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### The Problem of Identity in Collective Action

Craig Calhoun

Bravery to the point of apparent foolishness is essential to many social movements, especially the most radical. It cannot be explained simply in terms of expected outcomes. The attempt to do so, in fact, forces arguments about radical social movements into false choices among explanations. Because the odds of a desirable outcome from some actions are so long, and the risks so great, those who engage in the actions are held to be (a) psychologically debilitated (i.e., crazy), (b) acting rationally but on radically inadequate information (e.g., completely unaware of historical precedents for what happens to peasants who lead revolts), or (c) forced to their seemingly brave behavior by the dictates of a structural logic that leaves them no room for individual will. None of these conclusions follows. The risk may be borne not because of the likelihood of success in manifest goals but because participation in a course of action has over time committed one to an identity that would be irretrievably violated by pulling back from the risk.<sup>1</sup>

The extent to which participants in collective action seek to build, legitimate, or express an identity, rather than pursue some more instrumental strategy, is important to recent accounts of "new social movements" (Cohen 1985; Melucci 1989). Struggles over feminism, gay rights, and ecology, in this argument, are not simply attempts to gain material changes but also and crucially struggles over signification; they are attempts simultaneously to make a nonstandard identity acceptable and to make that identity livable in

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the context of the movement itself. This is one reason why such movements are so intensely self-reflexive, so concerned with their organizational and associational forms, and so heavily focused on individual members' expressive actions (Melucci 1989, p. 60). These movements involve a turn away from the model of the labor movement that dominated classical conceptions of social movements. First, they do not involve a claim to offer a single, overarching transformation or liberation of society. Second, they are not focused primarily on processes of production or distribution of the wealth produced. Third, they do not regard access to state power as their major means or object of struggle.<sup>11</sup> Rather, these movements "have shifted towards a nonpolitical terrain: the need for self-realization in everyday life" (Melucci 1989, p. 23, also p. 172).<sup>11</sup>

This argument seems to me to overstate the difference between "new" and "old" social movements. In the nineteenth century too, people struggled over religion as well as labor, founded communes and cooperatives as well as unions and political parties, and defended local communities as well as class interests (Thompson [1963] 1968; Calhoun 1982). The dominant rhetoric of collective action during the last 200 years has obscured this, stressing instrumental interests, thus reflecting a general vocabulary and understanding of human identity current in the modern period (Taylor 1989). That same vocabulary and understanding, however, also lead us to overstate the extent to which the full range of collective action even in the heyday of the labor movement could be explained by reference to objective interests or even subjectively constructed interests focused narrowly on production and wealth. The constitution of identity, then, is a crucial concern for the study of social movements in all historical and cultural settings. Moreover, the issue of identity is not adequately dealt with in terms of *legitimation*, *expression*, or other terms that imply that it exists prior to and is the basis of a struggle. Identity is, in many cases, forged in and out of struggle, including participation in social movements.

Identity, in this sense, cannot be captured adequately by the notion of interest. Identity is a no more than relatively stable construction in an ongoing process of social activity. At a collective level, this is a large part of what E. P. Thompson ([1963] 1968) meant by describing class as a "happening" rather than a matter of structure and/or objective interests. Even at a personal level, however, identity is not altogether internal to an individual but is part of a social process. In the term Bourdieu (and Elias) have revived for sociological analysis, identity is a matter of *habitus*, of a process of regulated improvisation that is always intersubjective (Bourdieu 1976, 1980). The habitus gives one a sense of how to play the game—that practical social sensibility (which includes a concrete identity) that is a crucially missing ingredient in most game-theoretic accounts of social action.

An understanding of identity that goes beyond the notion of interest is especially important when we want to examine collective actions that involve high elements of risk and, for most participants, steps outside the routines of daily life: rebellions and radical protests, for example, not price fixing among gas stations. Though Melucci and Cohen argue against interest-based accounts, many of the new social movement examples they give do not seem intrinsically closed to a rational choice explanation but involve unconventional sorts of interests and especially processes of continual redefinition of interests because of reconstitution of identity. I want to put the stress on this latter sort of process, within a movement that would be hard to class as a "new" social movement and that certainly did involve interests and strategies, as at least part of its constitution.

My case is the Chinese student protest movement of 1989. I cannot offer a sustained narrative or analysis here (see Calhoun 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1989d, forthcoming-a). My fragmentary empirical reference is illustrative, certainly not definitive. But consider the problem: On the night of June 3 and the morning of June 4, students in Tiananmen Square knowingly risked death. They did so without belief that there was any near-term likelihood that their actions would improve their own or their fellows' circumstances or effect the political changes they sought in China. They did so despite the availability of apparent alternatives. Yet these were not habitual risk takers. Some of those who died that night had been too cautious to identify themselves publicly with the boycott of classes only a month before. Many of those who risked death that night have gone to great lengths to avoid attack or arrest in succeeding months. But, at the crucial moment, they were willing to be brave to the point of apparent foolishness. Why?

The question is not idle. Were it not for this extraordinary bravery, the Chinese protest movement would not be remembered as it is. Were it not for similar cases elsewhere, revolutions would not have been made, battles won, rescues attempted. An earlier sort of collective behavior analysis tended to assume that something had to be wrong with people for them to take such risks, that such steps outside social routine were evidence of some socio-psychological debility. This view has been countered by two others. One contends that rebels and protesters are quite rational and that good accounts of their activities can be given in terms of their interests and available options for action.<sup>2</sup> The other says that sociologists ought simply to stay away from psychological accounts and try to explain risky and unusual mobilizations in terms of the structural conditions that make them possible. Here we confront what is commonly, if not very clearly or helpfully, called the micro-macro divide.

This way of framing the problem implies that levels of analysis, rather than more substantive theoretical differences, are at issue. This makes it easy

for sociologists to think they have solved the problem simply by combining micro and macro levels in analysis. Moreover, the equation of structure with macrosociology is challenged by the proliferation of "microstructural" analysis (e.g., in terms of personal networks), and Coleman (1990) has tried to show how a rational choice approach can deal with macrosociological problems. The more fundamental question to ask is not about levels of analysis but about basic organizing concepts. Can a language of interests adequately grapple with the identity and motivation of actors? Is a psychology implying irrationality the only alternative? Conversely, can structure be grasped adequately through "objective" measures rather than constructed, historically meaningful categories?

