Activist Knowledge: Interrogating the Ideational Landscape of Social Movements

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Abstract: Over the past three decades, there has been a rising concern about the ability of social theories to address the ideational (knowledge-making) processes in social movements. This article argues that in spite of the recent growing emphasis on the cognitive dimension of collective action, many theoretical attempts and the studies influenced by them evidence significant shortcomings in explaining the (trans)formation of ideas and ideologies in social movements. These shortcomings stem from a failure at the metatheoretical level, that is, their failure to hold an integrative and interdisciplinary approach to comprehending the relation between changing social structures, dynamic patterns of experience and the social consciousness of actors. In proposing a solution, the article starts with defining the ideational landscape of social movements by introducing the concept of ‘activist knowledge’. Then, it will argue for the necessity of developing an integrative, interdisciplinary, metatheoretical framework through a radical reconstruction of old metaphors like agency and structure in the light of the recent global changes.

Keywords: Social Movements, Activism, Sociology of Knowledge, Critical Realism, Ideology, Globalization

Introduction

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VER THE PAST three decades, there has been a rising concern about the ability of sociological theories to address the ideational (knowledge-making) processes in social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Alvarez 1998; Oliver and Johnston 2000; Koopmans 2005; Schurman and Munro 2006; Kurzman 2008; Escobar 2008). In this article, I will argue that in spite of the recent growing emphasis on the ideational dimension of collective action, many theoretical attempts and the studies influenced by them evidence significant shortcomings in explaining the (trans)formation of ideas in social movements. These shortcomings stem from a failure at the metatheoretical level, that is, their failure to hold an integrative and interdisciplinary approach to comprehending the relation between changing social structures, dynamic patterns of experience (or historical agency) and the social consciousness of actors. This failure, in turn, is related to the overriding reductionist tendency among the theories to overlook the relative autonomy of collective cognition with respect to the practices of actors and their conditioning circumstances.

In other worlds, the ability of social movement studies in theorizing and analyzing the ideational aspects of movements deeply relies on solving the dilemma of agency-structure. The dilemma cannot be satisfactorily solved unless a proper standing is given to the ideational dimension of social movements in relation to both the agential and social structural dimensions. As I will argue, Sociology of Knowledge (SoK) is potentially the most appropriate field of study for doing this. However, in understanding the cognitive aspect of collective actions, there is a significant deficiency in paying attention to the constructive role...
that SoK can play. There are two reasons for this failure: (1) the ideational aspect of social movements (or what I call here the ‘activist knowledge’) is not properly conceptualized in the side of social movement studies, and (2) SoK itself has fallen short of acknowledging activist knowledge.

In proposing a solution, I start my argument with defining the cognitive or ideational dimension of social movements by introducing the concept of ‘activist knowledge/ideation’. Then, I will argue for the necessity of developing an integrative, interdisciplinary, meta-theoretical approach through a radical reconstruction of old metaphors like agency and structure in the light of the recent global changes.\(^1\) Associated with this approach is a comprehensive research framework which is based on: (1) a critical realist conception of social structures and practices; (2) an elaborated version of classical sociology of knowledge; (3) incorporating the idea of ‘social mechanisms’; and (4) the application of ‘ideal-type’ construction method as developed by Max Weber (1949). (These will be delineated through the later sections.)

**Activist Knowledge**

Many may think that theorizing social issues and analysing social events is a job typically undertaken by social scientists. However, if we accept that all humans have the capacity to be reflective and many individuals and groups are engaged directly or indirectly in (re-) constructing ideas, then considering people as unmethodical (or naïve) social theorists can be a sensible assumption. People alter their understandings of their social worlds in the light of their own individual and collective experiences. This cognitive feature looks more pertinent to social ‘movement actors’\(^2\) who are engaged more actively and attentively in dealing with social issues and problems.

Social movement actors play an important role in transforming social knowledge at many levels. Many activists are deeply engaged in formulating tensions, articulating themes, and contributing to the present vocabulary of social thoughts. They redefine what is real and what is possible. They often develop provocative ideas to cause or resist social changes. Even at the practical level, by responding to social problems and formulating those problems for society, social movements create spaces for new intellectual activities and spur public discussions. The creation of new systems of meaning is a constitutive part of many social movements. As Whalen and Flacks (1989) mention, the creation of new systems of meaning is an inseparable part of social movements, through which they are treated by other sectors of society and individuals. Besides, at a practical level, ‘by spontaneously responding to new social problems, indeed often formulating those problems for society, social movements create spaces for new exploratory intellectual activities to become crystallized’ (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 106).

In today’s information age, the production of alternative knowledge to those dominant sources of authentic knowledge (like media corporations or political institutions) has become more essential than before for many participants in the growing global civil society. As Castells points out, the real targets of the current mobilizations are the minds of people.

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\(^1\) This approach, coined initially ‘Sociology of Dissident Knowledge’, was developed by this author (Hosseini 2010) for a specific research purpose. This paper provides an extension of the original argument by considering later revisions and further elaborations on its empirical application in a broader context.

\(^2\) I use the term ‘movement actors’ to refer to both activist individuals and collectivities.
around the world; it is ‘by changing minds that they expect to put pressure on the institutions of governance and, ultimately, bring democracy and alternative social values to these institutions’ (Castells 2004: 157). The growing importance of social forums, i.e. the spaces in which many different groups and individuals gather to discuss their problems and develop solutions, is one of the outstanding features of today’s global resistance. As mentioned in the World Social Forum’s Charter of Principles, ‘… the World Social Forum is a movement of ideas that prompts reflection, and the transparent circulation of the results of that reflection, on the mechanisms and instruments of domination by capital … and on the alternatives proposed to solve the problems of exclusion and inequality’ (WSF 2001 Principle 11).

