

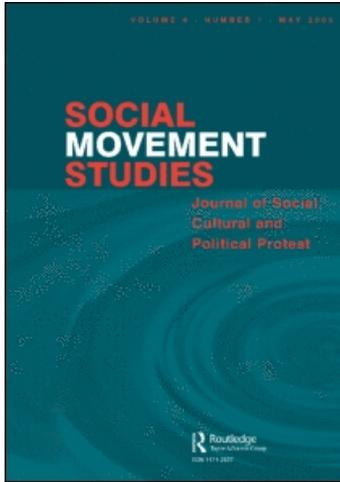
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Some Elements of an Interactionist Approach to Political Disengagement

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ABSTRACT *This article uses an interactionist approach to propose a theory of activist disengagement processes. Over the last dozen years, the sociology of activism has been revitalized by the conception of activism as a long-lasting social activity articulated by phases of joining, commitment, and defection. This has given rise to the notion of 'activist career', drawing directly on Hughes' and Becker's concept of interactionism. Applied to political commitment, the notion of career allows us to understand how, at each biographical stage, the attitudes and behaviours of activists are determined by past attitudes and behaviours, which in turn condition the range of future possibilities, thus resituating commitment across the entire life cycle. The concept of career therefore enables us to combine questions of the predisposition to and operationalization of activism, of differentiated and variable forms of engagement over time, of the multiplicity of engagements across the life cycle, and of the withdrawal and extension of commitment.*

KEY WORDS: Activism, activist career, biography, disengagement, commitment

One of the permanent traits of political organizations, whether partisan, union, or interest group, is turnover and consequently defection (Price, 1977; Fillieule, 2005). However, while the literature on political activism has essentially raised the question of recruitment and the enrolment of new activists, it has remained relatively silent on the maintenance of commitment and what amounts to the same thing, namely defection.

Many factors explain this situation. For example, activism itself has been less studied from microsociological perspectives than through analysis of the organizations encompassing it, which naturally leads to reasoning in terms of current assets rather than in terms of flux. Moreover, microsociological approaches to individual behaviour, except in their economicist version of rational choice theory, have long been dismissed in the name of collective behaviour theory (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999; McAdam, 2005), as well as due to the scarcity of available sources for those who were, nonetheless, interested in the engagement and disengagement of activists. By definition, 'ex'-activists are no longer there at the time of study, and very often organizations do not keep or make readily available the membership files that would offer hope of finding people who had defected. Further, there is the difficulty in moving from snapshots of reality to a processual

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perspective, which in cases of this sort requires longitudinal studies, whether retrospective or, ideally, prospective (Fillieule, 2001).

However, in broadening the range of literature to review related questions or fields, the spectrum of potentially relevant research seems considerable. If we exclude the autobiographical works of priests, terrorists and communist activists, literature that more or less directly broaches the question of disengagement emerges from life course sociology, especially concerning the question of the social effects of ageing (Cumming & Henry, 1961); from social psychology, concerning the social functioning of small groups and sociability networks (e.g. Kanter, 1972; McPherson *et al.*, 1992); and the sociology of roles, in the Mertonian or interactionist tradition, especially in the literature on churches and cults, but also divorce and the professions (Vaughan, 1986; Fuchs-Ebaugh, 1988).

In social movement research, three broad directions have primarily been explored, the first being the future of 1960s American activists. What did the protesting students become once they became adults and entered the workforce (e.g. Demerath *et al.*, 1971; Braungart & Braungart, 1984; Fendrich, 1993; McAdam, 1988; Whalen & Flacks, 1989)? At the same time, in Europe, the literature focuses mainly on communist disengagement (e.g. Pudal, 1988). Finally, starting in the 1990s, disengagement is instead envisaged through the question of a hypothetical 'crisis of political participation', whether via macro-social approaches aiming to situate individual defection in terms of long-term trends or social cycles (Hirschman, 1983) or on the basis of survey questionnaires, notably with regard to de-unionization (Klandermans, 1997; Labbé & Croisat, 1992). In parallel, building on Gusfield, research began on the succession and coexistence of 'activist generations' (Taylor, 1989; Whittier, 1995, 1997; Fillieule & Broqua, 2000, 2005).

