



# The Process of Collective Identity

(Alberto Melucci: Challenging Codes)

'values and beliefs' on the other can never answer the questions of how social actors come to form a collectivity and recognize themselves as being part of it; how they maintain themselves over time; how acting together makes sense for the participants in a social movement; or how the meaning of collective action derives from structural preconditions or from the sum of the individual motives.

- **Koncept kolektivní identity (collective identity) jako nástroj porozumění důvodům, proč jsou lidé aktivní v sociálních hnutích.**
- **Individuální i kolektivní úroveň**

A thorough rethinking of the concept of collective identity is necessary to productively confront the dualism between structure and meaning. The

**Duality:**

**Objektivní podmínky vs. subjektivní motivy a orientace**

**Struktura vs. jednání (Bourdieu – Teorie jednání)**

**Identita jako koncept překračující tyto dualismy**

## Co je kolektivní identita?

I call *collective identity* the process of 'constructing' an action system (see chapter 1). Collective identity is an interactive and shared definition produced by a number of individuals (or groups at a more complex level) concerning the *orientations* of their action and the *field* of opportunities and constraints in which such action is to take place. By 'interactive and shared' I mean that these elements are constructed and negotiated through a recurrent process of activation of the relations that bind actors together.

# Kolektivní identita jako proces

*(Processual approach and constructivist view)*

- (i) Collective identity as a process involves *cognitive definitions* concerning the ends, means, and the field of action. These different elements, or axes, of collective action are defined within a language that is shared by a portion or the whole of society, or within one that is specific to a group; they are incorporated in a given set of rituals, practices, cultural artifacts; they are framed in different ways but they always allow some kind of calculation between means and ends, investments and rewards. This cognitive level does not necessarily imply unified and coherent frameworks (unlike cognitivists tend to think: see Neisser 1976; Abelson 1981; Eiser 1980); rather, it is constructed through interaction and comprises different and sometimes contradictory definitions (see Billig *et al.* 1988; Billig 1995).

- (ii) Collective identity as a process refers thus to a network of *active relationships* between actors who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions. Forms of organization and models of leadership, communicative channels and technologies of communication are constitutive parts of this network of relationship.
- (iii) Finally, a certain degree of *emotional investment* is required in the definition of a collective identity, which enables individuals to feel themselves part of a common unity. Collective identity is never entirely negotiable because participation in collective action is endowed with meaning which cannot be reduced to cost-benefit calculation and always mobilizes emotions as well (Kemper 1978, 1981, 1990; Hochschild 1979, 1983; Scheff 1990). Passions and feelings, love and hate, faith and fear are all part of a body acting collectively, particularly in those areas of social life that are less institutionalized, such as the social movements. To understand this part of collective action as 'irrational', as opposed to the parts that are 'rational' (a euphemism for 'good'), is simply nonsensical. There is no cognition without feeling and no meaning without emotion.

between two actors which allows their (mutual) recognition. The notion of identity always refers to these three features: namely, the continuity of a subject over and beyond variations in time and its adaptations to the environment; the delimitation of this subject with respect to others; the ability to recognize and to be recognized.



One way to overcome the apparent contradiction between the static and the dynamic dimensions implied by collective identity is to think of it in terms of action. Collective identity enables social actors to act as unified and delimited subjects and to retain control over their own action; conversely, however, they can act as collective bodies because they have completed, to some extent, the constructive process of collective identity. In

supposes, first, a self-reflective ability of social actors. Collective action is not simply a reaction to social and environmental constraints; it produces symbolic orientations and meanings which actors are able to recognize. Secondly, it entails that they have a notion of causality and belonging; they are, that is, able to attribute the effects of their actions to themselves. This recognition underpins their ability to appropriate the outcomes of their actions, to exchange them with others, and to decide how they should be allocated. Thirdly, identity entails an ability to perceive duration, an ability which enables actors to establish a relationship between past and future and to tie action to its effects.



# Vztahová dimenze kolektivní identity

Social movements develop collective identity in a circular relationship with a system of opportunities/constraints. Collective actors are able to

There must be at least a minimal degree of reciprocity in social recognition between the actors (movement, authorities, other movements, third parties) even if it takes the form of a denial, a challenge, or an opposition (Gamson, Fireman and Rytina 1982). When this minimal basis for recognition is

The autonomous ability to produce and to recognize the collective reality as a 'we' is then a paradoxical situation: in affirming its difference from the rest of the society, a movement also states its belonging to the shared culture of a society and its need to be recognized as a social actor. The paradox of identity always consists of the fact that difference, in order to be affirmed and lived as such, presupposes a certain equality and a degree of reciprocity.