Social movements are not usually limited to their periods of mobilization and public appearance. Rather, the vigor of a movement depends on its influence on the ways the public thinks about the related issues. The most sustainable and successful movements are those that are able to be the sources of innovative ideas and inspiration when the mainstream thoughts have not been able to solve the major dilemmas. For example, the foremost social movements that arose in the period of 1960s-1970s proved to be able to debunk many of the widely presumed assumptions (such as the Universalist, scientist, and objectivist assumptions) which were mostly inherited from the Enlightenment. They challenged the essentialist definitions of identity such as those class-biased definitions that had ignored other elements of identity (such as gender, race, ethnicity, and religion).

These movements proved themselves rather successful in challenging the common conceptions of sex and gender among ordinary individuals. By challenging the mainstream definitions of democracy and questioning the practical role of dominant institutions with regard to democracy, the ideational aspects of activism has proved to be equally important to its political/practical component. Thus, social movements constitute a ‘field’ of contending (and at the same time overlapping) ideas that could last beyond their organizational existence or eventual mobilizations. Therefore, in understanding the nature of a movement, it is always important to investigate the processes through which social ideas and basic senses of solidarity are developed among the movement actors.

In sum, the ‘ideational dimension’ of a movement consists of the intellectual processes of how movement actors understand, conceptualize, explain, and analyze social problems and the events they have experienced, and how they reflect on their own individual and collective practices. The ‘ideational landscape’ of a social movement is a space where movement actors translate their collective experiences of social reality into ideas. Here, I prefer to label such a critical aspect of social movements, activist knowledge (or activist ideation). Activist knowledge is, by definition, a process of (trans)forming social consciousness through a certain course of socio-political contentions and communicative actions – mostly undertaken in ‘public spheres’, around a vital set of interrelated social issues, in order to explain and respond to them. This kind of collective-networked cognition is a practical-ideational process which proceeds out of a social movement’s relations with (and contributions to) both existing knowledge spheres and social reality. As I will argue, this process is not basically restricted to information acquisition and processing, social psychological cognitions, practical knowledge, deliberative contemplations in public spheres, discursive and ideological transformations, framing and so on.

‘Activist knowledge’ (or activist ideation) is formed through both strategic and communicative actions in confronting dominant social processes. Such knowledge is shaped at a very pragmatic level that differs in nature (despite some overlaps) from the academic level.
of knowledge production, the institutional level of political ideology construction, and even the routine interactional level of cultural reproduction.

By using the term ‘activist knowledge’\(^3\), we can stress the typical particularity and pragmatic nature of ideational processes in social movements. Highlighting the pragmatic nature of activist knowledge, however, is not adequate for differentiating it from other types. Moreover, there must also be an emphasis on the association of this consciousness with solidarity, contestations and communications, as well as an acknowledgment of a minimum level of self-reflexivity. Social movements are usually seen as mediators between the everyday life level of consciousness and the institutionalized knowledge formations. This is the case when movement actors translate ideas from one level to another and vice versa. However, social movements in this process create a relatively autonomous level of consciousness with particular features that cannot be reduced to the other two levels.

Activist discourses around global warming, for instance, while drawing on many scientific works and linking them to everyday life experiences of environmentally vulnerable people, form a level of knowledge which cannot be simply contested through systematic examinations and experiments or totally treated as unscientific, personal stories. This process of contemplation, translation and production is pragmatic, selective, value laden, and deeply associated with the dynamics of solidarity formation. There is a significant difference between ideologies and activist knowledge in terms of language, level of abstraction, formality, methods of reasoning, and embedded practical concerns-interests. Activist knowledge, however, has a strong ideological element that mediates between the actors’ cognitions and their actions; it translates ideas into action and vice versa.

Now we may ask how such an important aspect has not still received an apposite conceptualization in social movement studies. In fact, inspired by many of social movements of the time, there has been a significant turn in social sciences in the 1970s towards recognizing the ideational, linguistic, and cultural aspects of social life. So, why do we still need to lay stress on the ideational dimension of collective actions, particularly in social movements, despite the recent cognitive/cultural turn?

**Reductionist Treatments of Activist Knowledge in Social Movement Studies**\(^4\)

Collective cognition (and therefore activist knowledge as one type) was fully denied by the classical collective behavior approach which was the dominant paradigm in social movement studies during the 1940s and 1950s. Based on this perspective, any collective behavior was seen as non-institutional, formless, anomic and irrational (Buechler 2000), and there was no scope for taking the ideational aspect earnestly into account. In its heyday, behaviorism ignored the active role of thinking individuals. For the functionalist version of collective beha-

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\(^3\) The word ‘activist knowledge’ (rather than *activists’ knowledge*) is used metaphorically rather than literally. Words like ‘oppositional’ could also be used. However, I prefer ‘activist’ as it underlines the grassroots nature of this knowledge compared to formal and organizational political oppositions. Compared to the word ‘dissident’, as used in my other works (e.g. Hosseini 2010), the term ‘activist’ helps us avoid excluding oppositions to other movements.

\(^4\) This section, due to the space limit, provides a very brief review of mainstream theories in social movement studies. The readers interested in a more elaborative critical review are recommended to see the second chapter of my book (Hosseini 2010).
behavior approach (see for example, Smelser 1962), generalized beliefs are seen as one of the main factors in shaping collective behavior. They are as crucial as other elements such as structural strains, structural conduciveness, and precipitating factors. Nonetheless, this cognitive component of action receives less analytical attention in the functionalist approach. Ideational factors are interesting subjects of study for the sake of their functional roles in stimulating mobilization, rather than for their own sake.