Both rational action and structural accounts also have been challenged by others that emphasize culture. Sewell, for example, has criticized both Coleman's rational choice-oriented account of how to link micro- and macrosociology (Sewell 1986) and Skocpol's structural theory of revolutions (Sewell 1985).<sup>3</sup> Sensibly, he has not suggested that we can dispense with all the arguments Coleman and Skocpol developed but that these are fundamentally insufficient without serious attention to cultural factors. Sewell's approach to culture is substantially structuralist and accordingly does not emphasize action, especially at the individual level. My claims about identity complement this sort of cultural argument, and in the last part of this chapter, I will develop briefly the suggestion that certain distinctive features of modern Western culture—notably an instrumental notion of self and neglect of the idea of honor—hinder our ability to grasp the centrality of the problem of identity in collective action. Recognition is especially problematic for structural approaches (e.g., Burt 1984) that treat structural factors only as *context* for action, not a dimension of a mutually constitutive whole (see Giddens 1985), and with rational action approaches (e.g., Coleman 1986, 1987, 1990; Hechter 1987; Friedman and Hechter 1988) that take the individual as unproblematically and a priori given as the "micro-sociological" foundation for macrosociological analysis.<sup>4</sup>

It is not adequate to conceive of a macrosociology entirely on micro-foundations or to conceive of microsociology as set within the context of macro structure. Arguments over class point this up. I shall briefly consider the argument that Chinese students acted in ways shaped by class interest and then consider the classic dualism of Marx and Weber on this subject. Next I will try to show that seeing the construction of identity as an ongoing process undermines attempts to use either class or individual interests as Archimedean points for final explanations of social movements or similar actions. There can be no such fixed points. The identities and hence the interests of participants in collective actions are not objectively determined but subjectively constructed (albeit under conditions that are not subject to

individual control, *pace*, Marx [1852] 1973). This construction is at once personal and collective; the two cannot be sharply distinguished. In the final section of the chapter, I will consider the way in which the idea of "honor" might help us to grasp something of the centrality of identity to action, offering a complement to that of interest.

## PROTEST OF INTELLECTUALS

On April 27, in the early days of the "Beijing Spring," students marching on Tiananmen Square confronted soldiers. There had been no military violence yet, though many students were braced for some. The soldiers were young men from peasant families; the students came almost entirely from urban families, and those from "academic" universities were the products of a selection system that allowed only about 1.5% of their age mates such an educational opportunity. "Go home to your fields," the students shouted to the soldiers, "you have no business here."

The students began the protest movement of 1989 with a strong sense of themselves as young or prospective intellectuals and a strong sense of their own distinction from the peasants, members of the working class, and officials.<sup>5</sup> This was not just the product of China's extraordinarily detailed system of class designations, or even of 40 years of communist rule, which had recurrently made class background a matter of critical significance in determining treatment and life chances of individuals. It was a matter also and more deeply of basic personal identity. It had resonances with images of intellectuals going back thousands of years in Chinese history, and it was also manifest in the way people spoke, dressed, and carried their bodies. Who they were as individuals was bound up with and indistinguishable from their participation in a whole variety of social relationships that were colored and shaped by reciprocal recognitions of class identity.

From the self-strengthening movement of the 1890s, through the 1919 protests, the ebbs and flows of republicanism, and early stages of Chinese communism, intellectuals took on a stronger and stronger sense of their own crucial role in China's modernization.<sup>6</sup> In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping and other communist leaders had courted intellectuals as important agents of reform. This new respect and tolerance was joined, however, with the older idea of the intellectual's responsibility to remonstrate with an emperor (though that responsibility had never matured into a right to be free from punishment for doing so). So when Chinese students in 1989 said that they were acting as "the conscience of the nation," and that this was not just a simple choice but a responsibility they had to live up to, they were speaking in line with a long tradition.

Students were different from other intellectuals not only in their youth and the lesser development of their ideas and skills but in the fact that they didn't have families to support or jobs to risk (at least in the immediate sense). They were, therefore, understood to be freer than their elders to act through public protest. More senior intellectuals offered advice, tried to protect young activists, and pushed for change in quieter ways (though a special respect was paid to those elders who did put themselves on the line in public protest). Of course, the student "fraction" of the intellectual class also had its own complaints: crowded, poorly constructed dormitories, inadequate stipends, a shortage of good jobs after graduation, and so on. Spatial concentration; subject, class, and cohort organization; and the web of communication among universities provided structural facilitation for mobilization.

So, can we explain the student protest movement of that spring simply in terms of the class consciousness of intellectuals? I think not, though that is a crucial dimension to any explanation. Certainly the students' class position exerted a causal influence on their consciousness and on their participation in the movement. Certainly some part of the content of their consciousness was focused on class—that is, on their identity as students and/or intellectuals and what that identity ought to mean in China. But the stronger Marxist sense of class consciousness as the correct self-understanding of a class as a whole, together with the compulsion to act on such understanding, will not help us very much.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, though relatedly, the consciousness of the students changed in important ways during the course of the protest, and the consciousness of Chinese intellectuals has been changed by it and by its repression. These processes of change cannot be grasped through an understanding of class consciousness that focuses on the recognition of class interests.

Students did see the movement for democracy through lenses colored by class. For example, when they spoke of the relationship of education to democracy, they always spoke of the need for them, and others like them, to "educate the masses of people." They did not speak of democracy as itself a process of public education as well as of self-government. On the other hand, the basic self-identification of the protesting students in Tiananmen Square—and not just their intellectual self-categorization but their lived identity—was transformed, and at least for a time radicalized, by six weeks of activism. Their consciousness expanded beyond class concerns to include national ones and in important ways universal ideals. In the same way, when the ordinary people of Beijing rallied to protect the student hunger strikers starting May 19, this was not only because they saw students speaking for ideals they shared but because the act of refusing sustenance and courting government reprisals impressed people that the students were not just seeking their personal gains but sacrificing themselves for the people as a whole.

In the midst of the struggle, it became possible to identify emotionally with a general category—the Chinese people—which under more ordinary circumstances would be rent by numerous divisions.

