1. See the analysis of Durkheim's view of symbols as constitutive in Bellah 1973.

2. The two major lines of empirical work on values are the anthropological, comparing values of different social groups (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961), and the social-psychological, comparing the values of individuals (Rokeach 1973).

3. Geertz's early classic, *The Religion of Java* (1960), is overtly Weberian in inspiration and execution, tracing the influence of differing religious ethics on economic action. Geertz (1966) also emphasizes the problem of theodicy (explaining suffering and injustice in the world God controls), which was central to Weber's analysis of the dynamics of religious change. And Geertz has returned repeatedly to the problem of rationalization in non-Western religious traditions (1968, 1973).

4. See Keesing 1974 for a detailed treatment of this issue.

5. See Sherry Ortner's (1984) insightful and entertaining analysis of shifts in culture theory, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties."

6. This is the theoretical strategy Randall Collins (1981, 1988) has called "microtranslation." The theorist attempts to provide concrete, individual-level causal imagery even for macro or global causal processes, without making the micro reductionist claim that the underlying causal dynamics operate at the micro level.

7. Careful readers of Weber will note that such an explanation of action is perfectly compatible with his theoretical orientation. "Social action" is, after all, action whose "subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course" (Weber 1968: 4). Weber (1946b) also argued clearly that the Protestant sects continued to influence action long after intense belief had faded because members knew that sect membership gave visible social testimony to their worthiness. Nonetheless, Weber and most of his followers have been preoccupied with the inner workings of the religious psyche rather than with more external forms of cultural power.

8. William Sewell Jr. (1985, 1990) analyzes how dramatic social movements shift an entire pattern of public discourse and thus remake future forms of collective action.

9. See Jepperson 1991 and Scott 1992 for fuller treatments of institutions and problems of institutional analysis.

10. I develop this argument more fully for the case of marriage in *Talk of Love: How Americans Use Their Culture*, forthcoming from University of Chicago Press.

Chapter 3

The Process of Collective Identity

Alberto Melucci

Culture and Collective Action

Interest in cultural analysis has grown in the past two decades together with an extraordinary cultural transformation of planetary society. We are witnessing, with mixed feelings of amazement and fear, the impressive development of communication technologies, the creation of a world media system, the breakdown of historical political cleavages, the impact of cultural differences on national societies and at the world scale. Never before have human cultures been exposed to such a massive reciprocal confrontation, and never has the cultural dimension of human action been directly addressed as the core resource for production and consumption. It is not surprising therefore that social sciences are rediscovering culture, that a new reading of the tradition is taking place through the lens of this key concept, and that a wave of interest in cultural analysis is bringing a new vitality to theoretical debates in sociology.

Social movements, too, seem to shift their focus from class, race, and other more traditional political issues toward the cultural ground. In the past twenty years emerging social conflicts in advanced societies have not expressed themselves through political action, but rather have raised cultural challenges to the dominant language, to the codes that organize information and shape social practices. The crucial dimensions of daily life (time, space, interpersonal relations, individual and group identity) have been involved in these conflicts, and new actors have laid claim to their autonomy in making sense of their lives.

This essay addresses the concept of collective identity that was introduced in my previous contributions to the analysis of contemporary social movements (see especially Melucci 1989), and that has already stimulated a

promising discussion (Bartholomew and Mayer 1992; Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994). Why should the issue of collective identity be a concern and, more specifically, in the context of a book on social movements and culture? From the theoretical point of view, interest in cultural analysis corresponds to a shift (see Swidler, chapter 2 in this book) toward new questions about how people make sense of their world: How do people relate to texts, practices, and artifacts so that these cultural products are meaningful to them? And, ultimately, how do they produce meaning? These new questions raised by the recent reflections on culture are paralleled by the increasing evidence of the weaknesses of traditional sociological theories when they are confronted with contemporary social movements.

The study of social movements has always been divided by the dualistic legacy of structural analysis as a precondition for collective action and the analysis of individual motivations. These parallel, and sometimes intertwined, sets of explanations never fill the gap between behavior and meaning, between "objective" conditions and "subjective" motives and orientations. They never can 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, to linguistics, and to the many methodological warnings coming from ethnomethodology and cognitive sociology have also made more evident the low level of epistemological awareness and self-reflexivity typically implied in traditional research on collective phenomena. With few exceptions (for a good example see Johnston, chapter 11 in this volume), research on social movements has been led so far by a widespread "realistic" attitude toward the object, as if collective actors existed in themselves, were unified ontological essences that the researcher had to understand by referring them to some underlying structural condition or by sorting the motives behind the behaviors. 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 the field contributes to the construction of it. The present book is in itself a significant example of a turning point on these matters and a sign of an increasing epistemological awareness.

