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# **Collective Identities and Social Movements**

**Hugo Stokke and Marit Tjomsland**

**R 1996: 1**

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## **Summary**

This report gives an overview of theories and approaches to the study of social identities, drawing on recent literature in the field. It argues that the study of social identities should be linked to the social outlets for identity, be they movements, associations, networks and the like. Starting with an account of late modernity, it introduces social movements as an outgrowth of late modernity's rising dissatisfaction with organised politics and with the revitalisation and new social movements approaches are analysed and found wanting in various respects. This leads into a discussion of the politics of identity and its inclusionary and exclusionary facets and the mix of identities typical of modern society. Group identities are contrasted to individual identities and the importance of social position and narrative tradition are highlighted for identities. The report concludes with three suggestions for further research.

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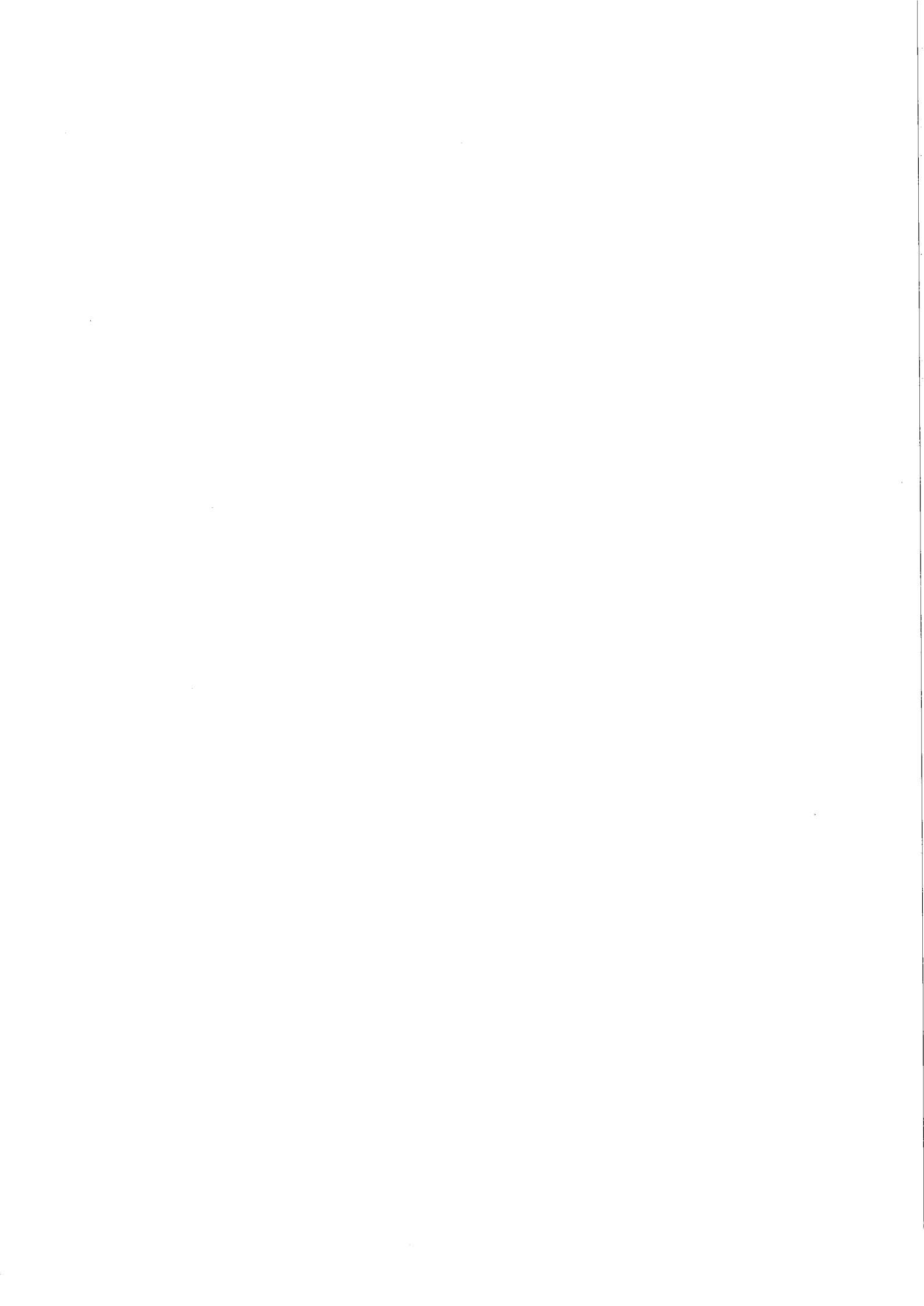
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## Preface

