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Theorizing Social Movement Practices

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This essay contributes to the systematic and expansive exploration of social movement practices by looking more closely at symbolic and instrumental practices, on the one hand, and works of mercy and structural transformation practices, on the other. The categories we have discussed, while far from perfect, provide valuable tools to understand social movement practices and thus movements in general. We argue that attention to practices can strengthen the systematic, comparative analysis of social movements both by calling attention to previously under-studied types of activities and by illuminating the relationships between different types of practices.

Key Words: Social movements, activism, religion and politics, progressive Christianity, immigration reform

Introduction

Practices, in many ways, define social movements. Movements are what people hope, dream, and plan for, but they are also what people do. We cannot understand social movements without examining different practices, the meanings they hold for activists, and their relations with other aspects of movements, such as ideologies, overall strategies, and outcomes. A systematic, comparative analysis can help, for example, to illuminate the reasons faith-based activists do things that appear to have no practical significance or the ways that direct acts of charity are linked to larger goals of structural change.

We get a hint of these connections – and the multivalent, often ambiguous nature of social movement practices – in the work of No More Deaths/No Más Muertes (NMD). NMD emerged in 2004, in response to the growing number of deaths linked to a 1994 Border Patrol policy known as “Prevention Through Deterrence.” The policy aimed to reduce illegal immigration by closing high-traffic crossing points along the US-Mexico border. However, it drove immigrants to cross in more isolated and dangerous areas in the Sonoran desert, leading to the deaths of over 7000 people between 1998 and 2017 (Armus, 2019). NMD volunteers leave water and other necessities along routes that immigrants travel in southern Arizona. They also help migrants retrieve their belongings, document abuses, search for migrants reported missing, and sometimes provide temporary housing.

Most NMD volunteers are religiously affiliated, and since 2008 the organization has been an official ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson (https://nomoredeaths.org/about-no-more-deaths/). One of the founders of NMD is Jim Fife, a Presbyterian minister who also co-founded the Sanctuary movement that provided housing, food, and legal assistance to undocumented refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s (Tory 2017). Those migrants were fleeing brutal civil wars, in which military regimes funded by the U.S. killed tens of thousands of civilians. More recently, a new Sanctuary movement, a network of religious
communities and faith-based immigrant rights organizations which emerged in 2007 as a reaction to intensifying prosecution of undocumented immigrants. Like the Sanctuary movement of the 1980s, the New Sanctuary Movement provides direct aid, including legal and financial help as well as housing, to immigrants threatened with deportation (Yukich 2013b, p. 306).

Nonviolent civil disobedience is the defining practice of NMD and of both incarnations of the Sanctuary movement. Activists from both groups break the law by providing various forms of aid to undocumented immigrants, actions which have been criminalized by a variety of federal and state laws. The largely faith-based activists in both NMD and the previous Sanctuary movement believe that breaking US law is justified when the laws are unjust, as they believe many immigration laws are. In keeping with the principles of non-violent direct action, activists do not attempt to hide their activities from law enforcement (Presbyterian Historical Society 2022).

No More Deaths received national attention in January 2018, when Border Patrol agents arrested NMD activist Scott Warren in southern Arizona, on charges of harboring undocumented immigrants. For several years, Warren had been working to expand “access to water and medical aid in one of the border’s deadliest and most remote corridors” (Deveraux 2019). He and his collaborators also work to find migrants reported missing and, in many instances, to locate, retrieve, and identify the remains of those who do not survive the journey. When he finds a body in the desert, as a 2019 article describes, Warren goes through a personal checklist:

The earthly components are straightforward. Log the GPS coordinates. Take photographs and notes. Scour the brush for more bones and pull together all the data pertinent to the investigation that local authorities will, in theory, initiate once they arrive. These elements are basic evidence-gathering. But for Warren, the process doesn’t end there.

Warren believes that these moments merit an acknowledgement of humanity. And so, after years of recoveries, the 36-year-old has developed a modest ritual for the grim encounters. He goes quiet, lowers himself to the earth, collects the dirt around him, and then lets the soil pour through his fingers. The point, Warren says, is to take a moment to reflect on, as he puts it, “hold space.” It may not sound like much, but for him, this process and everything that attends to it is as sacred as anything one might find in a conventional house of God (Deveraux 2019).

The activities of Warren and other NMD activists – leaving jugs of water in the desert, housing an undocumented immigrant, “holding space” at the site of their deaths – are at once symbolic and strategic, immediate and visionary. Their work reflects the multivalence of social movement practices, which not only pursue concrete ends, such as saving lives or changing laws, but also serve as ends in themselves, insofar as they nurture relationships, express identity, and fulfill moral commitments. The latter function is especially important for religious activists, who often express their participation as an effort to be faithful: to obey God’s demands, regardless of personal cost or practical impact. For many of these activists, their work for social change is indeed “as sacred as anything one might find in a conventional house of God.” This is reinforced in a study of clergy involved in social change, many of whom expressed a sense that “politics cannot be separated from daily life and . . . life at the church” (Crawford and Olson 2001a, p. 3). For many of these activists, their political activities are “demanded by their desire to remain true to their faith.” (Crawford and
Olson 2001a, p. 7). This demand can lead, as in the case of NMD and Sanctuary activists, to a conviction that they must sometimes break human laws in order to be true to “God’s law.”

