Module 6  Social Protests and Social Movements

Lecture 34  Identity Formation

Identity

The characteristics of various movements were different, and so was political and cultural context in which they developed. They all appear representative, in their own ways, of the relationship between collective and individual experience in social movements. In particular they tell us about the intersection of collective involvement and personal engagement which characterizes so much collective action (Melucci 1989). On the one hand, these stories are about personal change: they testify to the new sense of empowerment, and to the strengthening of the self, which originate from collective action. On the other hand, these stories are about the continuity in one’s life that a sense of collective belonging provides.

Identity means not an autonomous object, nor to a property of social actors; we mean, rather, the process by which social actors recognize themselves- and are recognized by other actors – as part of broader groupings, and develop emotional attachments to them (Melucci 1989). These “groupings” need not be defined in reference to specific social traits such as class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or the like, nor in reference to specific organizations. Collective identities may also based on shared orientations, values, attitudes, world views and lifestyles, as well as on shared experiences of action (e.g., individuals may feel close to people holding similar post materialist views, or similarly approving of direct action, without expressing any strong sense of class, ethnic, or gender proximity). At times, identities may be exclusive, and rule out other possible forms of identification (as in the case of religious sect expressing a wholesale rejection of the mundane world). Other times, they may be inclusive and multiple, as individuals may feel close to several types of collectivities at the same time.

How does identity work?

Identity construction should not be regarded simply as a precondition for collective action. It is certainly true that social actors’ identities in a given period guide their subsequent conduct. Action occurs, in fact, when actors develop the ability define themselves, other social actors, and the “enjeu” (stake) of their mutual relationship (Touraine 1981). At the same time, however identity is not an immutable characteristic, preexisting action. On the contrary, it is through act that certain feelings of belonging come to be either reinforced or weakened. In other words, the evolution of collective action produces and encourages continuous redefinition of identity (Johnston 1995). Collective action cannot occur in the absence of a “we” characterized by common traits and a specific solidarity. Equally indispensable is the identification of the “other” defined as responsible for the actor’s condition and against which the mobilization is called (Gamson 1992). The construction of identity therefore implies both a positive definition of those participating in a certain group, and a negative identification of those who are not only excluded but actively opposed (Touraine 1981). It also includes relationship with those who find themselves in a natural position. It is with reference to
“protagonists, antagonists, and audiences” (Reger, Myers and Ejnwohner 2008) that movement identities are formed and come to life.

The presence of feelings of identity and of collective solidarity makes it easier to face the risks and uncertainties relative to collective action. In the case of workers’ movement, close proximity of workplaces and living spaces facilitated the activation and the reproduction of solidarity. Socialist subcultures constructed “areas of equalities” where participants recognized themselves as equal, and felt they belonged in a common destiny. Collective actors are now less likely than in the past to identify themselves in reference to locality. Collective identity is less dependent on direct, face-to-face interactions which develop in the local community and everyday spaces. Phenomena of this type had already signaled the shift from pre-modernity to modernity, and the emergence of public opinion integrated via the printed word. But they have undergone a further acceleration with the expansion of the media system and the electronic revolution. Collective identity connects and assigns some common meaning to experiences of collective action dislocated over time and space. At times this takes the form of linking together events associated with a specific struggle in order to show the continuity of the effort behind the current instances of collective action. The issue of continuity over time is also important because social movements characteristically alternate between “visible” and “latent” phases (Melucci 1989). In the former, the public dimension of action prevails, in the forms of demonstrations, public initiatives, media interventions and, so on, with high levels of cooperation and interaction among the various mobilized actors. In the latter action within the organizations and cultural production dominate. Contacts between organizations and militant groups are, on the whole, limited to inter personal, informal relationships, or to inter organizational relationships which do not generally produce the capacity for mass mobilization. In these cases, collective solidarity and the sense of belonging to a cause are not as obvious as they are in periods of intense mobilization. Identity is nurtured by the hidden actions of a limited numbers of actors. And it is precisely the ability of these small groups to produce certain representations and models of solidarity over time which creates the conditions for the revival of collective action and allows those concerned to trace the origins of new waves of public action to preceding mobilizations (Melucci 1989).

Multiple Identities

In modern society, social movements are often represented as “characters” with a strategic capacity for action and bearing a specific cultural role. For these reasons, they are also seen as having a homogeneous and integrated identity. Little attention has been given to the systems of relationships in which actors are involved, and this has prevented the multiplicity of identities and allegiances among militants and movement groups from being recognized. Rather it has favored the tendency to see identity as the mirror of an underlying objective reality. In fact, however, collective identification is rarely expressed through the integrated and homogeneous identities which these visions of movements presuppose. As identity is first, a social process and not a static property, feelings of belonging among groups and collectivities which originated from these are, to a certain extent, fluid. A less rigid approach to the question of identity leads us to recognize that it does not always presuppose a strong “collective we”. Identifying with a movement does not necessarily mean sharing a systematic and coherent vision of the world; nor does it prevent similar feelings being directed to other groups and movements as well. Forms of allegiance which are not particularly intense or
exclusive can, in certain contexts, guarantee continuity of collective action (Melucci 1989).
In reality, it is rare that a dominant identity is able to integrate all the others. More usually, identities have a polycentric rather than a hierarchical structure. But excessive insistence on role of identity as a source of coherence often leads to neglecting the importance of forms of multiple identities. It must be remembered that movement identities can be shared by individuals, detached from every organizational allegiance. In fact, it is possible to feel part of a movement without identifying with any specific organization and, indeed, even express an explicit dissent towards the notion of organization in general. In some cases, collective identities expressed by different movements or different movement organizations can be mutually incompatible. The rise of feminism has revealed the persistent subordination of women within workers’ movement organizations or in many of the “new movements” themselves. In this way, they have shown the deep contradictions in actors’ identities which, nevertheless, can generally be explained with reference to the same area of “progressive” movements.

