

Book Review

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Kerstin Jacobsson and Jonas Lindblom, **Animal Rights Activism: A Moral–Sociological Perspective on Social Movements**, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016, 144 pp.

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In recent social movement studies a symbolic framework emphasizing rituals, symbols and master frames has contributed with important insights into the diverse communicative and socio-cultural aspects of contemporary social movements (Alexander, 2006; Benford and Snow, 2000; Jasper, 1997). With the publication of *Animal Rights Activism: A Moral–Sociological Perspective on Social Movements* a complementary perspective regarding the lifeworld of social movement activists has been added to this theoretical apparatus.

The central thesis of this illuminating book is that the study of social movements could benefit from including a moral–sociological perspective that highlights the importance of moral reflexivity in activism. With this 144-page-long, coherently written and well-structured book, the two authors forcefully demonstrate how revisiting classical sociology remains a fruitful source in social sciences. This is a book of relevance to any social scientist with an interest in social movements, activists' lifeworlds, moral sociology, and the works of Émile Durkheim.

Revisiting *Moral Education* (Durkheim, 1925), Jacobsson and Lindblom offer an original reading of Durkheimian thought that runs counter to the structuralist and consensus-oriented label that his theory has often been given, and thus leave room for more pluralist and agency-oriented interpretations. By approaching social movements 'as essentially moral phenomena' (p. 1), they place moral reflexivity in activism at the heart of the analysis.

The book also includes an empirical study of the Swedish animal rights movement, which – as the authors remark – both expands as well as supplements the predominant Anglo-Saxon focus in this area of studies. The data reported are derived from 23 open-ended, in-depth interviews, conducted during the period 1998 to 2010. This qualitative analysis brings the reader into close proximity with the multi-faceted moral lifeworld of activists engaged in the Swedish animal rights movement, as well as displaying the extensive degree of moral reflexivity in a movement that finds itself in continuous conflict with prevailing societal norms concerning the condition of non-human animals.

The book is structured into six chapters, the last of which is a short summation. In chapter one the authors introduce a theoretical distinction between *norms* and *ideals* derived from Durkheim's notion of morality, which serves as the basis for their analysis. These two components capture 'the mechanisms that gives rise to social solidarity, constituting the moral order in society' (p. 26), which are also sources of animal rights activists' inherently ambiguous moral position, resulting from having to balance their role as pursuers of moral ideals whilst challenging established norms (p. 12).

In chapter two the authors continue to examine moral reflexivity in social movements by conducting a comparative analysis between Swedish animal rights activists and peace-activists in the Plowshares

group.¹ Jacobsson and Lindblom demonstrate the multiple ways moral reflexivity is exercised both internally, within the groups, and externally, in relation to the surroundings. They find that an elementary source of moral reflexivity can be termed 'the activists' dilemma of norms and ideals' (p. 32), which results from the tension between the need to gain recognition from the larger public while feeling compelled to transgress juridical as well as informal norms in society, which bears the risk of alienating the intended audience (pp. 32–33).

In chapter three Jacobsson and Lindblom engage with a subject of continuing interest among sociologists, the role of emotion work, when they emphasise the importance of, as well as the considerable amount of time and energy that animal rights activists invest in, the management of emotions. They identify five types of emotion work frequently performed within the movement: these are processes of *containing*, *ventilation*, *ritualization*, *micro-shocking* and *normalization of guilt*. These processes serve in-group purposes – for example, when activists seek to recharge emotional energy, or play out in relation to the activists' surroundings in order to manage hostile emotions and confronting norms.

In chapter four the authors trace the elementary forms of religious life (another key aspect of Durkheimian thought) in the Swedish animal rights movement's more symbolic, ritualistic features. They describe the movement as 'an instance of secular religion' defined by the following characteristics: 'a distinct universe of meaning based on a division of the world into the profane and the sacred' (the sacred being the intrinsic value of animals); a 'moral community defined by its adherence to a specific sacred ideal and commitment to its defense'; and 'distinct beliefs, experiences and practices' (p. 82). Defining the animal rights movement as a moral community, Jacobsson and Lindblom again stress the activists' capacity of moral reflexivity, and thus avoid any dogmatic, religious readings that would disregard heterogeneity and agency. This is the case when, for example, animal rights activists are described as 'important agents in the historical development of the sacred' (p. 84). According to the authors, animal rights activism challenges 'established boundaries between sacred and profane by questioning our practices of eating animal bodies and the unique position granted to human beings' (p. 101).

In chapter five Jacobsson and Lindblom expand further on their conceptual framework with the term 'entrepreneurial deviance', based on Howard S Becker's concept of *moral entrepreneurs* (1963), which implies activists' commitment to processes of norm creation (p. 107). While deviance is not a concept new to the study of social movements, this approach highlights activists' comprehensive efforts to manage the social and psychological effects of being met with social stereotypes when labelled as norm transgressors and outsiders (p. 22).

To conclude, *Animal Rights Activism: A Moral-Sociological Perspective on Social Movements* demonstrates the value of using a moral-sociological approach and consequently provides the reader with an enriching analytical apparatus that complements the existing perceptions and interpretations of social movements placing moral reflexivity at the core of the analysis. However, while the authors argue convincingly for the relevance of this perspective, there might be important dimensions of power and structures influencing activists' moral reflexivity, emotion work and deviance management that are omitted from the analysis, and which cannot be captured through the lens of Durkheimian sociology. Thus an analysis of social movements that would exclusively adopt a moral-sociological perspective might end up underestimating the impact of political and economic interests regarding norms and social change, and moreover would entail the risk of depoliticizing social movements as important political actors. Notwithstanding these objections, Jacobsson and Lindblom offer an important contribution to the field of social movement studies that highlights the interrelations between a sociology of justice, social change and political movements.

Note

1. A US founded movement which, guided by the principle of civil disobedience, carries out high-risk and illegal actions aimed at disarming military power.

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