



MORAL OUTRAGE

Introduction

The Generative Power of Political Emotions

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Moral outrage has until now been conceptualized as a call to action, a reaction to injustice and transgressions, and a forceful motor for democratic participation, acts of civil disobedience, and violent and illicit action. This introduction goes beyond linear causality between trigger events, political emotions, and actions to explore moral outrage as it is experienced and expressed in contexts of political violence, providing a better understanding of that emotion's generic power. Moral outrage is here understood as a multidimensional emotion that may occur momentarily and instantly, and exist as an enduring process and being-in-the-world, based on intergenerational experiences of violence, state histories, or local contexts of fear and anxiety. Because it appears in the intersubjective field, moral outrage is central for identity politics and social positioning, so we show how moral outrage may be a prism to investigate and understand social processes such as mobilization, collectivities, moral positioning and responsiveness, and political violence.

■ **KEYWORDS:** directionality, generative power, moral outrage, political violence, social positioning, temporality

outrage (noun): 1. An extremely strong reaction of anger, shock, or indignation.

1.1. An action or event causing outrage.

outrage (verb): 1. Arouse fierce anger, shock, or indignation in (someone).

1.1. Flagrantly violate or infringe (a principle, law, etc.)¹

The wars in the Middle East, state violence against civil society all over the world, neoliberal abandonment, and separatist violence and terror attacks are only a few current events that stir emotional reactions such as horror, anger, or fear. In such situations, which may be described as escalated (Højer et al. 2018) and overheated (Eriksen 2016), one particular emotion has caught our analytical interest: moral outrage. As moral outrage is not only a reaction to but also an intensified dimension of the many crises we are witnessing, a study of this phenomenon directs our attention to the constitutive interrelationship between violence and emotions. In this special



section of *Conflict and Society*, we explore moral outrage as it is experienced and expressed in various politicized settings, and aim at providing a better understanding of the social orders and disorders it might generate.

Albeit the concept of moral outrage has gained little attention within the anthropological field, it has been fairly well discussed in other disciplines. Scholars doing research on social work (McAuliffe, Williams, and Briskman 2016, Sen 2009) have opted for social workers' capacity to be morally outraged in order to do a good enough job despite neoliberal limitations of welfare provisions and bureaucratic decision-making. Within political science studies on emotions and elections, scholars have pointed to moral outrage as a crucial ingredient in the maintenance of the democratic state, arguing that it is a mobilizing force against illegitimate power or unequal treatment before the law (Peters 2012). Within studies of revolutions (Reed 2004, Wood 2003), social movements (Jasper 1997, Moore 1978), and radicalization (Johnston 2014, Atran 2010, El-Said and Harrigan 2011, Sageman 2008), it has been explored as a call to violent, rebellious, and illicit as well as licit action. These studies show how moral outrage may be exploited strategically or occur spontaneously in collective attempts to bring about social and political change (Alexandrakis 2016, Jasper 1997).

Despite these different applications, there is a surprising lack of theoretical conceptualization of the notion. Especially, the unison argument in the aforementioned disciplines that moral outrage is a call for action is highly problematic—not least from an anthropological perspective. Moral outrage is central in settings marked by past, present, and future violence. We also know that it is but one of several elements that may lead to action within a violent context, as has been demonstrated by Henrik Vigh (2006), Vigh and Steffen Jensen (2018), and Satathis Kalyvas (2006), among others. The question is, if moral outrage is not necessarily a central force to action, then what is it? The articles in this section challenge the simple definition of moral outrage as a call for action and point to the variety of perspectives, relationships, collectivities, temporalities, and processes of transformation that it may also generate.