# Identita a konflikt

Collective identity contains an unresolved and unresolvable tension between the definition a movement gives of itself and the recognition granted to it by the rest of the society.

them but which each refuses to confer to the other. Beyond the concrete or symbolic objects at stake in a conflict, what people fight for is always the possibility to recognize themselves and be recognized as subjects of their action. Every conflict which transgresses a system of shared rules, whether it concerns material or symbolic resources, is a conflict of identity. Social actors enter a conflict to affirm the identity that their opponent has denied them, to reappropriate something which belongs to them because they are able to recognize it as their own.

During a conflict the internal solidarity of the group reinforces identity and guarantees it. People feel a bond with others not because they share the same interests, but because they need that bond in order to make sense of what they are doing. The solidarity that ties individuals to each other

# Kolektivní identita v čase

- Proces, který prochází různými stádii
- Nové definice
- Kontradiktorní tlaky

each of these spheres. The most serious cases provoke a breakdown or fragmentation of the collective actor or a breach of its external confines. This can lead to the incapacity to produce and maintain a definition of the 'movement' that could exhibit a certain stability or, vice versa, to the compulsive assumption of a rigid identity from which it is impossible to escape, as in sects or terrorist groups.

Collective identity ensures the continuity and permanence of the movement over time, it establishes the limits of the actor with respect to its social environment. It regulates the membership of individuals, it defines the requisites for joining the 'movement', and the criteria by which its members recognize themselves and are recognized. The content of this

# De-reification of collective identity

One cannot treat collective identity as a 'thing', as the monolithic unity of the subject; it must, instead, be conceived as a system of relations and representations. Collective identity takes the form of a field containing a system of vectors in tension. These vectors constantly seek to establish an

terms; in its dynamic connotation, however, collective identity increasingly becomes a process of construction and autonomization.

Collective identity tends to coincide with conscious processes of 'organization' and it is experienced not so much as a situation as it is an action.

**Identification** – termín pokrývající sebe-reflexivní a konstruovanou podstatu identity

# Co uvidíme optikou identity?

Collective identity is a concept, an analytical tool and not a datum or an essence, a 'thing' with a 'real' existence. As far as concerns concepts, one should never forget that we are addressing not 'reality', but rather instruments or lenses through which we read reality. The concept of collective

① The notion of collective identity is relevant to sociological literature because it brings along with it a field perspective on collective action and a dynamic view of its definition. It implies the inclusion of the social field as part of the movement construction and it means that beyond the formal definitions (public speeches, documents, opinions of participants) there is always an active negotiation, an interactive work among individuals, groups or parts of the movement.

② The concept of collective identity can also contribute to a better understanding of the nature and meaning of the emerging forms of collective action in highly differentiated systems. As the quantity and quality of

③ Collective actors are neither historical heroes nor villains. By identifying specific levels that enter the construction of collective identity, movements can be seen as action systems. They are not 'subjects' that act with the unity of purposes that leaders, ideologues, or opponents attribute to them. They are always plural, ambivalent, often contradictory.

④ The concept of collective identity has important consequences in clearing up the misunderstanding on the so-called new social movements.

quality (Offe 1985a; Dalton and Kuechler 1990). Contemporary movements are not 'new' or 'old' in themselves, but rather comprise different orientations with their components belonging to different historical layers of a given society. The notion of collective identity can help to describe and

⑤ Another important consequence of the concept of collective identity has to do with the theory of domination and conflict. The notion of col-

I have suggested that collective action of many recent social movements constitutes a communicative act which is performed through the form of action itself, making visible new powers and the possibilities of challenging them. Action still pursues political goals or instrumental advantages, but

⑥ However, this antagonist dimension cannot explain everything, and the concept of collective identity is a permanent warning about the necessity of recognizing a plurality of levels in collective action. This is perhaps

Finally, collective identity has some radical methodological implications. Sociological analysis is not free from the risk of reducing collective action to just one of its levels – which in fact is often the ‘official’ definition of a movement – and of considering it as a unified empirical object. When sociology still rests on an essentialist idea of social movements as characters acting on the stage of history, it may contribute, even unwillingly, to the practical denial of difference, to a factual and political ignorance of that complex articulation of meanings that contemporary movements carry in themselves. Putting into question the unity usually taken for granted by ideologists, sociology may help to reveal those dimensions of collective action that are not visible at first sight. To understand how a