

Christoph Hoefl: Standstill in movements? Collective learning in social movements. Bielefeld 2021.

Structure:

Section A: Model of learning and research design

1. Learning processes of social movements
2. Methodological approach
3. Case study: the undogmatic leftist scene in Hamburg

Section B: Empirical analysis

4. Learning processes – debates on collective identity
5. Collective identity in discussions on sexism and gender relations in the radical left
6. Collective identity in discussions on militancy
7. Collective identity in discussions on vacant urban spaces, gentrification and district politics
8. Collective identity in discussions on antisemitism in the radical left
9. Collective identity in discussions on organizational concepts and strategies

Section C: Concluding remarks

10. Final thoughts: the collective learning of social movements

Summary:

Some characteristics most social movements seem to have in common are their “loose,” constantly changing membership, a lack of task sharing and labor division, disavowal of hierarchies and informal ways of decision-making. Are social movements capable of learning despite of these seeming obstacles to it? Is there a kind of collective knowledge-production that can be shared among several generations of activists and may form the foundation for their present and future acting? How can we conclude that a movement has learned something – and which measurable items could show this? Who even is “the movement” in this context – and is a collective capable of learning at all?

This book focuses on these questions. It develops a model of learning that draws from different approaches to learning in the disciplines of political science and sociology. The model emphasizes the relationship between the different levels or scales of a movement: individuals, smaller groups, and the larger movement in general interact in processes of collective learning. Learning hence is conceptualized as a combination of actors and groups being open for new impulses and simultaneously undertaking a kind of institutionalization of existing knowledge. Such a broad understanding of learning incorporates all forms of knowledge changes and exchanges – for example, both the increase and decrease of information and experience. The concept of collective identity offers a useful link

to understand collective learning. In its specific identity, a social movement constantly negotiates who can be part of the movement, which goals are pursued, and which means and strategies could be used to reach them. Hence, a closer look at debates on collective identity facilitates the identification and reconstruction of learning processes on three different levels epitomized in the key questions: Who are we? What do we want? How can we achieve this?

The study analyzes collective learning based on a closer examination of one specific case study of a social movement – the so called undogmatic leftist scene in Hamburg. In order to understand how this movement negotiates its collective identity, the book turns to different debates published in *Zeck*, a magazine of the movement. Methodologically, the analysis follows and adapts the concept of the critical discourse analysis.

The main part of the book is structured into readings of five different controversial topics and the collective learning these topics triggered: sexism in the radical left; militancy; vacant urban spaces, gentrification and district politics; antisemitism in the left; organizational concepts and strategies. Close readings of the debates on these topics seek to reconstruct how even small changes in the collective understanding of the identity of the movement potentially may cause conflicts. Each section of the book ends with a discussion of some unique aspects of the specific debate, before commonalities and general findings are presented in the final chapter.

Among other things, this study explores how the openness for new learning impulses, the anchoring of existing and new knowledge, as well as the constant repetition of certain debates are intricately related to each other. Additionally, the meaning of authority and the importance of forgetting and unlearning surface again and again as central aspects of collective learning processes. Finally, *Stillstand in Bewegung?* suggests, cleavages in social movements could be interpreted as results of learning processes. For a better understanding of collective learning and different sequences of negotiations, it may be necessary to differentiate between several scales and ranges of learning.

This book illuminates the concept of collective learning of social movements, and adds to existing scholarship that tends to neglect such processes. Through a detailed analysis of discussions about the collective identity of social movements, this book fosters the understanding of this phenomenon. The results could be useful for future scientific research as well as for the political practice of social movements.