## THE CLASSICAL DUALISM

Among other legacies from our founding fathers, Marx and Weber bequeathed us a classic version of the contest between methodological individualism and holism. This is one of the many dimensions packed into the heavily loaded and problematic conceptual distinction of micro- from macrosociology.

Despite appearances, Marx was not a consistent methodological holist. Rather, he followed Rousseau in an ambiguous and shifting position, both evaluatively and epistemologically. Some of his accounts of class treated it as a category of individuals and suggested that their collective action would be motivated by the various utilitarian gains it would bring them. In other texts, he treated classes as themselves individuals with needs, missions, and destinies. For the most part, Marx was contemptuous of those who conceptualized the proletariat as an aggregate of individuals, however, rather than a singular class. As he stressed in *The Holy Family*, class was neither an arbitrary analytic device nor an optional set of values individuals might chose or disregard at will: "It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do" (Marx [1845] 1975, p. 211). This was, in a sense, Marx's class-specific formulation of the general will, as objective and irreducible as Rousseau's somewhat broader version. The general will was distinguished from the will of all as sharply as the latter was from any minority viewpoint—perhaps more so.<sup>8</sup>

Weber had little patience for such an idea. He seems to have encountered it in Lukacs, who was particularly committed to this version of Marxist thought. Weber's summary dismissal was withering. A class, Weber argued, is not necessarily a group. To hold that "the individual may be in error concerning his interests but that the class is infallible about its interests" is pseudoscientific (Weber [1922] 1968, p. 93). For Weber, class could only be a more or less arbitrary and abstract categorization of individuals in terms of their life chances or market power.

Both Marx and Weber defined class in terms external to the consciousness of actors—position in the relations of production for Marx and market position for Weber. Both regarded class as describing a set of objective interests and treated rationality in terms of following those interests. For

Weber, objective interests based on class were important but far from predominant; they had to compete for individuals' attention with a range of other interests. For Marx, on the other hand, class interests were not only objective but fundamentally compelling. It is this last distinction that led Marx to expect radical action on the basis of class while Weber did not.<sup>9</sup>

The Marx-Weber argument—or dialogue of the deaf—has been rehashed and repeated many times in the history of sociology. This has sometimes led to interesting new insights, but it has also helped to keep us stuck in a debate that poorly and misleadingly formulates the central issues. On the Marxist side, the gulf between class-in-itself and class-for-itself has proved bridgeable only in faith and imagination and is at most of metaphorical utility. The conceptualization has sometimes been pernicious, as when it has been used to justify Leninist vanguard party substitutionism. Weber's account was perhaps more realistic but in many ways just as limited. It certainly grasped a central feature of typical action in capitalist societies. But it did not provide any serious account of the power of class—or other similar—ideas in people's lives. While it offered an approach to differences in consumer habits, it lacked purchase on the emotional commitments that underlie some of the great struggles of the modern era. Ironically, because Weber was perhaps the greatest of comparative historical sociologists, and the clearest about the importance of historically specific conceptualizations, his discussion of class, and the methodological individualism that underpinned it, reflected rather than situated or explained capitalism's characteristic individualistic ideology. Thus Weber did not use his category of value-rational action to address the creation of "classed" identities as well as religious, ethnic, or nationalist ones. Class, for Weber, was always a category based on objective market interests; implicitly thus it could be analyzed entirely through the notion of instrumental rationality. To focus on value rationality as the pursuit of ends indissoluble from self, on the other hand, raises precisely the problem of identity in social action.<sup>10</sup>

It is hard to make many advances in this argument as it is framed. Though both Marx and Weber were more subtle and complex than these summaries reveal, Marx postulated a "holistic" account of classes and Weber postulated methodological individualism. The two played out an antinomy, a mirror image, deeply embedded in nineteenth-century philosophy of science (Mandelbaum 1971). We remain largely caught in the same problematic formulation today. In Marxist discussions of class consciousness, for example (as Wright 1985, chap. 7, has recently observed), people tend to assert either that classes are units capable of consciousness (a position Wright associates mainly with Lukacs) or that class consciousness must refer only to statistical patterns of individual consciousness (the position Wright himself takes,



within a methodological individualism drawn from the "analytic Marxist" version of rational choice theory).

Even the terminology of the dispute is oddly problematic, as though each term attempted to prejudge the case but in a way that rebounded on itself. What could individualism mean if not a sort of holism, the postulate that a given unit (the biological organism or the psychological or legal person) cannot be internally subdivided? If society, or class, is truly a whole, and, therefore, a phenomenon irreducible to its component parts, is it not then an individual?

Neither holism nor individualism in this sense is a sound starting point for analysis. Put simply, the problem is that neither perspective pays adequate attention to the *constructed* nature of both individuals and groups. A good opening to this has come in the growing influence of the network approach, which followed earlier social anthropologists in suggesting that the proper unit of analysis is neither individuals nor whole societies but the structure of social relationships (Nadel 1957). There is no reason, though, that the study of relationships should emphasize structure to the exclusion of action. In Giddens's (1985) terminology, we could say that the historical process of structuration is emphatically *not* a mediation between individual and society, for both individual and society are its products, or its contents, not its starting points. What is primary is the intersubjective process. This is nowhere more evident than in studying social movements and collective action.

## IDENTITY AS A PROBLEM

By a problem of "identity," I mean the need for accounts of collective action to offer a coherent understanding of who participants are. This may seem simple enough, but in fact it is a difficult interpretive problem. There are ambiguities inherent in the relationship between the singularity of a personal identity and the multiplicity of social identities that may be borne by a person—to be me, for example, means in large part to put together the roles of father, husband, son, professor, neighbor, citizen. But each may also under some circumstances involve a more or less compelling claim to see myself in terms of membership in a collectivity. These ambiguities are enhanced by the question of representation—to what extent do a number of specific workers represent the working class? This is an issue not only for academic analysts but for participants in struggle, inclined to feel that they are the class (or people) in action. Third, and most important for this chapter, identity is not a static, preexisting condition that can be seen as exerting a causal influence on collective action; at both personal and collective levels, it is a changeable product of collective action.