The life-and-death nature of NMD’s mission and its members’ willingness to break the law make it a particularly dramatic social movement. However, it shares many common traits with other movements, particularly those in which faith plays a significant role. NMD activists, like those in the earlier Sanctuary movement, are driven to help the most vulnerable members of our society, to help create a society that is more compassionate and just, and to witness to profound moral and religious convictions. Their practices combine pragmatism and symbolism, immediate need and long-range vision. In order to understand the intertwining of these apparently paradoxical qualities, we need a comparative, systematic approach to the study of movement practices.

**Defining and Studying Movement Practices**

In the literature on social movements, practices are often discussed as “tactics” and “strategies.” The goal of scholars – and the source of debate – is often “how best to explain the decisions over tactics and strategy that social movements make, the extent to which decisions reflect individual or group preferences, or the importance that should be accorded to the micro and macro levels of analysis” (Doherty and Hays 2018, p. 271). We believe that a more nuanced and robust understanding of movement practices requires broadening beyond the inherently instrumental concepts of “tactics” and “strategies.” Both these terms, and the discussions in which they are deployed, presume that social movement actors deliberately choose certain activities as steps toward predetermined objectives. The significance of these activities is largely their ability to contribute to these goals. This view of practices is part of a larger theoretical approach to social movements that emphasizes their rational, instrumental character.

One of the most influential models for studying movements has its roots in Charles Tilly’s concept of “repertoires of contention.” Tilly’s term indicates the “established ways in which pairs of actors make and receive claims bearing on each other’s interests” (Tilly 1993, p. 265; Doherty and Hays 2018, p. 271). These repertoires, according to Tilly, consist of “a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice” (Tilly 1993, p. 264). Movement practices are defined by and within these repertoires – they are intentionally chosen, often routinized actions that activists employ to pursue their goals in a situation of conflict.

Building on Tilly’s work, Sydney Tarrow defines social movements in a way that puts practices front and center: “The irreducible act that lies at the base of all social movements, protests, rebellions, riots, strike waves, and revolutions is contentious collective action” (Tarrow 2011, p. 7). This contentious action is the defining feature of social movements, which emerge “when collective actors join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents around their claims or the claims of those they claim to represent” (Tarrow 2011, p. 4). Contentious politics are not necessarily violent or extreme, but they are inherently conflictive, because contentious action “is the main and often the only recourse that most people possess to demonstrate their claims against better-equipped opponents or more powerful states” (Tarrow 2011, pp. 7-8).

Social movements are part of the inevitably conflictual process by which some people seek changes – in attitudes, in institutions, in larger social structures – that will improve their lives. However, movement actions are not merely strategies for achieving these changes. As Tarrow
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acknowledges, “Movements do not simply seek instrumental goods; they also make and manipulate meanings” (Tarrow 2011, p. 142). Activist practices reflect and reinforce activists’ understandings of themselves and their societies, create relationships, and express subjective commitments. These qualities have become more prominent in recent scholarship on social movements (Doherty and Hays 2018, p. 280). This affective, relational emphasis is especially relevant for the study of movement practices, which cannot be understood without attention to “the meanings that actors invest in particular tactics” (Doherty and Hays 2018, p. 282). Activists’ decisions to undertake certain activities are not merely strategic choices intended to achieve predetermined practical goals but also expressions of collective identities, moral commitments, and visions of the social world – how it works and how it should be transformed.

This expressive emphasis is typical of what scholars call “new social movements” (NSM), which generally refers to post-1960s movements that focus less on economic, material changes than on the expression of identities. Prototypical NSMs included movements for Black and Chicano power and women’s and LGBTQ rights, along with environmental and neighborhood-based movements. These were distinguished from “old” movements such as trade unions that sought concrete changes in working conditions and economic structures. The emergence of this supposedly distinctive type of social movement generated new theoretical approaches that analyzed the ways “people actively construct identities that generate and sustain movements” (Nepstad 2004a, 14). NSM theorists argue that “embracing and embodying a collective identity is both an act of protest in itself and an ideological critique of the dominant culture.” The change that activists seek is embodied in their actions. For example, as Sharon Nepstad notes, “Displaying a pink triangle or participating in a gay pride event is not primarily about political reform but rather a personal refusal to accept the shame that society has historically attributed to homosexuality” (Nepstad 2004a, p. 14).

