

## Animal Rights Activism

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# Animal Rights Activism

*A Moral-Sociological Perspective on Social Movements*

*Kerstin Jacobsson and Jonas Lindblom*

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# Preface

This book is the result of a productive and inspiring five-year long collaboration between us, and one to which we equally contributed. Our friendship, however, as well as our mutual interest in Durkheim, dates back more than 20 years. Without our continual dialogues this book and its theoretical endeavor would simply not have been possible. We can only wish that you, the reader, will find the book just as stimulating to read as it was for us to write.

We particularly want to thank James Jasper as series editor for working with us. His valuable comments on the manuscript helped us to take our analysis to the level we desired. We are also grateful for helpful comments by other generous colleagues during these last years. Abby Peterson deserves a special mentioning. Warm thanks also to Niklas Hansson for carrying of some of the interviews. Finally, we gratefully acknowledge the research funding provided by the Swedish Research Council (grant 421-2007-8782) and the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (grant 1751/42/2008).

*Kerstin Jacobsson and Jonas Lindblom  
Gothenburg and Västerås, May 2016*





# 1 Introduction: A Moral-Sociological Perspective on Social Movements

I am engaged in many different things, but I sense a special responsibility for animals. Maybe it matters here that animals are so helpless. Of course there are humans needing help from us who are privileged and well-off, but animals need this to an even greater degree. They don't even have a theoretical possibility of achieving their theoretical liberation (Swedish animal rights activist).<sup>1</sup>

As this Swedish animal rights activist stated, social movements make it their responsibility and task to challenge and transform institutionalized morality. Historically, social movement activists proved to be a reflexive force in the development of novel moral ideals, making possible the theoretically improbable. The women's movement, the environmental movement, the civil rights movement, the peace movement and the animal rights movement have all radically changed our sensibilities and conceptions of moral reality. The animal rights movement is particularly interesting as it invites us to extend our moral concern to encompass a new category of beings – animals. By viewing animals as helpless and unprivileged, yet as individuals with intrinsic value and rights, animal rights activists seek to change dominant social practices and moral codes. In this book, we develop a moral-sociological perspective, stressing the role of moral reflexivity in social movements. As the quoted animal rights activist displays, activists think, work, and act rather than responding routinely on moral matters. Social movements, such as the animal rights movement, provide society with moral tests and “an opportunity to plumb our moral sensibilities and convictions, and to articulate and elaborate on them” (Jasper, 1997: 5).

While the moral aspects of contemporary forms of collective action were frequently acknowledged in previous research (e.g. Touraine, 1981; Cohen, 1985; Gusfield, 1986; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992; Jasper, 1997; Crossley, 2002; Smelser, 2011/1962 to name some of the best-known works), in this book we examine social movements as essentially moral phenomena. The moral-sociological perspective draws on an original reading of Émile Durkheim's reflections on morality in *Moral Education* (2002/1925). An insight throughout Durkheim's production is that social life and moral life

1 All translations from the original Swedish by the authors.

are intertwined and cannot be comprehended separately. As Durkheim already noted in *The Division of Labor in Society*, co-operation between individuals cannot be explained in terms of economic contracts alone as these presuppose the existence of moral trust and understanding in order to be respected: "In reality, moral life permeates all the relationships that go to make up co-operation, since it would not be possible if social sentiments, and consequently moral ones, did not preside over its elaboration" (Durkheim, 1984/1893: 221). While these insights were fundamental for the development of sociology as a discipline (e.g. Shilling & Mellor, 2001), they have not been systematically used in theorizing social movements.

According to Durkheim, it is morality that keeps social groups internally together (Durkheim, 2002/1925: 85). Morality, in this perspective, has two components: first an element of obligation that prescribes or proscribes certain behaviors or types of behaviors and are backed up by sanction. Although Durkheim generally spoke of "rules of conduct" rather than "norms" when describing this element of morality, we employ the term norms throughout this book (see also Hall, 1987: 47-48). Second, there is also the element of ideals, denoting a conception of what the world should be like, which are internalized and perceived as desirable (Durkheim, 2002/1925: 96). Collective ideals are vested with prestige because they belong to the sphere of "the sacred" (Durkheim, 2001/1912; see also Emirbayer, 1996). To this realm Durkheim assigned societal phenomena that he saw as having intrinsic value – such as, first and foremost, moral ideals – as distinct from objects that only have instrumental value, which belong to the sphere of "the profane". All societies, including modern societies, have ideals that are perceived as sacred and inviolable. They form part of the self-identity of the group. Indeed the ideal aspect of morality is essential to Durkheim's concept of society. "Society", Durkheim noted, "is above all a composition of ideas, beliefs and sentiments of all sorts that realize themselves through individuals. Foremost of these ideas is the moral ideal which is its principle *raison d'être*" (Durkheim, 1993/1887: 20). Thus, morality is both external and internal to the individual; it is both imposed through social pressure and internalized as embraced ideals. Ideals and norms are the mechanisms that give rise to social solidarity, constituting the moral order in society.

