

Decomartmentalizing the sociology of activist commitment. A critical survey of some recent trends in French research[☆]

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Abstract

This article is a critical survey of a field of research that for 20 years has been particularly active in France and is once again gaining momentum: the sociology of activist commitment. An outcome of this sociological current was the inter-actionist paradigm, *i.e.* how activists' careers are embarked upon and evolve. The notion of how to reward activism has been refined and reconsidered. Theoretical debates relating to the surfacing – or not – of “new forms” of activism – or even “new activists” – are replaced in perspective and the two challenges that confront research today stressed. Both concern the social division of labor: how to account more thoroughly for the link between macro-social transformations and individual commitment, on one hand, how organizations are instrumental in formatting activism, on the other.

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Over the past 20 years, specifically in France but also in the Anglo-Saxon world, the sociology of activist commitment (if by that we understand all forms of a durable participation in some collective action aimed at defending or promoting a cause) has sparked a spectacular revival of interest and witnessed a renewal of its interrogations. If this field of research has as yet not emerged as a distinct subfield¹ – alongside studies on collective mobilizations – it is probably not because

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¹ For which *e.g.* a specialized journal would be required.

there are not enough participants but, on the contrary, due to their extremely varied disciplinary origins: research on activist commitment is carried out in political science, sociology, history and, to a lesser degree, economics and social psychology. The very fact that productions have been numerous and multi-disciplinary incites us here to offer, not so much an exhaustive presentation as an overview of what seem to us the most stimulating lines of thought, to point out the ones we feel should be further explored. As we go along, we will be referring to our own work on activism in trade-unions, political parties and humanitarian agencies.

It must be noted from the outset however, that, on the ground, this revival has not affected every sort of activism: “moral” activism (Reynaud, 1980), sometimes known as “altruistic” (Giugni and Passy, 2001), characterizing the movements that defend the “have nots”, alter-globalization, environment protection – the humanitarian sector in the broad sense of the term – has been receiving more attention than activism in political parties, trade-unions or professional groups. Global causes have also been more attractive than strictly local ones, often looked down upon, as the rather unobtrusive expression used to qualify them, “Not in my backyard” (NIMBY), would seem to indicate². Activism connected to labor, and defending living standards in their cooperative, collective, association, union or partisan forms, seem today to have been left to historians (Dreyfus et al., 1996). By the same token, activism among reputedly “left-wing” groups has been investigated more often than activism in right-wing groups or groups claiming to be a-political (employers’ or independent unions, home-owners’ associations or associations for the defence of private schools, service clubs³ . . .). The selective manner in which research fields are chosen has thus contributed to strengthening the belief in the decline of certain forms of activism called “traditional”.

In practice, left-wing, partisan activism has remained the “notional frame of reference” in France (Fretel, 2004a, p. 77), and can be found behind much work on commitment. This has been reinforced by the fact that several political sociologists have taken their cue from the pioneering work⁴ of Bernard Pudal (Pudal, 1989; Pannetier and Pudal, 2002), and, up to a recent date, by a considerable number of studies that have appeared on Communist activism (Marijnien, 2000; Mischi, 2002; Éthuin, 2003a; Matonti, 2005; Leclercq, 2005). The background to much thinking on commitment – and the established role that the term precisely designates – is still working-class or Communist activism. The implicit (or even repressed) significance of this model (ineffectual when invoked as the imaginary “golden age” that few researchers have taken pains to analyze) has had several side effects.

When analyzing commitment generally, the reference to Communist activism contributes to fueling the tacit opposition – for which there were naturally other causes as well – between “old”, working-class activism and so-called “new activists”. That opposition blended in with the idea, supported particularly by those who endorsed post-materialism and new political culture that new fractures were developing, generating new demands (Touraine, 1969; Offe, 1997; Inglehart, 1977, 1993; Clark and Hoffmann-Martinet, 2003). The opposition is well-known, as are also its critiques (Fillieule, 1997, pp. 91–201; Collovald et al., 2002, pp. 181–187). It crystallized in the specific history of the sociology of social movements in the United States, where the very term “social

² Paradoxically, after having been at the heart of several research programs towards the end of the 1970s – particularly thanks to the CNRS program “*Observatoire du changement social*” – local associations tend to be neglected today. For a critical analysis of the use of the acronym “NIMBY” see especially Dany Trom (1999).

³ Only activism in the rural world has been the subject of in-depth studies (Maresca, 1983; Lagrave, 1987; Purseigle, 2004). On service clubs, see Sandrine Gousset’s thesis on the Rotary Club (2004).

⁴ Particularly because it stimulates reflection on the gratifications and logics underlying the link between individuals and organizations.

movement” seemed to rule out the reference to the workers’ movement. Rallying some European sociologists of social movements to the supposedly New Social Movements (NSM) during the 1970–1980 era largely contributed to popularizing the assumption, and analyzing commitment in labor unions was particularly neglected. Thus, for a long time, the sociology of unionism, concentrating on the organizations themselves, on working relations and changes in employment—which meant largely disregarding activist itineraries in favor of the crisis affecting unionism in general (Capdevielle and Mouriaux, 1972; Mouriaux, 1983, 1998; Tixier, 1992; Croisat and Labbé, 1992; Labbé, 1996; Labbé and Courtois, 2001; Andolfatto and Labbé, 2006a, 2006b)—co-existed (without much contact between them) with a sociology of commitment basically limited to the French Communist Party (*PCF*) or its satellite associations (to wit the many local monographs on the Communist milieu published in the 1980s: Fourcaut, 1986; Hastings, 1991; Retière, 1994b).

Activism in political parties other than the *PCF* was long neglected, because it did not seem to correspond to the model of total devotion to an organization. True, the image (sometimes more than the reality) of Communist activism seems to fill all the conditions of felicity required by activist commitment, *i.e.*, to elaborate on Charles Tilly’s concept, a strong “catnet”—a strong social identity backed by dense networks of informal but also organized social contacts (Tilly, 1978). It is hardly surprising that the few French studies on partisan activism in the 1990s concentrated on the far-right National Front (Lafont, 2001a, 2001b; Bruneau, 2002; Boumaza, 2002; Bizeul, 2003), whose characteristics best justified an analysis in terms of career, of reversing the stigmata, even in terms of being a “counter-society” (Venner, 2002).