This effort to embody in their own actions the values they seek for the larger society is one of the distinguishing features of new social movements. “New” movements are more than instrumental for attaining political and social goals, according to Alberto Melucci, one of the founders of NSM theory: “Actors’ participation within movements is no longer a means to an end” (Melucci 1989, p. 5). The movements’ practices and their organizational forms are ends in themselves, as messages for the rest of society. For activists, further, participation within movements is a goal in itself, insofar as they “self-consciously practise in the present the future social changes they seek” (Melucci 1989, pp. 6, 206). A well-known example of this “practice of the objective” is Gandhi’s tactic of protesting the British monopoly on textile manufacture by weaving cloth on hand-held looms. In these cases, activists do not engage in contentious action by “demonstrating a claim in public,” but rather “perform protest by directly attacking the issue at hand” (Tarrow 2011, p. 102).

The study of NSMs suggests a broad understanding of movement practices, not just as tactics or strategies but as symbolically laden actions that may have many meanings, motivations, and results, for activists and their audiences. Movement practices include both physical and mental actions, and unintentional and even unconscious activities. The most clearly identifiable social movement practices are deliberate, well-planned actions that are clearly linked to movement goals – demonstrations, strikes, civil disobedience, and so forth. However, activists do a wide range of other things that are part of their movement identity, including personal consumption practices, informal social interactions (with fellow activists and outsiders), private actions such as prayer or
meditation, and even religious rituals. This expands the movement activities that we can identify and analyze.

While our definition is broad, not everything that activists do constitute movement practices. To refine our definition, we focus on two characteristics. First, movement practices are collective. Often they are undertaken by groups, but even the work of an individual activist is grounded in the collective identity and activities of the larger movement. Second, movement practices challenge the established order. Some activities are obviously contentious, such as demonstrations, picket lines, or sit ins. However, other practices contribute to contention by laying the foundation for bolder action. Movements “build organizations, elaborate ideologies, and socialize and mobilize constituents, and their members engage in self-development and the construction of collective identities” (Tarrow 2011, p. 8). In doing so, they often rely on previously existing civic and religious organizations and everyday activities, “the usually quiet improvement of their families and neighborhoods, the quest for education, and the struggle for economic success” (Levine and Stoll 1997, p. 91). Even practices that are not always explicitly oriented toward political change, in other words, help make it possible.

This broad definition of practices, which includes activities that are not always public or intentional, nuances and expands scholarly understanding of social movements. As James Guth points out, “our interest in specific kinds of political acts and issues often controls our results: we can find participation only where we look for it” (Guth 2001, p. 36-37). When we broaden beyond a narrow “repertoire” of things that activists do, we can see aspects of movements that otherwise remain hidden. Our approach also contributes to social movement theory by understanding practices not as ready-made tools that activists select for specific purposes but as the means by which activists come to understand themselves, their comrades, and their movement.

This emphasizes the subjective element of movement practices, “their significance and meaning for actors and observers” (Doherty and Hays 2018, pp. 274-75). The same action may carry very different meaning in different settings or for different actors. These nuances are not fully captured by the “repertoires of contention” approach, which “necessarily reduces events to instances of particular types, and takes us away from examining the meanings that actors invest in particular tactics” (Doherty and Hays 2018, p. 282). Activists’ subjective understandings are particularly important for analyzing practices that have mainly symbolic significance; many times, movements are driven not just by instrumental logic but by deep-rooted identities and commitments. Activists choose their actions based not only for effectiveness, in other words, but also because of their relationship to core beliefs and values (Nepstad 2004b).

**Instruments and Symbolic Practices**

Our analytic framework is organized around two paired categories of practices: instrumental and symbolic, on the one hand, and acts of charity and structural transformation, on the other hand. These categories are not exact descriptions of activists’ actual experiences but rather should be understood as ideal types. As Max Weber defined it, an ideal type is a heuristic category that accentuates certain points of view or aspects of a phenomenon, in order to highlight and isolate particular features for analytic purposes (Weber 1949). In the case of social movement practices, we must understand not only the artificial nature of our categories but also the blurry nature of the boundaries between them. It is not always easy to classify a given practice, and because the same
action can have multiple motivations and goals, the categories frequently overlap. Nonetheless, our categories provide a useful starting point for understanding the complex and interrelated practices that define social movement activism.

Our first category distinguishes practices as either instrumental (strategic) or symbolic. These terms hinge less on the type of action in which activists engage than the goals they pursue – or, more precisely, whether they pursue a tangible goal at all. What makes a practice instrumental is the fact that it is undertaken not as an end in itself but as the means to achieve another end. Symbolic practices, on the other hand, serve as ends in themselves. Because this distinction reflects activists’ motives for acting, it is helpful in explaining why people join social movements, a perennial interest of social movement scholars. While the distinction between actions undertaken to achieve a particular goal and actions undertaken as ends in themselves is meaningful, it is important not to reify this boundary. Even though the primary goal of symbolic actions is not to persuade decision makers, raise funds, or build an organization, they may contribute, incidentally, to all of these goals. It is rare, in fact, that any particular practice is exclusively symbolic or instrumental. Nonetheless, these categories help us make sense of many movement practices and illuminate the motives and values of many activists.

**Instrumental practices**

Activists engage in many types of instrumental practices. We can divide these up according to the goals they pursue. One of the most basic is the acquisition of resources, including fundraising and obtaining space and personnel. These are related to efforts to build organizational capacity, such as developing leadership structures, training staff and volunteers, and maintaining lists of supporters. These activities are the foundation for all other work a movement does. They are undertaken not for their own sake, but to create the structures that will support other activities.

