

Activists' Trajectories in Space and Time

An Introduction

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One can say that men go through a process as one says too that the wind is blowing, as if the wind were separate from its blowing, as if a wind could exist which did not blow.

N. Elias *Los Der Menschen*, 1987

No social study that does not come back to the problem of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey.

C. Wright Mills *The Sociological Imagination*, 1959

In 2011, *Time* magazine chose “The Protester” as its Person of the Year. And there is no doubt that the world is experiencing an unprecedented wave of dissent. In the course of 2012, “The Protester” voiced opposition to authoritarian leaders, first in Tunisia, and then in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain. “The Protester” in Greece and in Spain (the *Indignados*), but also the Occupy Wall Street protester in the United States, were struggling with a floundering economy. “The Protester” expressed anger over what were believed to be rigged elections in countries as diverse as Russia, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, apart some notable exceptions to which we will come back later, individual actors are largely absent from social movements research, which has mainly looked at macro processes and social movement organizations in the framework of structural analysis. As Jasper states (1997:214):

Most protestors are compelled by a combination of motivations, compulsions, and desires, some of them conscious and others not. Simple models of human

motivation, whether rationalist or crowd-based, miss the lion's share of reality. So do theories that look for the motivations of entire protest movements rather than those of the individuals who compose them. The biographical dimension of protest cries out for exploration.

There are at least five explanations for the failure of the literature to address this. First, activism has been less studied for itself than through the analysis of organizations that frame it. This leads naturally to reasoning in terms of stock rather than flow. Second, microsociological approaches to behavior, except for their economicist version of rational choice theory, have long been discarded in the name of the struggle against the paradigm of collective behavior which was considered – much beyond reasonable suspicions – as giving too much centrality to notions such as “frustration.” Third, there is a scarcity of sources that can prove useful in understanding the activist flow. By definition, ex-activists are no longer present at the time of the investigation and, very often, organizations do not retain records of members that would allow researchers to track those no longer active or, if they do, they usually do not make them readily available to researchers. D. McAdam would not have produced his masterpiece without the availability of the long questionnaires filled by the Freedom Summer's applicants. Fourth, there is the difficulty of moving from static approaches to a true processual perspective, which, in this particular case, is based on setting up longitudinal studies, whether prospective or retrospective (Fillieule, 2001). Finally, the overdominant structuralist framework of social movement research (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999) is largely responsible for the imbalance between research on recruitment by movements and that studying the effect of the institution on activists. Generally speaking, political behavior or participation in political organizations is usually conceived of as a dependent rather than an independent variable.

Notwithstanding, our book situates itself in the theoretical framework of social movement theory, as improved by the founding research of Tilly and Tarrow, with their strong historical attention to protest cycles and contentious performances. A major source of inspiration comes from McAdam's *Freedom Summer* (1988), a path-breaking case-study that highlights the lasting impact of high risk activism, and its effects on the matrimonial, political, and professional trajectories of ex-activists. It shows how such experiences predispose to remain politically committed, to behave as a social innovator. Two other strong landmarks are Della Porta's (1995) work on violent activism in Germany and Italy in the

1960s–1970s, and the work of the Italian historian Passerini (1996), who studied the Italian activists of the sixties with a qualitative and self-reflexive approach. The latter, with its attention to the role of emotions, affects, and beliefs, also invite us to borrow from research by Jasper (1997) and Polletta (1998a, b). The concepts of “micro-cohort” and “abeyance structure,” respectively coined by Whittier (1995) and Taylor (1989), would be other sources of inspiration. The first showing how joining a movement two, four, or six years after its taking off often means experiencing different political socializations, facing different stakes, and living different experiences of the connection between the private and the political. The second allowing theorizing of the dynamics of mobilization, de-mobilization, and re-mobilization of activists networks along time.

More recently, promising perspectives have been opened up for future research by a less structuralist and movement-centric approach to political action: on one hand, the expansion of the analytical focus to actors other than social movement organizations in their relations to the state; and, on the other hand, renewed interest in the microfoundations of collective action. Here, the propositions recently advanced by some scholars, with a new conceptualization of the space of social movements (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; McAdam & Schaffer-Boudet, 2012) and the effects of individual social engagement from a strategic perspective (Jasper, 2006; Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015), are particularly useful in offering the means to adopt a more sociological approach to protest mobilization, in particular, moving away from a restricted perspective confined to a narrow subdisciplinary field.

The present volume is consistent with this emerging return of sociological analysis in social movement theory in exploring the path-breaking direction of the personal and biographical consequences of protest activity, i.e. “effects on the life course of individuals who have participated in movement activities, effects that are at least in part due to involvement in those activities” (Fillieule, 2013).