The ‘relative deprivation theory’ of collective behavior approaches the ideational dimension of movements in a different way. According to this theory, a group – comparing itself with a reference grouping – may develop a sense of deprivation through recognizing the lack of resources they are experiencing. The subjective component of collective action is restricted to the irrational processes through which people measure a state of deprivation in terms of objective sources of satisfaction. Such knowledge is transitive and it can be easily changed through the objective measures of welfare. These conceptions of movements and their ideational aspect were dominant in many studies until the mid-1970s.

The first paradigmatic shift towards acknowledging the ideational aspect of collective actions in the study of social movements can be located somewhere in the period of the late 1960s and the early 1970s when social movements were considered as rational or meaningful elements of social change. At this time, the ‘cultural’ or ‘linguistic’ turn in the mainstream social sciences was associated with a paradigmatic shift towards emphasizing the cognitive, cultural, and discursive aspects of movements (Johnston and Klandermans 1995). According to this perspective, social actors try to make sense of each other in order to guide their own actions and interactions. This new wave, keeping its roots in the interactionist perspective, stimulated a second wave of social psychological approach (including social constructionism) in the area of social movement studies with the recognition of movements as phenomena not reducible to blind social mobs (see Snow and Oliver 1995).

From a constructionist perspective, movement actors and organizations are not simply viewed as the bearers of meanings and ideas, but as ‘signifying agents’ engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning of constituents, adversaries and bystanders in a field of contention. In addition, they are seen as being involved – along with the media, local governments and the state – in “the politics of signification”, based on which the “struggle to have certain meanings or understandings gain ascendance over others, or at least move up some existing hierarchy of credibility” (Snow and Oliver 1995: 587). This signifying work, called ‘framing’ by Snow and Benford (1992), is a cognitive process through which collective actions are constructed in the context of social movements.

In the discursive version of social constructionism, knowledge is considered as an ideological result of language processes and thereby the dynamic feature of knowledge is underestimated (Platt and Williams 2002). Activist ideation or knowledge is reduced to a semiotic inspired social psychology of symbolic protests or to abstracted discourses of post-industrialized ideologies. The discursive approach has tended to overemphasize social relations at the level of ideology with respect to other levels such as the material aspects of social relations (see Tew 2002: 75). As Burgmann (2003: 8) accentuates, “emphasis on the significance of

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5 I acknowledge that ‘relative deprivation’ theory has a significant merit in explaining the formation of social movements. Crossley (2002) has discussed the usefulness of this theory when it is applied in association with other theories. However, I am not personally satisfied with this approach when it comes to deal with meaning-making processes. It may helpfully address some of the social psychological mechanisms behind the formation of activist knowledge but it fails to acknowledge the role of creative collective agency.
language in the mobilization of subordinate groups does not entail commitment to poststructuralist theories that wrench political languages and concepts loose from their material and other influences.” Therefore, as she suggests, it is important to be attentive to the established structural and ideological context of the emergence of “new verbal frameworks and vocabularies within which experiences are expressed and communicated” (2003: 8).

Parallel to this wave, another strong strand of the American sociology, disappointed from the alleged ‘irrationalism’ of the first wave of collective behaviorists, adopted a model of agency rooted in ‘Rational Action Theory’ (RAT). This model substantially influenced two famous approaches: ‘Resource Mobilization Approach’ (RMA) and ‘Political Process Approach’ (PPA). Inspired by the cognitive turn in social sciences, PPA has taken a further step towards including culture into its definition of structural opportunities (McAdam 1996; Gamson 1998; McAdam et al. 1996a; Tarrow 1998).

RMA and PPA have presented more agential but less cognitive-oriented models than other approaches. They bracket out a consideration of the agent’s ideational schema and adopt a reductionist conception of the structural origins of action (i.e. resources and opportunities). The ideational aspects of movements are interpreted as an instrumental rather than a constitutive component of action with activist knowledge seen as an organizational attribute and as a means for mobilization (Kurzman 2008). As Fuchs argues, these ideas of ‘framing processes’ and ‘frame alignment’ still restrict the cultural and cognitive aspects to strategic tasks of consensus mobilization and action generation (Fuchs 2000: 68).

RMA reduces activist knowledge to organizations’ estimative faculties and decisions based on abstract rationality, i.e. assessing the balance of costs and benefits of engagement in a collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1977). By putting a premium on social movements’ organizations and relying on an economic logic, RMA has no choice except to identify the preferences of such organizations with the intact cognitive aspect of movements. Actually, RMA has failed to explain the role that cultural and ideological elements play in arousing the commitments and interests of people. The primary criticism of this theory is its downplaying of the role of ideational factors in general (Crossley 2002; Eyerman and Jamison 1991).

The political process approach (PPA), taking a moderated rational view on board, treats the cultural dimension of social movements as the representation of interests. Yet, it only takes account of the political and institutional environment as an external factor embedded within rational cognitive processes such as framing (see della Porta and Diani 1999: 9, 80-1). Political actors are able to include their own estimation of structural opportunities – such as openness of the local political system, electoral stability, and influential allies – into their calculations of results. In fact, a narrow conception of ‘social’ structures is being applied in relation to a narrow conception of ‘cognition’, namely rationality.