These problems of identity are embedded in all the collective or plural nouns we use to describe the participants in collective action—*nations, classes, communities, trades, students, intellectuals, corporations, neighborhoods, peasants, women or men*, and so on. I do not want to focus on the commonplace observation that we need to identify the degree to which these terms (or their proper noun specifications) reflect the analyst's conceptualization versus the participants' self-identification. That much, I think, can be taken for granted, though a good many sociologists ignore it and its implications are sometimes very difficult to work out in practice.

What constitutes "groupness" is a more serious issue. When Weber remarked that "a class does not in and of itself constitute a group," he raised an important point. Externally formulated (especially in Weber's definition), "class" is a single-dimensional category. To know how much a class formed a group, we would need to know more about how influential this category was in determining patterns of association and action and how closely it overlapped with other categories of differentiation. At the same time, a class, like any other abstractly formulated category, may be more or less of a group in terms of its social relations and patterns of action; this is an empirical question. The big difficulty with class is that, in most theoretical accounts, including both Marx's and Weber's, it specifies a very large category—such as, for Marx, those who share a common position in the relations of production *at the level of capital accumulation*. Classes in the modern capitalist world thus are implicitly either national or international in scale. This means that it is very unlikely for them to have a high density of internal relationships when compared with smaller and/or more locally concentrated populations. If they (or even somewhat smaller substitutes) are to be solidary groups for purposes of collective action, they must depend on some other sort of organizational and/or cultural processes.

Accounts of "groupness" in terms of simple cultural commonality or external attribution are relatively weak, though I think this is the level at which nearly all researchers first identify at least all large groups (that is, we tend to first find cultural *categories* and then look to see how grouplike they are).<sup>11</sup> Structural analysts of various sorts have given strong accounts of groupness, perhaps most notably in the network tradition; Tilly's (1978) appropriation of Harrison White's idea of "CATNET" is perhaps paradigmatic in the collective action literature. More recently, Hechter (1987) and Coleman (1990) have offered serious and sustained accounts of groupness within the rational action perspective.

These treatments of groupness, however, are all essentially external in their understanding of the problem of identity. That is, they ask how, why, or to what extent certain aggregates of individuals should be understood to have acted as a group.<sup>12</sup> This is perhaps the basic question that recent

accounts and theories of collective action have addressed. Basic as this question is, however, there is a deeper one. To address it, we have to grant that the notion of individual is just as problematic as that of group, though our Western cultural categories usually make us take it for granted. Thus, when Coleman (1990) sets out to analyze corporate actors as constructed individuals, it never occurs to him to question that human individuals are "natural" rather than socially constructed. My concern is not to rehash epistemological and ontological debates concerning the idea of individual, however, or to propose a radical cross-cultural incommensurability in understandings such that we are forced to an extreme particularism.<sup>13</sup> Rather, my question is whether basic ideas about personhood and identity—or, more precisely, personhood and identity themselves, lived phenomena, not just ideas about them—do not play a crucial role in collective action that is constitutive of the actor in a way that rational action theory and structuralism as currently practiced cannot recognize.

To engage in action is a process of living an identity that is always social; it is not the outcome of a decision-making or other process that is essentially individual. This is the difficulty with pushing analyses of the free-rider problem to a *reducto ad absurdum* in what Brustein (1989, p. 239) has called the "problem of first-order free riding"—that is, the possibility that individuals would opt out of society (or such primary groups as family) from the very beginning, making those groups as unlikely as Olson implied risky collective actions are. Like seventeenth- and eighteenth-century social contract reasoning, rational action theory taken to this extreme makes the existence of social institutions problematic but leaves the existence of individuals unexamined, as though those individuals were not socially constituted. This then poses the insoluble problem of trying to explain the creation of social institutions—family, community, and so on—as the products of the action of individuals imagined to exist externally to those institutions. Not only the social institution but the individual person is thereby misunderstood. We are not just influenced by social relationships during a socialization process and then left fully formed. We have our identity only within such relationships.

Not only is life always social, living is always a matter of action, not of statistically possessing an identity or set of attitudes prior to action. What one does defines who one is, both for others and especially for oneself. Risky and unusual collective action places one's identity on the line in an especially powerful way.

Put another way, very risky actions, like standing in front of a tank as it rolls down Chang'an Boulevard (to borrow 1989's most powerful media image of bravery to the point of foolishness), depend on a sense of who one is as a person and what it means to go on living with oneself that is

inextricably social, as well as personal, and that is sufficiently powerful to outweigh what might ordinarily be paramount prudential concerns. When I stood in Tiananmen Square the evening of June 3, I felt a rush of adrenaline at early stages of the fighting, a macho impulse to be where the action was, and deep anger at the government's decision to attack the protesters. I also felt all sorts of good reasons for not being there, including personal safety, even though the army was not yet firing live ammunition. Prudential considerations won out, in large part, because my sense of who I was had not been put on the line. I was not Chinese; it was not my government or my army that was beginning to attack. I was not even a journalist whose professional identity involved commitment to getting a story or a photograph; I was more committed to being a husband and father. And my family and my main circle of friends and colleagues were thousands of miles away. But none of these aspects of my identity was fixed and immutable. By early June, I identified myself with the student protesters more than I had in mid-April, largely because I had been with them around the clock for six weeks. But I had not been on hunger strike, I had not made speeches, I had not put my career in jeopardy. In other words, I had not been through nearly so transformative a sequence of events and actions as had many Chinese students. Perhaps in some basic sense I was and am not as brave as they were. But on June 3, some students were brave enough to risk death who a month before had not been brave enough to be publicly identified with the boycott of classes.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps another, older Chinese illustration will help. Qiu Jin was one of the first women to rise to importance among China's radical modernizers. She studied in Japan at the same time as Lu Xun (China's greatest modern writer and a protagonist of the May 4th intellectual movement). In Japan, Qiu Jin had developed a reputation as a fiery orator and drew large and admiring crowds among the other Chinese students. Her fame continued to grow when she returned to China in 1906. She played a key role in building a school and secret society in Datong and joined with her cousin and others in planning an insurrection. Eventually their plot was uncovered; before he was captured and executed, her cousin Xu Xilin succeeded in shooting the Manchu governor of Anhui province. She was warned by friends that the army was coming for her but chose to remain at her school, hoping to make a dramatic last stand with the arms that had been stockpiled there. She was captured and ultimately beheaded. Lu Xun, however, said that she had been "clapped to death." In other words, the crowds that had urged on her speeches and applauded her protestations against the government had implicitly pushed her to ever more radical positions. She could neither pause to consolidate her gains or escape when the troops came without humiliation and betrayal of her own sense of identity and direction. Lu Xun's comment stresses both the complicity of crowds in the increasing radicalism and

ultimately often the deaths of their leaders and the way in which personal identity may be transformed in the course of public action so as to foreclose the options of moderation and retreat.<sup>15</sup>