In writing this introduction, we have been pondering the register of moral outrage and how to define it. Looking at anthropological studies, we find moral outrage framed as a determined and unambiguous emotional sensation, which relates to the perception of a clear-cut transgression of rights and privileges (Goodenough 1997). Moral outrage is not necessarily intrinsic to the injustice itself (Moore 1978), “but has something to do with how it relates to us and to what is important to us” (Goodenough 1997: 6). We concord with these authors that the emotion emerges in the intersubjective field, as it only occurs when infringed by others, and is most explicitly expressed and experienced when collectively shared. The relational nature of the notion points to the fact that our experiences of the world do not start with the individual but rather are always already embedded in the social (Jackson 1996, Grøn and Meinert 2017). Hence, a study of moral outrage is basically a study of how intersubjectivity takes on form in practice. The emotion and its immanent moral positioning may be negotiable, debated, and contested or filled with doubt and hesitation, given that it is emplaced within ever-shifting horizons of morality, political power, and social relations.

We seek to explore how moral outrage is expressed in a wider social context by emphasizing its narrative structures, raising questions about the interactions, negotiations, and the exchanges that it animates. We conceptualize moral outrage as a political emotion (Hage 2009) expressed and responded to in variously positioned publics. In doing so, we are backgrounding its phenomenological and embodied experiential aspects (Seyfert 2012, Mazzarella 2017, Lutz 2017). We will therefore not focus on the affective qualities of moral outrage, although we recognize that this is certainly worthy of further exploration. As the name “moral outrage” implies, the notion is inherently linked to the social ordering of right and wrong and not least to moral

judgment. It may therefore also be understood as a “higher order” or evaluative emotion, which requires a greater degree of evaluation processing (Solomon 1984, Reed 2004). In this way, the notion provides us with a prism through which we can analyze how people negotiate values around violence, legality and illegality, and good and bad in the ordering of their everyday world. Hence, it may be more fruitful to explore moral outrage in relation to the transgression of (core) values within the context of moral pluralism rather than focusing solely on legal rights and privileged as suggested by Ward Goodenough (1997) (although they might be crucial too). Following Michael Lambek (2010), the negotiation of moral values does not necessarily take place in moments of moral crisis or breakdown (cf. Zigon 2007); it is an intrinsic part of everyday life. It is in the sense that we see the emotion as bound to an unfixed striving and negotiation toward the good—in peaceful as well as war-torn everyday settings—that we understand it to be inherently political and moral (White 2017, Robbins 2013, Hage 2009).

In this introduction, we will outline moral outrage as a multidimensional emotion. In this sense, we deepen our understanding of what moral outrage *is* and how we may decipher its complex qualities. Public expressions of moral outrage may seem to be similar and even interpreted in quite similar ways around the world—in the form of riots, protests, or peaceful demonstrations—communicating a moral standing in relation to global or transnational conflicts and crisis. Yet, these expressions are almost always bound to the time and space of the local cultural, geopolitical, and social context in which they emerge, or at least they are mediating the local, transnational, and/or diasporic context. As such, we suggest that the emotion is always contextualized, and the analysis needs to capture the complexity of the social and political life in which it takes form. We suggest placing the notion within three analytical domains: temporality, social positioning, and directionality. As we will briefly argue, these three domains reflect multiple dimensions of moral outrage and its generative power.

Moral Outrage and Temporality

We do not limit the notion of moral outrage to the instinct and nonconflictual sensation of anger (Hage 2009), disgust (Arendt 1958, 1951), or horror (Sageman 2008), although these sensations may also be at the center of our analysis. Rather, we ask, in what way we can grasp the notion of moral outrage as a momentary and instant emotional occurrence, as well as an integral part of intergenerational processes, state histories, and long-term political conflicts. As mentioned earlier, the emotion emerges and manifests itself through social interactions in the contemporary context in which it breaks out. Yet, as we will argue, it may be deeply rooted in historical and intergenerational experiences of injustice, violence, and value transgression. Nerina Weiss (in this section), for example, shows how the moral outrage expressed by pro-Kurdish activists in Norway is part of an intergenerational history of suffering, and an affective technology of diaspora politics. In the Kurdish case, moral outrage has become a state of being and an enduring process similar to what Martin Heidegger (1962) defined as being-in-the-world. How people relate to geopolitical conflicts from an intergenerational perspective is thus central to the analysis of experiences and effects of moral outrage in this particular setting.