A thorough rethinking of the concept of collective identity is necessary to 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. This strategic role of the concept in dealing with the questions that are coming to the forefront of contemporary sociological debates probably explains the parallel interest in both cultural analysis and collective identity. By asking the question of how individuals and groups make sense of their actions and how we can understand this process, we are obliged to shift from a monolithic and metaphysical idea of collective actors toward the processes through which a collective becomes a collective. A processual approach to collective identity helps account for such a theoretical and methodological shift. But the concept is often used in social movement studies in a reified fashion, a new passe-partout that simply substitutes the old search for a core "essence" of a movement. This essay stresses three basic points that are fundamental to a processual approach to collective identity: (1) collective identity implies a constructivist view of collective action; (2) it has some epistemological consequences on the way one considers the relation between observer and observed in social research; and (3) it affects the research practices themselves.

Defining Collective Identity

I consider collective action as the result of purposes, resources, and limits, as a purposive orientation constructed by means of social relationships within a system of opportunities and constraints. It therefore cannot be considered either the simple effect of structural preconditions or the expression of values and beliefs. Individuals acting collectively "construct" their action by means of "organized" investments: they define in cognitive terms the field of possibilities and limits they perceive while at the same time activating their relationships so as to give sense to their "being together" and to the goals they pursue.

Action and Field

The empirical unity of a social movement should be considered as a result rather than a starting point, a fact to be explained rather than evidence. The events in which a number of individuals act collectively combine different orientations, involve multiple actors, and implicate a system of opportunities and constraints that shape their relationships. The actors "produce" the collective action because they are able to define themselves and their relationship with the environment. The definition that the actors construct is not linear but produced by interaction, negotiation, and the opposition of different orientations. Individuals or subgroups contribute to the formation of a "we" (more or

less stable and integrated according to the type of action) by rendering common and laboriously adjusting three orders of orientations: those relating to the ends of the actions (the sense the action has for the actor); those relating to the means (the possibilities and the limits of the action); and finally those relating to relationships with the environment (the field in which the action takes place). The action system of a collective actor is thus organized along a number of polarities in a state of mutual tension. The collective actor seeks to give an acceptable and lasting unity to such a system, which is continuously subject to tensions because action has to meet multiple and contrasting requirements in terms of ends, means, and environment. Collective mobilizations can occur and can even continue because the actor has succeeded in realizing, and in the course of the action continues to realize, a certain integration between those contrasting requirements. This "social construction" of the "collective" through negotiation and renegotiation is continually at work when a form of collective action occurs. A failure or a break in this constructive process makes the action impossible.

The question How is a collective actor formed? at this point assumes a decisive theoretical importance: what was formerly considered a datum (the existence of the movement) is precisely what 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 actors themselves are "constructed."

A Definition

I call collective identity this process of "constructing" an action system. Collective identity is an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level) and concerned with the orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place. By "interactive and shared" I mean a definition that must be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated through a repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals (or groups).

First, collective identity as a process involves cognitive definitions concerning the ends, means, and 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 a society or that is specific to the 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 ends and means, investments and rewards. This cognitive level does not necessarily

imply unified and coherent frameworks (as cognitivists tend to think: see Neisser 1976; Abelson 1981; Eiser 1980), but it is constructed through interaction and comprises different and sometimes contradictory definitions (see Billig, chapter 4 in this volume).

Second, collective identity as a process refers thus to a network of active relationships between the actors, who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions. Forms of organizations and models of leadership, communicative channels, and technologies of communication are constitutive parts of this network of relationships.

Finally, a certain degree of emotional investment, which enables individuals to feel like part of a common unity, is required in the definition of a collective identity. Collective identity is never entirely negotiable because participation in collective action is endowed with meaning but cannot be reduced to cost-benefit calculation and always mobilizes emotions as well (Moscovici 1981). Passions and feelings, love and hate, faith and fear are all part of a body acting collectively, particularly in areas of social life like social movements that are less institutionalized. To understand this part of collective action as "irrational," as opposed to the "rational" (which in this case means good!) part, is simply a nonsense. 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; it implies a relation between two actors that allows their (mutual) recognition. The notion of identity always refers to these three features: 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. There is no doubt that at any given moment social actors try to delimit and stabilize a definition of themselves. So do the observers. But the concept of collective identity as defined here can precisely help to explain that what appears as a given reality, more or less per-