The constant construction of identity that is the habitus is not entirely absorbed within the immediate situation. The habitus includes representations of historical memory. Qiu Jin, for example, contributes to contemporary Chinese protesters one of a number of scripts for action in the midst of radical struggle. The commonplace events of everyday action—shopping, flirting, asking questions in class, developing a style of dress—all have innumerable possible contemporary models. Even without innovation, the range of choice is wide and multiplied by print and electronic media, which extend the proliferation of examples beyond one's direct observation. But the number of available models for how to challenge the legitimacy of the government, or face the threat of military repression, or suffer execution, is fairly small. Moreover, those past protesters who backed down in the face of repression do not live on as heroic legends. Our daily lives are full of examples of caution, but our narratives of revolution and popular struggle contain mainly tales of bravery rather than prudent common sense. As the course of a movement takes participants beyond the range of usual experience, they are thrown back more and more on such heroic images in their struggle to find acceptable guidelines for action.

## INTERESTS, HONOR, AND IDENTITY

One of the limits of a rational choice perspective is that it works best on the decisions that are the most routine (Davis 1973). Another is that its accounts hold best where actors can most readily be understood as individuals responding to situations in terms of some more or less calculable interests. This is not to say that rational action theory must be psychological in the sense of focusing on motivation as an internal state of mind. On the contrary, as Becker (1976) has shown, most of microeconomic theory, which overlaps closely with rational action theory, can be operated in aggregate (as distinct from individual case) terms without reference to such states of mind. All that is necessary is a situation in which certain goods are scarce; supply and demand then force the outcomes of rational choice models without any specific theory of action being needed. Difficulty will arise here first and foremost not in addressing rationality as such but when an attempt is made to specify demand for diverse and incommensurable goods (which depends, of course, on the rational choice theorist or economist admitting that there are diverse and incommensurable goods). The most common line of objection to rational action theory—that individuals are not so rational as it

suggests—usually results in critics and proponents talking past one another. It is, in any case, not the central issue to be raised about the relationship of rational action to “consciousness.”

The central issue, rather, is whether persons are constituted in terms of interests.<sup>16</sup> It is the notion of interest that provides the potential objectivity to evaluations of rationality, whether in Marxist terms of class interests or in utilitarian reckonings of individual and collective interests. It is the notion of interest, not of evaluation or rationality more generally, that is translated into the external terms of supply and demand by Becker's argument. But the notion of interest is both problematic and historically and culturally specific. That is, it is part of a way of thinking and an understanding of persons that is linked to the idea of discrete individuals constituted in terms of capacity for pleasures and pains—the view Bentham codified. This view is distinctive of modern Western culture, along with the idea of personhood as a state defined in terms of dignity rather than honor, universal (human) or civil rights rather than particular memberships.

The distinction between cultures emphasizing the axis of honor and shame and those emphasizing guilt and innocence is an old one in anthropology. I want to use it here not so much to argue that the Chinese (or any other non-Western people) are more motivated by honor in their collective actions than Westerners as to argue that we as Western analysts are peculiarly neglectful of the issue of identity raised by the matter of honor. Honor (and more generally issues of personal and collective identity) is important in understanding risky and/or unusual actions in the West as well as elsewhere. I think it is the case that the transformation of Western culture over the last few hundred years has made honor less salient a category and that this may be linked to differences in the radicalism of and/or risk taking in collective actions. My point here, however, is more general: We need to wrestle with the constitution and transformation of identity, and challenges to identity, in collective action.

The Western tradition has been distinctive (though not unique) in its reliance on ideas of guilt and innocence. This is one of the central cultural foundations for the modern version of individualism that rose along with capitalism and the state in Western Europe. The point is not that other societies lack notions of individual or self (as some extreme accounts have suggested) but that they organize personal identity differently. The Western individual is understood as the locus of a kind of responsibility that is epitomized in the notion of an eternal and eternally atomistic soul available for damnation or salvation.<sup>17</sup> We can be guilty, in biblical terms, precisely because we have eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. From the biblical story of the Fall, Western thought might have stressed the shame of Adam and Eve at their nakedness but has instead focused on their sin and God's

consequent curse. Our stress on knowledge as the basis of guilt and innocence is linked to a conceptualization of the individual (and on that basis the world) that is overwhelmingly and fundamentally conceived in terms of inside and outside a bodily boundary (see Taylor 1985b, 1989). The distinctive modern Western notion of the individual is rooted in this long-standing tradition. This involves positing the person as a bearer of rights and interests outside of and prior to any specific social relationships. The individual can only be responsible for his or her actions to the extent that he or she has knowledge of the consequences of an action and capacity to act otherwise, an idea of responsibility at odds with much more widespread notions of strict liability.<sup>18</sup> Some scholars have argued that even Western forms of causal reasoning and science are linked to this approach to individual responsibility.

Be that as it may, we have to make the effort to see other ways of conceptualizing the person if we are to develop a sound approach to the problem of identity in social action. Though no binary opposition of "them" and "us" could conceivably exhaust variation in this regard, the notion of honor is a good starting point. It stresses not only reputation, the opinions of others, but a particular way of evaluating oneself. This involves a much greater stress on archetypal patterns of behavior (Campbell 1964; Taylor 1989). The notion of honor does not break down into separable justifications of specific acts so readily as does that of guilt and innocence, or a calculus of interests. In terms of the transmission of culture and of engagement in social action, it places a strong emphasis on following commendable models.