Nevertheless, most of the work in the past 20 years that directly or more peripherally dealt with “activism in”⁵ social movements, focalized on recent causes, usually backed by new organizations. The most studied have thus been a series of movements which have cropped up since the 1970s—usually associations (Barthélémy, 2000; Hamidi, 2002), whether to express solidarity (Fillieule, 2001a; Giugni and Passy, 2001; Lechien, 2003) or altruism (Ravon and Raymond, 1997; Passy, 1998; Duchesne, 2003), humanitarian involvement (Dauvin and Siméant, 2002; Collovald et al., 2002; Parizot, 2003; Zunigo, 2003), or antiracism (Juhem, 1998), to defend the environment (Ollitraut, 2001, 2008), or the rights of the sick (Fillieule and Broqua, 2000; Broqua and Fillieule, 2001), to expose the mobilizations of prostitutes (Mathieu, 2001), of illegal immigrants (Siméant, 1998; Blin, 2005), homeless people (Pechu, 2001; Péchu, 2004), the unemployed (Maurer, 2001; Maurer and Pierru, 2001), or all three at once (Mouchard, 2002; Garcia, 2005), known as the “have-nots”/“withouts” (“*sans*”)—or, more recently, all the “anti-” mobilizations, such as “anti-ads” (Dubuisson-Quellier and Barrier, 2007), anti-consumerists (Micheletti, 2003; Chessel and Cochoy, 2004), or last but not least, the “alters”: “alter-globalists” or “another world is possible” movement (Agrikoliansky and Sommier, 2005; Agrikoliansky et al., 2005). In this general drift, the structural role of research funding must not be overlooked, since institutional research programs—*Plan, urbanisme, construction et architecture* (PUCA), *Mission de la recherche* (MiRe), *Agence nationale de recherches sur le sida et les hépatites virales* (ANRS)—give financial backing to the study of local associations, solidarities or environmental defence.⁶

Selecting these movements, often conceived along a “before” and “after” axis—before and after May 1968 in the French case—has paradoxically drawn scholars wishing to work on the “new”

⁵ In fact, far more often than “participating in”. It is significant that Dominique Memmi’s contribution (“*L’engagement politique*”) to a treatise on political science by Madeleine Grawitz and Jean Leca, is devoted primarily to the logics of participation, giving little space to the duration and stability of commitment (Memmi, 1985).

⁶ The two authors of the present article have had several of their research activities financed by the MiRe (1997) and the PUCA...

rather than the implicitly devalued forms of commitment (political parties and trade-unions) to the sociology of activist commitment. Recent work must be re-read in the light of the implicit temporalities they deploy, showing that their conclusions bear the stamp of the empirical cases on which they are based. The objects chosen (implicitly for their newness) have thus generated some blind spots:

- a tendency to call “new” forms of commitment that are new in name only (although that is not to be sneezed at), while some of the actors were in fact typically veteran activists who had been socialized in Catholic or secular, or yet again Communist, organizations. Giving precedence to forms of activism presented as “new” only creates confusion between new themes and new activists (Politix, 2004). Theoretical effects and the unequal appeal of social movements have led to ignoring the multiple commitments and long itineraries of many people who, sometimes at the price of considerable ideological and biographical revamping, or at least of re-considering if one is being true to oneself – never an easy job⁷ – inhabit such movements, bearers of new themes;
- since the sociology of mobilizations concentrates on rather insubstantial organizations – or organizations perceived as such by the new middle-classes and their so-called anti-hierarchical aspirations – insufficient attention has been lent to organizational effects, except through the theme of “professionalization” and the tensions it provokes. Yet, the latter is hardly unequivocal. The way organizations function and choose their participants are for the most part ignored;
- a lack of interest for the unevenly objective and institutionalized nature of activist groups has had the effect of letting connected issues lie fallow, such as the one concerning the individual capital needed or propitious for taking part in less institutionalized structures.

Over-investing in the study of the aforementioned associations also paradoxically had the boomerang effect of contributing to the very recent revival of interest in working-class organizations, trade-unions and commitment in political parties. This is possibly due not only to appeals for a return to such topics but also, perhaps, to the fact that the field was saturated with sociologists dedicated to the tiniest charitable, humanitarian, or other-worldly association, or to defending “have-nots”.

Before returning to these questions in greater detail, by insisting more particularly on the integration of levels and analytical methods, we will attempt to identify the main contributions made by recent studies, among which many share the same paradigm: interactionism.

1. A healthy renewal of the sociology of activist commitment

1.1. *The advent of the interactionist paradigm*

In France, up to the 1980s, the sociology of activist commitment more often than not boiled down to either a sociology of organizations centered on relations between activist leaders and followers (in the line of Roberto Michels’ work on the SPD), or to a quantitative sociology of activists and leaders each taken separately. Activism and socializing, and members’ rewards, with

⁷ We are thinking of the CFDT activists who must learn new, legitimate forms of involvement in a humanitarian organization connected to EDF, the “CODEV” clubs that became “*Électricité Sans Frontières*”, whereas it was their status as senior activists that predisposed them to join in the first place (Collovald et al., 2002).

the exception of Kriegel (1968), was rather postulated and idealized (Mothé, 1973; Bourdet, 1976) than described and analyzed. The same may be said of the circulation between organizations that composed the socio-political milieus or systems of action.⁸ Itineraries were noted in a less than dynamic fashion, and the mechanisms of selection and training simply ignored. Lastly, the points connecting context and variability in intensity and forms of activist investment were not really explored as such.⁹ As to research on social movements, for a long time incarnated by Alain Touraine's conceptions, they analyzed primarily the meaning of actions co-produced by scholars in group meetings – the famous “sociological intervention” – to the detriment of the sociology of actors and their interactions (Touraine, 1982).

Just as studying politicians was dominated by a social-class and social-groups perspective (Sawicki, 1999), the sociology of commitment, essentially quantitative, aimed first and foremost to characterize organizations or movements with respect to the social structure. The sociology of trade-unionists, like that of party activists, was thus a way – with the exception of Lagroye et al. (1976) – of comparing organizations and the social structure, to confirm or refute their claims of representing this or that social group. Similarly, the boom period for associations in the 1970s was basically interpreted as the materialization on the social scene of the demands of the new, salaried middle-classes and their preoccupations (lifestyle, environment, urban services...). Investing in associations was frequently seen as a way to access an established status (Apkarian-Lacout and Vergès, 1983). The dominant approaches thus tended to be holistic and give precedence to organizations (the mesological level) or social structures (macrological level). They investigated organizations or movements *per se*, not the activist phenomenon itself or its logics. Proof of this is the late date at which Mancur Olson's theses were not only translated but also discussed in France, and before that, all the literature concerning collective behaviors (Fillieule and Péchu, 1993).