manent, is always the result, at least to a certain extent, of an active process that 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 as defined here can help catch the interactive and sometimes contradictory processes lying behind what appears to be a stable and coherent definition of a given collective actor. I am aware of the fact that I am using the word *identity*, which is semantically inseparable from the idea of permanence and is perhaps, for this very reason, ill-suited to the processual analysis for which I am arguing. Nevertheless, I am still using the word *identity* as a constitutive part of the concept of "collective identity" because so far I have not found a better linguistic solution. Because, as I will argue, this collective identity is as much an analytical tool as a "thing" to be studied, it is by definition a temporary solution to a conceptual problem and can be changed if other concepts prove to be more adequate. In the meantime, I work within the limits of the available language, confident that the shift toward new concepts is a matter not just of different words but of a new paradigm. The way out from the legacy of modernity is a difficult process, and we will realize that our time is over only at the end, when we will find ourselves in a new conceptual universe. Meanwhile, for the sake of communication, we cannot help but use 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 be in control of their own actions, but conversely they can act as collective bodies because they have achieved 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 that actors are able to recognize. Second, it entails a notion of causality and belonging; actors 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. Third, identity entails an ability to perceive duration, an ability that 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 therefore defines the capacity for autonomous action, a differentiation of the actor from others while continuing to be itself. However, self-identification 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. Therefore it would be impossible to talk of collective identity without referring to its relational dimension.

Recent advances in the neurosciences and cognitive sciences on what is innate to human behavior and what is acquired (Ornstein and Sobel 1987; Gazzaniga 1987) provide a formal model for the present discussion of collective identity. Although some extreme positions have been taken up, contemporary brain research tends toward the intermediate view that the relational and social aspects of human behavior lie within its biological constitution. In the functioning of our brains, heredity lays down a neural program that governs the growth of an individual's nervous system. As far as the constitution of individual identity is concerned, the program creates conditions under which individual differentiation comes about as a result of interaction with the environment. Psychoanalysis, genetic psychology, and symbolic interactionism, investigating the early structuring of individual identity, had already demonstrated the crucial role of primary interactions—recognizing and being recognized—in the most deep-lying experiences of the life of an infant.

In a similar way, therefore, we can say that social movements develop collective identity in a circular relationship with a system of opportunities and 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 are in turn recognized and defined as such by the actor.

Therefore the unity of collective action, which is produced and maintained by self-identification, rests on the ability of a movement 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, even 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 ("We are for You the You that You are for Us"). 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 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 is always that difference, to be affirmed and lived as such, presupposes a certain equality and a certain reciprocity.

Identity and Conflict

Collective identity as a process can be analytically divided and seen from internal and external points 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 competition for scarce resources begins. Both subjects involved deny each others' identities and refuse to grant to their adversary what they demand for themselves. The conflict severs the reciprocity of the interaction; the adversaries clash over something that is common to both of them but that each refuses to grant to the other. Beyond the concrete or symbolic objects at stake in a conflict, what people fight for is always the possibility of recognizing themselves and being recognized as subjects of their action. Social actors enter a conflict to affirm the identity that their opponent has denied them, to reappropriate something that 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 this bond in order to make sense of what they are doing (Pizzorno 1978, 1986). The solidarity that ties individuals to

others enables them to affirm themselves as subjects of their actions 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 what 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 this need for identity and help to satisfy it.

Collective Identity over Time

Collective identity is a learning process that leads to the formation and maintenance of a unified empirical actor that we can call a social movement. As it passes through various stages, the collective actor develops a capacity to resolve the problems set by the environment and become increasingly independent and autonomously active in its relationships. 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 situations of crisis or intense conflict that challenge the identity of a movement, when it is subjected to contradictory pressures that 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 that it can still preserve a certain amount of coherence, at least internally to each of them. The most serious cases provoke a breakdown or fragmentation of the movement or a breach of its confines. This can lead to the incapacity to produce and maintain a definition of the movement that has 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, and 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.

When we consider organizational structures, leadership patterns, and membership requisites, we deal with levels of collective action that presuppose the notion of collective identity: they incorporate and enact the ways a collective actor defines ends, means, and field of action. One should consider those levels as empirical indicators of a possible collective identity and, con-

versely, 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.

