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The process of collective identity

Defining collective identity

The concept of collective identity was introduced in my previous contributions to the analysis of contemporary social movements (Melucci 1988, 1989, 1994), and has already stimulated a promising discussion (Bartholomew and Mayer 1992; Gamson 1992a; Mueller 1994; Proietto 1995). In recent sociological debates we are witnessing a renewed interest in cultural analysis which corresponds to a shift towards new questions about how people make sense of their world, how they relate to texts, practices, and artifacts rendering these cultural products meaningful to them (see Swidler 1986, 1995; Wuthnow *et al.* 1984; Wuthnow 1987; Wuthnow and Witten 1988; Clifford 1988; Alexander 1990; Alexander and Seidman 1990). The contributions of social psychology in terms of scripts (Schank and Abelson 1977; Abelson 1981), social representations (Farr and Moscovici 1984; Moscovici 1988), the rhetorical construction of arguments and thoughts (Billig 1991, 1992, 1995), as well as the reflections on the discoursive construction of identity (Gergen 1982, 1985, 1989, 1991; Shotter and Gergen 1989; Shotter 1993b; Harré and Gillett 1994) are also part of this shift towards a better understanding of the human capacity to construct meaning and to make sense of action.

The present interest in culture and meaning is paralleled by a growing discussion on the topic of identity, both at the individual and collective level, which crosses different disciplinary fields in social sciences (for an introduction see Hirsch 1982; Weigert *et al.* 1986 Berkowitz 1988; Abrams and Hogg 1990; Burkitt 1991; Breakwell 1992; Barglow 1994). The interest is focused on critical issues such as the continuity-discontinuity of identification processes and the multiplication of the facets of identity in contemporary society (Berger *et al.* 1973; Parfit 1984; Elster 1985; Taylor 1989; Gergen 1991; Strathern 1991; White 1992; Burke 1992; Melucci 1996).

These new questions raised by the recent reflection on culture, identity and meaning are paralleled by the increasing evidence of the weaknesses of traditional sociological theories when confronted with contemporary social movements. So far, the study of social movements has been divided among those who continue to work under the premises of the dualistic legacy discussed in chapter 1. As a result, we are still struggling to bridge the gap between behaviour and meaning, between 'objective' conditions and 'subjective' motives and orientations, between 'structure' and 'agency'. Explanations based on 'structural determinants' on the one hand and '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.

The development of a new interest in culture, and the related attention to hermeneutics, linguistics (Barthes 1970, 1975), and to the many methodological warnings issuing from ethnomethodology and cognitive sociology (Garfinkel 1967; Cicourel 1974, 1982) have also made more evident the low level of epistemological awareness and self-reflexivity typifying traditional research on collective phenomena (see also chapter 20). With few exceptions (such as Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Diani and Eyerman 1992; Johnston 1995), research on social movements has up to the present been informed by a widespread 'realistic' attitude toward the object, as if collective actors existed in themselves as unified ontological essences, readily offered for the comprehension of the researcher through reference to some underlying structural condition or upon sorting the motives behind the various behaviours. The position of the observer is of course that of an external eye, as objective as possible, and very little attention is paid to questions such as how the relationship of the researcher to her/his field contributes to its construction, even if we can see signs of a turning point on these matters and of an increasing epistemological awareness (on social movements, see Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Darnowsky, Epstein and Flacks 1995).

A thorough rethinking of the concept of collective identity is necessary to productively confront the dualism between structure and meaning. The concept, as we will see, cannot be separated from the production of meaning in collective action and from some methodological consequences in considering empirical forms of collective action (see chapter 20). This strategic role of the concept in dealing with the questions that are arriving to the forefront of contemporary sociological debates probably explains the parallel inter-

est in both cultural analysis and collective identity. By asking the question of how individuals and groups make sense of their action and how we may understand this process, we are obliged to shift from a monolithic and metaphysical idea of collective actors towards the processes through which a collective becomes a collective. A processual approach to collective identity helps to affect such a theoretical and methodological shift. But the concept risks being incorporated in recent social movements studies (see Taylor and Whittier 1992; Friedman and McAdam 1992; Hunt *et al.* 1994) in a reified fashion, as a new *passepartout* that simply substitutes the old search for a core 'essence' of a movement: without, that is, taking into account its theoretical and methodological implications. In the present chapter, I want to outline a processual approach to collective identity, relying on the constructivist view of collective action developed in this book. Such an approach, moreover, carries important epistemological consequences for the way the observer/observed relation is construed in social research, and it affects the research practices themselves, as we shall see in chapter 20.