In fact, most fields that have considered disengagement are interested in either 'total institutions' or 'high-risk' activism, suggesting that we should pause and recognize the diversity of phenomena to which this term refers. Indeed, the process of disengagement is highly likely to vary as a function of what provokes it, the cost of defection, the manner in which it takes place, and therefore what becomes of those who leave.

Defection is not always voluntary. It may result from the natural dissolution of a collective (Gottraux, 2002), from the decline of a movement, producing orphans in a cycle of mobilization, as Verta Taylor illustrates with regard to post-war American feminism (1989); from exclusion; from extraction/de-programming (e.g. Beckford, 1978); or even from a forced exit through exile or, say, a prison sentence.

The cost of leaving relates primarily to the manner in which organizations frame defection through various constraints. As we have emphasized elsewhere,

the psychic or material cost of defection, and therefore its probability, is due to a number of factors amongst which we will mention the extent of the sacrifices accepted to enter the group (initiation rites, trials, hierarchization and isolation of collectives); weaker or stronger group socialization, that translates especially into the reinforcement of emotional attachment, which varies as a function of the degree of renunciation of social relations external to the group (networks of family and friends); and finally the rules in place at the time of the defection, sometimes rendered impossible by material dependence or the threat of being pursued as a traitor. (Fillieule & Bennani-Chraïbi, 2003, p. 123; Kanter, 1968, 1972; Coser, 1974; Hirschman, 1995, p. 48)

To these barriers to defection we must also add the existence of lateral possibilities (the opportunities to reconvert acquired resources, the possibility of reconnecting with alternative networks of sociability, and so on), and finally the degree of social legitimacy of defection.

Forms of defection are extremely variable. They may be isolated or take place collectively, such as when a group splinters or an entire affinity group leaves. Introvigne (1999, p. 62) distinguishes between *defectors*, who leave their organization in a negotiated fashion and by agreement; *apostates*, who become their organization's professional enemies; and *ordinary leave takers*, who disappear quietly, and whose disengagement carries no apparent notable cost, for either themselves or the organization (1999, p. 67). Yet this is a rather cursory typology. It needs to be completed by various types of passive defection – withdrawal without leaving an organization – and different scenarios in which disengagement from an organization is followed, and sometimes provoked, by joining another organization or cause.

In all, little work has been directly interested in disengagement per se, as a process rather than a moment in time. Research has centred on the determinants of defection, or the future of ex-activists, but rarely on the disengagement process and on what happens *within* organizations.

Our aim here is therefore to illustrate the usefulness of a symbolic interactionist approach to the study of disengagement. Coined by Herbert Blumer in 1937, 'symbolic interactionism' is closely linked to the social behaviourism of George Herbert Mead (McPhail & Rexroat, 1979). Its subsequent usage belongs less to a school of thought than to a wide array of research sharing two standpoints: a common conception of the individual and their relation to society, deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition of pragmatism; and a way of doing research inherited from the Chicago School of sociology. More precisely, symbolic interactionism can be defined as a microsociological and processual approach which systematically links the individual and the study of situations to broader contextual factors and social order rules and norms. In this perspective, not only are individuals and society interdependent but they also mutually construct each other. We contend that recent developments in research on activism based on the interactionist concept of 'career' developed by Everett Hughes and Howard Becker – what the French refer to as *la sociologie des carrières militantes*, the sociology of activist careers (Fillieule, 2001, 2005) and which constitutes a renewed 'interactionist paradigm' in social movement studies (Siméant & Sawicki, 2009) – are particularly well suited to proposing a theoretical account of disengagement processes. This theoretical account enables the re-situation of disengagement processes diachronically, within the totality of individual life histories, and helps to contextualize individual exits synchronically at both meso/organizational and macro levels, rejecting the scholastic opposition between agency and structure.

Finally, we argue that any understanding of disengagement processes must take into account the dialectic between the dispositions and motives of actors, and their structural positions. In particular, our model is predicated on an irreducible heterogeneity of individual disengagement processes, which depends on factors as diverse as primary and secondary political socialization, the strength of 'role taking' and dependence on the activist group, the existence or not of reconversion opportunities, and political context.