Therese Sandrup’s study (in this section) of two critical events considered morally outrageous by the Turkish diaspora in Norway (i.e., the 2008–2009 Gaza War and the 2011 Syrian uprisings) foregrounds another important aspect of the long-term “emotional state” that may characterize diasporic responses to geopolitical conflicts. Building on Ghassan Hage (2009), Sandrup argues for the differentiation between identifying with a conflict (and thus being sympathetic to it) and identifying through a conflict, meaning to have a personal and not least emotional

relation to it. When people identify through a conflict, moral outrage generates more than mere sympathy. This process of identification may unfold as a dynamic between the present moment of emotional outburst and intergenerational histories, as well as across the divide of various civil populations and diasporas.

Moral Outrage and Social Positioning

From the temporality of the political emotion, we move on to demonstrate our second point relating to moral outrage, namely, that it is constitutive for collectivities. The nature of these collectivities seems to be rather varying; they may emerge from preexisting collectives that are based on shared moral standards, or they may be unessential (Agamben 1993) and purely based on that shared emotion without any other preexisting communalities. The latter is often visible in ad hoc demonstrations (Alexandrakis 2016). Thus, as much as the emotion may territorialize new connections (Guattari 1995), we show how it demarcates the fault lines within set collectivities and creates heavily exclusive communities. In his study of the public commemoration for the assassinated Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in Istanbul in 2007, Lorenzo D’Orsi (in this section) stresses the moral thresholds of outrage. The annual commemoration gathers thousands of people—distant in political, religious, and ethnic positions—in the shared feeling of outrage, which creates new moral spaces of action and thinkability. The pro-Kurdish activists described in Weiss’s article, on the other hand, oscillate between positioning themselves within the larger Norwegian community that is fighting for democracy and human rights, while at times positioning themselves outside that same community in a performative act of diaspora politics.

Moral outrage appears to be separating the outrageous actors from the outraged spectators. As Satadru Sen has argued, through a critical perspective on the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks in New York and the following War on Terror, “moral outrage is pleasurable enough, because it is an assumption of superiority” (2001: 3587). Tone Sommerfelt’s study (in this section) of the civil fear of terror in southern Mali clearly demonstrates how the expression of moral outrage not only separates the outraged population from the “terrorist threat” but also elevates the outraged population as a morally better being than the opaque, shape-shifting Other.

Finally, an effect of moral outrage is the socially and/or politically enforced positioning of the people, practices, or organizations—states and nonstates—that are constructed and defined as outrageous. In order to grasp this particular process, we turn to analyze moral outrage in its negative potentiality, that is, as a dormant threat posed by the public sphere that can become realized in the least expected moments. To those individual actors, groups, or communities that are endangered of becoming the object of this public outrage, its potentiality may be perceived as rather relentless and as something that needs to be contained. In her article on countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies in the Danish welfare state, Mette-Louise Johansen (in this section) points to the ways in which local state officials respond to the potentiality of a public moral outrage against the welfare state in security matters. The state officials navigate potential moral outrage at the nexus between an anxious society, an alienated target group, and the welfare state apparatus, which situates them in a precarious position, prone with moral dilemmas. Johansen argues that the state officials’ navigation shapes the nature and content of their ethical decision-making and discretion in CVE processes. Sommerfelt’s study takes a different perspective on the potentiality of moral outrage, since becoming an object of moral outrage can have deadly consequences in the Malian context. The fear of jihadist terrorists has generated a demand for moral exposure and explicit distancing from the morally inverted Others (the jihadists) who are being violently prosecuted. As an effect, situating oneself politically and

religiously in opposition to the jihadist project has become a way of sheer self-protection and survival.