Other instrumental activities are more clearly related to a movement’s goals. These include efforts to influence decision makers such as lobbying, letter writing, demonstrations, and press conferences. Often these activities focus on a specific bill or event. Immigrant rights activists, for example, have engaged in practices such as lobbying and letter-writing to persuade congressional representatives to vote for immigration reform bills such as DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act. Another good example is the work of congregation-based organizers who arrange meetings with local officials to present their demands on issues such as neighborhood improvement or school reform (Wood 2002).

Some of the most common and significant strategic actions aim not to influence decision makers, at least directly, but rather to shape public opinion. Practices in pursuit of these goals include education and publicity campaigns, consciousness-raising, rallies, marches, and nonviolent direct actions. These efforts often employ print and online advertisements, press releases, billboards, and, increasingly, social media. While social media are among the most common tools of many social movements, including both individuals and organizations, critics have pointed out that they often reach people who already sympathize with a movement’s goal. The well-documented “echo chamber” effect of social media such as Facebook and Twitter raises the question of how strategic they are; many posts on these media may have primarily symbolic or performative value, expressing an identity rather than contributing to a specific goal. Some users of these media
recognize this, although many may believe that their efforts do have a more tangible impact. Social movement scholarship would benefit from research on the ways that people understand their use of social media in relation to activist causes. The blurriness of the line between symbolic and instrumental uses of social media reflects the fluidity of boundaries between symbolic and strategic activism more generally, underlining our point that these categories are ideal types rather than exact descriptions of real-life experiences.

**Symbolic practices**
Symbolic practices are undertaken primarily for their own sake. While they may have some power to achieve other ends – e.g., through education or the formation of collective identity – symbolic practices are not undertaken chiefly for these reasons. The category of symbolic action is especially helpful for illuminating the reasons people participate in movements or activities that may seem pointless or illogical to outsiders, including some scholars.

Many of these actions are a form of moral witness, rooted in activists’ desire to be faithful to their conscience or faith. This faithfulness may justify civil disobedience: the deliberate decision to break a law that is considered immoral in order to be faithful to a “higher” law. Tactics of moral witness were central to the historic Civil Rights movement, exemplified in symbolically loaded actions such as sit-ins. Pacifist movements have also employed expressive actions such as civil disobedience and rituals. Michele Naar-Obed, a peace activist, explains that the use of blood (poured on the ground, for example) “brings home the bloody nature of war. . . We use blood to make that bloodshed real.” (Riegle 2012, p. 101). This can deepen the impact of protests on observers and make for powerful media images. Symbolism also makes protests more powerful for activists themselves, as Naar-Obed explains: “it’s a small and symbolic gesture of our willingness to pour out our own blood so that others’ blood may not have to be shed. And it’s following the example that Jesus gave us in the Eucharist when He gave His body and blood” (Riegle 2012, p. 101). This symbolic action links contemporary activists to Jesus, framing their actions as part of a larger sacred history. Following Jesus example means, according to Naar-Obed, that “we need to be willing to shed our own blood, to lay down our own lives. The ultimate example would be to have your life taken in order to save another, and this giving up of a few vials of blood is nowhere near that, but it’s a symbol and a gesture” (Riegle 2012, p. 102). Christian activists in Central America who engage in much riskier forms of protest echo this conviction that their practices are an effort to follow Jesus (Peterson 1997).

Plowshares, which emerged in the early 1980s in opposition to nuclear weapons, exemplifies the use of symbolic, expressive faith-filled actions by peace activists. The name of the organization itself comes from the symbolic action, described by Hebrew prophets, of turning swords into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4; Joel 3:12; Micah 4:3). Many Plowshares activists were inspired by radical streams within Roman Catholicism, and particularly the Catholic Worker movement, whose members sought to embody in their collective life the principles of peace and justice for which they agitated in the public sphere. One of the thinkers who inspired the Catholic Workers, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, counselled peace activists not to “depend on the hope of results” (Shannon 1985, quoted in Nepstad 2009, p. 101). Activism, in this perspective, is above all an expression of faith and solidarity, regardless of instrumental efficacy. As a Plowshares activist explains, “Our goal, our purpose, our approach is not primarily to have an effect. It is first of all to
be faithful. When you follow the gospel, it's not in order to be a success. It's an attempt to be faithful to God, to God's will for today, to be the voice of conscience” (Nepstad 2009, p. 109).

This desire to “be the voice of conscience” drives faith-based participants in No More Deaths and the contemporary Sanctuary movement. Their provision of direct aid to undocumented immigrants are at once pragmatic – helping people survive in a harsh situation – and symbolic – expressive of their rejection of laws they consider unethical and anti-Christian. They believe, as Scott Warren’s lawyer, Greg Kuykendall, put it, that “People who exercise the golden rule, people who are Samaritans, are not committing crimes. They are doing what all of us should aspire to” (Armus 2019; see also Kuykendall 2020). In expressing their faith concretely, they are obeying the divinely-inspired “higher law” that often contradicts the laws of the land.