The Interactionist Legacy: Transformation of Identities and Social Subworlds

Over the last dozen years or so, the sociology of activism has been revitalized by the conception of activism as a long-lasting social activity articulated by phases of joining, commitment, and defection. This has given rise to the notion of ‘activist career’, drawing directly on the work of Everett Hughes (1958) and Howard Becker (1960, 1966), but also on Hans Gerth and Charles Wright Mills (1954), or Anselm Strauss (1959).

The notion of career developed by Everett Hughes casts the stages of access to and exercise of a profession as a series of objective changes of position and an associated series of subjective upheavals. As Howard Becker stresses, quoting Hughes, the concept of career comes back to two dimensions:

In its objective dimension, a career is ‘a series of statuses and clearly defined offices ... typical sequences of position, achievement, responsibility, and even of adventure ... Subjectively, a career is the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him’. (Hughes, 1937, pp. 409–410 in Becker, 1966, p. 102)

The concept of career allows us to focus on the process and permanent dialectic between individual history, social institutions and, more generally, context. The outcome is less a case of predicting a state (activism, disengagement, and so on) than of rebuilding

a sequence of steps, of changes in the individual’s behavior and perspectives, in order to understand the phenomenon. Each step requires explanation, and what may operate as a cause at one step in the sequence may be of negligible importance at another step [...] In a sense, each explanation constitutes a necessary cause of the behavior [...] The explanation of each step is thus part of the explanation of the resulting behaviour. (Becker, 1966, p. 23)¹

A career approach consequently involves considering the two essential dimensions of social identity: from a diachronic perspective, the *transformation of identities* and the social mechanisms at work in these transformations; and from a synchronic perspective, the *plurality of sites in which social actors may be involved*.

In *Mirrors and Masks* (1959), Strauss analyses the manner in which identities are liable to change permanently, as a function of modifications of the social structure and actors’ successive positions in this structure, with all that this means for different stages of actor biography in terms of the subjective interpretation of the changes experienced. Strauss thus analyses what he calls ‘institutionalized changes’ (changes in status provoked, for example, by entrance into the workforce, marriage, etc.) and ‘biographical accidents’ (crises, failures, losses, and so forth), placing particular emphasis on the processes of ‘disidentification’ and ‘initiation’ that may produce lasting and irreversible changes in identity, such as in representations, attitudes, and motives.

In Strauss’s and the continuation of Mead’s work (1934), plurality refers to the idea that social actors are embedded in multiple social worlds and subworlds that may on occasion conflict, and is a fundamental characteristic of contemporary social life. Activists are also individuals, inserted in a multiplicity of life-spheres and therefore permanently subjected

to the obligation to submit to different norms, rules and logics that, at times, may conflict. In other words, the political memberships of individuals are in tension with the other involvements of the same individuals (Gottraux, 2002, p. 182).

Owing to this plurality of social worlds, individuals are governed by heterogeneous and sometimes even contradictory principles of socialization that they internalize. We may thus hypothesize that each actor incorporates a multiplicity of behaviour patterns and habits, organized as repertoires, and relevant social contexts that the actor learns to distinguish through the totality of previous socializing experiences (see also Passy & Giugni, 2000, and Lahire, 2001, for an almost similar conception).

A Configurational Approach to Social Characteristics and Dispositions

The link between social contexts and systems of disposition significantly reduces the value of analyses of the determinants of commitment or disengagement based on multivariate treatments which correlate the dependent variable with individuals' social characteristics, from responses to questionnaires or structured interviews. Indeed, any social characteristic (gender, age, income level, professional status and so on) lacks explanatory capacity if we do not resituate it in the 'configuration' (in the sense articulated by Elias) in which it develops and contributes to the creation of certain dispositions. In other words, the social characteristics of individuals are ambivalent. As Bargel points out (2008), 'their value (and thus their explanatory power) is established and varies in conjunction with the system of competitive interrelations in which they are found'. This system may be interpreted at three levels.

First, *at the level of the expanded political field*, understood as the widest possible competitive system. Depending on the social valuation, at a particular point in time and in a particular sector, of a particular model of a 'good activist', certain social characteristics and aptitudes will be devalued or, on the contrary, privileged. We know that the social value of a cause, as well as the ways of contributing to it, may vary as a function of transformations of the context in which it is found. Mobilizing against AIDS at the start of the epidemic, for example, does not have the same social significance as mobilizing in the 1990s, the AIDS cause having acquired by the end of the 1980s a strong legitimacy increasingly detached from homophobic stigmatization. In the initial phase of the struggle, only those directly affected, emotionally or physically, were mobilized (principally, in effect, gay men); while in the institutionalization phase, there is a significant mobilization of heterosexual women, investing themselves, in classic gendered terms, in a logic of *care*.

