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Publisher: Routledge

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Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csms20>

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Published online: 19 Dec 2011.

To cite this article: Kerstin Jacobsson & Jonas Lindblom (2012) Moral Reflexivity and Dramaturgical Action in Social Movement Activism: The Case of the Plowshares and Animal Rights Sweden, *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest*, 11:1, 41-60, DOI: [10.1080/14742837.2012.640529](https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.640529)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.640529>

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Moral Reflexivity and Dramaturgical Action in Social Movement Activism: The Case of the Plowshares and Animal Rights Sweden

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ABSTRACT *Drawing on Durkheim's sociology of morality, which identifies ideals and norms as the key components of morality, this article outlines a theoretical model for understanding how social movements can bring about legitimate social change. Social movement activists, we propose, can be conceptualized as followers and pursuers of sacred ideals. As such, they frequently come into conflict with existing norms in society. To manage this dilemma, activists must downplay their role as norm breakers while emphasizing their identity as followers of ideals. This in turn requires moral reflexivity in the staging of collective action. The article shows how dramaturgical control (Goffman) is exercised towards this end among activists engaged in two social movements in Sweden: the Plowshares peace movement and Animal Rights Sweden. The article further examines the internal stratification, or 'moral hierarchies', within the two activist groups in the light of the proposed model. The closer the activists were able to adhere to the sacred ideal, the higher the social status they enjoyed within the group.*

KEY WORDS: Animal rights, Durkheim, Goffman, morality, Plowshares, social movements

Social movements may in many cases be conceptualized as moral movements. Typically, the activists involved in them try to confront and change not only their addressees' political opinions, but also the moral convictions informing these opinions. Increasingly, movements embody new ethical orientations, whether these be towards animals, the environment, or something else (Tester, 1991; Crossley, 2002). Yet, while the moral aspects of contemporary forms of collective action have frequently been acknowledged in previous research, only a few studies have examined social movements specifically as moral phenomena (e.g., Gusfield, 1986; Jasper, 1997). A major reason for this dearth, we believe, has been the lack of adequate analytical tools to assist the examination of the moral dimension of movements.

In this article, we seek to help fill this gap by developing a theoretical framework for understanding the role of morality in social movements based on Durkheim's (1993 [1887], 2002 [1925]) sociology of morals.¹ Drawing on Durkheim's distinction between *ideals* and *norms*, we conceptualize movement activists as followers and pursuers of

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1474-2837 Print/1474-2829 Online/12/010041-20 © 2012 Taylor & Francis
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.640529>

ideals. In promoting and practising those ideals, their actions often come into conflict with existing norms in society. To successfully transmit their message and win new supporters, movements therefore must act in ways that downplay their role as norm breakers while emphasizing their identity as followers of ideals. This requires from them what Goffman (1990 [1959]) has termed dramaturgical control in the staging of collective action. While previous research has shown that social movements seek to realize moral visions, providing us with ‘an opportunity to plumb our moral sensibilities and convictions, and to articulate and elaborate on them’ (Jasper, 1997, p. 5), there is nevertheless a need to go deeper in exploring the implications of this ideal-following dimension in social movements. What are its consequences for movements’ strategy decisions, and what dilemmas must activist groups cope with in managing both their inner life and external strategies? To tackle these questions, we claim, it is important to pay closer attention than what hitherto has been done to the role of *moral reflexivity* in social movement activism.

To illustrate the usefulness of our basic theoretical framework, we apply it to an analysis of two groups of social movement activists operating in Sweden: the Plowshares and animal rights activists belonging to Animal Rights Sweden. The Plowshares movement was founded in the USA in 1980, becoming established in Sweden in the mid-1980s. Being part of a broader peace and solidarity movement, it is known for its advocacy of pacifism and civil disobedience, with the overriding aim of disarming the military (Nepstad, 2004, 2008). The activists employ illegal action following the classical Gandhian principles of civil disobedience (openness and preparedness to face legal consequences). Plowshares typically perform high-risk actions like breaking into prohibited military areas to damage weaponry by beating on it with household hammers, meant to provide a symbolic and moral example for others to follow. The actions are carried out openly and they are intended to trigger a process of reflection and dialogue, with the Plowshares usually informing the authorities of where and when an event is going to take place and then waiting to be arrested once the action is over.

While the Plowshares promote a widely shared ideal, namely peace, although by using methods widely seen as provocative, the animal rights activists challenge existing modes of thinking more radically still. They advocate a historically recent idea, one for which no consensus exists in society as yet, according to which animals have rights and should be considered as individuals. Animal Rights Sweden, of which the animal rights activists interviewed for this study were members, is the oldest and largest animal rights organization in the country, with a membership of approximately 35,000 in 2010. The organization was founded in 1882 under the name The Swedish Society against Painful Experiments on Animals, changing its name into Animal Rights Sweden in 1999. The official policy of this organization is to work within the boundaries of existing law, and its activities are relatively broad ranging, consisting of campaigns against animal experiments, fur farms, the industrial production of meat, excessive meat consumption, and the like.²

For this study, a total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted in 2004 (10 with each of the two activist groups studied). The study participants, 11 of whom were men and nine women, were aged 20–60. The interviews lasted between two and five hours, exploring the activists’ life-worlds and worldviews as well as their personal experiences of activism. As a criterion for participating in the study, the Plowshares activists had to have taken part in the planning and exercise of at least one high-risk action, the animal rights activists had to be actively engaged in the organization, and they had to follow a vegan diet (eat no

animal products). This was to ensure that the study participants all had a distinct activist identity and were not just passive members or supporters. As the Plowshares group in Sweden has always been small, all the movements' key activists at the time were interviewed for the study. The animal rights activists interviewed were recruited through snowball sampling, and all came from two large cities in Sweden, Stockholm and Gothenburg.

Before introducing our theoretical framework derived from the later Durkheim's work on morals and applying it in the analysis of the two activist groups, however, a brief look at previous social movement research carried out from a Durkheimian angle is in order.