The question of how a collective actor is formed at this point assumes a decisive theoretical importance: what was formerly considered a datum (the existence of the movement) is precisely that which needs to be explained. Analysis must address itself to the plurality of aspects present in the collective action and explain how they are combined and sustained through time. It must tell us, therefore, what type of 'construct' we are faced with in the observed action and how the actor himself is 'constructed.'

Action and field: a definition

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.

(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.

Let us try now to understand more closely this interactive and communicative construction, which is both cognitively and emotionally framed through active relationships.

Process and form

The term 'identity' is most commonly used to refer to the permanence over time of a subject of action unaffected by environmental changes falling below a certain threshold; it implies the notion of unity, which establishes the limits of a subject and distinguishes it from all others, and a relation 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.

The notion of a certain stability and permanence over time seems to contrast with the dynamic idea of a process. At any given moment social actors

no doubt try to delimit and stabilize a definition of themselves; so do the observers. But the concept of collective identity as defined above can precisely help to understand that what appears as a given reality, something more or less permanent, is always the result, at least to a certain extent, of an active process which is not immediately visible.

Such a process involves continual investments and as it approaches the more institutionalized levels of social action it may increasingly crystallize into organizational forms, systems of rules, and leadership relationships. The tendency and need to stabilize one's identity and to give it a permanent form create a tension between the results of the process, which are crystallized in more or less permanent structures, in more or less stable definitions of identity, and the process itself which is concealed behind those forms.

The concept of collective identity can be of help addressing the interactive and sometimes contradictory processes lying behind what appears as a stable and coherent definition of a given collective actor. We should, however, take notice of the fact that the term 'identity' remains semantically inseparable from the idea of permanence and may, perhaps for this very reason, be ill suited for the processual analysis for which I am arguing. Nevertheless, I have retained 'identity' as a constitutive part of the concept of 'collective identity' for the simple reason that for the present, no better linguistic solution seems available. Because, as I will argue, such collective identity is as much an analytical tool as an object to be studied, it represents by definition a temporary solution to a conceptual problem, and should be replaced if and when other concepts prove themselves more adequate. In the meantime, my work continues situated within the limits of the available language, confident that the inevitable shift towards new concepts will not amount to a mere matter of different terminology but to an overall emergence of a new paradigm. The way out of the legacy of modernity will be a difficult process, and our time will notice its completion only at the end, when, as in any major scientific shift, we find ourselves already in a new conceptual universe. Meanwhile, for the sake of communication, we cannot but continue using old words to address new problems.

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 terms of the observed action, one may thus speak of collective identity as

the ability of a collective actor to recognize the effects of its actions and to attribute these effects to itself. Thus defined, collective identity presupposes, 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.

The relational dimension of collective identity

Collective identity thus defines the capacity for autonomous action, a differentiation of the actor from others within the continuity of that identity. However, autoidentification must also gain social recognition if it is to provide the basis for identity. The ability of a collective actor to distinguish itself from others must be recognized by these 'others'. It would be impossible to speak of collective identity without referring to its relational dimension.

Social movements develop collective identity in a circular relationship with a system of opportunities/constraints. Collective actors are able to identify themselves when they have learned to distinguish between themselves and the environment. Actor and system reciprocally constitute themselves, and a movement only becomes self-aware through a relation with its external environment, which offers to social action a field of opportunities and constraints, that in turn are recognized and defined as such by the actor.

In this way, the unity of collective action, which is produced and maintained by autoidentification, rests on the ability of a collective actor to locate itself within a system of relations. A collective actor cannot construct its identity independently of its recognition (which can also mean denial or opposition) by other social and political actors. In order to act, any collective actor makes the basic assumption that its distinction from other actors is constantly acknowledged by them, if only in the extreme form of denial. 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

lacking there can only be pure repression, an emptiness of meaning nullifying the social field in which collective identity can be produced.

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.

Identity and conflict

Collective identity as a process can be analytically divided and seen from the internal and external point of view. This separation of two sides is obviously a way of describing what should be seen as a basically unified process. 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.