Second, there is *the micro level of biography*. As noted above, it is in the succession of encounters of social characteristics and variable socialization contexts that aptitudes are created. For example, gender is not *in itself* an explanatory variable with respect to politics and commitment, even if statistical correlations always stress the gap in the levels and modes of commitment of men and women. However, understanding the effects of gendered belonging in various social subworlds, at various biographical stages, allows us to pinpoint the gendered dimension of repertoires of patterns of perception and habits (Fillieule, 2009).

Third, the system of competitive interrelations must also be observed *at the meso level of organizations*. This means understanding how organizations, structurally, socially and politically, select and orient individual activities, in order to grasp how they differentially relate to their members' social attributes. Kanter (1968) confirms this when she places

commitment at the intersection of organizational requirements and individual experiences, necessitating consideration of the logics of commitment, keeping in mind the social context of practical involvement.

Within the interactionist framework, Hans Gerth and Charles Wright Mills offer a conceptual toolkit that allows us to examine the relationships between individuals and institutions (Gerth & Wright Mills, 1954, pp. 165–191). A number of consequences follow. First, activist commitment is the product of an adjustment between the supply and demand of activism. Above all, the literature has noted the supply of activism only in terms of the diversity of available causes at any given point in time. But this also brings us to the manner in which groups encourage or discourage individual commitment through their public image, and through selection processes that erect barriers to entry to the group, or create filters which guide newcomers towards the exit, or towards some tasks and roles rather than others.

As, like Gerth and Wright Mills, we believe that an institution is an organization with distinct hierarchical roles to which members must conform, it is reasonable to hold that the internalization of such roles occurs through learning mechanisms and secondary socialization, the strength of which needs to be studied – from conversion and alternation, in the sense used by Berger and Luckmann (1966), to strategic and limited adaptations – along with durability, from the viewpoint of biographical consequences in all spheres of life.

This model places the Goffmanian notion of ‘moral career’ at the centre of the analysis of activism. This refers, on the one hand, to *the selection of people* (to the incentives and barriers to joining, and the orientations of activities) and on the other to *organizational modelling*, or the multiple socializing effects of activism, themselves in part determined by organizational rules and modes of operation, understood as a set of constraints (status, proposed or reserved activities, leadership, and so on). Let us pause to consider these two dimensions.

Selection, Secondary Socialization, and Organizational Modelling

According to Gerth and Wright Mills (1954, p. 165), ‘institutions select and eject their members as a function of a great variety of formal rules and informal codes. The formal criteria allowing the assumption or abandonment of a role may be specific criteria such as age, sex, or state of health.’ In the domain of protest activities, social characteristics may affect selection in a number of ways, such as orienting people towards specific groups, and thus erecting a *de facto* barrier to entering other groups. The selection may also operate in a much less formal but more insidious manner as a function of explicit or implicit attributions. Here, Doug McAdam cites the gendered dimensions of recruitment by the SNCC of white student volunteers for the ‘Freedom Summer’ of 1964 (McAdam, 1992). McAdam demonstrates that applications from women were strongly discouraged due to both racist and sexist stereotypes. Where women nonetheless persisted in their desire to be involved, recruiters almost systematically excluded those who would not limit themselves to tasks considered feminine.

Voluntary involvement in AIDS vaccine trials provides another example in a very different domain. Here, we have been able to demonstrate (Fillieule *et al.*, 2008), through a sophisticated analytical approach to recruitment by the group of experts in charge of building the volunteer network, that stereotypes – in this case, of gender and class – governing the selection of individuals operated unconsciously (without being any

less effective). Recruitment did not set explicit discriminatory criteria linked to social class or gender; yet a lexicometric analysis of the initial letters of motivation sent by candidates reveals that the first stage of selection is in part based on the relative exclusion of women and working-class candidates. Exclusion linked to class is explained easily enough, since the motivation letter highlighted the unequal linguistic abilities of candidates. Gendered differentiation is more subtle. Here, individuals were more likely to be eliminated at this stage where they expressed their 'motivation' in a very personal register, referring almost exclusively to their experience and emotional concern. This group comprises primarily women and people from working-class backgrounds, who are traditionally more used to speaking for themselves than in the name of universal principles or abstract imperatives. In contrast, the group of people most able to rationalize motivation in general terms include, not surprisingly, a large proportion of men and professionals who combine economic and cultural capital. It is this group that statistically has a greater chance of passing successfully through each stage of the recruitment process.