As Marxist and structuralist paradigms eroded, sociologists' attention shifted towards action and interaction, as well as towards history and thus towards the dialectics between action and institution, strongly influencing the sociology of commitment and spurring its renewal in the early 1980s. First, by introducing the taboo question concerning the remuneration of commitment; then, by going further than the very narrow conception of activist socialization being either the product of one's childhood, or the main result of organizational brain-washing. At the same time, scholars became interested in the changes undergone by the various forms of commitment and action, again in a cross-sectional way. We can therefore sketchily qualify the change as the advent of an individualistic paradigm, not in the strict sense of methodological individualism, but by integrating the analysis of interactions between individuals, and between individuals and the contexts in which they act, *i.e.* an interactionist paradigm.

1.2. A fresh look at “remunerations”

Rather than espousing a completely utilitarian explanation for action, resorting to M. Olson's model of “selective incentives” was the instrument that broke with explaining commitment solely

⁸ The state of the literature compiled by Jacques Capdevielle and René Mouriaux in 1972, though it enumerates 116 volumes or articles, underlines the fragmentary nature of research on labor union activism: “paucity of data”, “silence over women's and immigrants' trade-union activism”, “absence of detailed analyses of the relations between union activism and involvement in political parties”, “nothing comparable to the work of R. Michels or Mills for French trade-unions”, ignorance concerning “the mechanisms of selection of activists”... .

⁹ Thus, the psychosociological approach to the motivations of CFDT activists by Andrée Andrieux and Jean Lignon relate them exclusively to their dissatisfaction at work (Andrieux and Lignon, 1973). For a review of research on activism in France up to the early 1980s, see François Subileau (1981).

by ideology. In France, the model was adapted in a particular manner, because it was so often used in connection with the model of the rewards of commitment (Gaxie, 1977). The idea at the time was to get rid of the most “enchanted” approaches to commitment. When the sociology of mobilization was imported into France, towards the start of the 1990s, the approach was completed by extensively referring to the notion of resources. Researchers sought to identify, in the movements, those individuals who, given their personal resources, were probably responsible for launching that approach in a truant (and improbable!) synthesis between Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology and Anglo-Saxon schools, leaving behind the most macrosocial and teleological analyses of social movements.

The fact that this part-renewal of the sociology of commitment was a byproduct of the sociology of mobilizations had significant consequences. Though often taken one for the other, the sociology of commitment and that of mobilization do not consider exactly the same questions. Due to the one-off dimension of the phenomena they observe, sociologists of mobilization do not usually ask whether activism is perpetuated and kept up: for them, it is enough that people engaged in a militant activity on a single occasion for their object to exist! Mobilizations do not rest exclusively on those who engage in them or who seem most involved: the success of a mobilization is also measured by the fact that, aside from convinced activists, actors whose activism may be short-lived¹⁰ also adhere to it.

But the massive use of the notion of “resources”, taken in a substantive more than a relational sense, and the tendency to superimpose the model of remunerations without testing its applicability, attained their limits. When Daniel Gaxie revised his 1977-paper, it was symptomatic of the need to refine a category that must be specified or risk losing all its heuristic value: “Personal interests, as distinct from collective ends [...] are the object of a collective and individual act of repression, refusal, defence and rationalization. Two pitfalls threaten the analyst: reductionism and enchantment” (Gaxie, 2005, p. 170).

Several recipes for controlling the model of remunerations have been suggested. First of all, since rewards are hardly thinkable without taking into account what it represents in a given social position, researchers set about specifying the relational dimension. Taking into account people’s socialization that makes certain forms of remuneration desirable, others less so, is obviously part of these developments. The distinction between competence and preference, developed in particular by Bernard Lahire (1998), is useful to grasp how one can have the capacity to act without having a taste for it, or vice-versa. The problem is less to decide that a given activity procures “symbolic” rewards than to understand why some militant practices procure them more than others, make them gratifying without necessarily being anticipated (Lagroye and Simeant, 2003, p. 56). “Enchantment” is a sociological enigma that cannot be circumvented by invoking actors’ bad faith. A movement’s whole emotional economy is today an open question in the sociology of social movements, if emotions are to be considered in their social context (Traïni, 2008).¹¹ Following Albert O. Hirschman (Hirschman, 1983, 1995), one’s attention must doubtless also be drawn towards over-commitment, more generally towards situations in which action becomes its own reward. James M. Jasper (1997, p. 5) declares that, compared to the ordinary medias, school, church, or politics, protest is one

¹⁰ At the heart of this sociology, “Conscientious Activists” were the means to retrieve through the window what had been expelled by the door, by working on long-term commitment. . .

¹¹ The need for a sociological accounting for emotions or objects that could be referred to psychology explains the way the work by Muriel Darmon (2003) was received, and before hers, Jacques Maître’s (1994), by French political sociologists.

of the rare situations where one has the opportunity to develop and elaborate one's own moral convictions.

Rewards, all the more, deserve to be mentioned if one adopts a sequential, explanatory model, distinguishing what speaks in favor of commitment from what may subsequently reinforce it (Siméant, 1998, p. 146), distinguishing also what was anticipated, even half-consciously – and even while denying it – from what was discovered in the act, or in what D. Gaxie (2005) called the “scotomization” of remunerations. In the same vein, censorship and the manipulation of remunerations by an organization have been discussed in several studies on the French Communist Party, among which we must especially point to those by Bernard Pudal (1989), Frédérique Matonti (2005) and Nathalie Éthuin (Éthuin, 2003a, 2003b).

Finally, attention has been paid, though again in patchy fashion, to the variation of the attractiveness of a cause, directly correlated to the credit one might derive from investing in it. We refer mainly to the work by Philippe Juhem (Juhem, 1998) and (Juhem, 2001) on the anti-racism association *SOS Racisme* or the studies by Bénédicte Havard-Duclos and Sandrine Nicourd, both on the association *Droit au logement* (DAL) (“Right to housing”) and on a literacy association (Havard-Duclos and Nicourd, 2005). Whether it sets the question of the temporal variability of remunerations or of a cause's force of attraction, a second powerful axis in recent research has been considering the time element when analyzing commitment.

1.3. *Activist careers: commitment as process*

Joining is no longer seen as the result of a linear form of socialization, with cumulative and mechanical effects that can be visualized thanks to standard statistical indicators. Just as sociologists of deviant behavior have overcome the deterministic explanations based on socializations or anomaly to account for delinquent behavior (Ogien, 1999), sociologists of commitment have turned towards the analysis of interactions presiding at the adoption and, especially, the stabilization of a line of activism, baptized, following Howard Becker (1960), “career” (Fillieule, 2001a, 2001b).