Conflict is the extreme example of this discrepancy and of the tension it provokes. In social conflicts reciprocity becomes impossible and the struggle for scarce resources begins. Both subjects involved deny each other their respective identities, refusing to grant their adversary that which they demand for themselves. The conflict severs the reciprocity of the interaction; the adversaries clash over something which is common to both of 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 enables them to affirm themselves as subjects of their action and to withstand the breakdown of social relations induced by conflict. Moreover, they learn how to gather and focus their resources in order to reappropriate that which they recognize as theirs. Participation in forms of collective mobilization or in social movements, involvement in forms of cultural

innovation, voluntary action inspired by altruism – all these are grounded in the need for identity and help to satisfy it.

Collective identity over time

Collective identity is a learning process which leads to the formation and maintenance of a unified empirical actor that we can call a 'social movement'. As that process passes through various stages, the collective actor develops a capability to resolve problems posed by the environment and becomes increasingly independent and autonomous in its capacity for action within the network of relationships in which it is situated. The process of collective identity is thus also the ability to produce new definitions by integrating the past and the emerging elements of the present into the unity and continuity of a collective actor.

It is above all in situations of crisis or intense conflict that the identity of a collective actor is put to challenge, when it is subjected to contradictory pressures which set a severe test for the ability of the collective actor to define its unity. It can respond by restructuring its action according to new orientations, or it can compartmentalize its spheres of action, so as to be still able to preserve a certain amount of coherence – at least internally to 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 identity and its temporal duration vary according to the type of group concerned.

When we consider organizational structures, leadership patterns, membership requisites, we deal with levels of collective action which presuppose the notion of collective identity: they incorporate and enact the ways a collective actor defines ends, means and field of his action. One should consider those levels as empirical indicators of a possible collective identity and, conversely, should use this concept as an analytical tool to dismantle the 'reified' appearance of those empirical dimensions of a social movement and to attain the constructive process behind them.

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 equilibrium between the various axes of collective action, and between identification declared by the actor and the identification given by the rest of the society (adversaries, allies, third parties).

Collective identity in its concrete form depends on how this set of relations is held together: this system is never a definite datum; it is instead a laborious process where unity and equilibrium are reestablished over and over again in reaction to shifts and changes in the elements internal and external to the field. Collective identity therefore patterns itself according to the presence and relative intensity of its dimensions. Some vectors may be weaker or stronger than others, and some may be entirely absent. One may imagine it as a field which expands and contracts and whose borders alter with the varying intensity and direction of the various forces that constitute it.

At any given moment both actors and observers can give an account of this field through a unified, delimited, and static definition of the 'we'. This tendency for 'reification' is always part of a collective actor's need for continuity and permanence. But today this unavoidable necessity has to confront important changes in the ways identification takes place.

Identification processes have been gradually transferred from the outside of society to its interior. From entities that are transcendent and metaphysical, from metasocial foundations such as myths, gods, ancestors, but also from the more recent avatars of God such as History or the Invisible Hand of the market, identification processes shift to associative human action, to culture, communication, and social relations. As identity is progressively recognized as socially produced, it becomes obvious that notions like coherence, limit maintenance, and recognition only describe it in static terms; in its dynamic connotation, however, collective identity increasingly becomes a process of construction and autonomization.

For recent social movements, particularly those centred around cultural issues, collective identity is then becoming ever more conspicuously the product of conscious action and the outcome of self-reflection, and, correspondingly, loses its status based on a set of given or 'structural' characteristics. The collective actor tends to construct its coherence and recognize itself within the limits set by the environment and social relations. 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.

To express this increasingly self-reflexive and constructed manner in which contemporary collective actors tend to define themselves, I suggest using the term *identization*. Within the boundaries of our language, it is a rough and provocative acknowledgement of a qualitative leap in the present forms of collective action, and also a call for an equivalent leap in our cognitive tools.

The lens of collective identity: what one can see through it

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 identity can function as a tool only if it helps to analyse phenomena, or dimensions of them, that cannot be explained through other concepts or models and if it contributes to the formation of new knowledge and to the understanding of these same phenomena.