Pacifists and radical immigration activists, among others, underline the importance of religious faith as a motivation for more radical practices such as civil disobedience. This echoes Ron Pagnucco’s study of faith-based peace movements, which are more likely than secular to employ “more unconventional, unruly tactics of ‘moral witness’” rather than conventional tactics of political bargaining (Pagnucco 1996, p. 210). Civil disobedience and other forms of witness can have powerful practical effects, as the US Civil Rights movement illustrates. However, in some contexts these practices are intended primarily as symbolic actions, expressions of faith that activists feel compelled to make regardless of their strategic utility. Merton’s instruction to act without a view to achieving results, according to Catholic peace activist Tom Cornell, appears to contradict calls “to make our work effective.” His conclusion is that “part of the equation has to be the possible effects of whatever actions we undertake. But then there are times when you just have to do what you have to do and say what you have to say. Because it’s true. That’s all. And you do it” (Riegle 2012, p. 202). Ultimately, personal faith and moral commitment compel activism regardless of effectiveness – one acts “because it’s true,” not because one’s actions will lead to concrete results.

One type of witness is what we call “embodied altruism,” in which people act in ways consistent with their values, regardless of the likely consequences. This theme is prominent in interviews we conducted with contemporary Sanctuary activists. One participant explained her work with the Sanctuary movement in these terms: “I can't say what is going to come from all this, but I won't be a part of the problem. I would just do whatever little I can do, and maybe that was just to make myself feel better” (interview with Sandra, Jan. 28, 2021). Sandra’s desire to live according to her values and not to be “part of the problem,” is not linked to expectations of measurable results. Even some actions with immediate and direct consequences, such as feeding the hungry or giving shelter to the homeless, may be performed primarily as a kind of embodied altruism. Activists feel called to encounter those in need and share in their experiences as a requirement of their faith.

Despite the importance of moral witness in many social movements, it is not frequently highlighted in social movement scholarship. This might be because the literature has framed social movements themselves as strategic efforts to achieve desired ends. This is undoubtedly true, but it does not mean that all activists act instrumentally all the time. The focus on strategic action has made it harder for scholars to identify and understand the motivations and actions of people who are acting, sometimes at great cost, in non-instrumental ways. These symbolic practices are often driven by religious convictions. Many activists believe that “we are called to be faithful, not effective”
(Pagnucco 1996, p. 218). In this view, actions are judged not on the basis of their measurable impact but rather on the basis of the actor’s fidelity to divine law and membership in a spiritual community. When discussing the impact of her work at a border hospitality house in El Paso, one activist remarked:

There’s the hopelessness factor, like not feeling hopeless about the 95-97% denial rate for these refugees. But in the midst of all the sadness, you realize your life isn’t all about you. When I came to El Paso, I was meeting people, a community of like-minded people who were just as passionate and committed to serving the stranger, to serving the least of us. I mean, they felt like they were meeting Christ in the other, and so did I (interview with Paula, Dec. 15, 2020).

The example and fellowship of others committed to the same cause is crucial for sustained activism. Costly or high-risk actions, in particular, are facilitated by participation in supportive networks of people who can provide practical and moral support and mentoring (McKanan 2012, p. 2).

These networks also help activists understand themselves as members of a particular community, holders of a particular ethos. Symbolic actions can reinforce this sense of belonging and identity, through activities such as public expressions of a commitment to a cause or the use of bumper stickers, buttons, or t-shirts. As noted earlier, social media is the most common activity in this symbolic-expressive category, which might also be called performative. The actors may believe they are pursuing a practical goal, such as expanding the audience for a cause or inspiring others to act, but most of the time they must realize that their practical impact, in this instance, is negligible. They decide to act not because they think they will change anyone’s mind but because they want to be identified as a particular kind of person or part of a particular movement.

Another non-instrumental practice is the creation or nurturing of social bonds. Social movement practices create relationships both among activists and between activists and those they are trying to help. These ties are appreciated for themselves, and not just as a means to an end, even though they may contribute to the movement’s organizational capacity and ability to pursue tangible goals. A Sanctuary activist we interviewed terms the latter kind of practice “encounter.” Her interactions with immigrants enables her to “give voice” to their stories, which might help shape public opinion. However, the deeper motivation for her work is “the encounter,” the bond created when she shares, even vicariously, in the immigrants’ suffering (interview with Beth, Dec. 17, 2020).