Beyond selection mechanisms, organizations also do a lot of work in socializing their members, understood as *role taking*, which allows individuals to identify the different roles they face and correctly fulfil their customary tasks. This secondary socialization can, at times, assume the form of *explicit* inculcations, the goal of which is to homogenize activists' categories of thought and their way of acting within and in the name of the organization. Most of the time, know-how and activist wisdom amounts to a 'practical sense', what Bourdieu refers to as 'the anticipated adjustment to the requirements of a field, what the language of sports calls the "sense of the game" (like "sense of place", "the art of anticipation", etc.)', acquired over the course of a 'long dialectical process, often described as a "vocation", by which "we make ourselves" according to what is making us and we "choose" that by which we are "chosen"' (Bourdieu, 1980, pp. 111–112). This process takes place outside of our conscious awareness.

If, to return to Gerth and Wright Mills (1954, p. 173), an institution 'leaves its mark' on social actors who are part of it 'by modifying their external conduct as well as their private life', then we need to examine both the content and the methods of the process of institutional socialization. Three dimensions may be distinguished: the acquisition of 'know-how' and 'wisdom' (*resources*); a vision of the world (*ideology*); and the restructuring of sociability networks in relation to the construction of individual and collective identities (*social networks and identities*). It is at these three levels that we may discern factors explaining disengagement.

Resources

Participation in a protest group may enable the acquisition of multiple resources, which obviously vary as a function of the social resources acquired in other life-spheres and prior to commitment, and which we will refer to by the generic term *rewards* and will define as the *material or symbolic benefits individuals think they receive from their commitment*. Four main characteristics of rewards must be stressed. First, rewards include both objective and subjective dimensions; in other words, they are not always perceived by actors. Second, they may be both expected prior to commitment and pursued afterwards, but also, and perhaps especially for 'grassroots' activists who do not always expect to acquire significant and tangible rewards, they may be discovered in the course of action, produced in some way by the activist experience. Third, costs are often confused with

benefits (Hirschman, 1983, p. 151). Fourth, rewards vary according to the evolution of contexts and individual experiences.

Attention to the variability of rewards is critical to understanding disengagement processes. Why, at this or that stage of the journey, does the commitment to activism become possible? Under what conditions are the benefits drawn from this commitment maintained and why are they sometimes depleted? These are questions we may hope to answer if we keep in mind what we have established previously: individuals are involved in a number of social spaces and the perceived returns from these different life-spheres are themselves variable. In each of these spaces, individuals are led to adopt specific roles in which they are more or less 'stuck', and which define various contexts of socialization. This may be especially observed if we note the importance of gendered social relationships, which contribute to determining assigned role expectations, as well as shaping the perceptions of reality and the relationship to politics. Individual identity is the product of the process of adjustment to these roles. From this it follows that any exit from the role may potentially bring about dramatic identity renegotiations. Further, the structure of identity in turn has effects on the possibilities of exiting the role and the manner in which other roles will eventually be assumed. This identity dimension is particularly clear for individuals who are, in the proper sense, 'devoted' to the activist organization, to which they often feel they owe everything. Significant changes may intervene in different spheres of life, constituting bifurcations in which certain roles are redistributed and identities transformed. From this perspective, socialization of the individual is viewed as a continuous process, notably under the effect of activism.

These remarks suggest that analysis of the logic of disengagement must proceed through identification, in different life-spheres, of *critical moments* that can translate into a new valuation of the expected rewards, knowing that their value in a sphere co-varies with the value attributed to them in all other spheres. For example, leaving the professional world, whether due to retirement or the loss of employment, may unleash the desire to commit to a social or political association that allows the individual to rediscover a 'social purpose' and new forms of responsibility.