As was stated in the opening section, the concept of collective identity was devised to overcome the shortcomings of the dualistic legacy still present in the study of collective action, and the difficulties of the current approaches in explaining some dimensions of contemporary social movements, particularly the central role of culture and symbolic production in these recent forms of action. It also addresses the naive epistemological assumptions, often only implicitly present in the many approaches to the study of social movements. It is then a concept that is intended to introduce changes in our conceptualization of social movements and for this very reason should contribute to a different understanding of the changing significance of social movements in contemporary society.

These two levels, changes in conceptualization and changes in our understanding of the practical-political significance of collective phenomena, are connected by a circular relation. The circle is not a vicious one if concepts help us to see more of the phenomena to which they apply, to see them differently. Reversely, if these empirical phenomena are filtered and interpreted through the conceptual lenses, they may help us to refine and improve the quality of the lenses themselves.

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. This again shifts the attention from the top to the bottom of collective action and does not consider only the most visible forms of action or the leaders' discourse. It looks to the more invisible or hidden forms and tries to listen to the more silent voices.

Processes of mobilization, organizational forms, models of leadership, ideologies and forms of communication – these are all meaningful levels of analysis for the reconstruction from within of the system of action that constitutes a collective actor. The whole of part IV will be devoted to a consideration of these aspects. But also relationships with the outside, with competitors, allies, adversaries, and especially the reaction of the political system and the apparatus of social control, must be taken into account to understand how the collective actor takes shape, perpetuates itself or changes. The importance of this dimension has been stressed for example by authors like Gamson (Gamson, Fireman and Rytina 1982), Tarrow (1989, 1994) McCarthy (Mc Carthy *et al.* 1991; McCarthy 1994) and will be developed in particular in part III.

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 work in the area has increased and improved our understanding of recent phenomena (Rucht 1988, 1990, 1991; Scherer-Warren and Krischke 1987; Dalton and Kuechler 1990; Pakulski 1991; Koopmans *et al.* 1992; Kriesi 1993; Kriesi *et al.* 1995; Giugni 1995; Ahlemeyer 1995; Proietto 1995), we know that contemporary 'movements' increasingly address cultural issues and tend to differentiate themselves from the model of political action. The concept of collective identity aids in the making of distinctions that mark off this cultural level from all others, and particularly from dimensions that are political in the proper sense. Such dimensions do not disappear from the scene, but come to play different roles that can be captured only if one relies on conceptual tools that allow the recognition of the complexity of present collective actors, tools that do not take for granted 'social movement' as a unified and homogeneous reality.

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. The notion of 'newness' that I introduced as a temporary and relative qualification of emergent collective action (Melucci 1980) has been criticized by

comparing different historical cases (see as examples of critics of the 'newness' Kivisto 1986; D'Anieri *et al.* 1990; Scott 1990a; Calhoun 1993), or it has been attributed to recent movements as a whole as their intrinsic 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 explain this connection between the apparent unity, which is always our empirical starting point, and the underlying multiplicity, which can be detected only by an appropriate analytical tool.

5 Another important consequence of the concept of collective identity has to do with the theory of domination and conflict. The notion of collective identity can prevent sociological analysis from ridding itself too quickly of the theoretical question of whether there are dimensions of contemporary collective action which express new systemic conflicts and challenge new forms of social domination in complex societies. To dismiss this question by reducing recent movements only to their political dimension is to hide or deny the new location of power.

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 within a limited scope and with a degree of interchangeability. But in so doing it also throws light on hidden issues that are not accounted for by the rationality of dominant apparatuses.

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 the most important contribution that the concept of collective identity can bring to the field of social movements studies.

7 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

'social movement' succeeds or fails in *becoming a collective actor* is therefore a fundamental task of the sociologist.

Actors, of course, act under the practical necessity of having to hypostatize their action-in-the-making in order to be able to speak about it. So do the opponents and the observers, including the researcher. 'Objectification' is a basic feature of the operation of human cognition and also a means of cognitive economy employed in speaking about the world. Yet this does not release us, as researchers, to taking this reification for granted, as if the relational texture of social phenomena would thereby disappear. The task of analysis is precisely that of deconstructing this apparent reality and letting the plurality of relations and meanings appear.

