6. Summation

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Much of the most productive theorizing of social movements originates from the US and has been utilized in Europe (and elsewhere). The theoretical paradigms developed, while instructive in many ways, tend to share a view of social movements as strategic actors, and their action as being guided first and foremost by instrumental rationality. As Alexander has put it in a critique, such perspectives make social movements “resemble complex maximizing machines” (Alexander, 1996a: 208). This holds true for the highly influential resource mobilization theory and the political process models. Even the culture and sociology of emotion approaches that have more recently been developed often share this assumption. In this book, in contrast, we are positioned in a European tradition, stemming back to Durkheim, and which sees morality as a reality *sui generis* and as fundamental to social life. Without due recognition of the role that morality plays in activism, much of the movements’ behavior may seem irrational or ineffective.

While the moral aspects of contemporary forms of collective action have frequently been acknowledged in previous research (e.g. Gusfield, 1986/1963; Jasper & Nelkin, 1992; Jasper, 1997), we examined social movements as essentially moral phenomena. The notions of morality commonly used in social movement theorizing usually do not see morality as a social product and, as such, having social consequences that activists have to deal with on a regular basis. Therefore, moral reflexivity in social movements has, by and large, escaped theorization. Reflexivity draws on problems and tensions that spur people to think. As we illustrated in this book, the project of realizing the moral visions that social movement activists strive for, takes shape as a complex process involving fundamental dilemmas that require for their management – and thus produce – a significant degree of moral reflexivity. Moreover, a continuous and collective exercise of reflexivity forms a precondition for a movement’s survival and success. Thus, in our model reflexivity constitutes a causal factor in social movements. These facts need to be better taken into account when analyzing and explaining movements’ actions, effectiveness, and outcomes.

Our moral-sociological approach to social movements has been enabled by an original reading of Durkheim’s sociology of morality, elaborating underdeveloped themes in Durkheim’s sociology. The capacity for reflexivity is only mentioned by Durkheim briefly and in passing, and to most sociologists
Durkheim is known for his determinism. The moral-sociological perspective on reflexivity developed in this book has laid the emphasis on the agentic aspects in Durkheim’s sociology not usually highlighted (see however Collins, 1988), and stands in contrast to, for instance, Neil Smelser’s (2011/1962) classic approach to social movements. Our neo-Durkheimian model of moral reflexivity seeks to reconcile actor and structure. Reflexivity is both a resource of the individual (the individual’s agency and ability to think and reflect) and a property of the social structure (reflexivity is linked to the social norms and moral ideals of society). The methodological assumption is that activists have the competence to alter a given condition known to them, yet are constrained by the existing moral-social order, existing as social fact. Moreover, we showed that Durkheim’s sociology of morality can be interpreted in a way that transcends the consensus interpretation of him (see also Collins, 1988, 2001, 2005/2004) while maintaining the understanding of social groups as constituted by shared moral ideals.

This neo-Durkheimian perspective has ramifications for our understanding of social movements. First, morality not only drives but also constrains activists by the existing normative order. Second, social movement activists must balance their in-group norms and their outward strategies, rather than trying to maximize their external impact or gain. Protecting the sacred, understood as non-negotiable moral ideals, might have priority over successful external relations and impact. Third, protesters’ moral status in society is inherently uncertain, fluctuating and dependent on societal definition processes, the consequences of which are critical for social movement researchers to investigate. Fourth, this ambiguous position necessitates moral reflexivity in social movement activism, which becomes central for successful outreach and impact. Fifth, activists construct distinctive feeling rules, differing from those of mainstream society. In this way, activists also challenge taken-for-granted sensibilities and emotional displays, making us aware of the fact that our most private experiences are, in fact, social products. Sixth, activists form moral hierarchies, and exert social control in their in-group life in defense of their ideals. Activist identity must be deserved and preserved. Seventh, activist recruitment involves a career, constituting a gradual development in the potential member’s orientation towards the social movement’s ideals and the norms of majority society. Eighth, the stress on moral reflexivity in the internal life of social movements implies that the term “work” is appropriate here since it denotes that activism is a transformative object. Thus, in our model emotion becomes emotion work, identity becomes identity work, movement culture becomes culture work, and deviance becomes deviance-management work.
Figure 2  A moral-sociological perspective on social movement activism: A conceptual scheme