Durkheim and Social Movements

While Durkheim's influence on social movement researchers has been considerable (Traugott, 1984), few – if any – of the previous studies carried out in the field appear to have specifically taken Durkheim's sociology of morals (Durkheim, 1993 [1887], 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 network theory' (Segre, 2004), 'a functionalist approach' (Tamayo Flores-Alatorre, 1995), 'a disintegration theory' (Traugott, 1984), a theory of 'moral economy' (Paige, 1983), or an 'interaction ritual theory' (Collins, 2001), or in terms of 'symbolic crusades' (Gusfield, 1986), to mention but a few alternatives.

In general, however, it seems that Durkheim's sociology of religion (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]) has been the main source of inspiration, and understandably so, given the importance of rituals in movement life. Activists' participation in rituals, such as demonstrations, sit-ins, acts of civil disobedience, meetings, and the like, can from this perspective be seen to 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., Peterson, 2001; Casquete, 2006; Gasparre *et al.*, 2010). Rituals create a heightened sense of awareness and aliveness, or what Durkheim (1995 [1912]) called *collective effervescence*, without which activists would not be able to transcend individual self-interest and produce norms, symbols, heroes, villains, and history.

Rituals, just as protests in general, produce emotions, which today form another important research field of social movement studies (e.g., Goodwin *et al.*, 2001). As Jasper (1997) has pointed out, many of the different emotions that trigger protests are inseparable from the moral order. Activists' righteous anger, discontent, resentment, indignation, and mistrust, for instance, represent deeply moral reactions, evoked by transgression of normative boundaries. Jasper has, moreover, usefully drawn attention to the role of moral shocks in movement mobilizations. In the absence of pre-existing social networks that could be activated for recruitment purposes, moral shocks in the form of strong visual or verbal rhetoric may be vital as a mechanism enabling social movements to reach potential new members (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; Jasper, 1997). This, Jasper found, was particularly true of the animal rights movement, something that the participants in this study, too, were able to confirm: they all reported having been 'awakened' after seeing documentary films and photographs of suffering animals. Hansson and Jacobsson (2011) have further shown that animal rights activists often keep exposing themselves to 'micro-shocks' to keep their inner fire burning. It is precisely because of its participants' strong moral commitment that

the animal rights movement has even been interpreted as a quasi-religious phenomenon. Although the typical activist involved in the movement is either atheist or agnostic, strong value-rational motives, conversion experiences, and concerns with purity are notably common among its core membership (Jamison *et al.*, 2000; Lowe, 2001).

Research has also looked into the role of morality in the construction of collective identity, although not always from an explicitly Durkheimian perspective. Protests, it has been found, often depend on activists' shared identification with moral convictions that then create bonds between them. Moreover, shared moral dedication appears to be a prerequisite for enduring activist commitment (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). As Downton and Wehr (1991, p. 119) have pointed out, 'all movements which have high levels of community will also have high levels of agreement about "core beliefs". In short, they will be moral communities.' This was obvious of the two movements under study here as well. Both were built around a common credo – animal rights and non-violence, respectively – which was translated into behavioural norms.

A normative perspective has also been employed to explain the relative success of movements. Research has shown that the public's sensitivity to what is considered just, right, good, dignified, and virtuous plays a critical role in social movements' ability to achieve public recognition (Jasper, 1997; Collins, 2001). Studies have, moreover, indicated that normative integration may be necessary for movement expansion. Skinheads belonging to a neo-Nazi movement, for example, have traditionally been seen as 'different' and clearly identifiable through their physical appearance (shaved heads, tattoos, display of Nazi symbols, and the like). Today, however, many skinheads rely on a normalization tactic with group members striving to appear and behave more in conformity with conventional social standards, to attract potential new members (Cooter, 2006). As we will see below, moral reflexivity enables activists to appraise the possible discrepancy between their ideals and the prevailing social norms. First, however, we need to introduce our Durkheimian framework in more detail.

A Sociology of Morals

Durkheim's sociology of morals is as simple as it is useful: it addresses mechanisms that apply to all social groups, which give the theory general applicability. 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], p. 298; 1993 [1887], p. 100; 2002 [1925]) – and, we might add, activist group.

For Durkheim, the social domain and the moral domain always go together: it is morality that keeps groups internally together (Durkheim, 2002 [1925], p. 85). Morality, in this perspective, has two components: an element of *obligation*, or the rules of conduct or norms that prescribe or proscribe certain behaviours or types of behaviour and are backed up by sanctions, and an element of *ideals*, which are internalized and perceived as desirable (Durkheim, 2002 [1925], p. 96). Morality, then, is both external and internal to the individual; it is both imposed through social pressure and internalized as embraced ideals. In Durkheim's sociology of morality as developed in his *Moral Education*, ideals and norms are the mechanisms that give rise to social solidarity.

Collective ideals are vested with prestige because they belong to the sphere of the sacred. 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 sphere of ‘the profane’. All societies have ideals that are perceived as sacred and inviolable. They form part of the self-identity of the group, with violations of the sacred prompting strong reactions of righteous anger or resentment.

The distinction between ideals and norms is important for our analysis. Ideals tend to be unrealized and as yet untranslated into social obligations. *The role of the activists*, we suggest, is to interpret and pursue such ideals. 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.

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 into practice. At the same time, however, the activists must pursue their ideals without being defined as breaching key societal norms. If the activists become defined by the general public and policy-makers as norm transgressors, they will fail in winning broader support for their cause. Conversely, if social movements manage to translate and externalize their ideals into norms, the desired change in behaviour has a greater chance of coming about.

Durkheim was well aware of the factuality of pluralism and functional diversity that, for him, also implied moral diversity (Durkheim, 1984 [1893], p. 298): since, in fact, we always form part of several groups simultaneously, in reality we never embrace only one single ideal; there even exist in us several collective consciousnesses (Durkheim, 1984 [1893], p. 67). Durkheim (2002 [1925]), however, also identified a third element of morality, which he called autonomy. The modernization process – secularization, the development of modern science, and, especially, individualization – increases the autonomy of the individual in relation to collective imperatives. Morality can thus no longer be endorsed blindly, Durkheim claimed, but must be accepted voluntarily and be open to criticism:

Society is continually evolving; morality itself must be sufficiently flexible to change gradually as proves necessary. But this requires that morality not be internalized in such a way as to be beyond criticism or reflection, the agents par excellence of all change. (2002 [1925], p. 52)

It is for this reason that we can claim Durkheim to have opened the analysis for moral reflexivity, even if he did not himself develop his views on this aspect much further.