This draws attention to a certain deficiency in 'classic' explanations of diminishing rewards which refer only to the evolution of activist organizations, such as the routinization and institutionalization of activities or loss of faith in the triumph of the cause. By excluding everything not directly related to the area of protest activities (which typically are not further explored), we cannot, for example, take into account individual defections or the crumbling of groups in contexts where there is no change in the functioning of the organization and the economy of rewards on offer. The literature provides numerous examples where commitment or disengagement corresponds almost exactly to increases or decreases in the rewards gained in the professional or emotional lives of activists (Rupp & Taylor, 1987).

How the social variability of rewards is produced needs also to be investigated. Beyond such immediately obvious reasons as, say, the loss of work, the end of a relationship, entry into the workforce or becoming part of a couple, we need to add a range of factors which are not directly and personally related to the lives of individual activists. This is because the value accorded to rewards in a particular life-sphere is also related to the value that other beneficiaries and society as a whole accord them. For example, the valuation of political activism depends primarily on the social value placed on political activities. Equally, the social value of a cause, as well as ways of contributing to it, may vary as a

function of transformations of the context in which it occurs. The example of the growing success of counter-globalization mobilizations demonstrates the rising social value of certain causes and subsequent effects in terms of attractiveness (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2004; Sommier *et al.*, 2007).

Finally, we need to understand how and according to what logic individuals manage their commitment once the rewards it brings are exhausted; whether through psychological repression, distancing from or attempts to transform their role, or defection. It is at this point that the strength of the dependence on the role and the existence of *lateral possibilities*, determined notably by the degree of autonomy of life-spheres, describe a world of constraints making defection easier or more difficult. And it is as much the socializing force of the role that one is leaving as the manner in which one leaves, once the departure is finalized or even many years later, that best reflects the shift in trajectories and the degree to which the biographical consequences of commitment are sustained.

Ideology

Socialization within organizations may also bear on the internalization of a vision of the world, of the place of the group in this world and one's place in this group (the importance of this socialization process may be expected to vary as a function of the type of group investigated). Activist groups are, indeed, institutions governed by both 'written and unwritten rules, transmitting habits and belief systems, largely internalized by activists and leaders' (Lefebvre & Sawicki, 2006, pp. 42–43). Just as with the acquisition of know-how and wisdom, the acquisition of a vision of the world happens most often through implicit processes, as Suaud and Viet-Depaule's analysis of French worker-priests reveals (2004, p. 199).

Ethnographic observation of everyday activist practices allows us to see how institutions legitimate certain types of discourse and practices to the detriment of others, and how, faced with these constraints, members do not all have the same resources to modify or renew the dominant ideologies. Here, institutional resources (such as the exercise of a formal or informal leadership function, a proximity to or membership of leadership circles, and an activist legitimacy based on seniority or 'battle scars'), as well as those beyond the rewards offered by the organization (expert ability or moral authority linked, for example, to a profession such as pastor, university scholar, elected politician, and so on), determine the capacity to resist and eventually redefine the ideologies imposed by the organization.

In order, therefore, for us to understand disengagement, we must also examine the erosion of this aspect of activist socialization. How do we explain the weakening of the organization's ideological power, which may lead to a lessening of the sacrifices one is willing to make for the cause? Here we may distinguish two possible levels of determination.

On the one hand, the strength of beliefs may decline due to a *change of political climate*, whether explained by a theory of recurrent social cycles or long-term trends (Turner, 1969; Gusfield, 1979; Hirschman, 1983, 1995), or by the historical exhaustion of a model of commitment, or even by a backlash and a return to order. For example, Whalen & Flacks (1989) claim that the primary cause of the ebb of activism in the 1960s was a change in the political climate. After a time, belief in the imminence of the revolution, the apocalyptic vision of the future, loses its value. The Vietnam War was over and the repression of leftist movements intensified. Such a context led to a rethinking of the chances of success of the

revolutionary project, as well as the cost of commitment. As a result, for young activists the question of the 'personal versus the political' became more important than any other considerations (Whalen & Flacks, 1989, p. 119; see also, on the backlash to feminism, Rupp & Taylor, 1987; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Reger, 2005). In the same way, the success rather than the decline of a movement may serve to dissolve ideological convictions. Indeed, the satisfaction of demands, the eventual institutionalization of movements through their integration into the inner circles of state decision making, may lead to a revision of priorities and demobilization. The emergence of state feminism is a good example of such mechanisms (Katzenstein, 1998).