This report has its origin in an interest on the part of the Chr. Michelsen Institute to explore new fields of research. A proposal was submitted to the research staff meeting in December 1993, suggesting four such areas for research. The proposal, entitled "States under Dual Pressures - From Above and Below: Widening or Narrowing the Scope for State Action" was written in response to suggestions from the Board of the Institute to consider new fields of research, particularly with reference to the emergent research programme Advanced Research on the Europeanisation of the State (ARENA). The decision was made to do a study on social identities. The report was written in summer - early autumn 1994 and was submitted to the Board and the Research Director of the Institute. As the contents may be of interest to ongoing research at the Institute and elsewhere, the authors and others at the Institute thought it a good idea to make the report more accessible by having it published in the Report series. Only minor changes have been made from the previous report.

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# 1 Introduction

Our main argument in what follows is that changes in social identities will have to be analysed in close relation to social movements. We argue that in order to make social identities more tangible and thus more appropriate for analysis, it should be studied in relation to the organisational outlet for such identities, in movements, associations, networks and other kinds of collective ventures. Our point of departure is that social movements are a genuinely modern phenomenon that are inextricably linked to the general process of modernisation in Europe. We do therefore start by examining some central features of modernity as they are observed in the literature. As modernity matures, the social basis for association changes accordingly. New types of social movements appear advocating other issues than previous movements. Political participation may seek these modes of expression rather than the formalised, institutionalised world of parties and interest organisations. The paper tries to outline how these social changes are reflected in the theoretical literature on social movements. Theoretical differences in approach in the US and in Europe are described, corresponding to different intellectual traditions as well as different historical experiences on the two continents. The Resource Mobilisation (RM) approach and the New Social Movements (NSM) approach are current theories that by and large correspond to US and European traditions and experiences, intellectually as well as historically.

Two features characterising the European approach are first, the emphasis put on identity and culture and secondly, on civil society. We devote considerable discussion to the elucidation of these concepts as we will argue that they give important pointers toward the research agenda we would like to pursue.

An important consideration is the extent to which social movements respond to the different and changing social environments within Europe and outside and secondly, between West and East Europe. A look at what may be changing bases of identity may give an idea about what kinds of movements are emerging or may emerge in the future. Religious, ethnic, regional and national identities may not only be expressed in various types of movements, these movements may even under certain circumstances claim self-determination. We try to explore some of these trends by using the concepts of categorical and relational identities.

On the basis of the discussion of theories and approaches, we conclude by proposing some promising areas of research and we hope that the following review may provide the researcher with some of the necessary tools with which to make further explorations. We would suggest three. First, more research is needed on the concept and reality of citizenship in multicultural societies; second, more inclusive theories of social movements are needed to correct for some of the current biases and thereby to embrace the full range of social

movements in the current world, and thirdly, more research is needed on how identities come about and what controls they may be subjected to.

## 2 Theories of modernity

The task of analyzing processes of change as complex as those we currently face in Europe calls for theoretical approaches of corresponding complexity. In our opinion, an analytical framework based on theories of modernity may offer the required complexity. Questions concerning the nature and consequences of modernity were essential to sociology already at its very creation, and the relationship between social science and modern society has since then remained so close that the history of sociology may be read as a reflection of the history of modernity. In order to properly deal with theories of modernity it is useful to keep in mind that both the theories and the societies should be understood in their proper historical context.