A pluralist understanding of a Durkheimian framework calls for an examination of the relation between ideals and norms. As Jacobsson and Löfmarck (2008) have pointed out, some norms are spread throughout vast geographical and social areas; they are *generalized* social facts. Other norms operate more locally; they are *localized* or, as we prefer to put it, *contextual* social facts. Many contextualized ideals are group-specific interpretations of more generalized ideals. Wahlström and Peterson (2006) have argued that, in Sweden, there is ‘an open cultural opportunity structure’ in that people in general are inclined to

listen to, and be affected by, the message of the animal rights movement. While this may indeed be so concerning animal welfare – it is a widely shared ideal in Sweden that animals should be treated well – it is probably much less true of animal rights proper, as the animal rights activists regularly encounter resistance from the public in their actions and daily life. Even so, the ideas that the Plowshares and Animals Rights Sweden promote are not alien to the public at large. Other movements, in contrast, may operate in an environment where the cultural opportunity structure is more closed and their contextualized ideals clash with more generalized ones. The neo-Nazi movement is a case in point, its notions and values being usually viewed as undemocratic and dystopian (Cooter, 2006). While the Plowshares, for instance, tend to evoke not only annoyance, but also sympathy among the general public, the neo-Nazi activists are seen as ‘evil’ and as a threat to their fellow citizens and the society at large.

More than Durkheim himself, but consistent with his outline of morality in modern societies, we emphasize social actors’ potential awareness of discrepancies between ideals and norms – their moral reflexivity. However, to understand activists’ moral engagement one also needs to take into account what Goffman called ceremonial norms. In contrast to substantive norms anchored in tradition, law, and ethics, which were Durkheim’s primary object of interest, ceremonial norms involve rules governing manners and etiquette vital to people’s self-presentation (Goffman, 1967, pp. 53–56). In order to convey their message successfully, social movements must be able to connect with the life-worlds of the audiences they address. Movement actions can thus be understood as dramas (Benford & Hunt, 1992) having to achieve what framing theorists have termed ‘frame resonance’ with their target constituency (e.g., Snow *et al.*, 1986).

Alexander (2004) has argued that in trying to connect with the public, collective action in contemporary society has increasingly come to take an overtly performative cast. The public space, in Alexander’s (2004) argument, could equally well be understood as a public stage, a symbolic forum in which actors have increasing freedom to create and to project performances of their reasons, dramas tailored to audiences. As Alexander puts it, performances stand and fall on their ability to produce cultural extension and psychological identification:

The aim is to create, via skilful and affecting performance, the emotional connection of audience with actor and text and thereby to create the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience. (2004, p. 547)

Since an audience can see without experiencing emotional or moral signification, the relation between actor and audience depends on the ability to project these emotions and textual messages as moral evaluations (Alexander, 2004, p. 531).

A major challenge for activists is thus to stage moral ideals in a convincing way, through effective *mise-en-scène* that lends an aura of authenticity to their actions. Goffman defined a teammate as someone whose dramaturgical co-operation one is dependent on to foster a given definition of the situation before the audience. There is then a bond of reciprocal dependence linking teammates to one another, but also the risk that someone in the team will ‘give away the show’ or disrupt it by inappropriate conduct (Goffman, 1990 [1959], p. 88). Activists who stage a collective action constitute this kind of a team, with their effort requiring collaboration as well as social control (cf. Benford & Hunt, 1992). However, what is not sufficiently emphasized by Goffman himself, or in the rich literature

on the framing of movement claims that his work has inspired (starting with Snow *et al.*, 1986), is that the sacredness of the ideals defended and pursued also constrains and limits the strategies available for social movement activists. It brings a necessity to constantly weigh strategic options to balance the need for practical effectiveness with the obligation to protect the sacred ideals from being ‘polluted’ by the profane. In other words, it prompts and fosters moral reflexivity.

Moral Reflexivity

A recurring theme in the theorizing of late modern societies is the notion of reflexivity. Actors display a reflexive relation to tradition in that they continually examine and interpret the past in the light of new knowledge, with increasingly more areas of life being opened up for reflexive questioning and choice (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992).

Moral reflexivity, we contend, is one of the key aspects of contemporary social movements. Departing from our framework above, it is possible to identify an elementary source of moral reflexivity in social movements. It might be termed *the activist’s dilemma of norms and ideals*. Since activists are pursuers and followers of ideals, they are frequently compelled to transgress norms in society as their visions and ideas of how society ought to be come into conflict with judicial and social norms reflecting how society, in fact, is. Being dependent on public reactions for the advancement and success of their cause, social movements nonetheless must make an effort to downplay the prominence and importance of their norm breaking while underlining the ideal-conforming aspects of the actions they perform. In the absence of reflection over methods, forms of communication, and learning structures through which to resolve this dilemma, the activist group is doomed to be perceived as deviant, facing the peril of alienating its audience (on ‘the dilemmas of activism’, see also Maddison & Scalmer, 2006).

In the life of movements, this dilemma of norms and ideals plays out in several different ways. First of all, it helps to explain the public’s unstable definitions of activists’ moral status. When Plowshares activists dismantle a nuclear weapon, for example, the incident might be perceived as action in fulfilment of the ideal of non-violent, diplomatic means to solve world conflicts; at the same time, however, it also involves illegal entry into a military area and destroying expensive property. When the public focus is on law and legality, Plowshares will consequently be looked upon as ‘criminals’ and even as ‘terrorists’; at other times, when the ideal component of the action is successfully brought to the fore, Plowshares may be seen as ‘moral heroes’, having accomplished what ordinary citizens may consider unachievable. Reflecting over moral definitions and awareness of the moral signals communicated to outside audiences are thus necessary in all activism. As one Swedish woman activist interviewed for this study described her experiences upon being released from a UK prison where she had served time for her role in a Plowshares action on a nuclear submarine:

It wouldn’t be incorrect to say that I was regarded as a hero. For one thing, I am a woman. Second, I was in prison in another country. Moreover, I had participated in dismantling nuclear weapons which, everyone agrees, are something they don’t like. I’m sure the reaction would have been different if it had been about ordinary Swedish arms exports. People have told me, ‘You are really someone who has the

courage to do things' and 'You are prepared to sacrifice yourself to stand up for your views.' They think what I did was very brave.³

Secondly, the activists also need to position themselves vis-à-vis other activist groups in the same field. Protesters frequently have difficulties in distancing themselves from circles and networks whose ideals they might share but whose norm-breaking activities make them dangerous to be associated with. The attitude of Animal Rights Sweden towards non-legal activist groups, such as the Animal Liberation Front, provides a case in point. Since Animal Rights Sweden makes a conscious effort to look 'clean' and acceptable to the general public, it must condemn every faction that attacks animal laboratories, releases minks and hens, blackmails farmers, and so on. Yet, the argument put forth by the organization in these connections is not that these groups are morally wrong, but rather that their methods are politically ineffective. Some of the most committed activists in Animals Rights Sweden come with a substantial background in non-legal activism, having meanwhile arrived at the conclusion that legal activism provides a more effective means to bring about social change. Similarly, the Plowshares are careful to distance themselves from activists who do not follow the Gandhian principles of civil disobedience, not wanting their sacred core 'polluted' through association with groups not living up to their own standards of moral reflexivity. It is for this very reason that the Plowshares movement in Sweden refuses to build alliances with other activist groups.

Thirdly, the dilemma of norms and ideals is vital for our understanding of the dramaturgical aspects of actions. To begin with, it influences the staging of low-risk actions typical of activist groups like Animal Rights Sweden. If the animal rights activist loses her temper in a heated discussion with strangers, the failure to keep one's composure will contrast sharply with the ceremonial norm prescribing calm and balanced comportment in public, making it difficult to win any debates in the open. For this reason, animal rights activists, in propagating ideals that many in their wider audiences find controversial, frequently work in groups providing enough support from the team for them to stay calm even when provoked. Animal Rights Sweden even provides training for its members in how to meet the public, alongside opportunities to attend international activist camps offering trauma management training to help activists improve their emotional management skills.

The Plowshares have demonstrated an advanced form of reflexivity in this sense, with activists frequently developing and rehearsing action scripts and practising role-play in preparation for actions. Such preparations are necessitated by the extensive norm breaking that high-risk actions frequently imply. It has become part and parcel of the Plowshares' culture to offer security guards coffee and biscuits once the action is over, to talk to the police as if they were friends, to try to negotiate with representatives of the weapons industry, and so on. All this is practised beforehand, by playing the various roles and placing oneself in the position of the security guard, the police officer, and others to be confronted on the scene of the action. Besides demonstrating an ability to engage in creative planning, such reflexive measures are also resorted to in order to counteract the distinct possibility of becoming labelled as a 'menace to society'.

A fourth aspect of moral reflexivity in movement actions is revealed in activists' communicative efforts to reach out and recruit new members and supporters. As noted above, the sacred quality of the ideals, a movement presents itself as standing for, may lead to activists' being defined as 'moral heroes', something that might be thought of as

obviously preferable to attracting pejorative responses. Being conceived of as a moral superman, however, does not provide one with a more favourable position from which to convince an audience of one's cause. Very often the response, of being looked up to as a moral giant, will prevent the intended receivers of the message from being able to identify themselves with the activists to a sufficient degree to commit to their cause; the distance between what the activists try to achieve and the life-worlds of ordinary persons remains too great. A Plowshares activist who travelled around Sweden to talk about an action to disable aircraft, for which he and two fellow activists had served long sentences, described this problem as follows:

After our meetings where we talked about our actions were over, we used to go and eat something with those who had come there to listen to us. There it, of course, became obvious that we were vegetarians as well. I felt that that was just too much. I hadn't just made the great sacrifice where I risked imprisonment and huge fines; I felt that it just made up one more barrier between me and ordinary people. So I decided to give up being a vegetarian.

Moral Hierarchies

The outreach strategies of social movement activists, however, cannot be fully understood without also taking into account the inner life of activist groups. That, too, tends to be characterized by reflexivity, as exemplified, for instance, by the activists' attempt to remain aware of the internal dynamics and power relationships within the group. Activists typically try to build structures resistant to mechanisms of exclusion based on gender, race, age, and the like. Yet, despite their efforts, they frequently fail to live up to their own high expectations, with individuals within the group positioning themselves in an informal hierarchy. Even though their existence as such is broadly acknowledged (see, e.g., Groves, 2001; Peterson & Thörn, 1994), the basis and functioning of such informal hierarchies need to be better understood. How and according to what criteria do activists establish unofficial status orders, and what consequences do such orders have for social relationships within the groups?

Drawing on a Durkheimian interpretation of social movements, we suggest that the informal hierarchies are structured first and foremost based on moral evaluations and distinctions. Activists construct a *moral hierarchy* in which actions are ranked by their morality and activists are assigned different positions closer to or further from the sphere of 'the sacred'. To borrow Collins' (2001, pp. 37–43) useful expression, the moral hierarchies are linked to 'the law of small numbers': only a few individuals are able to reach a position right by the campfire of the sacred, this limited space being reserved to those who stand out as morally exceptional. A high position in this hierarchy enables one to lay claim to an activist identity; one is not primarily evaluated according to one's professional career or civil status but according to one's success in realizing moral ideals. Activists assess one another's deeds and performance, make comparisons, and evaluate one another in relation to their ideals and the contextualized norms that have emerged from their interpretations of their ideals. Figure 1 gives a chart of the most important moral distinctions giving rise to an informal status order in the two groups studied, as reconstructed from the interviews. While the moral ideal always remains at the core, other distinctions, too, even when more peripheral, still influence the in-group ranking.