Generalized Ideals
- Secular Religion

Moral Ideals
- Sacred Qualities

Contextualized Ideals
- Novel Ethical Orientations

Translation Extension
- The Pursuit of Societal Visions

Moral Reflexivity
- Substantive Norms

Social Norms
- Ceremonial Norms

Contextualized Norms
- Emotion Norms

In-Group Formation
- Moral Hierarchies
- Feeling Rules
- Moral Resonance

Experiences of Awakening and Conversion
- A Meaning in Suffering and Guilt
- The Moral Community
- Protection of the Sacred Rituals

Passing and Confronting
- Techniques of Neutralization and Idealization
- A Cohesive and Transformative Subculture

Deviance Management
- Dramaturgical Loyalty
- Dramaturgical Discipline
- Dramaturgical Circumspection

Dramaturgical Control
- Containing
- Ritualization
- Micro-Shocking
- Normalization of Guilt

Emotion Work
To summarize the perspective on protest advocated in this book, we present a model of the main concepts we employed, highlighting the relations between these concepts.

A moral-sociological approach acknowledges and starts off from the constant intertwinements between social life and moral life: the social cannot be separated from the moral, and vice versa. Thus, in the model on protest put forward in this book, moral ideals are treated as empirical social facts, rather than as otherworldly or philosophical notions, and they form a constitutive part of society alongside social norms. Depending on their scope and acceptance, social movements’ moral ideals may be translated and extended to large segments of people – and thus become general social facts – or remain specific to a certain group and therefore contextual. The more widely shared the ideal, the easier the struggle, as the existing norms in society provide a readily available platform and support for the struggle. The commonly shared ideal of democracy, for example, makes it easier to win battles in new areas in society where this ideal is not yet implemented. At the same time, however, activists must pursue their ideals without being defined as breaching key societal norms. If the activists are seen by the general public and policymakers as norm transgressors, they will fail in winning broader support for their cause and reach moral resonance.

Furthermore, activists’ in-group life is deeply connected to their moral ideals. The routines and methods of the group are founded upon contextual norms derived from protesters’ interpretations of their specific moral ideals. The contextual norms also regulate activists’ moral hierarchies, assigning protesters a specific status-location in the group. This may give rise to conflicts and competition between fellow activists.

Social norms differ according to their object, and may be substantive (principles of law and morality), ceremonial (rules for self-presentation) and emotive (guidelines for feelings). They are always present as a back-drop in activists’ thinking of how the world ought to be. Hence, protesters’ moral reflexivity is neither confined to a rational calculus nor is it only a personal matter. It is instead deeply social in nature, arising from clashes between social movement activists’ novel ethical orientations and the various norms of society; to reach their desired goals activists need to habitually and collectively reflect over the public’s accounts and meanings. In addition, there are elementary forms and experiences of religious life in activism, implying that activists conceive of their moral ideals as non-negotiable objects of ultimate concern. This outlook further spurs the clashes between the ethical claims made and the present state of affairs in society, and, thus, prompts and fosters moral reflexivity in social movements.
Furthermore, the strategies that activists employ to pursue their societal visions also relate to the presence of social norms. Whereas deviance management is general and deals with all sorts of norms, there are also the more specific strategies of dramaturgical control and emotion work, concerned with ceremonial norms and emotion norms respectively. Successful dramaturgical control, deviance management and emotion work are success factors for social movements in their pursuit of social change alongside aspects more commonly emphasized by social movement scholars, such as resource mobilization, organizational structure and social networks.

In conclusion, we hope that this book will inspire a moral-sociological research agenda on social movements. Since protest is constituted by moral principles, intuitions and emotions, a moral-sociological framework is applicable to all social movements. Nevertheless, social movements differ in the degree to which they challenge the moral order. Some social movements create novel ideals, others interpret or reinterpret already existing ideals. Some movements break behavioral, ceremonial and emotional norms, others also transgress legal norms and commit criminal acts. Some movements operate in more prohibitive social and political environments than others. Some movements draw explicitly on religious authority, others show deference to their sacred ideals within secular discourse. Thus, a moral-sociological research agenda calls for comparative studies of different kinds of movements as well as movements operating in different normative contexts. Opportunity structures are, in this perspective, first and foremost moral, whether they manifest in a political, legal, cultural or discursive context.

Finally, the moral-sociological perspective we presented opens the door to the general sociologist’s study of the moral order. As we argued, activists are significant as a reflexive force in the development of moral ideals in society. Nevertheless, the links to, and contrasts with, other moral facts, to use Durkheim’s expression, need to be further examined. This is also a way in which social movement analysis, rather than being a confined field of study, could be fruitfully integrated within general social theory. At the very least, we hope to have contributed to a reawakened interest in Durkheim’s sociology of morality and its usefulness in understanding contemporary societies.