There are other distinctive features of social identity reliant on the notion of honor. As Peter Berger ([1970] 1984, p. 149) remarked some years ago, "The obsolescence of the concept of honour is revealed very sharply in the inability of most contemporaries to understand insult, which in essence is an assault on honour." One of the salient emotions driving student protesters in Beijing in spring 1989 was a recurrent sense of insult. Government descriptions of their protests as "turmoil," accusations that they were led or manipulated by a tiny band of foreign agitators, and charges that they were hooligans engaged in antisocial (or antisocialist) behavior all offended them deeply. On the night of May 19, I watched students dither in uncertainty about whether it was prudent to march yet again to Tiananmen Square only to be galvanized into immediate action by Li Peng's speech declaring martial law. Amid their tears and shouts, they repeated over and over again their sense of anger and outrage at his insulting tone. "He lectures us like naughty children." "He speaks like a bad, old-fashioned teacher." "He is so arrogant." Earlier, students had felt a similar insult in the *People's Daily* editorial of April 26, which condemned their protests as unpatriotic. One of the central student demands became the call for an apology and an official recognition

of student patriotism. To a Westerner, this seemed oddly abstract amid the more substantive calls for freedom of press or association and an end to corruption. But this may have been even more emotionally central to participants in the protest (though they were well aware that the other sorts of demands were more fundamental long-term goals).

As thinkers from Montesquieu to Dumont (1982) have suggested, honor is linked to a notion of the primacy of social hierarchy and is at odds with a conception of the world in which essentially equivalent individuals are primary. Not only personal reputation but the evaluation of collective niches in the hierarchy are crucial sources of honor (or shame): One's group must defend its honor against presumption from below and slights from above. Where such ideas are strong, notions like "human rights," which depend on abstracting the human individual from his or her social context (and perhaps even from his or her gender), are difficult to grasp or institutionalize. Yet, in pursuing democracy, Chinese students and intellectuals stressed the idea of human rights, which they saw (as had their forebears in 1919) as a quintessentially Western one. The Chinese protesters thus were in the paradoxical position of acting partly on the basis of a sort of identity at odds with one of their very goals. But paradox has never yet stopped a social movement.

An interest in honor is not adequately rendered—it seems to me, not in the strong sense that pertains to cultural difference and radical collective action—as an interest in something outside the individual. If we can use the term *interest* at all, it is an interest, rather, in a certain sort of identity. Let us compare the notion of rights that is familiar in the Western liberal tradition.

It is possible (though not uncontroversial) to render notions of individual rights in terms of external goods that people desire. One may even speak of life that way, though this may strain even a Westerner's habitual individualism; it sounds a little peculiar to speak of one's life as something external to or separable from one. We can translate the idea of honor into the language of possessive individualism (to borrow Macpherson's 1965 phrase) and treat it as a quantity of which we may possess more or less. This is, indeed, how we customarily try to deal with notions like the Chinese idea of "face." But it is a translation that is at odds with the original, for honor is not an external substance to be possessed. It is, rather, a quality of being. If it is honorable for a man to be manly, or honest, or intelligent, or Chinese, these are qualities not renderable as commensurable quantities. More of one does not make up for lack of another.<sup>19</sup>

Such qualities are simultaneously features of personal identity, within a habitus, and of archetypal images of "good" identity. If they are to be approached rationally, it is in Weber's sense of "value rationality," not instrumental rationality. But a set of honorable qualities is not entirely rationalizable; it is understandable mainly through a sense of practical



knowledge derived from archetypes and experience. These qualities are also imperative in a way interests are not. An identity distinct from the objects of one's interests means that there is a basis for rational evaluation of those various interests as more or less desirable, but the identity, the basis of that evaluation, exists separately from them.

At one level, we can approach honor by saying that it gives individuals certain interests in rational action—for example, protecting their reputations. And we can use the role of honor in improving explanations of why people seem sometimes to pursue collective actions against what appear to be their more tangible or “material” interests. But, at another level, the role of honor in establishing identity reveals a limit to the individualist version of rational action theory. The difficulty arises when we try to treat the individual as an irreducible foundation for approaching social organization or action. Rational action theory calls on us generally to take individuals as we find them. We try to reason then either from a subjectivist notion of their interests as equivalent to their wants or from an objectivist notion that we can derive their wants from some external feature(s) of their identity—such as their class position.

Each of these approaches carries a pitfall of potential tautology. The first is the familiar one of revealed preference theory—that is, the denial of any significant difference between people's interests and the consequences of their actions. If, in such a view, people always act in their own best interests, then we don't really need a notion of interests. What is lost is not only the possibility of error but the impact of external structure—for example, that one might have wanted a completely different product that wasn't manufactured or that class differences in purchases reveal less people's preferences than their fate.

The second sort of tautology arises when the notion of interests is so deployed that we can no longer distinguish between it and the subject of the interests. If a class is defined (as the Marx/Lukacs notion of the proletariat as a whole being infallible about its interests comes close to doing) as that entity that pursues class interests—such as the proletariat as the agent of revolutionary transformation of capitalism—then one has lost analytic purchase as much as in revealed preference theory. But the problem here is not simply one of working at a “macro” rather than a “micro” or individual level. It could also arise at the individual level. No listing of a sum of positional identities solves the dilemma of how the individual reconciles them into a singular personal identity. A key reason to speak in terms of interests is to be able to ascertain whether or not a given subject is pursuing or achieving them or a given course of action is appropriate to them. The interests derivable from various positional identities may provide a relatively satisfactory account of a large part of the person's action under ordinary

circumstances. What they cannot address is what the person will do when extraordinary circumstances place his or her very identity in question.

Even under more ordinary circumstances, it seems to me that using a language of interests can be problematic for talking about identity. What, for example, is added to the mere observation of one's existence by asserting that one has an interest in existing? Does one have an interest in being oneself? In a sense, I will argue, one does, but we need to be wary of an oversimplified notion of the self. For example, we should recognize, as Taylor (1985a) has suggested, that people may sometimes desire to change their desires. Indeed, it may be an important part of an idea of being good or virtuous to want one's desires to improve.