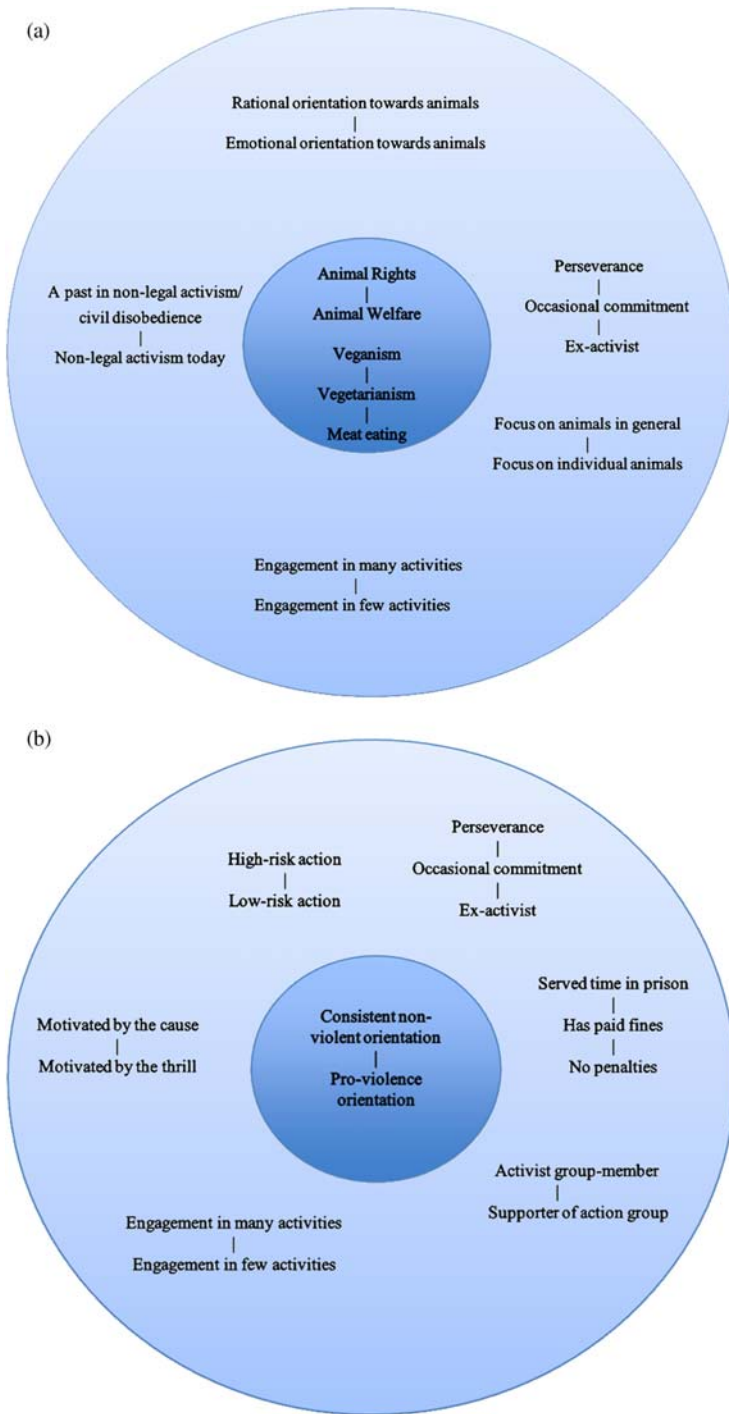


Figure 1. Moral distinctions in (a) Animal Rights Sweden and (b) the Plowshares group.

Within the animal rights group, it is thus not only morally, but also socially advantageous to be a vegan rather than a vegetarian or, worse still, a meat-eater. Among the Plowshares, it is not only preferable from a moral point of view to have participated in high-risk actions: this great sacrifice also confers to one a superior social status in the group compared to those who have only participated in low-risk actions such as information gathering about the production of armaments or harbour blockades to prevent weapons transported by sea from reaching their inland destination. It is thus for social reasons, too, that protesters need to dramatize their behaviour. Without also being *defined* as a vegan or a high-risk action participant, it is not possible to affirm and sustain one's activist identity. For this reason, activists place great importance on their efforts to gain visibility in the media to reach a widespread audience.

The moral hierarchies within social movements are *action-oriented*: the status that the members are assigned depends on what they have *done* rather than thought or said. In this sense, the worst that could happen in the world of activists is to stop 'doing' altogether – that is, to become an ex-activist who, for example, no longer participates in events or devotes her or his time to a cause, or begins to eat meat. 'Losing the fire' along these lines seems, morally speaking, to be almost more of a liability than not having become engaged in the first place. It was also clear from our interviews that one can only live so long on old merits; one is quite soon assigned the status of an ex-activist. In contrast, perseverance in activity over a long period of time and engagement in many different areas – being where the action is – single out those who are 'truly committed to the cause'. The words of a young animal rights protester interviewed for this study serve as a typical example of activists' way of reasoning in this connection:

I compare myself to others, [to see] whether I do more or less than they do. Maybe this preoccupies me more than other people because right now I'm busy trying to get more involved. If I haven't done anything for a while, I then have more to live up to [...]. There are probably a lot of people who come here twice a month just because they like going to meetings. They might not have enough interest and will probably disappear at some point, whereas those who really are on fire for animal rights keep deepening their engagement.

The imperative for moral action can also be observed in the aspiration for purity, or a position closer to the sacred, calling for protection from contamination. To pursue this aspiration, activists frequently give up opportunities for career advancement along with many pleasures that living in modern society offers. The Plowshares activists interviewed for this study spoke of paid work as something that clearly belonged to the profane, hampering their work for the cause. Even traditional family life was seen as a potential source of pollution; several activists from both groups studied expressed that they were not interested in having children. Activism, for them, required sacrifices. On this point, Lowe (2001) has drawn a parallel to the religious apologist: the willingness to risk imprisonment for what one believes in is indeed similar. Sacrifices for the cause, to be sure, also confer social status. For the Plowshares activists, serving time in jail was clearly a more salient status marker than having been fined or not having been punished at all.