**Relations between instrumental and symbolic practices**

Witnessing to faith, expressing identity, and building relationships can all have potent practical consequences. We categorize these as symbolic practices when, and insofar as, activists undertake them primarily as ends in themselves. This underlines our point that these different reasons for acting are not mutually exclusive; practices can be both symbolic and strategic at the same time. In other words, the fact that an action is motivated by faith does not mean that it has no concrete goals. U.S. civil rights activists’ use of non-violence in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, stemmed both from a conviction that nonviolence was morally correct, from a pragmatic desire to avoid escalating conflicts that could lead to bloodshed, and from a strategic decision to present a positive image of the movement to a national audience. Further, many faith-based activists believe that
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non-instrumental practices such as prayer or fasting are not merely symbolic but can have a powerful impact. For many religious activists, as Richard Wood and Brad Fulton explain, “public prayer is considered a potent form of action, not an escape from action” (Wood and Fulton 2015, p. 134). The same is true of other religiously-grounded practices, such as the pilgrimages and religious rituals commonly used in peace movements (Lambelet 2019). In another example, leaders of Black Lives Matter (BLM) note the spiritual significance of practices such as the calling out of names of Black people killed by police violence (Farrag 2018), which evokes a spiritual connection with the dead while also publicizing police abuses.

It is also important to note that the same practice can have different meanings for different participants. For example, some actions that organizers see as primarily instrumental, such as a protest march, may have great symbolic value for most activists. In addition to the fact that a single action can have both symbolic and strategic significance, actors’ motivations for engaging in particular activities can change over time. They may see it initially as a symbolic expression and come to see it as practically important, or vice versa. James Cone contends that Martin Luther King, Jr. initially saw nonviolent civil disobedience as the most practical way to pursue the concrete goal of ending Jim Crow laws, given both the brutality of southern police forces and the need to persuade northern white liberals of the nobility of their cause. Over time, however, King’s commitment to nonviolence became a central aspect of his Christian faith, a “way of life” and not just a means to achieve other goals (Cone 2012, p. 76).

A similar process characterizes congregation-based organizing. This organizing model grew out of the work of Saul Alinsky, who did not see religion as central to his overarching goal, which was to increase the political power of working-class people. After Alinsky’s death, however, his methods were increasingly used by organizers working with religious communities. As Wood explains, “Though initially the turn to a more explicitly faith-based model of organizing was made for fairly narrow strategic reasons, over time . . . organizers came to draw increasingly on symbols, rituals, practices, stories, and concepts that were explicitly religious as a key basis for their organizing” (Wood 2002, p. 138). The interactions between professional organizers and religious activists altered the way the former viewed their collaborations, transforming their methods and goals. Again, the categories of symbolic and instrumental action but should not be reified or opposed to each other.

Works of Mercy and Structural Change
While our first distinction rests on whether or not practices explicitly pursue external goals, our second hinges on the type of change towards which they are directed. Some actions aim to alleviate immediate problems by providing direct aid to those in need, while others seek structural changes that would address the root causes of such problems.

Structural change
Actions geared toward structural changes are at the heart of social movement activism. People often organize for structural change because they believe that a problem is too great to be addressed by incremental changes or works of charity. This conviction sometimes, but not always, leads to efforts at radical transformations in institutions or structures. They seek to empower the grassroots with the aim of shifting the balance of power. However, many movements for structural change are moderate or reformist, seeking seek changes within the existing system such as new laws or
new elected officials. They seek to access established power, enabling people to improve their conditions of life or work by working within the system (Day 2001, p. 96). This moderate approach can stem both from political convictions and from strategic considerations, as a minister involved with the Sanctuary movement in Arizona makes clear: “If you want to convince people to come to your side,” he believes, “you have to have a solution that appeals broadly” (interview with Rev. Schwarz, March 2, 2021).

Most movements for structural change include a range of approaches, from moderate reforms of existing institutions to their complete transformation. For example, some animal advocates seek reforms within existing institutions, such as better treatment of farm animals or reduced euthanasia in public shelters. Other activists aim for a more radical transformation of the relations between humans and animals and an end to institutions that exploit animals (Francione 1996). Both reformers and revolutionaries engage in many of the same kinds of actions, including many of the instrumental practices we discussed above as well as some primarily symbolic or expressive ones. We discuss the relations between these different types in more detail below.

*Works of mercy*

What we call works of mercy or charity provide direct assistance to people (or other creatures, for animal rights activists) in need. These are often undertaken by religious or civic groups that we would not identify as social movements per se, such as the Red Cross or Habitat for Humanity, as well as many local homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and health clinics. Many providers of charity are not social movements, in our definition, because they are not challenging the established order but simply giving aid to those who are suffering within it (and sometimes as a result of it). Some activists view the provision of direct aid not merely as a failure to challenge the status quo but as a support to it, a way to defuse frustration so that people do not organize for deeper structural changes. Thus the provision of direct aid to victims of social injustices can be a deeply conservative action. Religion is often implicated in these efforts, which enhances the impression that some secular progressive activists have of religion as a pillar of the status quo—an “opiate,” in Marx’s term (Marx 1978, p. 54), which lessens the pain caused by unjust social structures so that oppressed people are less likely to rise up against them.

