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Resonance through Electronic Media: The Sacralisation of the Body and the #MeToo Movement

Theories about religion often assume that Sacralisations remain stable only if they are continually reaffirmed through ritual interactions. Durkheim's sociology of rituals (1995 [2012]) – one of the inspirations behind Rosa's concept of resonance – emphasises that this is true even of groups that do not use an explicitly religious language when talking about what is sacred to them; this insight helps to explain the dynamics of social movements (Pettenkofer 2010). Late modern societies, however, depend less on physical co-presence, and more on technologically mediated communication at a distance, than Durkheimian sociology assumes. Does this not mean that ritual-based mechanisms lose their importance, and that stable Sacralisations become increasingly unlikely?

This PhD project focuses on a case that contradicts this expectation. The concept of sexual harassment – the normative background of the #MeToo movement – is a case of a 'modern' Sacralisation. It is not articulated through an explicitly religious language, but it implies a new, much stricter affirmation of the sacredness – the inviolability – of the individual body (Joas 2008), and a new sense of disgust about violations of this norm. For a long time, one could easily doubt whether there was any social reality to this norm. The #MeToo movement made a difference by affirming this norm in a new way.

This may seem surprising: The #MeToo mobilisation mainly happened on Twitter. Communication via electronic media rarely elicits strong emotions (Barth 2016) and thus can damage social movements (Fletcher Fominaya 2016). Even movements that may seem to rely on such media are actually sustained by contexts of intense interaction (Coleman 2010). And Twitter does not even create 'synthetic situations' (Knorr Cetina 2009) that *approximate* physical co-presence. Why was this success nevertheless possible?

This project uses the 'resonance' heuristics to show how the communication structure of Durkheimian rituals can emerge independently of the interaction settings that Neodurkheimians like Collins (2004) see as necessary. The guiding hypotheses are: The 'me too' mode of Twitter messaging decouples this communication structure from local interactions. This happens via continual, even personalised affirmations and through retellings of similar stories that, by communicating indignation about violations of shared values, reaffirm these values. These resonating experiences constitute the attraction of this movement and explain the emergence of a sense of collective agency and a readiness to participate.

In order to retrace the emergence of this resonating space of communication, the project concentrates on a reconstruction of Twitter sequences and other written documents, focusing on the different kinds of interlinkages between stories, and between stories and their comments; on the transformations of specific stories into widely transmitted examples; on the

ways in which emotions are communicated (e.g., how does sharing experiences of disgust create positive resonance?); and on the plausibility-enhancing linkages between tweets and longer accounts of harassments and related experiences.

The goal is to develop an empirically grounded theory that explains how sacralisations can be sustained through electronic media. The case of #MeToo also suggests two directions in which the concept of resonance can be elaborated. (1) It points to an underexplored 'cognitive' element: Sharing versions of the same story enables participants to understand their own experience as *typical*, and their own stories as credible (see Manne 2018 on the dilemma of 'epistemic injustice'). This 'cognitive' change also transforms their experiences as such and is crucial for creating resonance. (2) The #metoo hashtag had been introduced in 2006 by a black activist, but a larger movement only started when the hashtag was taken up by white celebrity actresses; this suggests that structures of intersecting inequalities can shape the opportunities for this kind of 'resonant' process.

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