Dereification of Collective Identity

In sum, one cannot treat collective identity as a "thing," as the monolithic unity of a subject; one must instead conceive it 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 that an actor declares 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 definitive datum; it is instead a laborious process in which unity and equilibrium are reestablished 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 that expands and contracts and whose borders alter with the varying intensity and direction of the 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 "reification" tendency is always part of a collective actor's need for continuity and permanence. But today this unsurmountable necessity has to confront important changes in the ways identification takes place.

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

For recent social movements, particularly those centered on cultural issues, collective identity is becoming the product of conscious action and the outcome of self-reflection more than a set of given or "structural" characteris-

tics. 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 as an action more than as a situation.

To express this increasingly self-reflexive and constructed manner in which contemporary collective actors tend to define themselves, I suggest that we coin a term: *identization*. Within the boundaries of our language, it is a rough and provocative acknowledgment 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, not a datum or an essence, not a "thing" with a "real" existence. In dealing with concepts, one should never forget that we are not talking of "reality," but of instruments or lenses through which we read reality. The concept of collective identity can function as a tool only if it helps to analyze phenomena, or dimensions of them, that cannot be explained through other concepts or models and if it contributes to new knowledge and understanding of these phenomena.

As I said in the opening section of this essay, the concept of collective identity was devised in order 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 recent forms of action. It also addresses the naive epistemological assumptions implied very often by many contemporary 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 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. Moreover, if these empirical phenomena are filtered and interpreted through these lenses, they may help us to refine and improve the quality of the lenses themselves.

Let me try to indicate what one can see through the particular lens of collective identity.

First, the notion of collective identity is relevant to sociological literature because it brings a field view of 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 (speech, documents, opinions of participants) there is always an active negotiation, an interactive work among individuals, groups, or parts of the movement. This shifts attention from the top to the bottom of collective action and it 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. But also relationships with the outside—with competitors, allies, adversaries, and especially the reaction of the political system and the apparatus of social control—define a field of opportunities and constraints within which the collective actor takes shape, perpetuates itself, or changes (the importance of this dimension has been stressed by, for example, Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; Gamson 1990; Tarrow 1989b).

Second, 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. In the past ten years, analysis of social movements and collective action has further developed into an autonomous sector of theory and research in the social sciences, and the quantity and quality of work in the area has increased and improved our understanding of recent phenomena (McCarthy and Zald 1987; Jenkins 1983; Cohen 1985; Turner and Killian 1987; Klandermans, Kriesi, and Tarrow 1988; Snow and Benford 1988; Melucci 1989; Gamson 1990). The autonomy of the conceptual field relating to analysis of social movements has developed, not by chance, in parallel with the increasing autonomy of noninstitutional forms of collective action in complex systems. The social space of movements has become a distinct area of the system and no longer coincides either with the traditional forms of organization of solidarity or with the conventional channels of political representation. The area of movements is now a "sector" or a "subsystem" of the social arena.

Recognizing this autonomy forces us to revise concepts like "state" and "civil society" (Keane 1988), "private" and "public," "expressive" and "instrumental"; distinctions break down and signal a change in our conceptual universe. The notion of "movement" itself, which originally stood for an entity

acting against the political and governmental system, is now inadequate to describe the reality of reticular and diffuse collective phenomena. Contemporary "movements" take the form of solidarity networks with potent cultural meanings, and it is precisely these that distinguish them so sharply from political actors and formal organizations.

The concept of collective identity helps to make distinctions that separate this level from others (particularly from political dimensions of collective action). These dimensions do not disappear from the scene, but come to play different roles that can be caught only if one relies on conceptual tools that allow one to recognize the complexity of present collective actors and that do not take for granted "social movement" as a unified and homogeneous reality.

Third, we have passed beyond the global and metaphysical conception of collective actors as historical heroes or villains. By identifying specific levels that enter the construction of collective identity, we can see movements as action systems. They are not entities that move with the unity of goals attributed to them by their ideologues or opponents. They are systems of action, complex networks among the different levels and meanings of social action. This is particularly true of contemporary forms of collective action that are multiple and variable. They lie at several different levels of the social system. The consequence for the analysis of contemporary conflicts is that we must therefore begin by distinguishing between the field of a conflict and the actors that bring such conflict to the fore.

In the past, studying conflicts used to mean analyzing the social condition of a group and using this analysis to deduce the cause of the collective action. Today we must first identify a social field where a conflict emerges and then explain how certain social groups take action within it. Moreover, the actors in a conflict cannot be easily linked to a social condition because they are very often a social composite. Their condition as such does not explain their involvement in a conflict. Since actors are not inherently conflictual, by their social "essence," the nature of action is temporary; it may involve different actors, or it may shift among various areas of the system. This multiplicity and variability of actors make the plurality of the analytical meanings contained within the same collective event or phenomenon even more explicit.