We propose an approach of political unrest by focusing on actors. It examines political involvements’ sociobiographical effects, that is, ways in which political commitment generates or modifies dispositions to act, think, and perceive, either consistent with or in contrast to the results of previous socialization. It is from the angle of how, in various contexts, trajectories are formed that we propose to broach this question and to determine what involvement leads to rather than, from a more conventional perspective, what produces involvement.

CHALLENGING THEORETICAL AND DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

Activists Forever situates itself at the intersection of a series of academic questions, foremost of which is the literature on movement outcomes (Giugni, 1998, 2008; Bosi, Giugni, & Uba 2016) and the biographical consequences of activism (McAdam, 1999; Giugni, 2007; Béchir-Ayari, 2009; Fillieule, 2009) but also political socialization along the life course and the question of political participation, which implies exploring the understudied links between social movements and parties (Kitschelt, 1993; Goldstone, 2003). Those questions are first and foremost dealt with in the context of Western democracies (see Viterna, 2013 for an exception), when in this book we also address them under nondemocratic regimes.¹ Let us expose briefly how three sub-fields of the literature interact here, before developing our objectives in this book.

Biographical Consequences of Activism

Literature on the consequences of social movements and protest activities addresses three types of consequences: political, biographical, and cultural (Bosi & Uba, 2009). To date, political consequences (that is mainly policy outcomes) have received the lion's share, the biographical consequences of activism remaining dramatically under developed, except for three empirical domains that have been quite well explored, paving the way for future research (see McAdam 1999; Fillieule 2005, 2009; Giugni 2007 for reviews).

¹ From that point of view, the book is also a contribution to the sociology of authoritarianism and transition to democracy. Literature on authoritarian regimes and democratization is characterized by a plurality of paradigms: deterministic, focused on cultural, social, and economic “prerequisites”; diffusionistic, focused on external/international factors (Torfason & Ingram, 2010) and transitological. This last paradigm, loosely embedded in a rational choice epistemology, analyzes democratization processes as a mode of conflict regulation and resource redistribution among elites (O'Donnell et al., 1986). Its pragmatism and its strategist character have widely inspired NGOs promoting democracy, but are not without scientific shortcomings (Carothers, 2004): Not all the transitions are moving toward democratization; the distinction between three successive sequences (opening, breakdown, consolidation) is not automatic; elections do not only help to deepen political participation and accountability; they can also contribute to an “autocratization” process (Lindberg, 2009). Following a new generation of research (Camau & Massardier, 2009), we propose to develop this approach through devoting greater attention to how individuals experience the processes of hybridization, social dynamics, and “concrete historical situations” (Jaffrelot, 2000).

A first flow of research deals with the study of black student activism in the civil rights and black power movements and of riot participants (Sears & McConahay, 1973; Gurin & Epps, 1975). It explores environmental influences as well as the impact of activism on political ideology and adult resocialization, suggesting that the riots themselves appeared to have resocialized not only the direct participants but those who only vicariously experienced them; a result that has recently been confirmed by studies on not-so-committed participants (Sherkat & Blocker, 1997; Van Dyke et al., 2000). But the value of this research lies primarily in analyzing how movements accomplish their socializing role, teaching young blacks to question the overall white system of domination through specific mechanisms and set ups like mass meeting, workshops, and citizen and freedom schools.

A second family of research, on the future of 1960s American activists, has addressed the question of the biographical consequences of social movement participation on the life course, based on a series of follow-up studies of former movement participants, suggesting that activism had a strong effect both on political attitudes and behaviors, as well as on personal lives of the subjects. Concerning the political life, former activists had continued to espouse leftist political attitudes; had continued to define themselves as “liberal” or “radical” in political orientation; and had remained active in contemporary movements or other forms of political activity. In terms of affective life-sphere, ex-activists had been concentrated in teaching or other “helping” professions; had lower incomes than their age peers; were more likely than their age peers to have divorced, married later, or remained single; and were more likely than their age peers to have experienced an episodic or nontraditional work history (Demerath et al., 1971; Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Marwell et al., 1987; Fendrich & Lovoy, 1988; McAdam, 1988; McAdam, 1989; Whalen & Flacks, 1989). These elements allow Fendrich to analyze the ex-activists as a “generational unit,” in the Mannheimian sense, which McAdam confirms when he demonstrates that the risks associated with the Freedom Summer undoubtedly greatly contributed to making this experience “unforgettable” for participants. In other words, the eventual direction of trajectories must be related to the nature of the activist experience, the moral career of individuals very likely having been affected to some degree by the duration and intensity of their activism.

However, in addition to having a narrow focus on New Left highly committed activists of the 1960s, these studies suffer from methodological

limitations (e.g. in the small number of subjects included, the lack of a control group of non-activists, and the lack of data collected before they participated in the movement) and are less interested in the very process by which movements act as socializing agents than by its long-term effects, as measured by statistical indicators (McAdam, 1988; Whalen & Flacks, 1989 for notable exceptions).