On the European side, new social movement (NSM) theories appeared to direct analyses not only with respect to macro social dynamics of social change but also at the macro aspects of collective cognition. In accordance with the nature of their subjects, many of these attempts have adopted ‘identity-oriented’ interpretations since they mostly believe that new conflicts concern primarily subjective goals, such as meanings, lifestyle, personal and collective identities, rather than directly targeting political and economic goods (Diani and Eyerman 1992: 7). These scholars normally define ‘social movements’ as sources of meaning. In this

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6 Crossley (2002) criticizes this narrowness of the conception of social structures in more detail.
definition, the ‘subjective’ (symbolic, cognitive, and culture-related) aspects of collective action are located at the center of analysis. Whereas in other theoretical approaches there is a common tendency to divorce social movements from the historical conditions that generate them, the most distinctive peculiarity of NSM theories is their attempt to identify the links between historically transforming social structures and transforming collective actions (Melucci 1996; Castells 1983; Habermas 1984; 1987; Touraine 1981; 1985).

However, as della Porta and Diani conclude in their review of the NSM approach, “It is important … to remember that collective action does not spring automatically from structural tensions [or from structural changes in general]” (1999: 57, 2006). Nonetheless, in addressing facilitating factors, which determine such an occurrence, they point to external factors such as a favorable political context, the role of intellectual leaders, and the availability of organizational resources. All these factors again can be interpreted as structural factors (external to social agents) that altogether cannot adequately determine the emergence of a movement. Rather, as I will argue, what must be considered as mediators between structural complexities and collective actions are the processes of cognizing and constructing these tensions; i.e., the processes through which social contradictions at the unconscious level of social structures are translated into the practical and reflective levels of political life.

Much of the debate since the mid-1970s, among the scholars of collective action, has focused on issues that are essentially subjective: from explaining the individuals’ decisions for participation at a micro-level of analysis, to the analyses of interactional processes of framing by groups and organizations at a meso-level, to questions about ideologies, master-frames and discourses at a macro-level. However, the complexity of what I defined initially in this article as the ideational dimension of movements is either dismantled into narrow concepts such as ideologies, identities, symbols, codes, frames, or practical knowledge or limited into confrontational levels of analysis such as everyday life level versus organizational level. In fact, this crucial aspect of social mobilizations has habitually received reductionist and substandard theoretical treatments.

Is the activist knowledge originally formed at the micro level of interactions among the movement actors (according to their pragmatic intentions), or should it be examined by analyzing the ideological and discursive productions of movements at a macro level? The answer to these types of question depends on the positions taken by social movement scholars on the dilemma of agency-structure. Those who lay stress more on the agential or intersubjective aspect of social life usually tend to reduce the activist knowledge to the meaning-construction (cognitive) processes and symbolic dimensions of interactions among movement actors. On the other hand, those who emphasize the importance of social structures usually tend to reduce the activist knowledge to the institutional level or mechanisms of knowledge production like master-frames or ideologies.

In order to conceptualize activist knowledge, it is not adequate to accentuate it as the end of study per se; rather what we are required to show is its proper location in relation to both the actors’ practices and to their broader social conditions. This location is what has made different accentuations controversial. Such a theoretical requirement for solving the dilemma of agency-structure is acknowledged by a growing number of scholars in the last two decades. Since the late 1980s, these scholars have attempted to extend the preexisting theories or to forge synthesizing speculations in order to produce explanations that are more satisfactory (see Ayres 1997; McAdam et al 1996b, for instance). If so, then one may again raise the
question that why it is still necessary to think of a new integrative meta-theoretical framework despite the recent growing attempts for integration.

**Necessity of Developing a New Comprehensive Framework**

Although the number of voices for integration has been increasing outside the mainstream, none of them has selected a virtual intermediary point of departure towards striking a balance between the contradictions among the theories. They have mainly offered extensions out of formerly established positions. As Buechler (2000: 52-3) asserts, these extensions appropriate the language and issues of a different paradigm and incorporate them as a minor theme in a preexisting paradigm that undergoes no fundamental change in the process of study.

McAdam *et al.* (1996b) argue that despite the diversity of perspectives, something of a consensus has emerged among social movement theories that political opportunities, mobilizing structures and framing processes are crucial to the emergence of social movements and must be analyzed altogether. Nevertheless, as Lockie (2004: 46-8) points out, by focusing on the relations between social movements and established institutions, McAdam *et al.*’s integrative approach narrows the scope of politics and conflict to that engaged in by centralized state agencies. Their approach also reduces struggles to interactions between these agencies and formalized social movement organizations.

Della Porta and Diani (1999, 2006) introduce a broader integrative approach. They embrace a dualistic integration of agency and structure, and the micro- and macro-levels of analysis. Della Porta and Diani argue that social conflicts arise from the interaction between structural contradictions and the emergence of a collective subject that can see itself as the bearer of certain values and interests (1999: 87). Structural conditions are assumed to exist independently of the collective subject. Structural contradictions are attributed a causal role in the emergence of movements. In terms of methodology, their approach implies a combination between structuralist methods and the objectivist methods employed by the PPA and rational choice theorists (such as Jasper 1997), in which collective cognition is held to be just a given factor, such as shared beliefs.

Melucci (1985; 1996; 1995) criticizes this kind of dualistic integration of structures and agency by arguing that neither the structural conditions nor individual impetuses can be said to lead directly to collective action. Influenced by the European phenomenological approach and incorporating it into the 1970s culturalist turn, he emphasizes the subjective constitution of collective action by conceiving it as a ‘field of meaning’ and ‘orientation’ and by focusing on the formation of ‘collective identity’ as a process. This formation takes place through interactions, compromises, and conflicts with opposing viewpoints (Lockie 2004).