Fourth, the concept of collective identity has important consequences in clearing up some misunderstanding on the so-called new social movements. Paradoxically, the result of the recent debate on "new movements" has been that the image of movements as metaphysical entities has been deeply questioned. Contemporary movements, like all collective phenomena, are not "new" or "old" but bring together forms of action that involve various levels of

the social structure. They comprise different orientations that entail a variety of analytical points of view. Their components belong to different historical periods. We must, therefore, seek to understand this multiplicity of synchronic and diachronic elements and explain how they are combined into the concrete unity of a collective actor. The notion of collective identity can help to describe and to 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.

Fifth, another important consequence of the concept of collective identity has to do with the theory of domination and conflict. Once one has clarified the epistemological premise concerning the "newness" of contemporary movements, the notion of collective identity can prevent sociological analysis from too quickly getting rid of the theoretical question of whether a new paradigm of collective action is now taking shape. The question occurs not in the empirical sense of taking the observed phenomenon as a whole, but rather analytically, in terms of certain levels or elements of action. We must ask ourselves, therefore, if there are dimensions to the "new" forms of action that we should assign to a systemic context other than that of industrial capitalism, if these dimensions express new systemic conflicts and challenge new forms of social domination, a question that is dismissed by critics of "new movements," who place these phenomena on an exclusively political level.

I have suggested that collective action in many recent social movements, by the very fact that it exists, represents in its form and models of organization a message broadcast to the rest of society concerning new powers and the possibilities of new challenges. Instrumental and political goals are still pursued, but they become precise in their scope and replaceable. Action affects institutions by modernizing their culture and organization as well as by selecting new elites. At the same time, however, it raises issues that are not provided for by instrumental rationality, which requires only the implementation of whatever has been decided by anonymous and impersonal power.

Sixth, this level of analysis 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. Contemporary movements, in particular, weave together multiple meanings, legacies from the past, the effects of modernization, resistances to change. The complexity, the irreducibility, the intricate semantics of the meanings of social action are perhaps the most fundamental contributions that the concept of collective identity can bring to the field of social movements studies.

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 and considering it as a unified empirical object. If sociology still rests on an essentialistic idea of social movements as characters acting on the stage of history, it may thus contribute, even unwillingly, to the practical denial of difference, to a factual and political ignorance of that complex semantics of meanings that contemporary movements carry in themselves. Not taking collective action as a given reality and questioning what is usually taken for granted—namely, the existence of a movement as a homogeneous empirical actor—are what analysis is about. To understand how a social movement succeeds or fails in becoming a collective actor is therefore a fundamental task for sociologists.

Of course actors have to reify their action in the making in order to speak about it. So do the opponents and the observers, including the researcher. "Objectifying" is a basic trait of human cognition and also a cognitive economy used in speaking about the world. But it does not mean that, as researchers, we have to take this reification for granted. The task of analysis is precisely that of deconstructing this apparent reality and letting the plurality of relations and meanings appear.

How are ends and means interpreted by different parts 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 the different parts 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 lead to a different research practice.

How to Study Collective Identity

Research Methods on Social Movements

I would like to discuss here the consequences that posing the question of collective identity has for research practice. In the field of social movements, research has reflected the actor-system dualism inherited from the nineteenth-century legacy. This dualism has been present in three major and recurrent practices. First and most commonly, in the observation of behaviors variously defined as movements, protest, mobilizations, and so on, the researcher seeks to discover a particular social condition. This has meant

investigating whether the structural conditions that define the actor, or rather the alleged actor, are capable of explaining the types of behavior observed.

The second area deals with the perceptions, representations, and values of actors. In this case, surveys are conducted, normally about activism, to delve into the motivations of individuals to participate in social movements. A sub-category of this approach is the analysis of documents produced by collective actors, that is, of the ideologies that have been articulated in written form. This entails working on organized (and organizational) representations. In this case, one can take the framing activity of "movement" leaders (those who have the power to speak on behalf of a movement) as a point of reference. Obviously a constant and recurring possibility is that of relating these two levels: certain representations and opinions are correlated with certain structural conditions.