This quest for purity is also characteristic of the animal rights movement. The activists carefully control what they purchase, wear, and use in their daily lives (clothing, make-up, type of soap, etc.). The same is true about their diet: for even though the preparation and

serving of meals are not carried out as any specific ritual process, veganism offers repeated opportunities for acts of cleansing and purification that help redress the activists' sense of their own complicity in the suffering of animals (Jamison *et al.*, 2000). For the purists in the movement, nothing less than stopping using animals and animal products for human needs altogether is acceptable. Accordingly, the purists had the highest status in both of the groups studied: they were seen as closer to the sacred (cf. Tester, 1991).

The imperative to act often gives rise to guilt feelings among activists. The interviewees for this study expressed that they felt guilty for not doing enough, with guilt propelling them into further action (see also Groves, 1997). The feeling of guilt also seems to lead to a certain feeling of alienation in relation to others in society; 'I feel alienated from people who just shrug their shoulders,' as a Plowshares activist put it. Another Plowshares activist reported often having 'a sense of unreal when walking among people who don't care about the world'. The activists often feel like foreigners in this world. As Durkheim (1995 [1912]) pointed out, basic forms of religious life pervade all societies, including the ostensibly more secularized ones, as became obvious also from our interviews. The experiences of awakening and conversion that the study participants reported were clearly religious in nature. Yet, in contrast to traditional religions, movements do not offer any source of external atonement, such as confession or the belief in a forgiving God. The only way to alleviate guilt is to *do more*.

Action, and maintaining one's informal position in the group through that action, can be very demanding. The interviewees frequently spoke of their fellow activists who had become depressed or 'burned-out' (see also Gaarder, 2008). As one animal rights activist reported:

[T]here was a period when I was doing a lot less than usual. I felt really uncomfortable about it. But I was burned out because I had been so active until then. I just couldn't bring myself to get going even though I really wanted to, as this is the kind of stuff I really feel strongly about. I didn't feel good at all about that break I had, and I'm really glad to be busy doing things again ...

Due to her involuntary break from activism, she lost her position in the group's informal hierarchy:

It was a really weird in terms of my relation to my roommate, too. Earlier I had been much more actively involved than her. Then it got pretty awkward when this fatigue hit me, and I began to notice how she was doing a lot more than I. I was constantly reminded of the fact that I wasn't that involved any more. She began to be in the know about everything I used to be informed about. Our roles were reversed.

The moral hierarchy is constructed first and foremost *within* and *for* the group. The pressure to be a committed individual is experienced as coming more from other group members than from friends, family, and other outsiders. Fellow activists can brusquely ask, 'Why haven't you been doing anything for such a long time now?' as one Plowshares activist explained it. In a similar fashion, also encouragement and praise from within the group were valued higher than admiration by outsiders.

At a closer look, the intra-group status order is also gendered. Among the interviewed animal rights activists, the male activists tended to base their motives for

action on philosophical reasoning while the women tended to emphasize emotions. Philosophical reasoning was understood to have a higher status, which some of the interviewed women felt uncomfortable with (cf. Groves, 2001). In the Plowshares group, those with the highest status tended to be men (see also Peterson & Thörn, 1994). As one female Plowshares activist stated, 'I'm looking for female role models because it's most often men who get all the attention.' However, as advocates of anti-hierarchical organizations and relationships, activists also strive to become more aware of any informal status differentiation in order to control and change it. In this respect, the Plowshares movement stands out as 'hyper-reflexive', in that it has developed specific methods for dealing with status differences. At their meetings, for example, the chairperson function is separated into different roles to ensure everyone's ability to participate on an equal basis. One person has the responsibility of making sure that the discussion is focused on the items on the agenda, another one that underlying conflicts and other tensions are brought to the surface and so become openly dealt with, while a third person concentrates on time keeping. The Plowshares have, furthermore, made attempts to deal with problems related to media attention, as described by one interviewee:

In the media, the Plowshares are often made to look like heroes. All media go after them. We have tried to deal with this within the movement. We've purposely divided ourselves between those who carry out the actions and those who represent the group to the outside world. This way, we have actively tried to avoid the glamorization and idolization that the media are so prone to [as] it's so easy for people to look up to and admire those who've participated in a well-known action.

However, as the interviewed Plowshares activists also admitted, it is often difficult to change the hierarchical structures within the movement. As one activist described the situation in her group:

It is us who do the actions that get all the admiration. It's a bit like in the theatre: the lead actor gets all the praise while all those who also work hard are totally forgotten about. Those behind the scene ought to get as much praise as us.

Since, due to the great economic and psychological demands that participation imposes, the number of active Plowshares is small, only few people generally plan the actions, communicate with the media, write statements to the courts, and so on. Moreover, as the activists interviewed for this study testified, the anti-authoritarianism embraced by the movements has made it complicated for members to openly show admiration when someone has done something praiseworthy. From the theoretical perspective developed above, these and other difficulties in dealing with informal intra-group status distinctions might in the first place be attributed to the activists' moral world. Yet, as Goffman noted, we are both moral *and* social creatures, which entail a need to put significant effort into being viewed as moral by others – which in itself is a non-moral activity. Hence, while we are all 'merchants of morality' (Goffman, 1990 [1959], p. 243), to activists and other followers of ideals the challenge in this respect cannot but be greater than for the rest of us.

Dramaturgical Control

As observed above, there are social mechanisms at work in the activist groups that help support and maintain the ideals they pursue. Through moral hierarchies, fellow activists can uphold the ideals of the group by continually discussing and assessing the merits of one another's actions. However, activists' pursuit of ideals also requires the staging of successful public performances. To borrow Goffman's (1990 [1959], pp. 203ff.) terminology, ideals are thus pursued by means of *dramaturgical loyalty*, *discipline*, and *circumspection* – that is, through mechanisms of dramaturgical control (see also Benford & Hunt, 1992).

In the context of activism, exercising dramaturgical loyalty often means that members of the team must not exploit their presence in the front region to stage their own show. The Plowshares activists, for instance, do not accept their members' engagement in acts of civil disobedience on their own, since this may lead to a perception formed by others of a solitary maniac. Dramaturgical loyalty also entails not revealing secrets (like future actions) between performances. Social movements carrying out high-risk actions have typically developed practices and routines to preserve secrecy (Peterson, 2001). Dramaturgical discipline requires from the activists that they remember their respective roles and do not behave inappropriately while performing them, and that the activists taking part in the action exercise expression control (face, voice, etc.). Dramaturgical circumspection entails that the team members in the activist group decide in advance how to best stage the show, exercise foresight in all planning and preparations, and practise prudence when acting out their plan. In other words, protests are carefully performed.