Late European nineteenth century society still behaved largely in accordance with the classical Enlightenment principles of modernity, and the early sociologists all based their analyses on these principles of rationality, objectivity, secularisation, and progress. Their concrete perceptions of the consequences of modernity varied significantly, however. Emile Durkheim, for instance, had high and distinctly optimistic hopes for the modern era, which he, due to its large capacity for adaptation and development, saw as a superior form of social organisation. Max Weber was more pessimistic about the consequences of modernity, which he predicted would be dominated by inhuman large-scale bureaucracies; he did, however, agree with Durkheim that the modern mode of organisation due to its capacity for ordered adaptation and change is superior to others. Karl Marx deviated from his two colleagues in that he did not see the modern society of his time as an end in itself, but merely as a means to reach a post-capitalist - but hardly post-modern - socialist society. Thus, the influence of the Enlightenment ideas is evident in all these sociologists' theories - as well as in their methodological approaches, which are characterised by orderly, systematic, and basically one-dimensional and uni-directional analyses of the contemporary modern societies.

When turning to the contemporary scene of theories of modernity, it is clear that the classical Enlightenment perception of modernity has lost much of its momentum. The tendency of contemporary society to be perceived as increasingly chaotic and irrational rather than ordered and rational - some of the current changes in Europe illustrate this tendency fairly well - must take much of the blame for the decline of the popularity of the Enlightenment ideas (Mestrovic, 1994). They do, however, still have prominent defenders, of whom Ernest Gellner is one. In his recent work he reconfirmed his strong and long-standing conviction that modern society is indeed orderly and rational, and that the social world is comprehensible to any researcher willing to accept rationality and objectivity as the imperative principles for scientific activity (Gellner 1992).

Gellner and his like-minded are representatives of the vast and diverse field called modern social science, which is a paradigm founded on the assumption that cumulation of objective, scientific knowledge about the social world is indeed possible (Rosenau 1992:169). This paradigm is being rejected by an increasing number of social scientists, among whom the post-modernists constitute a limited, but significant group. Taking as a point of departure the assumption that the social world is by nature "fragmented, disrupted, disordered and interrupted" (ibid.:170), and thus inclined to rapid and irrational changes, postmodernist social scientists avoid Gellner and others' problem of explaining how apparently chaotic and uncontrollable social processes can be expressions of an orderly, systematic, and rational social world. The postmodernists' problem is a rather different one, though closely related to their world view and its consequences for social scientific activity: Their deconstructivist approach, which implies rejection of the principles of modern science down to its perceptions of linear time and predictable space, logically leads to a rejection of the very concept of knowledge (ibid.:171-172). While proficient at drawing intriguingly fragmented pictures of contemporary society, postmodernist social science therefore has in itself a rather limited ability to contribute to the body of autonomous social scientific work - a fact that a number of the adherents of this tradition recognizes when claiming that their only possible objective is indeed limited to criticism and deconstruction of the alleged findings of modern social science.

Eager defenders of the classical Enlightenment ideas like Ernest Gellner and equally eager offenders of the very notion of social scientific knowledge like the postmodernists are best understood in terms of being the "extremists" of contemporary social science, and their theories should be read as fundamentalist acceptances or rejections of the Enlightenment heritage. However, a third approach can be found, emphasizing that modernity combines features of both order and chaos.

As a non-postmodernist relativist, Antony Giddens has developed a theory of modernity which represents a quite different - and, we believe, in our context more constructive - interpretation of contemporary modern society than those so far discussed. He argues that even though modernity is based on the classical Enlightenment belief in human reason and rationality, the irrationality and chaos that currently appears to dominate our world should be understood as inherent consequences of modernity rather than as expressions of the post modern - he calls the period they signify late modernity. This period has, according to Giddens, taken on quite a different appearance than the early modern period of Durkheim and Weber; it is characterised by much greater complexity and impenetrability. Put differently, contemporary modernity is multi-dimensional on the level of institutions, and each of the single dimensions focused on by the early sociologists (industrialism by Durkheim, rationalisation by Weber, capitalism by Marx) plays a part in this late modern totality of dimensions (Giddens 1990:12).