Consider, however, the test of extreme circumstances. Is it one's interests or one's very identity that is at issue when goods that one needs to live, or freedom from unbearable pain, are made available only contingent on the violation of one's fundamental sense of self—as, say, they might be to a prisoner asked under torture to reveal the whereabouts of comrades sought by her tormentors? Within a logic of guilt and innocence, we are apt to excuse the prisoner who gives the information because she had no reasonable choice in the matter. The prisoner's sense of herself as a person, however, may be deeply damaged by those events regardless of her knowledge that her action was forced. Being told that she is innocent may not stop her from reliving the nightmare of having betrayed her friends. A logic of honor is at work, then, and is substantially independent of intention and choice. Honor can be sullied through no fault of one's own. And so, as the example of the prisoner suggests, can one's identity be radically undermined by an action avoidable only at the cost of one's life.<sup>20</sup>

In this case, it would be hard to treat the dilemma before the person as one of a fixed individual possessor of interests confronting a competition between two of those interests. We might try to say that the person who chooses between life and honor makes an evaluation—correctly or incorrectly—of which choice holds the greater pain. But, in a sense, at the point of such a decision, there is no future in which the identity of the honorable individual is not radically altered. Each option negates the self in a fundamental way. By contrast, of course, a person lacking in honor would not find this choice difficult or suffer devastating consequences from choosing life. The difference between the two people would not be analyzable as a difference in interests except in the most tautological sense. It would be, precisely, the difference between *people*, that is, between identities. Moreover, it would be extremely difficult to relate ordinary identity—self-conceptions, the way people reconcile interests in everyday life—to the identity that emerges as salient under this kind of extraordinary situation. It is not just that the true test of honor lies in these extreme moments. It is also that the capacity to act

according to high standards of honor may be nurtured by intense participation in certain courses of action, including some social movements.

## CONCLUSION

During spring 1989, Chinese student protestors went through a series of actions and experiences that shaped and reshaped the identities of many. They moved from small statements like marching to boycotts of classes, signing petitions, and hunger strikes. They made speeches—simply to each other as well as on television—that affirmed the primacy or even irreducible priority of certain values. They linked these values—freedom, national pride, and personal integrity or honor—to their positional identity, seeing them as particularly the responsibility of intellectuals. But their actions were more than a reflection of positional interests. Students joined the protest movement largely in blocks of classmates, so their primary immediate social network supported the process of redefinition of identity. Indeed, it seems that those more centrally placed in everyday social networks—such as class monitors and other leaders at school—were more active in the movement and felt more obligated to hold themselves to high standards of committed behavior.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, various other factors in addition to honorable defense of identity determined expressions of bravery. Not least of all, I suspect, were detailed and largely arbitrary chains of events the night of June 3 that presented varying demands for heroism.<sup>22</sup> My point here is simply that accounting for actions so high in risk or cost as to be outside plausible instrumental rationality need not involve reliance on notions of psychological debility or more or less mystical leaps of substituting class interests for individual ones. Rather, even extraordinarily risky, apparently self-sacrificing action can be seen as rational. But the condition of a rational action account of such behavior, paradoxically, is precisely not to see it literally as self-sacrificing but to see it as self-saving. That is, the rational choice to take extraordinary risk may depend on the social construction, in the midst of unusual collective action, of a personal identity that makes *not* taking a given risk more certain to imperil the self of the actor than taking it. This sort of calculation cannot be understood in terms of an approach to rational action that takes actor's identities as fixed attributes of individuals or one that analyzes individual action solely in terms of interests derived from various external sources—such as class position. But it can be understood.

The student protesters of China's Beijing Spring certainly began their protest with a consciousness shaped by their class position and concrete

material concerns (or interests). But the risks they took, the sacrifices they made, and the moral example they provided for the future of democratic struggles in China cannot be understood primarily in terms of that positional identity. This is not a matter of structural or holistic accounts being better than individualistic or micro-social ones. Rather, we have to see how, for some of the students, participation in the protest contributed, at least temporarily, to a transformation of personal identity. Not only did they identify with a larger whole—the Chinese people—or with democratic or other ideals. Crucially, these students understood who they themselves were on models of such high standards of courage and struggle that failing to accept the danger would have meant a collapse of personal identity or at least a bitter wound.

## NOTES

1. We might apply Weber's ([1922] 1968, p. 25) distinction of value rationality and instrumental rationality: "Examples of pure value-rational orientation would be the actions of persons who, regardless of possible cost to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call, personal loyalty, or the importance of some 'cause' no matter in what it consists. In our terminology, value-rational action always involves 'commands' or 'demands' which, in the actor's opinion, are binding on him. It is only in cases where human action is motivated by the fulfillment of such unconditional demands that it will be called value-rational." Weber is somewhat unclear as to why this should be called *rational* action. He seems to have been seeking a way to acknowledge that people perfectly capable of making instrumentally rational judgments about the likely efficacy of their actions in achieving various outcomes sometimes do not do so because, for ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other reasons, they regard certain actions as ends in themselves.

2. I have offered a twist on this line of argument by suggesting that radical mobilizations may sometimes involve people acting in local situations—such as strongly solidary oppositional communities—that not only provide them with social foundations and selective incentives for collective action but systematically mislead them about their chances of success against more distant structures of power such as capital and state (Calhoun 1988a, 1988b).

3. One of the virtues of Sewell's dual challenge is that it points up implicitly something of how the rational action and structural positions tend to be flip sides of the same record. The rather overdrawn micro-macro debate between rational action analysts and structuralists concerns whether either can claim a primacy over the other. Do macro structures rest on micro foundations, for example, or are they autonomous? The structuralist claim to dominance, rather than mere autonomy, seems to rest most often on the rather intellectually unsatisfying grounds of a disciplinary division of labor with psychology (see, e.g., Blau 1987).

4. Coleman (1990) is very sophisticated and interesting in this regard but still assimilates corporate actors (his main vehicle for macrosociology) into individualism by understanding them as constructed individuals—and seeing human beings as "natural persons" rather than recognizing the process of social construction that establishes both the category of the individual and each particular person.

5. The term *intellectual* carries a broader reference in China than in the West. It means more or less all educated people. See Calhoun (forthcoming-a) for a more substantial treatment of the intellectual field influencing the student protests.

6. The May 4th movement was a particularly important prototype for student protest. In a narrow sense, it focused on the poor treatment China's weak government secured at the hands of its ostensible allies in the Versailles treaty. More broadly, it united a generation of modernizers intent on transforming Chinese culture. Ideologically, the slogan of the May 4th movement—democracy and science—sums up both the importance of the European Enlightenment model for modern Chinese intellectuals and their sense (like that of their European forebears) that they had a crucial role to play in enlightening and improving their country. Movement leaders mostly eschewed crude nationalism but did combine a search for democracy and cultural revival with the pursuit of a stronger China. See Schwarcz (1986) for a general discussion.