The distinction between ideals and norms is important for our analysis. Ideals tend to be unrealized and as yet un-translated into social obligations. The role of activists, we suggest, is to interpret and pursue these ideals to achieve social change. Seeking to realize and embody moral ideals, activists thus draw their sustenance from the burning fire of the sacred; the closer they stay to the sacred ideals, the hotter that fire that fuels their passion.

This is something that is reflected even in everyday language: English speaks of highly energetic activists as “balls of fire”, and in Swedish, they are often described as “souls of fire” (*eldsjälar*), or persons who “are afire” for a cause, driven by burning enthusiasm. Drawing on Durkheim’s ideas, we conceptualize social movement activists as *pursuers of moral ideals* as they interpret and formulate new societal visions about the environment, peace, democracy, animal rights, etcetera. It is the sacred ideals and the sentiments that these ideals evoke that are the driving force that propels social movement activists to social change.

However, as pursuers of ideals, activists readily come into *conflict with established social norms*. This resonates with common understandings of social movements, such as Diani’s definition of movements as consisting of “a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities” (Diani, 1992: 1). Social movements seek to challenge and transcend the present order (Melucci, 1985, 1989). As pursuers of sacred ideals, activists tend to have an ambivalent relationship with institutional politics built on compromise, pragmatism, and a piecemeal approach to change. Even though there are variations in the degree to which social movements challenge mainstream society, they should, therefore, analytically be distinguished from such entities as companies, interest groups, or political parties (see also Melucci, 1989; Diani, 1992; Eder, 1993).

Social movements’ conflicts with established social norms have wide-ranging significance for the analysis of moral reflexivity in protest. Melucci has importantly pointed out that social movements play a reflexive role as mirrors, enlightening “what every system doesn’t say of itself, the amount of silence, violence, irrationality which is always hidden in the dominant codes” (Melucci, 1985: 811), at the same time announcing that something else is possible (see also Melucci, 1989). Or, as put by Eder: “The collective moral protest follows the logic of the ritual reversal of official reality” (Eder, 1985: 879). Thus, “[t]he difference between moral ideal and social reality becomes the motivating force of collective protest” (Ibid). In Eder’s analysis, what characterizes a social movement in contrast to pressure groups, as well as moral crusades, are the ongoing collective learning processes, whereby moral issues also become the subject of argumentative debate (Eder, 1985: 886). This is in line with our notion of the moral reflexivity in social movement activism.

However, more than these previous approaches we stress, and explore the consequences of, social movement activists’ *inherently ambiguous moral standing* in relation to the moral order of society. On the one hand,

social movement activists may be seen as defending important ideals (the sacred). Being in conflict with established social norms, on the other hand, activists may *also* be perceived as outsiders, threats, villains, and/or criminals by the general public (the profane). And typically, they oscillate between these positions, performing both the “angelic” role and the role of “the illegitimate” in the moral order of society. As will be shown in the following chapters, this ambiguous moral position is consequential for social movement activists in a variety of ways. It carries implications for activists’ lifeworlds, including their emotional life, their group life and their social relationships. We suggest that a Durkheimian understanding of morality is particularly enlightening for exploring activists’ equivocal moral position in mainstream society as pursuers of sacred moral ideals as well as norm transgressors, which prompts and fosters moral reflexivity in social movement activism.