A third and prolific direction stems from feminist research and deals with the development of a gender consciousness through the women's movement (e.g. Sapiro, 1989; Whittier, 1995; Klawiter, 2008). The reason that this movement has served as an active agent of socialization is partly due to the fact that one of its central goals was to change women's self-understanding: that is, to provide a social space in which women can consider and negotiate their social identity as women and its relationship to politics. Moreover, beyond the specific case of the women's movement, feminist research suggests that all protest movements may operate like gender workplaces. As a matter of fact, activism can play a liberating role for women in permitting them to leave the domestic universe and acquire social skills previously inaccessible to them. This is the reason why, even in movements where women are kept in positions of subjugation, mere participation can foster emancipation (Blee, 2008). Finally, it is clear that activism can generate profound and widespread socialization effects on individuals by transforming their sense of identity and politicizing the resulting social identification (McAdam, 1999; Polletta & Jasper, 2001), especially in situations where activism is repressed or criminalized as we shall see in the following section.

Political Socialization

Political socialization is more and more frequently defined as the gradual development of the individual's own particular and idiosyncratic views of the political world, the process by which a given society's norms and behavior are internalized (Sigel, 1989). This has three main theoretical consequences: primary and secondary socializations are equally important in the socializing process; it is not only family and school that are central instances of socialization but also many other institutions active in the life spheres of work, affective ties, voluntary work, and political engagements; political dimension is at play in all socialization process and doesn't correspond to a specific domain of activity or designated

institutions. However, scant attention has been paid to social movements. There are many reasons for this. As Sapiro (1989) states:

social movements are populated by adults, and only recently have socialization scholars turned their attention in any serious way to adult socialization. Moreover . . . Socialization research has been aimed at understanding why individuals do or don't participate in politics not at revealing the effects of political activity. We have rarely studied the socialization effects of explicitly political organizations.

Four basic ideas about the ways political dispositions might vary with age or life stages could summarize most of the literature. The *persistence model* suggests that the residues of preadult learning persist through life, perhaps even hardening with time. Largely assumed rather than tested directly, this model faced strong critical reviews in the 1970s and 1980s, suggesting that “the primacy principle” had been overstated and that at best, the evidence for it, such as adult retrospective accounts of their own attitudes or longitudinal studies, had been quite indirect. Long-term longitudinal studies appeared, implying that partisan tendencies change more after the preadult years than the persistent view would allow (Jennings & Niemi, 1981). Those critics gave way to the *lifelong openness model*, which suggests that dispositions have an approximately uniform potential for change at all ages and at the end, that age is irrelevant for attitude change. Unfortunately, this model has been left largely unexplored so far. The first volume on adult socialization appeared only at the end of the 1980s (Sigel, 1989). This important series of studies examines the political effects of discontinuities within adulthood, such as entering the workplace, serving in the military, immigrating to a new country, participating in a social movement, getting married, or becoming a parent. Each of these cases incorporates three elements that potentially can affect political attitudes: crystallization of an individual's own unique identity; assumption of new roles; and dealing with the unanticipated demands of adulthood. This trend of research has been particularly convincing in stressing the fact that neither childhood nor adolescence adequately prepare mature adults for all the contingencies with which they have to cope over their lifetimes. Hence the necessity to adopt a lifespan perspective that takes into account the impact that individual-level events as well as macro-level ones have on the maintenance, modification, or abandonment of values and orientations to which the individual may have subscribed at an earlier point in

his or her life. However, the authors agree that all these specific discontinuities also occur most often in late adolescence and early adulthood, which means that the model here is quite close to a third view, the *impressionable years model*. Three propositions are behind this model: Youth experience political life as a “fresh encounter,” in Mannheim’s words ([1928] 1952), that can seldom be replicated later; dispositions and attitudes that are subjected to strong information flows and, regularly practiced, should become stronger with age; the young may be especially open to influence because they are becoming more aware of the social and political world around them just at the life stage when they are seeking a sense of self and identity. Some important surveys support the formative years hypothesis, for example Jennings 2002, about the durability of protesters as a generation unit, but one should also think of Skocpol’s *Reflections at Mid-Career by a Woman from the Sixties*, concerning her own experience of belonging to a critical and optimistic “Uppity Generation” (Skocpol: 1988).

In this book, we contend that dispositions, attitudes, and behavior change throughout life, especially during formative years (i.e. between fifteen and twenty-five), and that some, possibly much, of early learning is of limited consequence for adult political behavior. As a consequence, not only does participation into social movements depend on political socialization, but also has to be considered as having potentially socializing effects, which means that social movement organizations and protest events have to be studied as explicit and implicit socializing agents. We argue that the almost exclusive analytic concern with the institutional consequences of political commitment and subsequent neglect of its “independent psychological effects” (Zeitlin 1967: 241) is certainly one of the blind spots of contemporary political socialization and social movement research.