We appreciate these critiques and agree that many providers of direct aid are not social movements. However, we do think some qualify. The key distinction is “contentiousness,” in Tarrow’s sense: when people act collectively in opposition to dominant cultural, social, economic, or political forces, they are part of a social movement. Activists may choose to express that opposition in ways that do not pursue structural changes directly, for reasons that may include a desire to stay local, cynicism about the possibility of structural change, or religious convictions. No More Deaths and the Sanctuary movements, for example, are clearly part of the larger immigrant rights movement, even though almost all their actions involve direct aid to needy individuals. And although most animal rescue activists focus on providing shelter and care to homeless animals, many also understand themselves to be part of a larger movement to transform policies and attitudes regarding nonhuman animals.

Thinking about works of mercy as legitimate and often integral practices of many social movements can help refine our understanding of what defines social movements as such. What matters is not simply the kind of practices in which activists engage but their own understanding
of and goals for their actions. This is to some extent a personal matter. One person volunteering at a soup kitchen or an animal shelter might see her actions as apolitical works of mercy, with no broader meaning than the provision of aid to people or animals who need it; she considers herself a volunteer rather than an activist. Another person at the same organization might see her work as part of a larger commitment to structural changes such as ending hunger or reforming the animal welfare system (Greenebaum 2009). This does not mean that single individuals constitute a social movement, but individual actions, even works of mercy, can be performed as part of a larger, collective movement and linked to efforts to achieve structural change, as we discuss in more detail in the next section.

**Relations between structural change and works of mercy**

In some ways charity and structural change represent very different, perhaps even mutually exclusive, approaches. Some actors see works of charity as neutral actions, in which they can engage without becoming involved in “contentious politics” (Tarrow 2011). This is true for many people of faith, including many religious leaders. In this view, as a Pennsylvania bishop put it, “The role of the church in society is not to engage systemic injustice but to fill in the gaps.” This is, as Dennis Jacobsen notes, “the practical, working theology of most churches in the United States whose social ministry, if it exists at all, is devoted to food pantries, homeless shelters, or walk-a-thons to generate money for this or that cause” (Jacobsen 2001, p. 18). For Jacobsen, an advocate of congregation-based organizing, direct aid is valuable but must be connected to structural change. “The hungry must be fed. The homeless must be sheltered. The works of mercy are central to the teachings of Jesus,” he acknowledges. Perhaps even more important, “When we engage in a personal ministry of mercy, we have an opportunity to learn from those who suffer. We move beneath tidy statistics to the complexities of the human dimension.” This move should lead to an awareness of structural injustice and a commitment to work for structural change: “We begin to see how systems are designed to benefit the prosperous and keep the poor down” (Jacobsen 2001, p. 18).

Thus the relationship between works of mercy and structural change can be chronological. People concerned about a problem – education, poverty, homelessness, environmental damage – may choose to start with an apparently apolitical project that yields clear results, such as feeding hungry people, sheltering homeless animals, or cleaning up a polluted waterway. In and through works of mercy, they come to know others concerned with the same issues and they learn more about the problem and the people and places it affects. This may lead to interest in the larger implications or roots of the problem, which in turn can lead to work towards structural change.

Like instrumental and symbolic practices, charity and structural change are not mutually exclusive. Many activists concerned with homelessness or immigration reform, for example, work both to help people in immediate need and to change the structures or laws that cause them harm. In addition, movements might emphasize one or another type of action at different times, in response to differing circumstances or possibilities. Activists who pursue both direct aid and structural change often see the two as integrally connected. Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker movement, frequently explained the connection as the dual obligations of Christianity. The “abiding norm” of the Catholic Worker movement is “works of mercy,” which include spiritual practices such as bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving all injuries, and praying for the living and the dead, as well as “corporal” practices such as feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, and
caring for the sick (Catholic Worker n.d.a). These works of mercy are not isolated acts of charity but rather part of a larger effort to create a society that reflects “God’s justice,” understood as an end to war, poverty, the exploitation of labor, ecological destruction, and bureaucratic authoritarianism. The overall goal is to build structures that make it “easier for people to be good,” in the words of Catholic Worker co-founder Peter Maurin (Catholic Worker n.d.b).

Modern Catholic social initiatives reflect these twin goals of direct aid and structural change. Pope Pius XI highlighted the necessary connection between charity and justice 70 years ago: "Charity will never be true charity unless it takes justice into account ... Let no one attempt with small gifts of charity to exempt himself from the great duties imposed by justice" (Pius XI 1937, para. 49). In a similar way, Pope Benedict XVI notes in his encyclical, Caritas in Veritate that both direct encounter with neighbor and work for justice are necessary (Benedict XVI 2009, 7).

These goals have been combined in grassroots projects such as Catholic Worker houses and also in institutional initiatives, including “Two Feet of Love in Action,” a program developed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The first “foot” is charitable works, such as helping in soup kitchens, donating food, clothing or money, tutoring children, or sponsoring a refugee family. The second “foot” of social action addresses longstanding injustices, such as “advocating for just public policies and becoming involved in community self-help projects” (USCCB n.d.). Another example of this social justice approach is Bread for the World, an ecumenical Christian organization that addresses global hunger not by direct aid but by pursuing policy change. It also discusses prayer as an important element of its work.