It is for the purpose of dramaturgical control that activist groups use scripts (Benford & Hunt, 1992). As noted above, the activists in Animal Rights Sweden are trained to stay calm and rely on scientifically based arguments when faced with an antagonistic or aggressive audience, working moreover in teams in order to better handle potential disruptions. Following an action, they often go on to have coffee together, which allows them an opportunity to review and debate the events that just transpired. In Goffman's terminology, they thereby leave the front stage for a backstage where suppressed feelings can be let out. As one animal rights activist described it:

It doesn't give a serious impression if I lose my temper. If there is a quarrel at the end, it's because people get angry and yell at us. But we don't shout back; we respond with arguments or just shrug our shoulders. Only when the people have left and no one is around listening we might express what we really feel.

The Plowshares' actions are even more carefully choreographed. The action scripts are clearly articulated, and they are learned, rehearsed, and internalized using repetitive role-plays that prepare the activists for the public staging of the action with no room left for improvisation. Unpredictability may even be viewed as dangerous, since other actors may resort to violence when feeling threatened. For this reason, to be able to adhere to the script no matter what happens during the action, the activists practise poise under pressure. The Plowshares also always have designated persons on hand to provide emotional support for those performing a high-risk action.

The scripts are also reflexively applied within the Plowshares movement itself. As noted earlier, internal meetings and decision-making processes are reflexively monitored by

designated facilitators and/or 'vibe-watchers' (Peterson & Thörn, 1994). In addition, the activists receive training in reflexive emotion management, to be able to better understand and talk about their own emotional reactions. The group members openly criticize and challenge one another, for instance by questioning their fellow activists' motives for their engagement.

Several of the interviewed Plowshares members had, before the time of the study, lived together in shared accommodation. In such an environment of strict social control, reflexivity at times turns into mutual accusations of rule breaking as well as informing and reporting on alleged rule breakers. Reflexive monitoring can thus be a source of conflict and uneasiness as well. Some of the interviewees for this study expressed personal frustration and impatience with the degree to which interactions and individual behaviours were regulated within the group. Rigid rules concerning how teammates were to talk about one another, for instance, had even led to some activists' being expelled from the movement, as reported by one Plowshares activist:

We've had a system of rules, lots of explicit guidelines concerning non-violence, about how you are to express yourself. You may not insult another person or speak about someone else when this person is not present. In practice, however, many people have been unable to follow these rules. This has led to their becoming excluded, which has caused serious rifts among the group members.

Goffman characterized the familiarity among teammates as 'a kind of intimacy without warmth', a familiarity that need not be of an organic kind but is rather a formal relationship (Goffman, 1990 [1959], p. 88). In the internal culture of the Swedish Plowshares, where most informal interactions are monitored according to the scripts, there seems to be no backstage region where the teammates can withdraw to vent their suppressed feelings, relax, and shed their role characters. Thus, the Gandhian notions of non-violence and openness that guide the Plowshares may also lead to harmful consequences when transformed into rules and behavioural dictates within their group. The social control function then overrides the role of the group as an emotional support structure for the individual activists.

Balancing Efficacy and Purity

The inner life of the activist group, socially structured around the protection of sacred ideals, has consequences for the choice of outward strategies and dramaturgy. All strategies are simply not possible if the ideals are to be protected from 'contamination'. This is also the main reason for the activists' preference for social movement activism rather than engagement in traditional politics, PR work, or other social forums which do not allow for 'authentic moral tests' (Jasper, 1997, p. 5). Movement activism thus means having to carefully balance between the needs to protect the purity of the ideals and to successfully reach out to the life-worlds of the intended audience, again pointing to the importance of moral reflexivity in any successful protest action. In focusing its attention almost entirely on the outreach aspect of movement activity and looking at it from a strategic point of view, the literature on framing (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000) thus fails to notice that there are limits to the extent to which instrumental concerns can be invoked in social movement activism. Similarly, by concentrating mostly or even exclusively on the

rhetoric or narrative level of analysis, framing theorists tend to overlook the weight of the target audiences' moral convictions and sentiments, and thus 'the depth and richness of that which must be connected to' (Crossley, 2002, pp. 142–143). There have been several attempts at mitigating the 'instrumentalism' of the framing approach (e.g., Steinberg, 1999; Gillan, 2008). Yet, the resulting formulations, too, fail to acknowledge activists' need to balance purity and efficacy, just as they do the tensions and problems which these balancing acts frequently give rise to.

The two cases discussed in this article exhibit differing degrees of success in their ability to strike a right balance between these two aspects, of internally protecting the sacredness of their ideals and effectively reaching out externally to an audience. Collins (2001) has, relevantly in this connection, suggested that researchers should devote more attention to the question of why many movements, in fact, lose their influence and disappear, instead of concentrating on the successful cases among them. The Swedish Plowshares serve as a case in point in this regard. Several of the Plowshares activists interviewed for this study, speaking from the perspective of long-time movement participants, expressed dissatisfaction with the movement's situation at the time. As one experienced activist put it:

The Plowshares movement does not have credibility any more as something that can become a popular movement. But what I am first and foremost interested in is creating social change. As I see it, the movement has reached a dead end.

Since the time of the interviews (2004), the movement's activities have decreased even further, leaving it in a state of what seems like a terminal crisis. The movement's failure, in our analysis, can be attributed to its inability to generalize the contextualized ideals and norms it stands for and thus mobilize wider support for its cause.

One of the explanations for movements' failure, we might then conclude, is their constant concern with purity, which causes too much of their attention to be centred on the group itself. In practice, the group might become more focused on 'doing the right thing' than on attempts to reach out to recruit new members and supporters or build alliances with others. As pointed out by Peterson (2001), participating in high-risk actions may foster 'aristocratic' motives (activists understanding themselves as an *avant-garde* that dares to do what others do not) that favour secrecy in planning, which in turn contributes to activists' further isolation from society. The dramaturgy of the Plowshares, in the present case, is not only heroic, but also introvert. In failing to speak authentically to any significant outside audiences, it, in Alexander's (2004) terminology, fails to achieve cultural extension and resonance. The critical meanings (or definitions of a situation) are construed beforehand rather than negotiated with the audiences, which are not genuinely invited into the drama.