But having social characteristics in common with members of an activist group, seeing eye to eye with them on many things and sharing the same sort of habitus are still not enough to make a given individual join the group; in most cases, the mediation of close friends is necessary though also not sufficient (Snow et al., 1980; Gould, 1991; Passy, 1998; Diani and McAdam, 2003; Duriez and Sawicki, 2003). Though the existence of close ties is not always efficient or effective, biographical narratives often confirm that relatives, friends, colleagues, or even certain tutelary figures such as teachers, priests, model activist . . .) were instrumental when making the decisive step. Social psychologist Molly Andrews (1991), who collected and analyzed the biography of British Socialist activists who had been activists uninterruptedly from the 1930s to the 1980s, identified three major influences on their political awareness: intellectual stimuli (books, films, casual education), the role of very visible groups (youth organizations, trade-unions . . .) and special people. Experiencing the life of a member of the working-class is not enough to understand commitment. Since they are not very tempted to read political works, what most influences young workers at first is meeting and seeing activists, who make them read – usually the political and trade-union press – and encourage them to find reasons to become active and dare go to their first public meeting. Formal education hardly counts in developing commitment and family predispositions seem relatively unimportant. It is more often a neighbor, schoolmate or older friend from the factory-floor who plays the role of initiator. Among activists from the middle-classes, religion was often

decisive in becoming aware of injustice, there again through a minister, or leader of an association.

It is significant that the first sociologists to follow this theoretical and empirical line of investigation were specialists in the processes of religious conversions.¹² David Snow, who first worked on conversions to Buddhism, thus recalls, in a review article, that sociographic studies on the subject had for a long time limited themselves to studying the target groups, whereas only the study of interactions and social networks can explain the unequal chances such or such a member of these groups has to convert:

“When Lofland and Stark first proffered their conversion model, they included ‘cult affective bond’ and ‘intensive interaction’ as two of the seven conditions necessary for conversion. Subsequent research has substantiated the importance of these two factors. Since a positive, interpersonal tie to one or more group members can function as an information bridge, increase the credibility of appeals, and intensify the pressure to accept those appeals and corresponding practices, it is not surprising that conversion is unlikely, especially for nonseekers, in the absence of affective ties.” (Snow and Machalek, 1984: 183)

In a recent study on joining the CFDT trade-union, we could show that the role of union cronies in the process of deciding to join was still central, as well as – to a lesser extent – that of family and friends. The latter sometimes play the role of “models” or “godfathers”, through a form of socialization that operates more by impregnation and identification than by inculcating explicit messages and values (Duriez and Sawicki, 2003). While not excluding the element of chance from people’s biographies, this approach confirms the continuity between formal and informal sociabilities and the fact that newspaper or postal campaigns to get people to join are rarely followed by spontaneous engagements. Pinpointing the characteristics that fit in with activism greatly depends on social networks: *e.g.*, entering a humanitarian circuit usually implies belonging to networks that may be intended to recruit but are above all meant to “discover” humanitarian profiles (Dauvin and Siméant, 2002). The role of these persons or groups consists in convincing future activists that they fit the profile, or in giving them advice to improve their CV. These individuals – volunteers, employees of certain organizations, sometimes met by chance during a period when they were open to suggestion – are both initiators into a humanitarian career and living proof that those who aspire to do humanitarian work are already well inserted in the group. They contribute to making commitments come true, and make all the difference between those who will take the decisive step and the others. That role may also be filled by certain social authorities, such as priests who encouraged young, hesitant Catholics to enter politics and validated their potential orientation towards the UDF¹³ (Fretel, 2004b). They, like the Catholic chaplains of yesteryear (Berlivet and Sawicki, 1994), were instrumental in encouraging individuals who seemed to them particularly predisposed to be in activist spheres of action, to join.

Recent research has also insisted on the role of social networks in supporting new sociabilities and identities, contributing to making enlisting in collective action effective and lasting. When commitment means taking on a new role and a new identity (as “unionist”, “defender of the environment”, “Socialist activist”...), it reduces an individual’s possibilities, especially when it “marks” or stigmatizes, as in the case of trade-union members who, by declaring they are unionists,

¹² They refer among others to Lofland and Stark (1965).

¹³ In 1978, the *Union pour la démocratie française* made up of Liberals and Christian-Democrats, supported Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in the Presidential election.

take the risk of sacrificing part of their professional career. Commitment means adopting an identity for oneself and for others, which may be costly and painful to relinquish later on (Ebaugh, 1988). As Doug McAdam reminds us, underlining the role of “incitations to show solidarity”:

“I think most individuals act routinely to safeguard and sustain the central sources of meaning and identity in their lives. As a practical matter, this means frequently prizing solidary incentives over all others and, in particular, conforming to the behavioral dictates of those whose approval and emotional sustenance are most central to our lives and salient identities.” (McAdam, 2005, p. 57)

In that perspective, the question of the “benefits” of joining (pleasure and emotions included) can be broached from a relational standpoint, though not separating it from the question of identity for oneself and for others. On the adjustment or non-adjustment between the spheres of family, friends, professional milieu and activism depend the chances of staying committed or not, or of increasing the level of one’s commitment. Identity pressures, conflicting roles and practical impossibilities between expectations and the values inherent in each sphere may lead to having reservations about one’s commitment. On the contrary, if the latter is given value (or simply accepted) in the domestic and emotional universe, it is likely to be compatible or even interact with one’s professional career, which can reinforce one’s commitment by ricochet. In that case, one might speak of real ratchet effects: once an identity has been consented to, a stigmata reversed, there is no turning back except at great emotional cost, as Marnix Dressen demonstrated on the subject of Maoist “*établis*”, of which many endured in the factories long after the organization had been dismantled (Dressen, 1999).

Though this approach leaves room for unforeseen encounters and influential historical coincidences, it has sometimes led to explaining things as if they were unique, and to the fascination of certain scholars with biographical analyses.¹⁴ Though we don’t deny that some in-depth case studies can be very useful, either because of their extremist or atypical character (Maître, 1994; Sommier and Brugié, 2005), or on the contrary because they are archetypal (Pudal, 2005), there is a big risk of forgetting that what often allows collective mobilizations¹⁵ to succeed – *i.e.* to endure – is precisely the existence of social experiences shared by groups of individuals that, if not the same, have similar features. Jean Peneff (1979) had already emphatically stressed the point in his work on trade-union activists. Sylvain Maresca (1983) confirmed it for trade-unionists in agriculture, Bernard Pudal (1989) for the high-ranking Communist followers of Maurice Thorez in the 1930s, Christophe Charle (1994) for the Socialist intellectuals of the *Belle époque*, Frédéric Sawicki (1997) for Socialist activists, Marnix Dressen (1999) for extreme left-wing Maoist activists, Éric Agrikoliansky (2001, 2002) for activists of the League of Human Rights, etc. In fact, the mobilizations that succeed and last often count on activist groups which, if they have not always already met face to face, have experiences in common that can explain

¹⁴ This raises the methodological question of reconstituting biographies in directions very much oriented by the way activism is practiced today, running the risk of flattening out the multiplicity of individual involvements and spheres of life (Strauss, 1993, pp. 41–43; Passy, 1998). Militant organizations are necessarily composed of individuals belonging to a multitude of different places on the social checker board. Methodological proclamations against the biographical illusion do not always prevent the authors from succumbing to it. Though paying attention to the temporality of careers represented considerable progress by seeking to grasp certain aspects of the triggering, upkeep or on the contrary shriveling of commitment (McAdam, 1986, 1988, 1989), it has not always escaped very psychologically oriented forms of life stories, which roll off personal histories paying little attention to context.