Furthermore, moral reflexivity in social movements is promoted by the cultural modernization process. In Durkheim’s terms, this development forms part of the “secularization of morality” in modern societies (Durkheim, 2002/1925: 1-14). As shown by Giddens (1991) and others (e.g. Moore, 2006; Adkins, 2003) today’s societies are characterized by institutional reflexivity. By this they emphasize actors’ capacity to continually examine and interpret the past in light of new knowledge, with increasingly more areas of life being opened up for reflexive questioning and choice. The focus is on the break with tradition as more dogmatic and ritualistic. Reflexivity theorists stress the widespread significance of self-conscious self-monitoring, individual identity formation and lifestyle choices in society. This transformation is stimulated by innovative technologies, and social movements are at the forefront in engaging in new moral issues, such as those related to reproduction, gene-modification, and nano-application. And, as pointed out by social movement researchers, reflexivity is further increased by activists’ questioning of the structures of domination existing in the present age (Cohen, 1985: 694; Melucci, 1985; see also Touraine, 1981, 2000).

However, approaches such as Giddens’, which emphasize the role of self-fashioning, run the risk of reinstating voluntarism. While modernity opens for moral reflexivity, this always takes place within the confines of the moral order of existing norms and ideals. As Alexander puts it: reflexivity can only be understood “within the context of cultural tradition, not outside it” (Alexander 1996b: 136). Furthermore, reflexivity is embodied and demands a different moral practice. This means that reflexivity is not only an individual but also a collective endeavor, as it takes place among

fellow actors within groups (e.g. Adkins, 2003). Social movements are a case in point. Here reflexivity is deeply social in nature, arising from clashes between activists' novel ethical orientations and the various norms of society; to reach their desired goals activists need to habitually and collectively reflect over the institutionalized meanings.<sup>2</sup> The activist community provides, we suggest, a community of thinking and arguing on moral issues. This point is supported by King (2006), who argues that activists need to distance themselves from traditional norms in order to transform social conditions. Similarly, as Pallotta well described, animal rights activism implies a turning away from "dominant cultural ideologies", normalizing concern and empathy for animals (Pallotta, 2008: 150; see also Hansson & Jacobsson, 2014).

What is needed is a perspective on morality, which reconciles structure and agency. Thus far actor-oriented approaches have been more developed in the study of social movements. Typically, morality is seen as a cultural resource that actors interpret and use (following Swidler, 1986; see e.g. Williams, 1995; for a critique, see Alexander, 1996a), rather than focusing on the structural dimensions of morality. For instance, it has been pointed out that social movement activists are often fuelled by their moral principles, intuitions and emotions (e.g. Jasper, 1997), or that activists may harbor altruistic motives (Melucci, 1996). Yet, having elaborated their models within the cultural tradition of social movements, there has been less focus on how morality imposes constraints on social movements' conduct.

We suggest that the actor-oriented models of morality need to be complemented with a conception of morality as social fact. Moral reflexivity, as exerted by activists, is structurally conditioned by the moral order. Morality

<sup>2</sup> A moral-sociological understanding of moral reflexivity thus differs from moral philosophy. Firstly, a moral-sociological perspective is exclusively oriented towards an empirical inquiry of activists' moral beliefs, providing no normative theory. A focus on observable moral realities in social movements thus replaces the philosopher's elaboration of, and arguments for, moral principles. Second, a moral-sociological perspective is historical in its nature. It pays attention to the development and alterations in moral beliefs across different societies over time. Moral philosophy is, on the other hand, usually ahistorical as it relates to history as an intellectual source of accurate or erroneous ideas. Finally, and consistent with the aforementioned differences, a moral-sociological perspective takes a relativist stance towards moral reflexivity. When developing, what he called, "the science of moral facts", Durkheim criticized the moral philosophers who establish their own idealist conceptions without reference to the actual moral state of society. As Durkheim noted: "One hears it said today that we can know something of economic, legal, religious, and linguistic matters *only* if we begin by observing facts, analyzing them, comparing them. There is no reason why it should be otherwise with moral facts" (Durkheim, 2002/1925: 23, original italics).

imposes constraints on activists when they go against societal norms and ideals. For instance, norm transgressions are met with social sanctions, whether in the form of legal punishment, public opinion reactions or waves of indignation (Durkheim, 1982/1895). Indeed, Durkheim's sociological method encourages us to capture morality by studying responses to norm-breaking. A Durkheimian understanding of morality carries important implications for the study of social movements. First, as social fact, morality restricts activists in their striving for social change; activists have to take existing norms into account when carrying out actions. Second, morality is not something that can simply be "used" and "traded" instrumentally as more actor oriented and voluntaristic models on protest would have it (such as Snow et al., 1986; Benford & Snow, 2000). In other words, activists are constrained by norms as well as being a prominent force in changing norms. And this necessitates moral reflexivity.