**Does Identity Facilitate Participation?**

The starting point for his reflection is the concept of collective action as concerned with the production of collective goods. These derive their nature from the fact that, once obtained, they may be enjoyed by any member of a social group, regardless of his/her contribution to the clause. Sometimes the “social group” consists of people living in a given territory. For example, once a local environmental coalition has had stricter controls on car emissions implemented in its community, the collective good “cleaner air” is accessible to all the residents, no matter whether they supported the campaign or not. At other times, the “social group” may consist of a collectivity defined by specific characteristics. For example, once voting rights were extended to women, any women were entitled to them, again irrespective of her contribution to the suffrage movement. Or, if a regional business association successfully pressures the government to launch a plan of massive investment in public communications in the area, all single business operators will profit from it, including those who are not members of the association.

**How is Identity Generated and Reproduced?**

Self and hetero-definitions of identity- Identity emerges from the processes of self-identification and external recognition. Actors’ self-representations are, in fact, continuously confronted with images which institutions, sympathetic and hostile social groups, public opinion and media produce of them (Melucci 1989). The construction of identity at the same time contains an aspiration to differentiate oneself from the rest of the world and to be recognized by it (Melucci 1989). A collective actor cannot exist without reference to experiences, symbols, and myths which can form the basis of its individuality. Social movements challenging form of domination deeply embedded in cultural practices, lifestyles, mental habits, and inbred stereotypes offer a particularly fitting illustration of these dynamics. Stigmatization from the outside often ends up blocking the development of a strong autonomous identity and limiting the possibilities for collective action. This is very clear, for instance, in the case of gay and lesbian movements as well as in less controversial movements like those acting on behalf of animal rights. In all cases, challenging negative stereotyping is a major component of movements’ cultural production. A most blatant
example is the stereotyping of women as uninterested in the public and political dimensions of social life, inclined towards the private sphere, most particularly family life, and as lacking the rational abilities which are held to be essential in order to act in the public sphere.

**Production of identity: symbols, practices, rituals**

Among contemporary movements, nationalist movements are probably those most explicitly rooted in historical experience. Even students of nationalism, however, are skeptical of essentialist views of identity. Differences run in the historical foundations of the symbols and myths used to fabricate modern national identities. Some argue that modern national identities draw upon events, institutions, myths, and narrations which precede by a long period of time the existence of the nation-state. Others object that large parts of the myths on which these are based do not have any historical foundation, and that one should rather talk of “invention of tradition”. All protest events promoted by movements have a ritual dimension, which often assumes a powerfully dramatic and spectacular quality. The forms which demonstrations take, the type of slogans shouted, the banner or placards waved, even the conduct of marshal bodies, are all elements which, potentially render the practice of a movement distinctive. Through rituals, traditional symbolic codes are overturned and the rules which habitually determine appropriate social behavior are denied. For example, by recounting in public their experiences of sexual abuse, many American women have transformed episodes which might otherwise have produced only feelings of shame and personal isolation, into a source of pride.

**Identity and the political process**

For political movements, the construction of identity is often conditioned by variables of a strictly political nature. The criteria by which social groups identify themselves and are identified externally echo characteristics of the political system and of the political culture of a given country. It seems that the development of collective identity can be explained by reference to a reformulated version of the well-known argument that forms of policymaking determine forms of political action, and not vice versa. Social actors, in fact, tend to structure their action and establish alliances in different ways on different policy issues, with large interest groups dominating distributive policies and more pluralistic networks characterizing regulatory policies.

Interactions with authorities often represent important sources of identity. It has long been noticed how “encounters with unjust authority” (Gamson 1990) may facilitate the consolidation of both motivations to act and hostility towards power holders and their representatives who fail to recognize people’s genuine needs as facilitators of the development of political identity.

Thus identity construction is an essential component of collective action. It enables actors engaged in conflict to see themselves as people linked by interests, values, common histories – or else as divided by these same factors. Although identity feelings are frequently elaborated in reference to specific social traits such as class, gender, territory, or ethnicity, the process of collective identity does not necessarily imply homogeneity of the actors sharing that identity, or their identification with a distinct social group. Nor are feelings of belonging
always mutually exclusive. On the contrary, actors frequently identify with heterogeneous collectivities who are not often compatible among themselves on fundamental issues.

References


Questions

1. What is meant by identity?
2. How does the concept of identity contribute to collective action?
3. What are multiple identities?
4. Explain the process of how identity is generated and reproduced.
5. Analyse the co-relation between identity and the political process.