¹⁵ With the exception of Fabienne Federini’s work (2006), for the way she compares what characterizes Jean Cavaillès and Jean Gosset compared to other intellectuals and academicians of their generation not engaged in the *Résistance*..

their affinities. The warnings emitted by Michel Dobry (1986) about the heterogeneous nature of mobilizations and of the motivations that trigger them are not contradictory with – and should not deter from – taking the social characteristics of those who commit themselves into account as well as the role of affinities and comparable socializations.

Thus, the considerably committed youngsters from Catholic and working-class milieus who belonged to the JOC,¹⁶ then the CFTC,¹⁷ in post-war Brittany, though a minority, were at the intersection of global and individual histories (Berlivet and Sawicki, 1994). They shared the experience of having been uprooted, of injustice due to the unequal treatment received in their Catholic schools; many had been raised by their mother, in the absence of a father often killed in the war or its aftermath. Though every individual life experience does not possess the same force and the same singular imprint, these youngsters shared the same sentiments, resentments and aspirations. They received similar training, first in an association, then in a trade-union, since at that time young Catholic chaplains were simultaneously setting out to convert the working classes. The association *Action catholique* became the receptacle for these disparate experiences by giving the young people a collective identity and treating them like “real people”. Their strong involvement in the group is equivalent to what its members get out of it on the level of their intellectual and consubstantially emotional development. In that sense, if they felt the JOC was like their second family, the explanation does not reside simply in the individual experience of a few, but because their suffering was anchored in a widely shared collective history. The “institutional program” (Dubet, 2002) of *Action catholique* thus functions thanks to the finely-tuned adjustment between individual expectations and what the group delivers, but also because the discourses and practices of the institution correspond to those of its representatives.

This example illustrates an approach uncovered in several of the studies mentioned above (Peneff, 1979; Maresca, 1983; Pudal, 1989; Sawicki, 1997; Dressen, 1999; Agrikoliansky, 2002). Individual and collective trajectories combine and together determine activist careers: it is hardly possible to analyze separately (we shall return to this) the dispositions, currents and networks of membership, and institutions (or even simply groups on their way to becoming institutions). In other words, the careful attention paid to individual logics of commitment must never let us forget that they are often part of collective trajectories, and rarely occur without having been prompted by groups or organizations. Not taking this sufficiently into account, as well as the constraints that weigh on the organizations, appears as one of two major limitations of recent work that focused on the “individual dynamics of commitment” (Fillieule and Mayer, 2001).

1.4. *New activists, new forms of activism*

The second limitation derives from the weak correlation established between the cases studied and societal changes. From that point of view, the way the work is accomplished in CRESAL¹⁸ – e.g. Jacques Ion’s synthetic review – would deserve a detailed analysis (Ion, 1997;

¹⁶ The *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne* is a Catholic movement created in the 1930s to combat de-Christianization in the working class. Many trade-unionists, leaders of associations and political groups had their first experience as activists at the JOC.

¹⁷ The *Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* is a trade-union created in 1919 in support of the Catholic Church’s social doctrine. At first mainly attractive to shop-keepers and women, it became popular among workers in the 1930s. A majority of members broke with the Church in 1964 and founded the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT), propounding Democratic socialism and self-government.

¹⁸ CRESAL: the *Centre de recherche et d’études sociologiques appliquées de la Loire* became Modys (Mondes et dynamiques des sociétés) in 2007.

Ion and Peroni, 1997; Ion, 2001; Ion et al., 2005). The “end of activism”, in its concision and systematic hypotheses, seems to have liberated a fair number of research scholars from the question of societal transformations. Instead of being a fresh start, a prelude to testing research hypotheses, the volume (Ion, 1997) did not provoke – except from its authors’ colleagues and the survey on the CODEV clubs at EDF directed by Annie Collovald et al. (2002) – any comparative and systematic research aiming to confirm or contradict its hypotheses. With “post it” commitment, the game was over: yesterday’s activists were fossilized once and for all, and today’s activists definitively freed from their institutional shackles, emancipated from all socialization. It is as if it were logical to study the first with a microscope, while the latter called mainly for a microscope (Sawicki, 2000).

It may be regrettable that J. Ion’s theories (often validated or refuted before reading) have so rarely been subjected to empirical testing. Up to what point have practices, organizations and militant identities actually changed, as Emmanuèle Reynaud suggested already in the late 1970s, concerning more limited and fragmented commitments (Reynaud, 1980, p. 280)? If mutations have taken place, how can they be explained? Can they be explained by changes in “ways of believing” (Hervieu-Leger, 1999), themselves connected to the emancipation of individuals vis-a-vis rigid institutional programs (Dubet, 1994, 2002)], or yet again by an effect intrinsic to the new, public stakes and the way politicians manage them (Callon et al., 2001)?

J. Ion’s work bears on forms of action but disregards activists’ social assets. Research linked to post-materialist currents does not go into the details of those “new middle-classes”, who, aside from a vague mention of levels of education, are defined rather haphazardly. Paul Lichterman (1996), one of the few scholars who examined the connection between changes in activist practices and activists’ social assets, by comparing (through participant observation) movements against polluted sites in contrasting socio-economic contexts, brings to light two sorts of commitment, each of which produces and reinforces specific identities. The first is communitarian commitment: Black Protestant churches whose leaders make a connection between the protection of the environment and the dignity of the black working-classes, but also white, suburban, middle-class communities, riddled by dense association and neighborhood networks. The latter, which he baptized “personalized commitment”, rests on personal autonomy and larger groups. It mobilizes first and foremost persons with higher education and few territorial roots. Both forms produce different ties as to responsibility and different definitions of the “good” activist. However, organizations based on the respect for personal autonomy are forced to constantly confirm those ties, and are consequently held to a high level of turnover which obliges them to resort to outside means (fund raising, looking for sponsors, calling on experts. . .). Paul Lichterman’s work – few can be compared to it in France – clearly demonstrates that the model of distant commitment is less connected to the nature of the cause being defended than to the social characteristics of those who defend it. It also stresses the organizational consequences of that sort of loose discipline and their impact on actual and potential activists. Resorting to professionals who pay for themselves by initiating fund-raising campaigns based on marketing and managerial techniques, seems to be one of the undesired effects of that sort of organization (Jordan and Maloney, 1997; Lefèvre, 2007), and leads in turn to hemming the activists working the field into tightly circumscribed chores, which reinforces their volatility.