Giddens uses a discontinuist institutional approach to modern society - he assumes that modern institutions are distinct from all types of traditional order, and that it is through studies of the uniqueness of these institutions that one

may grasp what modernity and its consequences actually are. Some preconditions are, according to Giddens, fundamental for the existence of modern social institutions. One of these is the separation of time and space, which makes possible the "empty" modern perception of time as independent from what happens during it (ibid.:18). Such an "emptying of time" is a precondition for the "emptying of space", meaning the separation of the concept of space from the idea of place in the meaning of a locale, and both these "emptying" operations are necessary parts of the modern condition. Hence, while a pre-modern time-concept like "sunset" will be linked to both season and place, "seven o'clock" is an abstract expression of time which permits planning and ordering of events over indefinite distances. Thus, this separation permits the time-space "zoning" of social life which is a precondition for the modern mode of social organisation.

Closely connected to the time-space separation is the disembedding of social systems, which lifts social relations out of local contexts of interaction and restructures them across indefinite spans of time-space (ibid.:21). There are several disembedding mechanisms. One of them is symbolic tokens, such as money, which makes possible interchange independently of the actual individuals or groups involved at any time. At least equally important are, however, what Giddens names the expert systems, which are systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise organising a main part of the late modern social environment (ibid.:26).

According to Giddens, the modern separation of time and space and disembedding of social systems have as consequences a mode of social organisation where the individual to a large extent is unable to control the preconditions for his or her own way of life. The large degree of generalised trust in the social system which this lack of individual control implies, is what enables modern society to develop in so complex ways. However, the back side of this coin, namely the high level of generalised risk involved in such a social form, is by many perceived as an even more central characteristic of late modernity (see for instance Beck:1993), and this is what makes modernity an unusually vulnerable form of social organisation, since the high level of complexity results in a situation where large-scale breakdown is a highly probable outcome if individual trust in the system is withdrawn.

While vulnerability is modern social organisation's weak spot, its great capacity for change is its main advantage. Giddens actually identifies dynamic change as modernity's most central characteristic, along with its globalising nature. The latter comes about because of the "stretching" of relations between local and distant events which is a consequence of the time-space distancing that may well be seen as an integrated part of the general dynamic nature of modernity.

However, this inherent dynamism of the modern mode of social organisation has accelerated the pace and scope of change as modern society has matured, and it is this acceleration of change which has led to the increasing number of unintended consequences of modernity which today tend to appear to us as irrational chaos. Thus, the current state of disillusionment with rationality, science, the future, and most other things which many social scientists today

choose to term post modern, is actually the inherent and unavoidable consequence of the initial Enlightenment illusion on which modernity is built, namely that human reason can produce certain knowledge, and thereby control the consequences of human action. Rather than being beyond modernity, the current state is therefore actually thoroughly modern in nature, it is "modernity coming to understand itself" (Giddens 1990:48).

In spite of great differences, the theories of modernity so far discussed resemble each other on one point: they all, in one way or another, recognize the dynamic nature of their object of research. This dynamism - the possibly most generally recognized aspect of modernity - characterises all modern institutions, and not the least the political institutions.

The democratic form of government has come to constitute the modern mode of political organisation par excellence, particularly in our part of the world. Its relatively great adaptability to change, together with its emphasis on the classical Enlightenment perception of individual freedom and autonomy, probably explains much of its popularity.

Unlike most earlier forms of government - and like most other modern institutions - democracy depends on trust from the individual members of society in order to function. Significant parts of the current development in Europe may be seen as indications that trust in the democratic system is declining: In the "old" European democracies, we see distrust expressed in declining participation in elections as well as in the revitalisation of non-democratic ideologies. In Eastern Europe, where modern democracy tends to have a rather shorter, or even non-existent, history, large sections of the population seem indifferent or outright opposed to the (re)establishment of democratic rule, due to the lack of trust in politics and politicians in general. This withdrawal of trust in modern parliamentary democratic institutions may be approached in terms of the increasing number of unintended consequences of the late modern period. The inability of contemporary governments to control an increasingly uncontrollable society is easily perceived by the electorate as political incompetence and contempt for those who brought them to power. One should, however, be careful with interpreting the withdrawal of trust as a sign of political apathy. Contemporary political history actually suggests the contrary: political activity in Europe is as high as ever, but it is absorbed by other kinds of political channels than the classical numerical one; in the late modern period, Europeans decreasingly trust conventional politicians, and increasingly work politically in social movements rather than in political parties (Dalton and Kuechler 1990).