The three dimensions of a social movement as a social phenomenon, i.e. the ‘structural’, the ‘practical’ and the ‘cognitive’, are well acknowledged in Melucci’s solution. However, Melucci does not provide the analytical tools or models with which one can translate his integrative meta-theoretical assumptions into consolidated empirical researches. Such models are required to integrate a moderated structuralist methodology with a moderated interpretive methodology in order to show how the ideational construction of a social movement is interwoven with its objective existence and how one can analytically abstract it by analyzing the movement in accordance with its historical context. The next section discusses how sociology of knowledge can be brought into the field of social movement studies as a base for developing a proper integrative approach and its associated analytical models.
Sociology of Activist Knowledge (SAK) as an Integrative Approach

Here, I argue that it is possible to develop a general analytical model using an elaborated version of sociology of knowledge that employs the ideal-types as the best means to perceive both the unity and diversity within a social movement as diverse as the global justice movement. Sociology of activist knowledge, on the one hand, by reflecting on social movement studies as a kind of social knowledge, can provide a proper space for the critical review of theoretical orientations. Thereby, it can assess the possibility of integration among different methodologies. This is not an unprecedented suggestion. Eyerman and Jamison (1991) and Buechler (2000: Chapter 2), for instance, have critically reviewed social movement theories through the lenses of the sociology of activist knowledge in order to figure out the links between the development of theoretical approaches and their socio-historical contexts.

Sociology of knowledge, by targeting activist ideations, can directly contribute to the study of movements through explaining the transformations in intellectual, ideological and cognitive landscape of social movements and thereby it can help the integration of theory and practice. Therefore, sociology of knowledge needs to include the notion of ‘activist knowledge’ into its definition of ‘knowledge’. By giving a proper position to collective ideations in relation to social agency and structure, sociology of knowledge can potentially provide the necessary base for a meta-theoretical integration.

However, despite such a potential, sociology of knowledge has mostly remained divided between those who study professional, scientific knowledge and those who study ‘everyday’ knowledge. ‘Cognition has been seen either as the work of professional cognizers or the work of everyone’ (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 52). Criticizing the state of sociology of knowledge for this aspect, Eyerman and Jamison rightfully emphasize the mediating role of social movements both in translating everyday knowledge into professional knowledge and in providing new contexts for the reinterpretations of professional knowledge. One can read social movements as producers of knowledge since the emergence of many social perceptions are attributable to critical questions that have been raised by movements, for example about the relation between society and nature in the case of environmental movements. Therefore, an appropriate sociology of knowledge must not be restricted either to a micro- or to a macro-level of analysis. In spite of such emphasis, Eyerman and Jamison’s sociology of knowledge does not present an explanatory account of the movements’ ideational making. Their argument remains descriptive as they, themselves acknowledge (see 1991: 64).

In contrast, I introduced the concept of ‘activist knowledge’ earlier in this paper which can be useful in the context of developing an applicable sociology of knowledge in the area of social movement studies. Such knowledge is neither merely a set of predisposed frames/packages of information in the hands of movement actors in order to represent themselves or to recruit followers, nor simply an ideological object produced by movements for intellectual purposes. Based on this definition, the ideational structure of a movement is best understood as a constellation of ‘logically compatible’ modes of social thought. Therefore, activist knowledge should be treated as an important autonomous social practice inter-

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In fact, Eyerman and Jamison underemphasize a movement’s cognition and treat it as derivative, rather than essential. For instance, the authors, instead of examining activists’ strategic/practical knowledge, mostly target the protest techniques/strategies (such as nonviolent direct action) in order to uncover the implicit knowledge underlying them. They do not employ a consistent theory of the sociology of knowledge and instead use a simple typological description.
related with other practices, such as emotional, discursive, strategic, interactional, and organizational.

Logical compatibility is not a necessary condition for mobilization or even for defining the contours of a movement’s activist knowledge. However, logical compatibility is one of the necessary criteria for mapping, ideal-typically, the ideational structure of a social movement. In the case of global justice movement, the differentiation between pro-welfare and anarchist discourses can be investigated more deeply in terms of their underlying logics and assumptions (see Starr 2000, 2003, for instance). Among the other underpinning assumptions that can be considered when mapping activist knowledge are those about what is aesthetically plausible or implausible, morally right or wrong, pragmatically viable or inefficient, logically true or false, recognizably self-related or other-related, etc. It is the objective and the context of research that determines what assumptions are going to be highlighted and what features of activist knowledge are going to be accentuated in the process of ideal-type construction.

Activist knowledge is a conglomeration of diverse ideational abilities and processes that have practically shown enough capacity to build solidarity around a set of shared goals and values for changing, or resisting changes of, society. This definition carries ideal-typical characteristics since it requires investigators to justify the logical compatibility and congruence of modes of thought, and their attribution to a social movement, at a very abstract level but in reference to reality. The modes of activist knowledge can be investigated by the means of ideal-types (for a more extensive discussion around the methodological value of ideal-types in studying the ideational aspects of movements, see Hosseini 2010: Chapter 3).

Accordingly, social movements must be seen as part of a broader historical formation of societies, and not just as a group of social players acting for the sake of their interests. In contrast to Melucci, who defines movements’ ideational landscape as a constellation of broad orientations that challenge the dominant cultural codes and meaning systems, I prefer to focus on those fields of ‘intellectual contention and deliberation’ in which social subjects challenge the modes of thinking, justifying and interpreting the social world underlying the dominant or rival meaning systems. Thereby, I intend to stress those aspects that I believe are essential in analyzing the historical role of a movement from sociology of knowledge point of view. Instead of relying on mechanical terms such as intellectual producers or creators of knowledge, I define the ‘ideational landscape’ of a movement as a ‘field of intellectual contention (and deliberation)’8, that is:

A constellation of relatively autonomous ‘public spaces’ constructed through ‘intersubjective’ actions among different movement actors with diverse and even contending orientations in confronting commonly acknowledged structural changes.