The logics behind professionalization and social selection therefore interact. In the same way as the successes of political parties and trade-unions led to their institutionalization and the surfacing of a new profile of leaders and activists, the success of environmental, feminist, antiracist, humanitarian, etc. mobilizations has deeply affected organizations, all the more as their activists were, doubtless less than others, disposed to be satisfied with simply carrying out orders. What

distinguishes these organizations from trade-unions or certain originally working-class parties, or yet again from churches, is that they were not inspired to create any general training system; they counted on their members, university graduates in the vast majority, to bring them the expertise they needed.

2. Challenges facing the sociological research of commitment

This necessarily succinct presentation outlines the two main challenges that confront the sociology of commitment, which both imply harmonizing the levels of observation: the micro levels (individuals in their face-to-face interactions), meso levels (more or less institutionalized groups and organizations) and macrological levels (socio-economic, cultural and political transformations).

2.1. *Micro/macro: a social division of labor and activist investments*

In multiplying the number of case studies, of thorough and meticulous explorations of processes of socialization and joining, of remunerating activism, and by extending the analysis to what makes people drop out (Fillieule, 2005) or “convert” (Ubbiali, 1999; Willemez, 2004; Gaubert et al., 2006), considerable progress has been made in the comprehension of the individual logics that lead to activist commitment. By being attentive to the interactions between individuals, residential milieus (their significant networks, one might say) and sociopolitical contexts, recent studies have been able to put aside the ontology proper to utilitarian models and certain forms of methodological individualism. In this sense, they subscribe to a conception of action that cuts across vast areas of contemporary sociology, well synthesized for France, each with their own variations, by F. Dubet (1994) and B. Lahire (2002). These studies leave room for “individual variation”, biographical “chance occurrences” linked to encounters or accidents, to local contexts, to the dynamics produced by participating in the life of a group or organization. Taking people’s experience into account completes their other dispositions (Sawicki, 2003).

The result of paying attention to the micro level has however been to underestimate the effects of societal mutations on the cost of commitment, on activist capital, on being ready to take on a commitment and on expectations. Have been only too rarely analyzed in France the transformations that affect militant practices, whether they are social (changes in the sexual division of social work, rising levels in training, new geographic distribution of social groups, loss of consistency and growing precariousness of the working class. . .) or political (massively subcontracting public programs to associations and institutionalizing concertation and negotiation in many sectors. . .), the different levels of legitimacy for the repertoires of actions and causes, the generational (non)transmission of certain ethics or activist capitals (Matonti and Poupeau, 2004). To be more exact, approaches inspired by interactionism coexist, without much communication between them, with more macro approaches of the associations or trade-union sector, whether quantitative (Héran, 1988a, 1988b; Archambault, 1996) or centered on changes affecting the structures and functioning of associations (Sainsaulieu and Laville, 1997; Barthélémy, 2000; Prouteau, 2003) or trade-unions (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2006a).

Though much analysis of activist commitment has paid attention to individual trajectories and rightly so, it is not possible to disprove or confirm hasty generalizations on activism from studies centered on specific individuals or organizations, or by giving up the idea of considering the different sides of the global offer of activism or of phenomena that concern activist involvement more generally. It is not only a matter of pleading in favor of rehabilitating social structures (Matonti and

Poupeau, 2004, p. 7) – which individuals continue to embody anyway – but to understand what objectively and subjectively constrains individual itineraries. Works that intend to truly restore both what is possible and the existing constraints affecting activists – professional, but also in terms of family life, for example – are very rare indeed.

Thus, Robert D. Putnam's hypotheses (2000), though disputable, on the collapse of social capital in Western societies, or work on the connection between participation in an association and in politics (Van Deth, 1997), have not much inspired French scholars working on activism.¹⁹ R. D. Putnam as well as J. Ion are nevertheless to be commended for attempting to show the relationship between socio-economic and cultural transformations (massive influx of women on the labor market, increased residential mobility, family break-ups, leisure revolution . . .), the drop in "civic commitment" and formal changes (burgeoning of associations in the tertiary sector based on sales methods inspired by marketing, press campaigns and expertise, thus based on weak ties). Beyond the doubtful character of the link established between a diminished social capital and the drop in the level of confidence and civic virtues, the phenomena pointed out by R. D. Putnam provide a good starting point for new research, on condition one tackle the question of social capital differently according to social group and take into account the transformations affecting the political order, *i.e.* the ways our societies are governed.

Much historical research has shown that activism in trade-unions, professional organizations and political parties was for a long time facilitated by men freeing themselves from domestic chores, which in turn rested on women's tendency to exclude themselves from the labor market once they have children. In contrast with them, militant women belonged to one of two categories: on one hand, those who participated in family, school, church or charitable associations, where activism prolonged roles socially assigned to women,²⁰ on the other hand, those who went into trade-unionism or politics, but in exchange often had to accept remaining single (Loiseau, 1996). These differences have not disappeared. Yannick Le Quentrec and Annie Rieu remind us that, at the end of the 20th century, active women were still three times less unionized than men and from three to five times less frequently in positions of responsibility in a political party (Le Quentrec and Rieu, 2003). Overall, membership in a trade-union or political party has decreased in most Western democracies. The hypothesis that the generalization of feminine employment and the aspersions cast on the "male breadwinner" model have made it difficult today, for women as well as men living in couples with children, to reconcile very demanding professional, personal and militant lives, must be taken seriously, on condition one also take into account professional constraints and the income levels attached to the different occupations. Traditionally, for instance, male teachers were often married to active women, often teachers themselves, and were active together, as activist couples, even when committed to different causes. It is thus difficult to explain the trend towards less activism in the teaching profession by the change in gender relations alone; perhaps it can better be explained by the increased feminization of the profession and the relative drop in the degree of homogamy in it today (Geay, 1999). On the other hand, since women in agriculture presently earn a salary but often leave the land due to contemporary working conditions

¹⁹ To our knowledge, in France, Nonna Mayer (2003), Sophie Duchesne and Camille Hamidi (Duchesne and Hamidi, 2001; Hamidi, 2002, 2003, 2006) were alone in attempting to test and nuance part of the model (the relation between civic conscience, confidence and belonging to an association), by testing the remarks made by Nina Eliasoph (1998) on the sometimes negative connection between participating in an association and political awareness. On social capital, see the volume by Antoine Bevort and Michel Lallement which brings together theoretical texts (a contribution by R. D. Putnam, among others) and case studies (Bevort and Lallement, 2006).

