontotalizing, antifoundationalist praxis, then, the question is, can we speak of a certain relationship between the two? Specifically, can we speak of new social movements as movements proper of an imminent post-modern era? This is a noble question in that it requires from us a certain audacity in acknowledging such possibility. And if we welcome such possibility, almost all hitherto social movement theories turn out to be inevitably outmoded, because they tend to theorize new social movements within various foundationalist frameworks. It is precisely this theoretical predicament that informs the inquiry of this text. It necessitates a thorough investigation, in the light of radical phenomenology, of the possibility of whether these movements indicate a new constellation in theory and praxis, and therefore, attest to a possible radical shift, although it may still be in its embryonic stage, in the ways we, the mortals (who “have renounced all ultimate holds”²), act out our existence?

Thus, the entire project hinges on the question posed in the epigraph to this introductory chapter. Despite the fact—or perhaps precisely because of it—that the current work is a study of, and hopefully a contribution to, the theories about contemporary social movements, due to the nature of its orientation, it situates itself primarily within contemporary social and political thought. It is important to note, as one might expect, that the analysis offered in the following text prepares for a postmetaphysical mode of acting and thinking, which collapses all hitherto perceived philosophico-sociological relationships between theory and practice. As is well known, ever since Aristotle philosophy has effectively played the central role in securing the rational foundations to which the whole of action in a given era should conform. Since the advent and expansion of modernity, sociology has carried out such a derivative conception of practice by not only deciphering, under the banner of sociological theory, the rational foundation(s) of society out of the existing social relations and institutions, but also by offering a specific vision of the future to which modern practices should subscribe. The long-presumed metaphysical-referential identity between theory and practice did not allow ways of perceiving the relationship between theory and practice, thought and action, other than referentiality.³ By deconstructing such a relationship between theory and practice, which ultimately puts referential and derivative conceptions of action out of operation, a postmetaphysical approach frees thought and action from all metaphysical fetters. It thereby allows us to think a major shift into the post-modern, (that is, an era liberated from the burden of ultimate foundations). This direction will therefore prompt us to investigate and expose, as our point of departure, the referential assumptions prevalent in some of the contemporary social movement theories. As will be shown, such assumptions as human nature, rational/calculating individual, the subject, the agent, and the social structure intimate the modes of thought that belong to an era dominated by metaphysical representations of ultimate foundations.

The central inquiry of this study is pregnant with other questions as well. Arguments for the “newness” of new social movements, as some social movement theorists have already indicated, call for critical examination. Throughout this text I will discuss how the highly connotative, multifaceted, small in appearance yet great in effect, adjective—“new”—poses serious predicaments for theory. Does a mere distinguishing of a set of contemporary practices from other practices—which are nowadays deemed, thanks to insight granted retrospectively, as once dominant—qualify the former as “new”? Or, is it merely the prevalence of certain practices resisting the formerly dominant modes of practice that designates them as “new”? Can we see the celebration of the “new” in the social movement literature as a by-product of the increasing acceptance of the postmodern turn in the social and hu-

man sciences? Indeed, how and under what conditions does the “new” become conceivable and intelligible? These questions constitute the major components of the inquiry of this text. As I will show in the following chapters, *articulated experiences* set the content for identities and make the emergence of social imaginaries possible. The movement actor, therefore, receives his or her identity from the destinal path toward a social imaginary. A *genuine* articulation of experiences sets forth a *non-hegemonic, transgressive destiny*, one that defies the limitations that the *hegemonic regimes* impose on action. The great challenge before the new social movements of our day is to free their practices from what I call the *oppressive categorization* of actors by contemporary hegemonic regimes of *technological liberalism*. I will also discuss in the subsequent pages that the waning of *teleocratic* holds over new social movements’ practices is indicative of the possible transition toward a postmetaphysical, post-modern era in which the legitimation of *praxis* cannot proceed from *theoria*. As such, this study intends to show what implications the study of contemporary social movements have for contemporary social and political thought. As well, it intends to place these implications in the broader context of a possible *epochal shift* toward a post-modern era in which action is not to secure the rational foundations of society. It will thereby offer an outline for a social theory that is enriched by a postmetaphysical philosophy of the epochal conditions of intelligibility and constellations of truth. Hence the relevance of the now fashionable and popular notion of “postmodern”—a notion that cannot be referred to without having already and adequately established exactly what the “post-” intends to delineate. This study will therefore necessarily move toward a critical elucidation of the “post-” in the post-modern, as resistances against the tedium of universal justifications of action.