This analytical task allows some distinction between collective identity as a constructive process and its objectified results: collective actors have always a 'public identity' (Johnston *et al.* 1994), they always act as 'historical actors' (Mueller 1994), in the same sense in which individuals present their self according to Goffman. But the concept of collective identity can help us precisely to question the surface and to reach the deep relational texture of the collective actor. How means and ends are interpreted by different groups of the movement? How are resources and constraints held together in the movement discourse? What kind of relation with the environment shapes the movement and how do its different groups interpret it? What kind of conflicts, tensions, and negotiations can be observed during the process of construction and maintenance of a movement as a unified empirical actor? These are some of the questions that can be derived from the concept of collective identity and that bring us closer to the beginnings of a different research practice. Chapter 20 will deal with the methodological consequences of this theoretical stance.

Identity and collective emotional experience

In conclusion to the preceding discussion, I want to briefly engage a level of analysis whose importance has often been underevaluated by sociologists. Smelser (1962) has already stressed the need for an analysis of collective behaviour which moves simultaneously on various levels and which combines, yet without confusing them, both psychological and sociological variables. Attempting to go beyond the simple juxtaposition of these two different points of view, I will address an analytical level which one might call *collective experience*, which involves people's feeling and emotions, and which should be neither confused with other dimensions of collective action nor generalized into an overall explanatory model. I believe it important for the understanding of the formation of collective action to

complete an analysis of the meaning it assumes at the level of emotional dynamics. This is a complementary dimension which must be kept distinct from 'structural' analysis, but which nevertheless forms a constituent part of any analysis which takes seriously the task to understand 'action', not merely behaviour. Indeed, many misunderstandings and much pointless debate has been provoked by the confusion of these two levels. The analyst is caught between, on the one hand, the risk of an explanation using the categories of dynamic psychology, generalized at the level of structural explanation, and, on the other, the endeavour to use structural analysis also to explain processes which involve the motivations of individuals, the emotional meanings of action.

I shall attempt to make a step in the direction of overcoming this simple duality by indicating a possible level of analysis in terms of emotional experiential dynamics. Smelser has shown that collective action expresses both of the terms of the ambivalence (love/aggression) which characterizes relationships from an emotional point of view. This observation is echoed in Alberoni's theory of *statu nascenti* (Alberoni 1984), in which he formulates 'three principles of the dynamics' which regulate the relationship with the love-object: (i) ambivalence (love/hate); (ii) reciprocity of the energetic investments (love to those who love, hate to those who hate); (iii) tendency to reduce ambivalence.

Developing such a perspective, we can assume that, in terms of emotional investments, the objects of love are always affected by the love/hate ambivalence. It is difficult to endure the ambivalence and to accept its contradictory emotional content. If we hate those who we love we feel guilty. When the emotional charge of ambivalence reaches a threshold where it becomes unbearable for where it exceeds the actors' available energetic capacity, an attack on the enemy could constitute the defensive reaction reflecting the guilt of hating the loved one. Blaming the enemy projects onto him/her that part of aggressive tendencies towards the loved one which one cannot tolerate. By separating the terms of the ambivalence this enables both of them to be covered through investing the love-object only with eros and discharging aggression onto the enemy.

This model can be applied to what I call antagonist social conflicts. At the level of experiential dynamics, conflict takes the form of a reduction of ambivalence. Humankind's relationship with its own production is a relationship with objects imbued with an energetic positive charge (love-objects), for we identify ourselves with our products and always invest them with emotional and not just instrumental meaning. But love-objects are also those which enslave us and from which we become dependent. Hence the ambivalence towards our own production. In social conflicts, the

struggle among adversaries for control over social production is a way of reducing this ambivalence. Each party reduces the ambivalence by one-sidedly projecting one of the poles onto the other; each one attributes to the adversary in a projective way the aggressiveness s/he feels towards her/his own love-object. Opposition towards the adversary who appropriates or threatens the love-object redirects aggressiveness onto him/her and resolves the ambivalence towards the loved one, who thus retains only positive features.