7. Marx, of course, did not see intellectuals as a "historic" class. But it's not clear that the proletariat is more cohesive or its members more single-minded.

8. Lest one think that Marxists have a monopoly on such anti-individualist formulations, recall Edmund Burke's argument that revolution is generally a mistake because it is an attempt to make history conform to inevitably individual ideas: "The individual is foolish, but the species is wise."

9. Weber's, rather than Marx's, understanding of class seems immanent, or at least natural, to "mature" capitalist society. This is why class struggle has characteristically been reformist and subject to competition from other lines of allegiance and competing goods. The stronger kind of solidarity that Marx envisioned for class struggle has been reserved so far for collectivities that fit his conceptualization of proletariat very imperfectly at best (Calhoun 1982, 1988a). Some later work broadly in the Marxist tradition has tried to confront the essentially historical and incompletely determined process of class formation (see Przeworski 1985; Katznelson and Zolberg 1986).

10. Baumann (1978, pp. 79-82) has suggested that Weber saw the prevalence of instrumental rationality as important to sociology because it gave social actors identical (or at least commensurable) ends. This made it possible for scientists to offer objective judgments of the rationality of various means. Value rationality was important, by contrast, precisely for taking account of residual but still powerful beliefs that dissented from the prevailing market-based instrumental rationality. These various "absolute" values could not simply be traded off against others, as, say, an official might seek to balance money, power, and prestige. They were, rather, ends indistinguishable from the self and thus problematic for Weber's search for a clear-cut basis for cross-personal evaluation (such as the market gave to instrumental rationality). Aesthetic, ethical, religious, or other bases for value rationality made people incommensurably different from each other. Elsewhere, Weber tends to limit rationality (and meaningful understanding) to those cases where a means/ends calculus is operative; rationality is reduced to instrumental rationality. Thus, for example, in his treatment of legitimacy, Weber ([1922] 1968, p. 33) groups value rationality with affective and religious legitimacy as "purely subjective"; the other sort of legitimacy is that based on "the expectation of specific external effects, that is, by interest situations."

11. Even a resolute structuralist like Peter Blau (e.g., 1977; Blau and Schwartz 1984), for example, must begin with some induction of the categories that he will then test for their salience in predicting in-group versus out-group rates of association. This induction is basically an untheorized role for culture in his anticulturalist argument (see Calhoun and Scott 1990).

12. Thus Hechter sees no qualitative distinction between voluntary, single-purpose associations and ongoing groups into which persons are born, like families or communities (see Wacquant and Calhoun 1989).

13. There is an enormous literature on these problems. The issue was perhaps most developed in the debate over rationality and cross-cultural analysis that followed the publication of Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958). This is summarized in two excellent anthologies, Wilson (1970) and Hollis and Lukes (1982). The issue has regained currency with the rise of so-called postmodernist social theories that argue for ethical and analytic particularism on somewhat distinct grounds (see Calhoun forthcoming-b).

14. McAdam (1986, 1988) has shown a similar process at work among participants in 1964's "Freedom Summer." More generally, he shows how participation in the longer-term civil rights movement nurtured an intense identification with that movement, supported by webs of relationships with fellow activists; these in turn encouraged participation in the specific high-risk and high-cost actions of Freedom Summer.

15. Qiu Jin's death, like that of many martyrs, fits well into Durkheim's (1895) account of altruistic suicide. See accounts by Rankin (1971) and Spence (1981).

16. Perhaps an even more basic issue is whether the construction of persons in a culture is based on a notion of the individual at all. All cultures have notions of personhood, but these may be very different than the Western individualistic one. Arguing this case does not seem essential here; it is a case, moreover, that would require a very developed account of what a person who is not an individual is—an account that I am not in a position to develop and would not have space for if I could. Several insightful discussions are contained in the book of essays sparked by Mauss's brilliant but neglected essay on the category of the person (Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985).

17. In an essay focused on showing that the Chinese do in fact have a range of notions of the self, and that Mauss was wrong to make as sharp a distinction of Chinese from Western ideas of person as he did, Mark Elvin (1985), nonetheless, finds a significant distinction on just this point.

18. The current revival of strict liability doctrines often troubles us precisely because it is at odds with this deep-seated cultural understanding. Strict liability, by the way, is often closely related to notions of corporate or collective liability, as, for example, one kinsman or clansman may be held liable for the actions of another (see discussion in Moore 1972).

19. I am reminded of an old joke from the Jewish communities of pre-Holocaust Germany: God described his plans for the character of different nations to the archangel Gabriel. The Germans, he said, will be honest, intelligent, and National Socialists. "Oh no," said Gabriel, "that's too many good qualities for any one nation." God reconsidered, and so it is that each German has only two of those three qualities. There are honest Nazis, and there are intelligent Nazis, but people who are honest *and* intelligent are never Nazis.

20. This misfortune has befallen many Chinese people during the last 40 years. It is a central theme in the "literature of the wounded" in which victims of the Cultural Revolution recount, explore, and try to assuage their sufferings. Among the most central of these sufferings is living with the knowledge that one engaged in false or undeserved criticism of one's comrades. One can pride oneself for holding out a long time against pressure, or for trying to say only things that were strictly true, but this does not make the sense of violation go away. It is crucial that such violation is felt by those who criticized as well as by those they attacked. Several such personal narratives are recounted and discussed by Thurston (1988).

21. A somewhat distinct account of selective pressures is needed to account for the preponderance of students from outside Beijing in the square just before the crackdown. These had to overcome greater obstacles (e.g., long-distance travel) to participate. They had a special need to demonstrate their own radical commitment because their comrades from Beijing had already proved theirs through the hunger strike and other earlier actions (and, in any case, had the benefit of membership in more prestigious and traditionally radical universities). Perhaps most important, it was much harder for them simply to leave as danger grew.

22. It is important to note also that students were not the only actors on the popular side of this drama. Insurgent workers and *laobaixing* (ordinary people) figure more prominently among the dead (if not so far among the martyrs of reconstructed history). Students were brave to be in the square, but the killing took place along the roads into Tiananmen, and the dead seem largely to have been local residents.

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