The third type of research practice concerns the quantitative analysis of collective events, a relatively recent approach that Charles Tilly (1978, 1986) has systematically developed with very important results (see also, in the same direction, Tarrow 1989b). Here the empirical units are protest events. Such events, further classified by their specific characteristics (size, type of actors, repertoire of actions used, response on the part of the authorities), are then correlated with structural factors or different states of the political, economic, or other systems.

Each of the foregoing research practices provides useful information and helps clarify some aspect of collective action. Each of them indicates a research path that, explicitly confined to its own epistemological limits, could increase our understanding of collective action. But when an approach becomes the only tool for the interpretation of "a movement as such," then it easily becomes an undue extension and generalization that is also colored by a metaphysics of the actor that tends to consider it an "essential" subject instead of a system of relationships.

In the first case it is assumed that the structural "thickness" of a social condition should explain action, which is not able in itself to carry the "true" meaning of what is observed. One has to refer to a more substantial reality beyond the appearance of the phenomenon. A self-restrained application of this approach could provide useful information on the social profile of participants in social movements and on some societal macroprocesses that affect collective action.

In the second case, when inquiries concern the participants' motivation, the assumption is that by comparing individual opinions and representations and by relating them to some structural variables (e.g., social condition) one

can draw a picture of the movement as a collective actor, which is supposed to be the sum or the combination of those individual opinions. When, on the other hand, one refers to documents, the discourse of the leaders and their framing activities are taken, mostly implicitly, as representative of the movement as a whole: the actor is conceived therefore as a unified reality that is interpreted in a transparent way by the leaders and by the organizational discourse. Here too a self-restrained use of these sources and methods could tell us what participants and leaders think.

The third case is concerned with protest events, and it is based on public records. In this case the reification of the collective actor is produced first by the fact that it is reduced to a political actor: given the nature of the data, the only forms of action that can be considered are those that challenge a public authority and are recorded by the police, the press, or other public sources. Second, in the definition of the movement, all the submerged relationships, the everyday activities that are part of a movement culture cannot be taken into account, or can be referred to only indirectly. But, of course, a self-restrained use of this method could give us important answers to the question of how an actor confronts a public authority and how the action is affected by the opponent.

When these approaches are used to provide general interpretations of "a movement as such," what disappears from the scene in all three cases is collective action as a social production, as a purposive, meaningful, and relational orientation, that cannot simply be derived from structural constraints (first case), cannot be reduced to the unity of leaders' discourse or to the sum of militants' opinions (second case), or cannot be reduced to being merely public behavior (third case).

The recent developments of discourse analysis applied to social movements are aware of this complexity and try to creatively approach the multiplicity of levels implied in a collective discourse (Johnston, chapter 11 in this volume). They bring a different point of view that is more concerned with meaning and its construction. Also, the recent wave of interest in biographical methods (see for a synthesis Bertaux 1981; Della Porta 1992) has also brought new attention to the subjective and discursive dimensions of collective action. But here there are also some risks related to a new version of the naive assumption that the meaning of a collective action will be the sum of the representations of individual actors (see Melucci 1992). Moreover, the assumption that a narrative will somehow adequately reveal the meaning of an action—above and beyond the relationship with the researcher in which the narrative is produced and the particular relationship of the narrator with

his own memory—can easily end up identifying action with the ideology of the actor (and of the researcher) instead of revealing the nature of action as an interactive construct. If attention is not paid to the conditions of production of a text, to the reception and interpretation of it by the researcher, a new kind of "objectivism" can be the outcome of a very "subjective" source as biographical data.

Action research and research intervention, particularly as developed by Alain Touraine (1978), directly address the question of how action is constructed and attempt to observe action as it takes place, as a process built by actors. But these approaches assume a kind of missionary task on the part of the researcher, who ends up playing the role of deus ex machina, providing the actors with a consciousness that they are apparently not able to produce for themselves (this is particularly true of Touraine 1974, 1984). Second, they ignore the relationship between the observer and the observed, a problem that is crucial for any form of research that entails a direct interaction between researcher and subject. Finally, research-intervention methods underestimate the fact that a researcher intervening in a field of action does not work under "natural" conditions but modifies the field and may even manipulate it, beyond his or her intentions (this point has been particularly developed by the French *analyse institutionnelle*; see Lapassade 1981; Loureau 1977).

Conditions for Studying Collective Identity

If collective action is conceived as a field of meanings and orientations that are constructed through social relationships within resources and limits, further steps must be taken to address empirically the shortcomings of these attempts. Since collective identity is not a "thing" but a process of construction through active relationships, a research practice focusing on process should at least fill three conditions.