On the other hand, the loss of ideological conviction may also be produced by a *rupture of the consensus* within a movement, the appearance of factions, and eventually of splits. The causes may vary and, on this point, social psychology has produced a great number of fascinating results, especially from the study of small groups showing which conditions foster group loyalty. For example, Kanter's work presents a typology of elements liable to boost commitment (1968, 1972). In her analysis, the maintenance of attachment is based on the twin mechanisms of *sacrifice* and *investment*: the more one had to sacrifice to enter the group and remain a member, the higher the cost of defection. The cost of activism somehow determines the price. Like Hirschman, Kanter's approach is inspired by the concept of cognitive dissonance to stress the psychic dimension of the cost: the more intense the efforts, the more difficult it is to recognize the futility of these efforts. The notion of investment, for its part, brings us back to the existence of alternatives. The more individuals are caught in a system which is the sole distributor of rewards and costs, the more they remain committed (Kanter, 1968, p. 506).

Social Networks and Identities

Socialization within organizations also occurs through the degree of redistribution of activists' relationship networks, in the activist sphere, as well as in other social subworlds. Above all, belonging to an organization is belonging to a group, with its borders and world of meaning, participating in its *illusio*; it is interacting with other members, with varying degrees of regularity; therefore, to belong is to construct a place or an identity for oneself. Here, too, social psychological research is invaluable in understanding the mechanisms by which the *cohesion* of a group is assured. This notion designates the affective links between individuals and emotional attachment. Two mechanisms are at play in this case: renunciation and communion (Kanter, 1968, 1972). Renunciation refers to a withdrawal from all social relationships outside the group, with the goal of ensuring a maximum of internal cohesion (see also Bittner, 1963; Coser, 1974). Communion, the *we feeling*, is characteristic of the establishment of a unanimity-exclusion dialectic. Here, we find Turner's and Killian's very Durkheimian observations with respect to the importance of camaraderie and the role of ceremonies and rituals in the cohesion of social movements (1957, pp. 399, 442). Cohesion is also assured through means and techniques of control, from the most subtle to the most extreme, such as mortification and denial. Mortification brings us back to renunciation of one's desires and interests, to the abandonment of a private identity in favour of identification with a group, which Goffman develops in his discussion of the total institution based on the notion of 'mortification of the self'. Denial, for its part, brings us back to unconditional dedication to an authority, to members' internalization of what the group says and wants.

Overall, it is the manner in which groups structure sociability relations, both internally and externally, as much as the placement of individuals in the group, that suggests a series of important factors underpinning the logics of disengagement. For example, McPherson and his team have produced interesting results on sociability networks, on their role in the maintenance of commitment and on the role of intragroup relations in defection (McPherson, 1981, 1983; McPherson *et al.*, 1992; Popielarz & McPherson, 1995; Cress *et al.*, 1997). In particular, they show that individuals involved in multiple networks are more liable to leave organizations (*niche overlap hypothesis*), which brings us back to the 'spheres of life'. They also show that voluntary associations lose members whose profile is atypical faster than more typical volunteers (*niche edge hypothesis*). This finding is consistent with Kanter's remarks that, when groups are underrepresented in an organization, they experience tensions (stress, and stereotypes) and are generally excluded from informal friendship networks formed in the course of activities. Overall, then, individual disengagement is often not distinguishable from observable clashes between successive generations of activists (Gusfield, 1957, 1963; Taylor, 1989; Popielarz & McPherson, 1995; Whittier, 1995, 1997; Fillieule & Broqua, 2000, 2005).

In this respect, one should notice that it is not always the longest standing members who find themselves marginalized when the composition of the collective organization changes. Many accounts show how, faced with the arrival of new members, long-time activists may, through various voluntary and involuntary means, 'close ranks' and make it difficult for newcomers to integrate. In research on internal decision-making procedures in American social movements, Polletta (2002) provides a number of examples of this. She especially shows how the women's liberation movement, based on an internal structure stressing sisterhood and rejecting explicit internal hierarchy, placed numerous barriers to the entry of women anxious to join the group, to such an extent that generational renewal was rendered almost impossible (Polletta, 2002, pp. 151, 154; see also Whittier (1995) on the feminist movement in Columbus).