The thesis that I intend to develop and defend in this text is that at the reversal of modernity that we are experiencing today, the new social movements allude to the *possibility* of post-modern, nonmetaphysical and nonprincipled modes of thought and action. The passage through the caesurae between epochs is led by experiences that defy the current hegemonic foundations of society, the subject, and agency. That is why the new social movements cannot be adequately and properly understood without asking simultaneously the two questions: “What is ‘new’ in new social movements?” and “Are we post-modern yet?” The epochal character of this inquiry, therefore, necessitates the development of a social movements theory that is informed by Reiner Schürmann’s (Heideggerian) epochal theory.

As such, the current study will not extensively concern itself with how particular modes of identity, antagonism, and resistance emerge as particularities. Rather, while paying heed to such particularities, the study will seek to reveal and elaborate on how these particularities, one way or another,

allude to the civilizational crisis of universal models that reign over our time. It will therefore search for commonalities, for what can link humans together in their struggle against various forms of oppression and injustice without appealing to any universalistic and foundational model. Such a theoretical tendency, indeed, will need to critically examine several contemporary forces involving the situating of humanity—namely, capitalism and the state. But for the purpose of maintaining the proper focus of this text on the questions of action and social movements, arguments about these factors will be reduced to those pertaining to social movements in particular, not to society in general.

Radical Phenomenology and Action

To deconstruct action is to uproot it from domination by the idea of finality, the teleocracy where it has been held since Aristotle. . . . Action is not deconstructible in isolation. This is why the first task is that of a phenomenology of epochal principles.

Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*⁴

The primary methodological approach of this study is adopted from Reiner Schürmann's radical phenomenology. His pathbreaking, "backward" reading of Heidegger—that is, from the "topology of being," to the "truth of being," to the "meaning of being"⁵—not only ended the "hermeneutical dilemma" of how to interpret Heidegger, but also enabled a political theory based on an astute awareness of the metaphysical epochs whose normative-legislative-predicative principles have been operatively holding fast the West in the past twenty-five centuries. His take on the "hypothesis of metaphysical closure" enjoys a particular emphasis on the anarchic actor and shows his undeniable affiliation with a radical "Left" that is suspicious of all universalistic models. Schürmann offers an anti-humanist, epochal theory that severs all references to metaphysical ultimacies (such as the modern subject) by deconstructing the principles that govern an epoch. As such, he provides a theory that anticipates the possibility of the waning of the principles of modernity and prepares for a passage to the post-modern era characterized by the absence of normative principles. Since Schürmann's theory is itself an expansion of Heidegger's political theory, my reading and application of Heidegger's texts will primarily follow the theoretical contours sketched by Schürmann. This approach provides the context for probing the two major inquiries of this study. First, how are intellectual constellations of such social relations and arrangements as subordination, oppression, rights, and democracy constructed within social

movements? Second, based on the directions revealed through the first inquiry, how is an epochal theory of social movements possible?

Radical phenomenology enables us to think our contemporary issues in terms of the epochal constellations of truth. Throughout this text, I use the term *epoch* to designate, following Heidegger and Schürmann, *the self-establishing of an era* in which an interruption sets two different ages (indeed, two different worlds) apart from one another, just as nowadays we separate the medieval era from the modern era. As such, radical phenomenological thinking opens new horizons before a self- and epochally-conscious theory that at each step checks itself in relation to the hypothesis of metaphysical (modern) closure. As a methodological framework, radical (or deconstructive) phenomenology contains the remarkable potential to incorporate various theories into its discourse, while exposing and abandoning their metaphysical assumptions. This is particularly the case with the task, undertaken in this text, of bringing the concept of experience back into a theory that has already undergone the subversive radicalism of French deconstruction. The study will specifically explore various aspects of action within the three planes of analysis that Schürmann identifies: existential, historical, and event-like.⁶ These planes of analysis will enable me to bring together the theoretical contributions of deconstruction, postmarxism, Gramsci, and especially the phenomenologically informed political theory of Claude Lefort that make up a crucial component of the theoretical approach of this study. This will hopefully elucidate the reason why I have intentionally bypassed the already established sociological phenomenology (pioneered by Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann). The nonmetaphysical approach of epochal theory, of radicalized phenomenology, necessitates a fresh start in order to show the important contributions of a radical phenomenological inquiry to the contemporary social and political thought. This phenomenology, as Reiner Schürmann points out in the epigraph to this section, deconstructs the teleocracy that has dominated action since the dawn of Western philosophy.

We will start to pursue the various facets of the main theoretical concerns of this text in Chapter 2, which investigates how the acknowledged emergence of the “new” movements in social movement theories of Alain Touraine, Alberto Melucci, and Klaus Eder, through their emphasis on identity, marks a paradigm shift in social movement theory. I will show how these recent theories suffer from assumptions about an ultimate ground that eventually impede them from properly understanding new social movements. Chapter 2 will pave the way for further reflections on the predicaments that new social movements have forced theory to face.