In contrast, the dramaturgy of Animal Rights Sweden has remained more extrovert and more concerned with connecting with the life-worlds of the movement's target audiences. Also, in contrast to the more radical groups within the broader animal rights movement, the ideal that Animal Rights Sweden draws upon is a generalized one, namely the ideal of animal protection and welfare, with the aim of gradually extending this ideal to also include animal rights proper. By not pursuing their contextualized ideals single-mindedly in the manner of many groups more radical than theirs, the activists of Animal Rights

Sweden have been able to reduce their risk of becoming defined as norm transgressors and thereby being marginalized.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued for a perspective that puts morality at the heart of social movements, showing how social grammar of social movements is morally based. Without denying the analytical relevance of other aspects of social movements, the moral dimension, we contend, is distinct in being *constitutive* of social movements. Without due recognition of this fact, much of the movements' behaviour may seem irrational or ineffective.

More specifically, we have argued for a Durkheimian sociology of morality, the principles of which we then applied in our own analysis. Using this perspective, it was possible to show, firstly, that social movements are moral communities. It is the moral fire ignited and sustained by the sacred ideals that provides the basis for solidarity and common identity within a movement. While the same is generally true of all social groups, social movements *actively pursue ideals to achieve social change*. In doing so, they stretch the boundaries of, and sometimes transgress, existing norms in society.⁴ Secondly, we were able to show that the most important emotions in social movements are the morally based emotions (cf. Goodwin *et al.*, 2001). Righteous anger and indignation triggered by violations of the sacred help movements mobilize and sustain their activities over time. In addition, failure to defend the sacred ideals actively enough gives rise to feelings of both guilt and shame among movement activists: guilt for one's own inadequacies in the pursuit of the ideal as such, and shame for one's inadequacies in relation to, or in the eyes of, other group members as followers of the same ideal (cf. Groves, 1997). These emotions then help create enduring commitment to action. Thirdly, while previous research has acknowledged the role of reflexivity in social movements (e.g., Peterson & Thörn, 1994), there has been little recognition of the fact that it is most importantly moral reflexivity that is in question here. Movements challenge both the symbolic and the moral order (cf. Melucci, 1996), and, 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. Yet, since they engage in transgressive action, and to be able to reach out to their constituency, activists must always exert prudence in the staging of their actions, which necessitates moral reflexivity. Above, we have drawn attention to some prominent ways in which social movement activists exert just such moral reflexivity. Fourthly, while social hierarchies within movements have been subject to numerous studies, our framework suggests that it is specifically moral hierarchies that form the basis for status differentiation within movements. Fifthly, our moral framework helps to explain what the driving forces are that propel social movement activists as protagonists of social change: the sacred ideals and the sentiments that these ideals evoke.

Finally, and most importantly, Durkheim's sociology of morals, when developed a step further, also yields outlines of a theoretical model for explaining how social movements can bring about legitimate social change. A key factor here is the tension between, firstly, ideals and norms and, secondly, between generalized and contextualized ideals and norms. As suggested above, social movements are to be conceptualized first and foremost as *pursuers of ideals*: they formulate and act upon moral representations of rightness and goodness, with the ultimate aim of achieving societal change. In this, social movements

play the double role of *interpreting* and *developing* ethical orientations that have become culturally accepted at a given time and space (termed ‘generalized ideals’ in our framework) *and* producing and introducing *new* ones. In both cases, social movements confront and provoke their environment with original ideas of how the world we live in ought to look like: they are carriers of contextualized ideals in society.

As pursuers of ideals, social movements find themselves in an inherently reflexive relation vis-à-vis social norms. On the one hand, discontented with the current state of affairs, social movements may seek to transform their own group life to make it more consistent with the ideals they celebrate. They are thus confronted with the task of implementing both formal and informal routines and rules – contextualized norms – to create a non-alienating praxis in which activists can feel at home. As the case of the Plowshares reveals, this may sometimes be a difficult challenge. On the other hand, taking social norms into consideration is an important condition for the wider success of the movement. Based on our analysis, this success demands that the movement is able to, first of all, *translate its ideals into norms*, that is, to codes of conduct backed up by social sanctions, and, secondly, *promote and disseminate these norms as norms for society at large* (generalized norms). Each movement faces the challenge of having to manage this tension between ideals and norms and of solving the dilemmas it entails. In other words, to achieve the desired social change, social movements need to become defined by their environment as *followers of ideals rather than norm transgressors*, in turn presupposing the successful translation, externalization, and extension of norms just mentioned. They therefore have to adapt to both substantive and ceremonial norms in society, forcing them to balance reflexively between adaptation and transgression. Generalized norms thus function as both the backdrop and the end goal of social movements’ struggle. The project of realizing the moral visions that social movement activists strive for, in brief, takes shape as a complex process involving fundamental dilemmas that require for their management – and thus produce – a significant degree of moral reflexivity. A continuous and collective exercise of reflexivity, moreover, forms a precondition for movements’ survival and success. It is these facts that need to be better taken into account when analysing and explaining movements’ actions, effectiveness, and outcomes.

Notes

1. The research for this article was funded by the Swedish Research Council (Grant 421-2007-8782), focusing on extra-parliamentary activism in Sweden.
2. There are also other groupings within the wider animal rights movement in Sweden. The Animal Rights Alliance is mostly engaged in traditional public opinion work in combination with undercover filming of animal farms while also giving moral support to illegal actions. The Animal Liberation Front breaks into laboratories, poultry farms, and fur farms to free animals. In addition, there are a number of animal welfare organizations such as Animal Welfare Sweden and the Swedish Animal Protection Organization.
3. All translations from the original Swedish by the authors.
4. Here social movements differ from *subcultures*, which, too, may transgress social norms, in that they purposely and actively promote social change.

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