Social movements are distinctive of modern society - in that sense, they are thoroughly modern phenomena. Furthermore, social movements have in the modern era developed into more advanced forms than previously known; they have become intrinsic parts of the modern system. Their progress during the modern era is without doubt related to their unique qualities as agents for change. Or, in Giddens' words, "social movements provide glimpses of possible futures and are in some part vehicles for their realisation" (ibid.:161). Therefore, understanding current political changes in Europe means



understanding contemporary European social movements. A large body of social movement theory is available to help us with that task.

## 3 Social Movements

### 3.1 The evolution of social movement theory

Interest in social movements constituted a central element of the early sociological occupation with modern society. In spite of significant differences, the first traditional social movement theoreticians (Rucht 1991:24) had one thing in common: They regarded social movements as anomalies, as caused by grievances existing in society, and thus as pathological social phenomena. At the turn of the century, the group psychology approach, developed by among others Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud, was very influential. Empirically, it focused on expressions of collective behaviour events like mass hysteria and "mob"-like crowds. The research was founded on the assumption that crowd-behaviour is basically irrational, and the aim was to find means to control or prevent such dangerous and destructive forces in society.

The Marxist approach to social movements deviated from the view generally held by the traditional social movement theoreticians because it did not perceive the existing social order as the ideal, and because it regarded a social movement - the labour movement - as the constructive driving force in the struggle for socialism. Due to the enormous practical political impact of the labour movement in Europe in this century, the historical-materialist approach exerted considerable influence on the European perception of social movements. One consequence of this was that the social sciences to a large extent came to regard the labour movement as the prototypical modern social movement, and another consequence was that social movement activity in Europe from the early stage was understood in terms of materialist, class-based politics and philosophy.

While Marxism tends to see social movements as such as both positive and natural aspects of modern society, and is more interested in analyzing and evaluating the different movements' messages than in explaining why they come about, the school of Max Weber - the other significant early theoretical tradition in the field of social movement research in Europe - regards them with more suspicion. While agreeing with Marx that the division between labour and capital was the main conflict-line in modern society, Weber saw significant problems related to the social movements which this conflict had brought to the centre of society. Because he feared their destructive powers, he tended to prefer social movements in their mature, institutionalised forms - forms which became readily available for study as the labour movement in the interwar period consolidated its central institutional political positions throughout Europe. In the same way as the labour movement maintained its political position in the postwar period, the inheritance from Marx and Weber continued

to dominate European theoretical approaches to social movements until the late Sixties.

In the United States, the situation was quite different. There, the socialist movement never had any significant influence, and it was the group psychology approach rather than Marxism that came to inspire American social science in the first half of the century. From this source, two theoretical schools with distinctly different focuses emerged. The symbolic interactionist school associated with Herbert Blumer saw social movements in more positive terms than was otherwise common, as this school, through its individual-oriented, social-psychological approach focused on the potential social creativity in the new forms of symbolic interaction within such movements. The structural functionalist school, of which Talcott Parsons was a founder, drew on Emile Durkheim and the early European group-psychology approach as well as on Max Weber in their focus on macro-level structural strains caused by social imbalances during the process of modernisation as reasons for the occurrence of social movements. In spite of significant differences, these two schools later came to merge in the collective behaviour approach, which dominated American research on social movements until the late Sixties (Smelser 1962).

Occurring more or less simultaneously in Europe and the US, the so-called new social movements of the Sixties did only marginally follow the acknowledged patterns of the "old" social movements. The exact ways in which they were perceived to break with the social movement tradition did, however, vary considerably between the European and American social scientific milieux - understandably, since their existing bodies of theory developed on the basis of the "old" social movements were so different. In Europe, the theoretical response to the new social movements quite simply carries their name, while the theories developed in the US constitute the Resource Mobilisation Approach.