Faith-based projects such as Two Feet of Love in Action and Bread for the World, among many others, link works of mercy to efforts to create a new society – to live, on a small and temporary scale, according to rules of justice and compassion that should guide the larger society. This is also important to some streams within the civil rights and feminist movements, which sought to embody their values of racial and gender justice in their own practices and communities at the same time they sought to transform the larger society. Within the contemporary immigration reform movement, a similar goal motivates many activists. They believe their society should welcome the stranger and help the most vulnerable; in their practices they embody these values and create, in small form, a community that resembles their vision for the whole society.

Another potential connection is that charitable activities themselves may lead to structural changes, even though they were not intended to do so. This may occur because a series of small incremental changes, such as legal reforms, eventually amount to structural transformation. This is evident in the gradual expansion of voting rights in the U.S., for example; the work of suffrage and civil rights activists led to radical changes in political institutions. Parallel transformations have occurred as the result of efforts to democratize leadership opportunities in some religious traditions, including many Christian denominations.

Works of mercy can also lead to structural change at least in part because of their symbolic power. This is evident in the Catholic Church’s provision of direct aid to victims of political violence in many places in Latin America during recent periods of military rule. Many churches provided housing for refugees, legal aid for families of political prisoners, and other services. For example, churches in Chile, El Salvador, and elsewhere helped families of people who had been “disappeared” by publicizing their names and faces and asking authorities for information about
their fate. This was a work of mercy for traumatized people who lacked the knowledge and funds to navigate the political and legal system on their own. However, it was also a way to publicize political violence, shaping the work of both domestic and international human rights organizations. Very concrete forms of direct aid strengthened both internal opposition to oppressive regimes and international condemnation, ultimately contributing to political transitions.

Connecting Movement Practices
The relationship between symbolic and instrumental practices both parallels and intersects with that between works of mercy and efforts at structural change. The parallels lie in the blurriness of the boundaries between two apparently contrasting terms. Like symbolic and strategic actions, direct aid and structural change are not mutually exclusive. Many movements engage in both, and as noted above, the same practices can have symbolic as well as instrumental value.

Both efforts at structural change and works of mercy involve symbolic as well as instrumental practices. Instrumental activities goals may seek to influence policy and elect officials who share their values. Other practices falling outside the electoral and legal system, such as civil disobedience or the establishment of alternative economic structures like cooperatives, have symbolic resonance as well as practical impact.

There is no set relationship between the categories of symbolic and instrumental action, on the one hand, and works of mercy and structural change, on the other. Some acts of charity are purely instrumental, e.g. they feed people who are hungry. However, sometimes works of mercy are at the same time symbolic, such as taking water to immigrants near the US southern border. Similarly, movements working for structural change employ some highly symbolic practices, such as fasts or pilgrimages employed in the civil rights movement, as well as more strategic ones, such as lobbying and electoral work. As we have noted, NMD and Sanctuary activists perform works of mercy by aiding undocumented immigrants while also engaging in demonstrations, civil disobedience, and other “traditional” social movement activities aimed at changing US immigration policy (Yukich 2013a, 2013b; Epstein 1991; Wiltfang and McAdam 1991; Todd 2021). The ability to combine works of mercy with other forms of activism may reflect the power of religiously oriented social movements to serve as not just instruments for achieving external goals but also ends in themselves. This underlines, in turn, the complexity of movement practices, which often embody a variety of meanings, functions, and goals all at the same time.

Conclusion
This essay contributes to the systematic and expansive exploration of social movement practices by looking more closely at symbolic and instrumental practices, on the one hand, and works of mercy and structural transformation practices, on the other. The categories we have discussed, while far from perfect, provide valuable tools to understand social movement practices and thus movements in general. We argue that attention to practices can strengthen the systematic, comparative analysis of social movements both by calling attention to previously under-studied types of activities and by illuminating the relationships between different types of practices.

Attention to symbolic actions, in particular, can help identify and explain the motivations of activists, a major concern of social movement scholars. Although non-instrumental actions are central to many activists, social movement theory rarely examines them in detail. Symbolic
actions. such as Scott Warren’s “holding space,” express individual and collective movement identity, nurture relationships, fulfill moral commitments, and serve as ends in themselves. From the point of view of social movement theory, this approach is significant as it demonstrates that for many activists, movement goals can be secondary to movement identity. Given the centrality of non-instrumental actions to movement identity and the lives of individual activists, often what matters most is not simply the kind of practices in which activists engage but their own understanding of and goals for their actions.

In addition to highlighting the significance of non-instrumental action, our framework illuminates the relationship between different types of practices. The analytical pairs we examined—symbolic and instrumental actions; acts of charity and structural transformation—are neither exactly mutually parallel nor mutually exclusive. Thus, we argue for a closer examination of the overlapping practices between each analytical category to better understand major concerns of social movement scholarship, including motivations, recruitment, resources, and impact. Further attention to these issues, and to other aspects of practice, can both expand and deepen the study of social movements.
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References


Interview with Sandra, Jan. 28, 2021. Conducted by Christopher Lomelín.