First, it should recognize that actors understand the meaning of their actions, independent of the redeeming or manipulative intentions of researchers.

Second, it should recognize that the researcher-actor relationship is itself subject to observation.

Finally, it should recognize that any research practice that requires an intervention in the field of action of a given actor creates an artificial situation that must be explicitly acknowledged. Such a practice therefore requires a high degree of self-reflexivity and a capacity for metacommunication regarding the circular relationship between the observer and the observed.

A research practice capable of responding to these requirements needs to

concentrate more on processes and less on contents. It is toward this end that my research experiments in the field of collective action have been directed. This experience has resulted in my conviction that the three directions I have indicated here constitute a proving ground for any method that wishes to escape dualism between structure and intentions, observer and observed. In following these recommendations, research on collective identity casts off the illusion of being a reflection of the "true" reality and moves closer to understanding its very nature: action is a self-reflecting process socially constructed within the limits of a given social and cultural field; research is that particular kind of social action where chances or opportunities for self-reflexivity are higher.

Collective actors are never completely in control of their own actions. They are acted upon and lived by the process of the construction of a "we" even as they act and live that very process. There is an opaque, hidden aspect of collective action that is a result of the impossibility of an actor's simultaneously assuming the position of actor and the point of view of the relationship in which it is involved and to which it contributes. The relational point of view is not inaccessible to a collective actor, but one cannot simultaneously act and be an analyst, as each of us knows from our own personal experience. Analysis requires the distance that permits us to assume the point of view of the relationship itself and to metacommunicate about the limits and the possibilities by which action is delimited.

Only by keeping this distance and at the same time being close to the action can one observe that intense, plural, and sometimes contradictory system of meanings that constitute the collective identity of a social movement. Without access to the invisible network of negotiations and interactions among different parts and levels of an empirical movement, it is difficult not to reduce action to behaviors and opinions. But this access requires some conditions in the relationship between researchers and collective actors.

A Contractual Relationship

Knowledge about collective identity assumes a decisive role in rendering accessible a specific potential for action; it functions as a multiplier of processes for change because it gives the actors responsibility for the choices they make. Action research is sometimes close to this purpose and result, but it is often led by a missionary spirit that too easily transforms the researcher into an activist or a preacher.

Knowledge today becomes a desirable resource for actors, allowing for the recognition of a difference between actors and researchers in terms of

skills and interests. The researcher is a particular type of actor who can provide cognitive resources, which help to make the relational point of view more transparent. This helps bring about the possibility of a negotiated relationship between actors who professionally control some cognitive resources and others who need to clarify their capacity for action but in turn control expertise and information relative to the action itself.

The meeting point between these two groups of actors is necessarily contractual. There is nothing missionary about it. Nor does this relation imply expectations about the destiny of the actors for the point of view of researchers. This might be true of some researchers as individuals, as citizens, as political activists, but not as scientists. In their institutionalized role, researchers are called upon to produce knowledge. In this capacity, they have to take ethical and political responsibility for the production and destination of cognitive resources; they do not have the privilege of being able to guide the destiny of a society as advisers of rulers or ideologues of protest.

The meeting ground between actors and researchers, and in this case I am not thinking only about the study of social movements, is the recognition of a demand for cognitive resources. Two distinct interests, that of the researcher who gathers information and that of the actor who improves his or her capacity to act consciously and meaningfully, can temporarily meet and create the possibility of an exchange.

An Example

In my own research practice, which is based on group experiential and videorecorded sessions (Melucci 1984), I have tried to apply these methodological guidelines to different social movement networks. The goal of my methodology is to break the apparent unity of the discourse of movements and to observe the interactive construction of the unity through differences and conflicts. The particular methodology is intended to address not individual opinions, but the system of interactions in its making. It assumes that it does not address only discourses, but discourses constructed through actual interactions involving the internal and external action field: actors are confronted with their internal tensions and with the external relationships with researchers, leaders, other actors, observers, opponents. The procedure is intended to allow the multilevel, multifaceted, often contradictory aspects of identity to emerge. Through a structured and process-oriented intervention it aims at the reconstruction of a field of meanings and relationships that is often dilemmatic (as the rethorical approach in social psychology has also shown; see Billig, chapter 4 in this volume).