In other words, a field of intellectual contention is an assortment of diverse ideational abilities which have practically shown enough capacity to build solidarity around a set of shared goals and values, for changing or resisting changes of society.

Regarding the above definition, activist knowledge does not necessarily (or totally) emerge through oppositions to dominant ideologies or norms. The ways in which ideologies

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8 Using the concept of ‘field’ (as loosely borrowed from Bourdieu) and considering social movements as fields of both ideological ‘contentions’ and ‘deliberations’ will help us avoid excluding groups which do not deviate from relatively consensual norms.
(whether dominant or rival) interpret the social world and justify events make soft targets for a movement to discredit, contest, or criticize and to establish its own modes of interpretation and justification. However, these contesting modes of activist knowledge are not totally, antagonistic, innovative or alien. Since movements are not isolated from their historical context, and they have been mainly socialized within the same cultural system, they usually borrow many discursive and cognitive elements from their enemy’s ideology. This gives movement actors flexibility in articulating their beliefs, and helps them to communicate more simply in a public space conquered by dominant discourses. Through such a mechanism, they also challenge the exclusive authenticity of dominant (or rival) ideologies in using and interpreting concepts. However, the persisting predominant ideological elements within the counter-hegemonic discourses are not always advantageous, as they do not totally function as the necessary means for communicating with the broader society. As Gramsci (1971: 326–327) describes, the coexistence of conformity and resistance in civil society stems partially from group-belongings with shared modes of thinking and acting. It also gives rise to inconsistencies and tensions between thought and action, and between different forces of resistance (Cox 1999).

The ideal-construction of a movement performs a starting point for the analytical part of the study, and offers a general sense of the subject that can be a methodological means for assessing the other studies. Of course, this ideal-typical sense of a movement is itself developed and abstracted, highly selectively, out of available information and debates, but it gives coherence to a researcher’s point of view from the beginning of his/her argument and it must be the subject of critical examination through further studies.

Sociology of activist knowledge is intended to balance ‘practice’ and ‘structure’ by giving a relatively autonomous standing to collective cognition as the third dimension. It is also grounded on the assumption that the activist knowledge/cognition is not reducible to either everyday life processes of meaning construction or institutional processes of ideology/knowledge formation. In the following section, I attempt to define the approach by discussing its underlying assumptions rooted in a critical-realist perspective.

**Principles of SAK as a Research Program**

As I argued before, what I call the SAK is grounded on the acknowledgment of dialectical relations between the three major components of a social phenomenon, i.e. the historical-structural, the ideational, and the practical-agential. This can be translated into a methodological approach by synthesizing a reflexive version of interpretive orientations with a modest version of structuralist methodology. Such a demand can find its basic justifications among critical realist debates (see Morrow and Brown 1994).

Morrow and Brown (1994: xiv, 24-5, 160-2) argue that the methodological foundations of critical realism, in order to be more applicable as a research program with empirical dimensions, must be rearticulated in an integrative approach in which both subjective and objective dimensions of reality are treated appropriately. They label this methodological approach ‘interpretive structuralism’, or ‘hermeneutic structuralism’9. However, in this ap-

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9 Morrow and Brown (1994) introduce the term as a natural manner of expressing the methodological framework shared by the classical historical analysis described by C. W. Mills, Habermas’ theory of communicative action, Giddens’ structuration theory, and Bourdieu’s theory of practice. The framework is mainly based on a tendency towards reconciliation of hermeneutics and structuralism.
approach, an assumption needs to be highlighted. This assumption is that “social subjects [especially movement actors], albeit in different degrees, take up ‘distance’ – in their social conducts – from both their surrounding conditions and their own actions. They can do this by means of their reflexive, deliberative contemplations and strategic decisions” (Hosseini 2010: 47-8; see also Mouzelis 2000). 10

It is precisely because of this assumption that we need to give an analytically autonomous position to ‘activist ideation’ in relation to ‘agency’ and ‘social structure’. This autonomy is more eminent in social movements as the reflective distantiation between actors and their surrounding structures is higher. Based on the above assumption, the irreducibility of all the three dimensions of social phenomena needs to be acknowledged in our analyses. According to SAK, any social phenomenon has three analytically separable dimensions: ‘practical-agential’, ‘contextual-structural’, and ‘discursive-cognitive’. These three dimensions are quasi-causally interrelated via ‘social mechanisms’.

In order to study the ideational aspect of a movement, researches can be arranged around the following questions: What are the significant ideational features of a movement as a field of cognitive resistance? If different groups and organizations within the field show essentially different ideational features and characteristics, then what have made them coalesce? How do the movement actors’ basic ideational orientations emerge out of changing socio-economic and political structures as well as their social experiences? In other words, how can we explain their activist knowledge in terms of their experiential implementations from within the movement and structural transformations from without? And, how do these ideational features construct the current reality of the movement?

The above inquiries can be organized in four assignments in the SAK research program:

1. Ideal-typically constructing the specific contesting trends within a field of resistance in terms of their very basic orientations towards defining social conditions and bringing about social change by eligible agents (each trend/category can be called an ‘activist vision’). This can be done through accentuating the movement’s basic ideational features that may challenge the predominant discourses of the system in terms of their ideological principles and may contest with other modes in the field for developing alternatives. Critical and morphological approaches to discourse and frame analysis can be employed for mapping the ideational structure of the movements (see van Dijk 2006; Freeden 2006; Carroll and Ratner 1996; Starr 2000; Freeden 1998; Maddison and Scalmer 2006; and Hosseini 2006, as some exemplars).