²⁰ On this, read Magali Della Sudda's recent doctoral dissertation (2007).

on many farms, the availability of young farmers for activism is considerably reduced, even if they do not give up belonging to professional organizations (Purseigle, 2004).²¹

In the same vein, though geographic mobility – which increasingly affects certain social groups – is not in itself a deterrent,²² it modifies the *type* of activism by radically differentiating between activist and mundane sociabilities. When moving away, one may remain attached to a cause, but not to the organization that defends it; one's relationship to the organization tends to become more instrumental, which explains the disillusionments that frequently lead to abandoning it. It would be apposite here to measure the very uneven nature of residential mobility depending on social group and occupation and according to categories of habitat and regions. Since the surveys carried out by the French Observatory of Social Change (*Observatoire du changement social*), we are sorely lacking in studies on the restructuring of local associations, their activities and appeal, the social assets of their members and the extent of their multi-commitments. Associations are mostly apprehended on a national scale or sectorially, as in *e.g.* environmental defence associations (Lascoumes, 1994, chapter 7 and 8; Sawicki et al., 2001). It thus becomes difficult to evaluate the degree to which the greater geographic mobility of some groups (executives in the private sector, but also workers and employees) or the development of housing estates in peri-urban areas to the detriment of social housing in the suburbs, leave room for others to enter. The “endocratic” nature (Retière, 1994a, 1994b) of the field of associations and local politics has often been pointed out. Excluded from the main centers of sociability, newcomers keep to themselves and have less occasion to take part in associations,²³ except in cases of massive arrivals implementing settlement strategies in the long term. In this case, as has several times been demonstrated in “rurban” or peri-urban districts, formerly dominant groups – farmers mainly but also certain groups of workers – see themselves literally ousted, their members forced to leave or invest less land-bound organizations. All things being equal, one might consider that becoming an activist was simplified for young people of North African immigrant descent in the Paris suburbs at the beginning of the 1980s, by the fact that activists from the working-class or wage-earning middle-classes left to live in peri-urban zones or in the newly rehabilitated, inner-city neighborhoods (Masclat, 2003; Neveu, 2004).

Monographs and verifying hypotheses of a structural nature are thus not incompatible, as research on the crisis of working-class unionism has shown (Croisat and Labbé, 1992; Contrepois, 2003). The field-work carried out by Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux on the workers of the Peugeot factories in the Montbéliard region, the principal working-class region in France, is emblematic. Wondering why “the group of activists at the factory is no longer reproducing itself” (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999, p. 333), they describe the discouragement of the senior activists of the 1970s and their reticence with regard to the young generations' trade-union practices. Younger workers, often taken on as substitutes and considering themselves “birds of passage”, are not very sensitive to the political training that older delegates try to accomplish with them (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999, p. 359). The authors present the phenomena both with respect to the mutations undergone by the plant (just-in-time production, massive presence of electronics, growing number

²¹ These macrosocial transformations do not play a mechanical role, they are also mediated by the transformations of the conceptions of women's roles, which may tend to give unequal value to their investment in politics.

²² In certain circumstances, being uprooted may reinforce professional sociability – compensating local sociability – to the benefit of trade-union life, as the example of Postal employees in the Paris region shows: in friendship groups and unions, they found “second homes”, both literally and figuratively.

²³ Aside from the research carried out in the OCS program, see the monographs on Villefranche by Michel Bozon (1984) and the one on suburban family housing North of Paris (Cartier et al., 2008).

of interim workers . . .), and to the changes affecting local society, which in turn were determined by general political and economic evolutions. The access of workers' children to secondary school, or even for some of them, to higher education in the 1990s, if it is often a source of disappointment because of the disparity between hopes and the objective chances of finding qualified and stable employment, has destroyed the "anti-school culture" on which part of the factory-shop culture rested and, above all, totally destroyed the value of menial labor. Not being able to identify with that group, the younger generation experience working in the factory like a parenthesis and a calvary. Young workers and workers' sons no longer identify with the working-class culture that grew out of a sense of belonging to a community opposed to foremen and managers, the very culture still represented by the delegates, who are therefore trapped in it (Beaud and Pialoux, 1999, p. 344). From there on in, the entire system of circular compensations, such as the esteem of the comrades in the shop, which also propped up the delegates' dedication and allowed them to persevere despite the professional cost of their commitment, falls through. The microsocioal logics of a lasting commitment cannot be separated from the great transformations.

Aside from the case of working-class milieus, the question of the descending mobility of groups or fractions of social groups would deserve a re-examination. Approaches in terms of relative deprivation have been one of the main targets for the new sociology of commitment, bent on underlining that there is always enough frustration to explain a mobilization. The mobilizing resources school has thus shifted scholarly attention towards entrepreneurs and selective incentives. It is however regrettable that Anthony Oberschall's intuition (1973) about the importance of the segmentation of social groups – by which he means they are disconnected from the centers of decision – in their resolve to act should be as neglected as it is today. The result is finally to ignore the link between groups' social mobility (ascending or descending) and commitment, while some of Joseph Gusfield's demonstrations (1963) provide a stimulating scheme for apprehending mobilizations connected to questions of social morphology, for example in his study of temperance movements as being mobilizations aimed at conserving the status of the middle-class WASP uneasy about European immigration.

Analyzing the connection between socio-economic and cultural transformations, and being disposed and available for activism is not exclusively reserved to ethnographic investigation. One may regret the absence (not only in France) of research on commitment among socio-professional groups, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Though showing interest only for the individual characteristics of the "entrepreneurs of mobilization" is not unjustified, it often leads to characterizing their assets and know-how as "resources" *ex-post*. Even in quantitative surveys, interest for individual features is not always accompanied by a comparison with the distribution of the same properties in the global society or among the group of potentially mobilized individuals. In retrospect, that omission often contributes to turning those characteristics (obviously significant) into the necessary conditions for commitment instead of seeing that they show up the historical strata and social networks where activists are recruited. Only by not taking off exclusively from activists can one distinguish between committed and non-committed persons²⁴ and evaluate the respective characteristics of both categories and, especially, distinguish forms and types of commitment according to generation, sex, social origins, place of residence, professional itinerary, seen in relation one to the other. Only by such comparisons would it be possible to separate what is due to global change or to transformations that concern more particularly a given profession.