The European New Social Movements Approach has as its point of departure a perception of the new social movements as qualitatively very different from the "old" movements. The difference lies both in the values propounded by the movements, their action forms, and their constituencies.

New social movements theory draws on traditional social movement theory in that it focuses on grievances and aspirations caused by social modernisation as explanations of the rise of movements. However, the new movements are results of new kinds of grievances and aspirations, which, according to the theory, unlike the old ones result in a focus on non-material values (or post-material in Inglehart's (1990) terms). This occupation with non-material issues is perceived as a fundamental element of the new social movements, and has earned them labels like "post materialist", or even "post modern" (Eyerman and Jamison 1991).

The action-forms of the new social movements are also interpreted as signs of their qualitative newness. Their small-scale, de-centralised, un-hierarchical style reflects their conscious distantiating from the political establishment, but is also related to the fact that such action forms suit the typically one-issue new social movements (in contrast to holistic "old" movements purporting to have

one all-embracing solution), focusing on clearly defined themes like gay rights, anti nuclear power, or environmental issues.

This lack of a single master-narrative guiding the activities of the different new social movements points toward another of their characteristics highlighted by new social movements theory: Rather than working for revolution or other large scale social change, the new movements aim at producing or reconfirming particular collective identities, and at establishing and consolidating group culture (Rucht 1991). This concern with group identity and culture is an indication of the high degree of self-reflexivity which, according to new social movements theory, typifies the members of these movements, who furthermore tend to originate from quite different constituencies than the members of the "old" movements: New social movements recruit from the new middle classes, and from groups more than normally exposed to the negative consequences of modernisation. These constituencies' main motivation for joining is, according to the theory, satisfaction of endangered (non-material) needs, which is sought through compensation for loss or disturbance of identity.

The American Resource Mobilisation Approach regards the new social movements from quite a different angle. It is similar to the traditional social movement theory in that it focuses on collective action as the significant expression of social movements, but unlike this theoretical school - and also unlike the new social movements approach - it finds grievances to be insufficient conditions for collective action, since grievances will exist in all societies. Instead, the approach emphasises availability of resources and opportunities as the essential preconditions for collective action. Thus, compared to the earlier discussed approaches to analyzing social movements, resource mobilisation theory turns the question upside down, in that it focuses on opportunities for rather than reasons for creating social movements. The resource mobilisation approach furthermore deviates from the earlier American theoretical tradition in that it does not perceive collective action as negative, deviant behaviour; rather, it seeks to identify the "objective" interests of the participants in social movements.

The rational actor is a central concept for the resource mobilisation approach, since its understanding of participation in social movements builds on an assumption of individual rational estimation of the costs and benefits involved in this kind of activity. For this line of thinking, the organisation of social movements - if, how, and to which degree they are organised - is of central importance. Good organisation is perceived as a main resource, supposed to both decrease the individual costs of participation, help recruitment to the movement, and generally increase the chances of success in reaching the movement's aims. Moreover, the likelihood that the movement will succeed, following the principles of rational choice, will be an imperative collective incentive for participation in the movement. According to Charles Tilly, one of the central figures within the resource mobilisation approach, the analysis of collective action has five big components: interest, organisation, mobilisation, opportunity, and collective action itself (Tilly 1978:7). These components suggest the overall organisational focus of the approach, and the

degree to which it differs from the identity- and culture-focused European new social movements approach in its understanding of their common objects of research: the new social movements.

While the resource mobilisation approach analyzes rather well the mobilisation-phase of social movements, it is less useful when it comes to explaining "irrational" collective behaviour like suicidal projects in the name of a movement or participation in high-risk movements generally. As a tool for analyzing emerging social movements in contemporary Europe, it has several weaknesses. Firstly, some of the movements which have made themselves most notable lately, like nationalist, fascist, and sectarian movements, can only with difficulty be understood in terms of rationally calculating individual actors. In fact, the RM approach does not theoretically and methodologically differentiate strongly between routinized political activity and the sort of non-routinized political activity normally associated with social movements.