2. Explaining how the ‘activist visions’ and their associated modes of thought are pragmatically constructed due to the social actors’ experiences of their collective actions in realizing their subjectivity and shared ideals, while being ‘conditioned’ by socio-economic and political structures. This assignment is a moderate constructionist research program. Melucci’s works (2000; 1996) as well as some post-Foucauldian attempts (Caldwell 2007) can be considered as inspiring exemplars for directing this assignment.

3. Explaining how the emergence of ‘activist visions’ within a movement is socially conditioned by structural complexities while being ‘constructed’ through the movement actors’ interactive experiences of the political, cultural and economic conditions. This

10 Although Mouzelis (2000) truly accentuate this principle in criticizing Giddens’ dialectical approach, he does not conclude the autonomy and irreducibility of cognition.
assignment is a moderate structuralist research program which can be implemented by adopting the (neo-) Gramscian approach to studying (counter-)hegemony (for instance, Mumby 1997; Sklair 1997; Carroll and Ratner 1996) and feminist and Freirian perspectives on knowledge from below (Conway 2006; Freire 1998).

Activist knowledge is not only conditioned by social structures and practically constituted through social interactions, but also construct and mediate the relationship between structures and practices. Therefore, explaining the ideational aspects of a movement requires investigating the quasi-causal impacts of both ‘practical’ and ‘structural’ contexts of the movement in a circular way that, in turn, requires analyzing the ‘cognitive compound’ of both contexts especially through the lenses of related social actors.

This perspective rejects the notion of universal patterns of causation in social life. Rather, it recalls the structuralist alternative to explanation and its emphasis on generative ‘social mechanism’ that can be referred as quasi-causal. The idea of social mechanism is developed mainly to intermediate between general laws and specific descriptions in social sciences (see Elster 1998). Mechanisms in general can be roughly defined as sets of entities and activities organized to produce a regular series of changes from a beginning state to an ending one. Social mechanisms in particular are thought of as complexes of interactions among social actors conditioned by their social conditions and statuses that underlie and account for aggregate social regularities (see Steel 2004). Social factor/variable X is the cause of social factor/variable Y if and only if there is a social mechanism from X to Y. However, the notion of social mechanism that I propose here is more general and qualitative; social mechanisms are recurrent social processes or events that mediate between an initial change in a given aspect of social life and its outcomes for other aspect (for a more comprehensive explanation of social mechanisms, c.f. Hosseini 2010, Chapter 3).

Frames, rhetoric, narratives, discourses, intellectual products and activities, repertoires and so on are not only the bearers of ideas and the constitutive elements of social actions, but also they are the reflections of and contributors to structural changes. Thus, these are not treated in SAK just as a means to answer how questions about cognitive process-structures of movements’ formation, but also they can be analyzed as means to better answering the why questions about the socio-historical processes of movements’ ideational development.

Answering each question cannot be complete without regard to the other question. For instance, the how question, mainly focused on by constructionism, relates to the constitutive role of collective-networked framing (cognition) in constructing the political action out of changing and conditioning social structures like political opportunities. Frames are the means articulated by movement agents to manipulate specific norms, to persuade audiences and followers and therefore to achieve ends (see Payne 2001). Therefore, the best channel towards understanding social actions, for constructionism, is to analyze these framing processes.

I need to emphasize that ideologies, identities, discourses, social imaginaries, rhetorics, frames, cultural repertoires, grievances are all different manifestations of ideations in social movements. What makes activist knowledge peculiar to social movements, and therefore requires specific theoretical approach, is not the diversity of its manifestations. Rather, it is the reflexive association between the process of idea (trans)formation and the formation of solidarities (see Schurman and Munro 2006, for the case of anti-genetic engineering movement). ‘Activist knowledge’ is a ‘catch-notion’ that keeps reminding us of the typical particularity as well as autonomy of knowledge formed in social movements. Sociology of
knowledge can constructively contribute to the field of social movement studies. To my surprise, this potential is extensively ignored. Treating the ideational aspect of movements as an autonomous form of knowledge can liberate our understandings from the pragmatism and rationalism underpinning concepts like frame and the idealism behind the phenomenological accounts of new social movements.

On the other hand, explaining these activist knowledge and visions requires an understanding of the ‘conditioning’ structural factors and contingent structural complexities out of which actions and framing processes come to exist. I lay stress on the process of ‘social conditioning’ as an answer to this general question: ‘how do structures influence agents’? Generically, there has been an emerging consensus among the post-1960s sociologists of knowledge to replace the concept of social structures as ‘social determinants’ with the more modest but still imprecise concept of structures as ‘social conditioners’ (see McCarthy 1996; Archer 2003). The conditioning influence of social structures on social movements, as social agents with their own projects for changing society or resisting changes, is two-sided: ‘constraining’ and/or ‘enabling’. Since human beings have a degree of freedom in determining their own courses of action, “it is essential to distinguish between the existence of structural properties and the existence of their causal powers” (Archer 2003: 7).