That is why we propose a fresh analysis of activist socialization from a comparative perspective, seeing it as a process of individual transformation, directly or indirectly stemming from involvement, and with immediate or deferred repercussions in all domains of social existence (subsequent political commitment, of course, but also professional and affective life). Beyond the explicit learning dispensed by activist organizations, or the socializing effects of exposure to political events, it is a matter of studying the ways in which political commitment affects all individual behaviors and perceptions, in other words of considering that all participation, “however sustained or intense, has secondary socializing effects” (Fillieule, 2005: 39).

Political Participation, and Movement–Parties Interdependencies

People engage in politics in various ways, mainly by voting, signing petitions, forming political parties, joining unions, and participating in advocacy groups, social movements, and protests. So far, social scientists have conceptualized these forms of citizens' engagement as two distinct phenomena (conventional versus nonconventional participation) leading to a peculiar split between research on formal or institutional political participation and social movements. As a result, and among other dead angles, research on movement–parties connections has remained quite rare until the turn of the twenty-first century. R. Goldstone's edited book on *States, Parties and Social Movements* (2003) was among the first to attempt to mobilize comparative research “bridging institutionalized and noninstitutionalized politics.”²

Party–movement relations can be explored as a complex game of strategic interactions (Schwartz, 2010). Coordination exists in alliances, even mergers. More often ambiguity prevails in the “invasive” strategies by which movements try to colonize party structures, or parties coopt movement leaders and troops. These relations are also made of conflict when parties are the target of mobilizations – e.g. the 1968 Democrat convention in Chicago – when mud-slinging campaigns try to weaken an organization perceived as a threat, or to purge party or movement members suspected of connivance with the “enemy.”

The need for a relational approach, challenging the flaws of academic hyper-specialization is nicely illustrated in Raka Ray's (1998) study on Bombay and Calcutta. Analyzing the political spaces of these two huge Indian cities as fields, she shows how the presence (in Calcutta with the Communist Party) or absence (in Bombay) of hegemonic political forces on the left can inhibit or frame the expression of women's movements. In Calcutta they depend strongly on the economic support and ideological limitations of the Marxist hierarchy of legitimate social struggles, leaving themes such as the critique of patriarchy only to outsider social movement

² Many among the classics of political science on political parties suggest the continuities and influences between parties and movements. Rokkan's sociohistoric study of the genesis of party systems (2008) can be read as a map of the contribution of organized and mobilized interests (peasant, working-class, religious groups) to the birth of many European parties. Duverger (1951) coined the concept of “indirect party” to make sense of the peculiarities of (Catholic and social democrat) political organizations created by trade unions or voluntary associations. (see Luck & Dechezelles, 2011 for a review).

organizations, especially when they target local politicians. In Bombay, a more open field with a more balanced distribution of resources between political forces leaves more autonomy and space for critical expression to women's movements. The lesson is crystal clear. Beyond micro-specializations (in party politics, social movements, and one may add interest groups), the understanding of political process needs a connecting approach, a global vision of the actors and repertoires of political action. Which brings us back again to one of the central statements of interactionist sociology, i.e. to always situate the phenomena under study in "interactional fields," which can be defined as a mix of temporal process and social contexts.³

Questioning the intricacies and dynamics of the movement-parties interdependencies has not only a theoretical dimension. The stake is also a better understanding of the current situation of democracies (Crouch, 2004; Hay, 2004; Mastropaolo, 2012). They may question the sociological closure of politicians' recruitment among narrower and narrower "fishponds," the trend toward earlier and earlier trajectories of investment of politics as a job market. The sociology of parties highlights how the age of cartel-parties is also a time of growing distancing between parties and civil society, replacing grassroots politics by monitoring devices (polls, surveys, focus groups), substituting the continuities between voluntary associations and parties with the "hydroponic" production of ideas and policy programs by think tanks and experts. A significant part of these changes and of their consequences could be explained by the dominant trend toward disconnection between social movements and ruling parties, in the structuration of contentious politics as an autonomous political space. The reasons as well as the strength of this divorce do vary from one country to another, according to institutional variables, party systems or resource allocation systems (for the US Case: Pacewicz, 2015). When parties are soft structures, when the bargaining opportunities are real, movements may keep a strategic interest in investing part of their resources, and in activists establishing something like a garrison inside party structures. Lisa Young's comparison of the women's movement's strategies (1996) in their interaction with parties in the United States and Canada is illuminating on this point. But the main trend is not dubious. The percentage of party members keeping a serious commitment

³ On this notion of "interactional field," see Abbott, 1999: 193–222. See also Duyvendak and Fillieule, 2015 and Fillieule and Broqua, 2018.