Turning to new social movements theory, the geographical closeness of this approach to the object of research cannot hide the fact that its emphasis on the qualitative "newness" of contemporary movements in our connection makes it an awkward tool. Social movements which are "new" in the approach's sense constitute only a limited part of the total range of current social movements. A fair share of this totality appears to be "neo-old" if anything, since the movements may be said to revive ideas of holism, nationalism, and, to an extent, materialism, and as they tend to recruit from the constituencies of the "old" social movements rather than from those of the new. Thus, the new social movements approach describes well the reflection of the late modern social complexity and fragmentation in the ad hoc-type, one-issue directedness of the new social movements. It does, however, seem unable to deal constructively with the recently occurring movements which do not follow the pattern of the new social movements.

The problems of the new social movements approach may be related to the great emphasis it places on the qualitative differences between "new" and "old" movements. It has lately been claimed by others (see for instance Calhoun 1993c) that this division is not only exaggerated, but actually analytically false. According to this line of argument, the "new" aspects of the new social movements are due mainly to their quantitative, not qualitative, newness, and these "new" aspects could also be found in "old" social movements, when they were at a similar stage of development. In any case, the new social movements approach seems to be rather severely handicapped when it comes to dealing with social movements on a more general level, and may therefore be only of limited use for us.

### **3.2 Recent contributions to social movement theory**

When measured against the analytical needs of a study of processes of social transformation in contemporary Europe, the theoretical approaches discussed so far seem to have in common a simplistic and one-sided way of perceiving their object of study, whether their emphasis is on social grievances, rational actors or post-materialist identities. Seen from a different angle, this may

suggest that the current late modern European social form - unlike previous social forms - is characterised by a lack of one overarching empirical tendency. Put differently, what may be typical for contemporary European social movements is exactly their lack of a typical character - and, perhaps, their sheer multitude, since social movements flourish like never before in Europe.

This late modern multiplicity of social movements calls for theories of a new level of complexity; it requires theories which simultaneously can explain militant neo-nazi groups and animal rights movements. However, the new social movements- and resource mobilisation approaches have continued to dominate the research done on social movements until now (see for instance Morris&Mueller 1992), and the current empirical situation is most often attempted fitted into these somewhat one-sided theoretical frameworks.

Some attempts at filling this theoretical void through developing a "third generation" theoretical synthesis have nonetheless been made. Most of them seem to have in common a preference for the European new social movements approach rather than the American resource mobilisation tradition as a source of inspiration, a preference made clear not the least by their commonly large emphasis on the concept of identity. Apart from that, they approach the theme rather differently. We will examine two of them here.

### 3.2.1 *The cognitive approach*

With what they call a cognitive approach to social movements (Eyerman & Jamison 1991), Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison attempt to straighten out what they see as a biased relationship between the social sciences and social movements. While most sociological approaches to social movements do "perhaps unwittingly serve to bring them under political control" (ibid.:2), their cognitive approach seeks to avoid this disloyalty to the objects of research by studying the movements on their own terms. They are entirely clear about the reason for their concern: As former American student activists they identify with the new social movements trend, and therefore find it natural to study social movements in terms of positive contributions to society rather than as undesired liabilities. Hence, they distance themselves clearly from their American group psychology and collective behaviour-inspired theoretical heritage. As they do not focus on social grievances as sources of social movements, they do, however, on this particular question, lean more towards the resource mobilisation-approach than the new social movements approach.

According to Eyerman and Jamison, their choice of using a historically and politically informed interpretation of a social theory of knowledge as basis for their approach enables them to move beyond the biased, partial, and insufficient ways which have dominated social science's understanding of social movements. Furthermore, this theoretical foundation allows them to treat movements processually, a possibility which is central to them, since they understand social movements basically as activities by which individuals create new kinds of social identities. Hence, they abandon the resource mobilisation approach's occupation with rational actors, and draw instead on the European