This explanation applies to ongoing conflict but leaves its genesis unexplained. It does not discuss, that is, how the situation arises in which the same object (social production) is contested by adversaries and in which each perceives a threat from the other. Reflection on the process whereby control over production is delegated in the process of division of labour and of social differentiation (the sociological reasons I have already addressed in chapter 2) may shed light on the matter. The distribution of control over the allocation of social production and the creation of imbalances of power among social positions involves a transfer of ambivalence. Those delegating power and control to others reassign onto the function delegated the ambivalence which characterized their relationship with the love-object. To delegate power is not only a relieving and facilitating experience; it also implies a sense of loss and incapacity. Those delegating power invest the ones in power with aggressive emotions, in order to free their love-object (their own action) from any negative feeling. The recipients in the delegation experience the same situation of ambivalence *vis-à-vis* their mandators. To be invested by other people's mandate and expectations is a gratification and a honor but also a burden. The aggressive feelings are diverted towards the mandators, so that the action of those in power can be kept uncontaminated by negative emotions.

For both of the actors, the relationship marks out a situation of loss/conservation of the love-object. Those delegating power lose the direct control over their action, but through aggressiveness directed at the adversary can at least partially repair this sense of loss and preserve the positiveness of their action. Those in power lose the unburdened freedom of not having to exert control and take care of others, but they can assign the blame to the mandators and channel towards them their aggressive feelings.

When there exists a situation of direct control over the delegation relationship, a certain reciprocity of recognition prevails between the partners, for each of them accepts of receiving from the other something that is considered equivalent to one's own investment. One accepts the burden of exerting the function delegated to her/him; in exchange, however, recognition, deference, and gratification is received. One accepts to delegate power,

but only to receive in exchange service, help, support, security. The situation can be interpreted as a type of relationship which permits reduction of ambivalence through a limited acceptance of the pain connected to partial loss, which is perceived as tolerable. Aggressiveness towards the other takes the form of subjugation by the delegator and that of service by her/him who exercises the control function. Reciprocal direct control and frequent face-to-face confrontations, as in small-group situations, allow continuous monitoring of the relationship, reduce the risk of an aggressive clash, and favour the possibility of making sense of the situation as a limited and acceptable loss, which is reciprocal (submission in exchange for service and responsibility, and vice versa).

But when, for the structural reasons we have already examined (differentiation of the system, increasing distance among social positions), the possibility of direct control over the delegation disappears, so too does the reciprocity of recognition break down. We may presume that the sense of an acceptable loss no longer predominates and aggressive feelings gain in prominence. Uncontrolled ambivalence emerges once again and triggers the mechanism whereby aggression is redirected onto the adversary. Thus is created the situation of conflict described above.

This brief outline provides one possible reading, in terms of collective emotional experience, of the 'structural' theory of conflict that I presented earlier. The opposition of the adversaries and the desire to appropriate social production between its different producers could thus be explained also in terms of the emotional investments that characterize social production and collective action.

Collective identity, the construction of a 'we', is then a necessity also for the emotional balance of social actors involved in conflicts. The possibility of referring to a love-object ('Us' against 'Them') is a strong and preliminary condition for collective action, as it continuously reduces ambivalence and fuels action with positive energies. Collective actors constantly need to draw on this emotional background in order to feed their action, to make sense of it, to calculate its costs and benefits. When facing changes, the necessity of renewing and possibly renegotiating the bond that ties individuals and groups together originates from this deep emotional commitment to a 'We' which must maintain its integrity in order to motivate action.

Collective identity in historical context

One could argue that the concepts proposed by my theoretical framework are historically related to a very specific wave of collective action, that of the movements which started to appear in the Western countries in the

1960s. It is indeed difficult to separate the analytical level from its historical sources which, in my case, were the movements which I started to analyse in the early 1970s. The concepts on which my work relies are certainly influenced by contemporary social movements; yet I have always seen it important to draw the distinction between the conceptual level and the empirical analysis of concrete social movements. The concept of collective identity is important for my work as it provides a way of addressing the question of how a collective becomes a collective, which is usually taken for granted. In other fields of sociology the situation may differ, but in the case of collective action the question itself is apparently raised by no one. We usually take the collective actors for granted and quasi-spontaneously attribute a kind of essentialist existence to them. The theoretical problem for us today is this unity, the creation of a collective subject of action as a process which needs to be subjected to explanation.