Moral Outrage and Directionality

In the literature on moral outrage, we find that the notion is almost exclusively treated as a unidirectional phenomenon. Moral outrage is almost solely described as an experience triggered by a critical event, deviant actor, or transgression of values and rights, and subsequently directed toward the transgressor or those held responsible for the transgressor's punishment (Goodenough 1997, Cohen 2011). The articles in this section seek to move beyond the tropes of linear causality between distinct drivers and action, which frames our understanding of political emotions and mobilization, protest, activism, or contestation. In contrast to Goodenough's depiction of the unidirectional character of the concept, we emphasize that, as an emotion, moral outrage points to the indetermination of expression. As most of the contributions in this section show, the link between the outrageous act, the outrageous actor, the outraged, and the spectator is far from clear-cut (Kalyvas 2006, Weiss and Six-Hohenbalken 2011). In fact, the expression of moral outrage is most often directed at something or someone else than the primary perpetrator. Hence, Weiss shows that when pro-Kurdish activists in Norway demonstrate against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, their moral outrage is directed toward not Erdoğan but rather the Norwegian government's denial of political violence against the Kurdish people. Furthermore, the pro-Kurdish activists do not depict the spectator of their demonstration to be the Norwegian public, the Norwegian government, or, least of all, Erdoğan. Rather, they engage as morally outraged in a global communication about marginality with the Kurdish diaspora.

D'Orsi and Sandrup emphasize that situations, which are publicly defined as morally outrageous (like the Gaza War or the assassination of Hrant Dink) opens up for many different grievances and problems to be focused on. In such situations, various and multilayered grievances may be elicited, but they may also lead to a relief of emotional tensions, especially if somebody is put "on trial." Sandrup emphasizes that when acting on something or somebody we all agree deserves to be put on trial, a relief that concerns other issues at hand might also be felt. Inasmuch as expressions of moral outrage are determined as multiple, sometimes incoherent, problems, they also provide a social space for reevaluating and defining the political environment. In Johansen's study of the Danish police force, the indeterminacy of moral outrage is extremely problematic when the emotion is approached and managed in the form of its negative potentiality. Emerging as highly unpredictable and ambiguous, the potentiality of public outrage leaves the police with a condition of immense uncertainty, as well as irresolution and incoherence in thought and practice (Berliner et al. 2016). The situation is even more comprehensive in the Malian case. As Sommerfelt states, moral outrage is justifiable when people fail, or refuse, to make visible their constitutive relationships to prove their moral being in a context of intense insecurity and violent prosecutions. In this context, moral outrage can be directed at anybody, at any time, if they do not comply to distance themselves from the threatening Other.

Conclusion

In this section, we see the need to broaden the analytical focus on political emotions as calls for action in order to explore in greater ethnographic detail their nature and effects. We emphasize the relational, temporal, geopolitical, and social dynamic between emotions and political vio-

lence, arguing that moral outrage is generic and transformative in itself, thus leading to numerous outcomes, one of which is action. The contributions demonstrate that moral outrage can be used as a valuable analytical prism through which we can investigate and understand social processes, such as mobilization, collectivities, moral positioning, responsiveness, and political violence.

The material in this section raises questions to the nature of the relationship between emotions and political violence, pointing to their mutual constitutiveness. We explore how this particular interrelationship is animated, perceived, and responded to by a range of different state and nonstate actors. This raises questions to the agency of various social and political actors in the realm of political violence and the role of witnessing in situations of violence. From studies of violence, we do know that active witnessing of suffering and violence are essential to overcome experiences of violence as ultimately individualizing (Das 1997, Asad 2003). Active witnessing implies an ethical engagement with the outraged “through all the facets of her humanness so that witnessing can take place within a mutually constructed frame” (Cubilie 2005: 252). However, as the contributions to this section show, moral outrage is not an emotion that belongs to victims of violence alone: the relationship between the outrageous, the outraged, and the reason for outrage are multiple and blurry. Different perspective, positions, and partial knowledges are thus produced within larger social contexts of power structures (Harraway 1988). A focus on audience and witnessing of expressions of moral outrage therefore ultimately raises questions of how power is used to break the mutually constitutive relationship between violence and moral outrage, thus maybe leading to a more peaceful society.

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■ NOTE

1. OxfordDictionaries.com, s.v., “outrage,” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/outrage> (accessed 8 August 2018).

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