Applying SAK: The Case of Global Justice Movement

In this section, I briefly discuss how the SAK can be employed to study a social movements as diverse as the so-called ‘global justice movement’. The application of this approach requires that the activist visions in the movement to be explored and mapped and the historical emergence and evolution of these visions to be explained in terms of: (1) the participants’ experiences of their own subjectivity conditioned by the structures, such as their experiences of cyber-spaces of activism and networks of solidarity, facilitated by information technologies and restricted by inequalities; and (2), the complexity of objective conditions as they are experienced by the social actors, such as the deprivations and lack of social protection because of rationalizing the economy. Through the cross-interpretation of these two assignments, a synthesizing framework for the theorization of the movement’s cognition, in terms of both agential and structural factors, is possible. In both assignments, what is essential from a SAK point of view is to show how actors distance themselves from both surrounding conditions and their own experiences through self-reflective contemplations. This reality requires us to acknowledge the existential autonomy of activist knowledge in relation to both practice and structure.

Therefore, in order to map the ideal-types of activist knowledge in the global justice movement for instance, we need to understand not only the legitimizing principles and reasons for the globalist paradigm – mainly justified by neoliberalist capitalism, new imperialist ideology, and consumerist culture – but also the principal assumptions behind the different forms of resistance within the field. The counter-hegemonic bases of activist knowledge must be examined in terms of the movement’s confrontation with the ideational bases of dominant ideological discourses. Additionally, the deliberative foundations need to be conceptualized in terms of contesting orientations towards interpreting the reality of global change and developing alternatives.

Through an extensive study of ‘activist visions’ in the global justice movement, I have shown somewhere else that a growing worldwide awareness of the multilateral nature of
social inequalities has given birth to a new mode of activist knowledge (see Hosseini 2010). The newly developed visions inside the movement convey an adaptive mode of activist knowledge, coined *accommodative consciousness* (see also Hosseini 2006). The features that determine such an ‘accommodative’ nature are as follows:

1. Going beyond the incompatible conceptions of social differentials – around issues like gender, race, cultural identity, individuality, and community – in establishing a flexible solidarity based on a collaborative inclusion of the Other into the definition of Self;
2. Understanding the ‘complexity’ of globalization processes in terms of their unevenness, contradictions, and multidimensionality; this is associated with a systemic conception of particular events in relation to the main globalization processes without overlooking their specific socio-cultural contexts.

For the global justice activists, in contrast to the majority of the 1960s–1980s movements, the organizational challenge is more related to sharing activist knowledge and the power of creativity across all participant groups. Therefore, different new horizontal networking initiatives for sharing knowledge and experience have been broadly expanded. What is obvious is that this situation has resulted in the emergence of a broader conception of alliance among the movement actors. At the same time, many groups, in order to preserve the openness of public spheres, attempt to ground these organizational structures in the principles of a deeper, participatory democracy. Wainwright (2004: xvi–xx) summarizes these principles, mentioned by different authors in a collection of essays about the WSF, as such: openness, easy accessibility, confidence, understanding debates as processes “essential to arriving at the truth, seeing opinion as knowledge in the making,” recognizing “the practical relevance of reflectively exchanging information, experience and ideas without necessarily taking decisions, and accepting the benefits of consensual decision-making”.

**Conclusion**

This article identified the need for developing a comprehensive approach to studying social movements, which does not reduce their ideational landscape to either the agential or social structure dimensions. Rather, this demand is based on the assumption that ‘the construction of social phenomena and the construction of knowledge have a circular relation’ (Melucci 1992: 44). Therefore, each of these two construction processes must be explained in terms of one another. This need is met, at a general level, by outlining the basics of SAK to studying the activist ideation.

SAK is a specialized version of sociology of knowledge founded on an integrative and interdisciplinary metatheoretical agenda (inspired by critical realism) that cuts across sociology of knowledge, socio-political movement theories, and social psychology of collective cognition. Therefore, SAK is not a theory. Rather, it aims to bridge the gap between the theories that overlook the cognition-agency axis of explanation (like Neo-Marxist, structuralist branch of NSM and Political Process approaches) and those that overlook the ideation-structure axis (like the social psychological and constructionist accounts of collective actions).

I have discussed the limits of some popular notions that are used to address different ideational aspects of social movements. Concepts like frame, grievance, political ideology, identity, and discourse can be incorporated into this approach as far as they are given the
right position. For instance, while frames are useful means of analysis, they fail to grasp the totality of activist knowledge. I have explained that activist knowledge has always an ideological dimension. However, political ideologies, when used in social movements, must only be considered as one type of activist ideational manifestation.

In order to avoid the poverty of reductionism, the article has argued that we need to consider movement actors’ ‘agency’, their conditioning ‘social structures’, and ‘ideations’ as three interrelated but analytically autonomous dimensions which cannot be reduced to one another. Depending on the context, such an approach needs to be tailored for developing appropriate frameworks and concepts which show us the complex ways these key dimensions are interrelated in the (re)formation of any given social movement.

As neither the structural conditions nor actors’ experiences-motivations can be said to lead directly to changes in activist knowledge, showing dialectical integration of ‘structures’ and ‘agency’ cannot be an efficient manner for the explanations of styles of thought in our version of sociology of knowledge. In contrast, the SAK is developed according to two taken-for-granted assumptions: (1) synthesizing between mutually opposing sociological paradigms is possible (Sibeon 2004; Ritzer 1996), (2) practice-experience (agency), structure, and knowledge (ideation) are relatively autonomous and not reducible to one another. This autonomy or separation between social agency, social structure, and activist ideation is higher in both investigative-scholar and strategic-activist relations, where social subjects (say scholars or activists) distance themselves from social objects (say their political context) and deliberatively produce alternative knowledge to dominant perceptions. Hence, activist ideation is seen as interacting with objective structures and actors’ practices-experiences as a force of equal standing.

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See Mouzelis (2000), for his argument about the relative autonomy of subject and object from each other.


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