Let me take as an example the women's movement of the 1970s. My example is based on the movement in Italy (Melucci 1984, 1989), but many characteristics resulting from this particular research are comparable to similar phenomena in other Western countries. Usually the women's movement has been analyzed either as a political actor or as a feminine culture spread in the life world. Through the reconstruction of the collective identity I was able to detect the action system of this collective actor and the ways the different components of women's action are kept together and translated in visible mobilization.

The women's movement reveals the tensions between consciousness-raising groups centered on the transparency of internal affective needs and the professional groups committed to conquering a public space for the feminine difference; between the groups producing "women's culture" (writing, art) for internal consumption and those engaged in the production of services (lodging, health, welfare); between the groups giving priority to research on the self and individual differences and those that put the accent on "sorority." These are not the only types of groups within the movement, but orientations that are present within a single group or portion of the movement. The integration of these orientations is assured by the high degree of elasticity of a very adaptable organizational form, simultaneously self-reflective and productive (the main production is that of "feminine" cultural codes). Starting from this identity structure, the mobilization of women is thus possible and assumes the characteristic double-level (visibility-latency) form: brief and intense public mobilization campaigns that are fed by the submerged life of the networks and their self-reflective resources.

This example shows how important the notion of collective identity can be in revealing collective action as a system of tensions. Applied to empirical cases, it accounts for different outcomes of the movement, which are related to the different internal field and to different answers from the external environment. Collective action should be thought of as a construct, putting an end to the structure-intentions duality. Action is an interactive, constructive process within a field of possibilities and limits recognized by the actors. The accent on the limits to the process of construction, which always take place within the boundaries of a given field, avoids the risk of a radical constructivism that would be difficult to sustain (Giddens 1984). Nevertheless, without the capability of perceiving and making sense of its boundaries, action would not be possible. In fact, radical constructivism finishes by destroying the relational dimension of social action and presents itself as the ultimate version, perhaps more sophisticated, of a voluntaristic paradigm.

Some Conclusions

At this point I would like to discuss some more general consequences concerning the position of the researcher and the role of scientific knowledge. Today scientific knowledge increasingly enters into the constructive process of collective action as a particular form of social action with a high self-reflective capacity. Knowledge is not a mirror revealing in a linear way the causal chains that govern reality. Instead, it is a circular process of modeling (of its subjects) and self-modeling (of its instruments). It is a process that is anything but "pure," in which the contaminating factors of emotions, subjective evaluations, and the limitations of the observer interact in a decisive manner. But also different fields of knowledge interact to an ever greater degree, continuously calling into question the conventional disciplinary boundaries and their institutional settings. Thus defined, scientific knowledge takes on the aspect of a bricolage, the gathering and combining of cues, whose meanings depend upon variations in point of view, from the particular perspective of the observer (Bateson 1972, 1979; Gilligan 1982).

Studying collective identity means redefining the relationship between the observer and the observed because we are dealing not with a thing, but with a process continuously activated by social actors. Acknowledging both in ourselves as scientists and in the collective actors the limited rationality that characterizes social action, researchers can no longer apply the criteria of truth or morality defined a priori outside of the relationship. Researchers must also participate in the uncertainty, testing the limits of their instruments and of their ethical values. They cannot avoid freezing in a definition "what a social movement is," as very often is the case for actors themselves. But they must be aware that collective identity is just a tool for analysis, not a reality in itself.

Thus the two models that have always characterized the relationship between researcher and actor in social sciences fall to pieces before our very eyes: that of identification and that of distance. "Understanding" or "empathetic" researchers share with ideologues, from whom they nevertheless intend to distance themselves, the illusion of the power to destroy the gap between reflection and action. The myth of transparency or of total communication seems to feed in a recurrent manner the need to transform the scientific work into maieutics or into pedagogy, exposing the "cold" body of science to the fire of action. But the model of distance, of the neutrality of the researcher, high priest of a "truth" and a "reality" that are beyond the comprehension of the actors, also seems to be obsolete. After all, just what is this

"reality" of which researchers speak, if not that constructed together in a circular interaction with their "subjects"?

Giving up the role of the demiurge, the great suggestor or the eye of God, researchers can take responsibility for their work of knowledge, and they can offer the actors the possibility to develop their capacity to learn how to learn, to produce their own codes.

The particular form of action that we call research introduces into the field of social relations new cognitive input derived from the action itself and from the observation of its processes and effects. In complex societies, research could be conceived as a process of metacommunication, a second-degree learning process, as the development of the formal abilities that an era of accelerated change such as ours requires of knowledge. Providing an account of the plurality and tensions constituting a collective actor, collective identity, is a cognitive tool for this learning process.