Of course, this question could probably not be raised for the movements of the past, not because these processes were inactive in earlier movements but because they were less important and less visible. Collective actors of the past were more deeply rooted in a specific social condition in which they were embedded, so that the question of the collective was already answered from the beginning through that social condition that accounted as such for the existence of a collective actor. A working-class movement is first of all the expression of a working class social background; it is already defined by the social conditions of that particular group. For the working-class militants it was extremely important that they belonged to a specific culture which was organized in structures of everyday life, in forms of solidarity which shaped the identity and grounded it in the material and cultural conditions of the everyday (Calhoun 1982; Fantasia 1998). This continuity between the structural location of the actor and the material and cultural world of its experience is what I mean by the class condition.

Today, as we are increasingly more dealing with movements which cannot be referred to any specific social condition, the question of how a collective becomes just that has become more prominent. In my work, I was able to raise this question as it was focusing precisely on such particular realities, but nevertheless the question in itself seems a reasonable scientific question which can be addressed also to other historical movements. Theoretically speaking, this question also could not be raised within another cultural and intellectual context, as there simply existed no social and conceptual space in which to advance thought in these terms. We are thus always proceeding within the circular relationship between concepts and objects, but if concepts prove heuristically effective once they are in place they can nevertheless find application beyond the historical context

in which they were produced. They can help us to see differently objects in other historical contexts.

A final note could be added concerning the use of the notion of collective *identity*. As already stated, the term 'identity' is conceptually unsatisfactory: it conveys too strongly the idea of the permanence of a subject. At this moment, however, no other designation seems in possession of the capacity to replace it in its purpose. Thus, for the time being we must continue being trapped in the usage of the term in the near-contradictory situation where in order to bring to light the processual dimension of collective identity as an interactive construction, we inadvertently stress the reality and the permanence of the actor. What I am trying to do with this concept, however, is to bring it to its limits. Scientific enterprises proceed in this manner, through an increasing effort to 'use up' the relevant concepts until they reach their internal limits, to allow then the situation itself to affect a change in concepts when the older tools have proven useless and outdated themselves. To be sure, there exist even now notions that better stress the dynamic side of identity, but they seem partial successes as well. The term 'project', for instance, points out one dimension of identity: the capability of relating to the future, starting from the present. However, one has to be located somewhere in order to think of the future, to be rooted in an already established definition in order to have projects; otherwise one is left in the world of fantasies and images. A 'project' is possible only when a location somewhere in the present is established. It is the here and now, and this point of consistency provides the only possible starting point to think of the future. But the relation to the past is equal in importance to the projectual dimension in the definition of an identity (Halbwachs 1975; Namer 1987; Middleton and Edwards 1990). The relation with the past is necessary the same way as the capacity to make projects, and this has become particularly concrete and obvious against the backdrop of the dominant trends in our present culture. Ours is a culture which is making of speed and change its central values, and through them it creates new forms of power. There is a rhetoric of change and speed as values that reveals its belongingness to the dominant logic of big organizations, of production and circulation of goods, of the world media system; its consequence is the erasure of past and permanence.

More than in any previous culture identity today is in need of a relationship to the past. Such a relationship is created by the necessity of retaining something while changing, of maintaining roots, of reconstructing our history without which there is no possibility of progress. The whole notion of time is redefined with the new relationship to the past and the future: the present becomes a crucial dimension, not as a point-like, instantaneous

dimension but rather as the possibility of forging in the here and now the connection between the past and the future, between memories and projects.

At the same time, however, the use of the notion of identity addresses and points out a contradictory situation which is important for collective actors. Every actor is faced with a two-sided problem. On the one hand, the actor must maintain a permanence which, on the other, must be produced continuously. This tension is always present, and probably the currency acquired by 'identity', the apparent paradox (speaking of the 'process of identity') it contains, captures something of it by signalling the contradictory necessity of permanence in the continuous constructive process. At any given time, when requested its identity, a collective actor (excluding the extreme, completely schizophrenic situation) is able to provide an answer through its many mouths in a definite way. Any such stable definition, however, is at the same time the outcome of constructive processes.

Ultimately, identity becomes a matter of the question that is asked and of the position taken by the observer. If one is interested in defining who the actor is at a given moment, identity provides a useful concept. Should one, however, be more interested in the constructive process behind its formation, then probably other concepts should be created that are more appropriate than identity for addressing this particular point of view and for account for the tension between maintenance and production of the definition that a collective actor gives of itself.

Having outlined our theoretical framework, analysis of 'movements' in complex societies may now begin.