## A Sociology of Morals and the Research on Social Movements

For a long period, social movement researchers tended to shun Durkheim, associating him with the "collective behavior" tradition along with authors such as Gustave Le Bon (1960/1895) and Neil Smelser (2011/1962). Collective protest here readily became associated with unruly crowds or deviant behavior. Durkheim was also commonly identified with the heavily criticized structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons. Since then there has been a renewed interest in Durkheim generally, focusing *inter alia*, on the symbolic dimensions of social life (e.g. Alexander, 1988), micro-sociological analysis of emotions (e.g. Collins, 2001, 2005/2004) and social network and relational analyses (e.g. Emirbayer, 1996, 1997). Prominent authors such as Alexander (e.g. 1988) and Emirbayer (1996) have explicitly attempted to bridge the structure and agency divide.

All these neo-Durkheimian approaches are highly relevant for, and have been used in, the study of social movements over the last decades. However, few if any of the previous studies have taken Durkheim's sociology of morality as developed in *Moral Education* (2002/1925) as their point of departure. Rather, Durkheim's contribution to the study of activism has been viewed variously through the lenses of "a symbolic framework" (e.g. Alexander, 1996a; Olesen, 2015), "a network theory" (Segre, 2004), "a relational theory" (Emirbayer, 1996), "a functionalist approach" (Tamayo Flores-Alatorre, 1995), "a disintegration theory" (Traugott, 1984), "a theory of moral economy"

(Paige, 1983), “an interaction ritual theory” (Collins, 2001) or in terms of “symbolic crusades” (Gusfield, 1986/1963), to mention but a few alternatives.

Instead, it is Durkheim’s sociology of religion (Durkheim, 2001/1912) that has been the main source of inspiration, and understandably so, given the importance of symbols (Olesen, 2015) and rituals in movement life. Activists’ participation in rituals, such as demonstrations, sit-ins, acts of civil disobedience, meetings, and the like, can have the function of developing and strengthening the moral ties between them. Indeed, rituals have been shown to have a positive effect on the level of engagement in political action and social movements (e.g. Tiryakian, 1995; Barker, 1999; Peterson, 2001; Casquete, 2006; Gasparre et al., 2010). Rituals create a heightened sense of awareness and aliveness, or what Durkheim (2001/1912) called *collective effervescence*, without which activists would not be able to transcend individual self-interest and produce norms, symbols, heroes, villains, and history.

Many critics of Durkheim, such as Tilly (1981),<sup>3</sup> focused on his early and arguably more structuralist conception of morality. *The Division of Labor in Society* (1984/1893) and *Suicide* (1951/1897) may invite such macro-oriented and determinist readings. In contrast, *Moral Education* allows for a decidedly less structuralist reading of Durkheim. His analysis here is located at the micro- and meso-levels focusing on the social group as the main unit of analysis. Here, it is useful to recall Durkheim’s views on society, which refers to all kinds of social groups. Durkheim was well aware of our simultaneous membership in many different groups, such as family, occupational/professional organization, company, political party, nation, even humanity (Durkheim, 1984/1893: 298, 1993/1887: 100, 2002/1925), and, we might add, activist group. Thus, as Collins has put it in his discussion of

3 Few authors have been more merciless against Durkheim than Tilly (1981) in his piece with the telling title *Useless Durkheim*. Tilly’s interest was the link between large-scale social change and collective action. Thus, like most of Durkheim’s critics, Tilly took his point of departure in *The Division of Labor in Society* and *Suicide*. He derived three hypotheses for which he found no historical validity: (1) Weakened social control (as a consequence of anomie) leads to heightened levels of social conflict; (2) Periods of rapid social change increase levels of social conflict and protest; and (3) Different forms of social disorder, such as suicide, crime and protest, tend to coincide since they stem from the same reason (lack of moral regulation due to social change). Emirbayer (1996) questioned this one-dimensional reading of Durkheim. In his reply to Tilly entitled *Useful Durkheim* he pointed to the relevance of Durkheim’s sociology of religion for historical-comparative analysis of collective action. Taking into account both the structural contexts for action and the “dynamic moment of *human agency*” (Emirbayer, 1996: 111), his conceptualization aimed to bridge the structure and agency divide, just as our perspective in this book aims to do (see also Olesen, 2015).