Ultimately, these examples lead us to emphasize the importance of generational approaches in the analysis of the disengagement process, precisely because they are concerned with various activist cohorts. They also allow us to grasp the full significance of the duplications and reversals which generate a sense of malaise and lead to defection, and to recognize the role of institutional selection strategies.

Conclusion

Applied to political commitment, the notion of career allows us to understand how, at each biographical stage, the attitudes and behaviours of activists are determined by past attitudes and behaviours, which in turn condition the range of future possibilities, thus resituating commitment across the entire life cycle. The concept of career therefore enables us to combine questions of the predisposition to and operationalization of activism, of differentiated and variable forms of engagement over time, of the multiplicity of engagements across the life cycle, and of the withdrawal and extension of commitment.

More broadly, this perspective offers a powerful means for narrowing the disparity between individual trajectories, institutions and social structures, enabling us to investigate the permanent interactions between these three levels of reality. Ultimately, it

also invites us to set aside the over-dominant ‘tyranny of causal explanation’ in social sciences and to favour instead a *configurational* approach, to adopt Eliasian terms. The question is less here of understanding why people volunteer in a cause or disengage after a while, but how they do behave when they are committed to a cause, in particular situations. We have argued that this can be done at three interrelated levels: the expanded political field, which allows us to study the social valuation of given dispositions and activities at certain moments in time; the micro level of biographies, where we can study socialization processes; and the level of organizations, which enables us to focus on how institutions implicitly or explicitly select individuals (which refers to the interactionist concept of *role taking*) and leave their mark on their members through institutional socialization, i.e. the acquisition of resources, ideological formation, the restructuring of sociability networks and the modelling of collective identities.

Logically, such a configurational approach does not aim to offer a definitive conclusion about which factors might universally determine disengagement. Our approach is more to be understood as an attempt to bring out a certain number of characteristics that may be at work in a number of cases. Let us conclude by summarizing these characteristics.

On the one hand, there is the importance of specific contexts and the transformations in the structure of commitment opportunities. The observable differences between cohorts or generations of activists, and thus the elements which influence commitment and disengagement, may be attributable to a range of characteristics: to external factors, including the state of the commitment offer, the nature of state intervention (or the lack of it) in the public policy domain addressed by the mobilized network, and the public image of the cause. Internal factors, on the other hand, concern the extent of the development of the mobilized network (territorial spread and numerical growth, and therefore the extent of recruitment networks through people that know other people), the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity of the group in terms of social-biological and ideological characteristics (which also constrain the nature and range of acquaintance networks), and finally the degree of ‘openness’ of the groupings studied (the voluntary recruitment policy, ways of integrating newcomers into the group, and so on).

On the other hand, we have the importance of ‘institutionalized changes’ and ‘biographical ruptures’ to different career stages. The pivotal nature of the plurality of life-spheres underlines that activist organizations are also comprised of individuals who are inserted in a variety of social space locations. Activists are thus permanently subject to the obligation to comply with different norms, rules and logic, which may potentially be in conflict. These different levels of experience may proceed simultaneously or successively; for the observer, the difficulty lies in studying the succession of events within each order of experience at the same time (the structure of each order) and the influence of each level on all the others, and, consequently, of course, in studying the dependent variable, activist commitment.

Finally, our analysis stresses the importance of ‘moral career’, the combination of the effects of selection and organizational modelling on the long-term commitment of individuals, in the orientation of their activities within the group, and in the forms (the practical modalities and the reasons they cite) that eventual disengagement will assume. This last point stresses the great importance of institutional socialization and of its libidinal dimension, a dimension that until recently has been stressed by only a few studies (e.g. Coser, 1974; McAdam, 1988; Echols, 1989; Jasper, 1998; Goodwin, 1997, 2001).

Note

1. It is this process that Becker uses in his celebrated analysis of the deviant career of marijuana smokers. His procedure was also borrowed recently to analyse phenomena as diverse as the process of uncoupling (Vaughan, 1986), male to female transgenering (Ekins, 1997), and anorexia (Darmon, 2003).

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