²⁴ Members are often left out of quantitative studies on activism, which precludes testing the validity of variables supposed to explain their decision to act.

An in-depth exploration of the evolution of certain socio-political milieus (the organizations and networks that make up the Catholic or secular milieus, for example) is part of the same research strategy that aims to reconcile the micro and the macro. The internal changes of the Catholic church, largely determined by macrosocial evolutions, thus gave way to a marked *embourgeoisement* of Catholic “activists”²⁵ and by invalidating a style of intervention typical of Catholic action. They caused the tensions so well described by Jacques Lagroye (2006), between two systems of truth – the system of certitude and the system of testimony – and ways of relating to the institution, two ways of living and expressing one’s faith. In that context, the most left-wing Catholics, although it is difficult to evaluate their number with any precision, find it more and more difficult to fit in with the Church institutions, and more than ever transfer their commitment outside the parish, into the family sphere or to associations that have no connection with the institution.

Taking into consideration the societal changes mentioned by Robert D. Putnam (2000), locally and contextually, thus departs from the monistic explanations of the mutations of activist commitment, whether mostly cultural (the rise of individualism prized by essayists in a hurry to publish) or socio-economic (the transformation of the social division of labor, the “averaging-out” of post-industrial societies . . .). The history of socio-political milieus and the organizations that compose them, their social density, mediate societal changes that are never univocal, as Julian Misch (2002) has shown in his analysis of the deconstruction of the French Communist Party, a process which masked real pockets of resistance.

Changes in our societies’ forms of government – multiplying forums of discussion and expertise, European integration of local levels of government. . . – analyzed by specialists of public action but neglected by R. D. Putnam adepts, must equally be taken into account if we wish to grasp the evolution of militant practices and profiles. Generalizing procedural democracy, including in the social domain and in corporations, due to the development of collective agreements, has obliged most activist organizations and social movements to forego violent action, except in ritualized fashion, which does not exclude some “unfortunate mistakes”. This imposes a certain discipline upon activists – which revolutionary parties already imposed in their day – that can only be upheld at the cost of long and arduous personal effort. From that point of view, transformations in trade-unionism outstripped those of many social movements or associations. Militant capital based on an ideology or on rebellious attitudes and expressed by a desire to come to blows was thus gradually ruled out and replaced by the capacity to “direct” a negotiation and therefore also “one’s” troops. That sort of evolution affected many associations, and in the absence of a resolute training scheme, had every chance of promoting activists whose personal dispositions were best adapted, in the same way as it drastically reduced the gratifications connected to the most expressive dimension of political commitment, with the risk of forcing two modes of relating to commitment difficult to reconcile to exist side by side (but which no longer always cohabit in the same organizations).

Of course, a conflictual activist culture, based on class ideology and on actions demanding global political transformation, has not disappeared; it remains the foundation on which the identity of many activists is built, and is the source of internal tensions endured by individuals as well as organizations, at every level, as Anne-Catherine Wagner has shown for union delegates in the European Trade-Union Confederation (Wagner, 2004). Activists bearing a confrontational

²⁵ Meaning “every practicing Catholic man or woman officially caught up in activities with religious significance”. “The term ‘activist’ here only means that the man or woman does not limit his/her participation to those activities ordinarily signifying membership in the institution (in particular ‘going’ to mass)” (Lagroye, 2006, p. 28, footnote 28).

culture also know how to invent new forms of action and new utopias, as the success of the “alter-globalization” theme has proved, with its relatively federative character on the local (Duriez, 2005), as well as national (Agrikoliansky et al., 2005) and international levels. Nevertheless, by putting forward a discourse that was essentially economic, and proposing very intellectual work (but without connecting it to actions anchored in daily realities), a movement such as ATTAC has difficulty recruiting people with little schooling and growing into a mass organization (Cruzel, 2005). This contrasts with the militant successes of the French Agricultural Confederation (*Confédération paysanne*), which are apparently directly connected to its ability to pool general and categorial demands – defending local agriculture, certain productions – and to unify its members by actions in which there is something for everyone: ripping apart the McDonald’s in Millau, uprooting GM plants, organizing demonstrations, putting up barricades. . . (Bruneau, 2005). Calling upon associations to make up for – thanks to State or municipal subventions – the inadequacies of the administration and react favorably to new public challenges was a major transformation in territorial public action. It considerably modified associations’ modes of organization and management and brought with it the statutory and functional professionalization of volunteers or activists that makes the workings of an association resemble that of a corporation (Prouteau, 2003).²⁶ As a result, within these associations, but also in the field covered by their interventions, the space remaining for activists who do not possess the expected competences but are ready to devote themselves to the cause, has considerably diminished.

Societal and macropolitical changes do not have univocal and mechanical effects on all social groups, nor do they affect the chances of making a commitment and the forms of involvement chosen, except by the way they are retranslated, sometimes deadened, sometimes amplified, by the organizations present among associations, politics and unionism, according to each country’s – or even each region’s, each group’s – history.

2.2. *Micro-meso: the organizational moulding of activism*

Militant organizations, as organizations *per se* and regardless of their degree of institutionalization, mould individuals and are moulded by them. Though relinquishing one’s commitment cannot be explained by factors in the life cycle alone, many individual approaches to activism do not specify how militant organizations manage to hold on to (intentionally or not) certain social profiles, and on the contrary let go of others. When defining commitment synthetically and relationally, Rosabeth Kanter recalled that it “emerges at the crossroads of organizational expectations and personal experience” (Kanter, 1968, p. 499). Taking off from there, grasping how commitment shapes up within an organization supposes not only accounting for motives and motivations, but also accounting for the organization’s strategies as it seeks to maintain and orient those motivations, as *e.g.* Bénédicte Havard-Duclos and Sandrine Nicourd have done (Havard-Duclos and Nicourd, 2005). Several research directions spread out from there and intersect at the question of “professionalization”.

Being alert to how potential, new activists can be “spotted” could profit from the knowledge acquired in the sociology of religions, notably by Charles Suaud (1978) on inspiring and recognizing vocations in the Catholic church. If it follows informal roads connected to a person’s social networks, that recognition can take on more definite forms, specific to each organization, which

²⁶ The phenomenon can also be observed internationally. As of the 1980s, one could note a massive use of NGOs to channel outside intervention by States and international organizations.

may either prefer to recruit the greatest number of members or, on the contrary, prefer recruiting those best corresponding to its expectations on the ideological level or yet again from the point of view of their biographical characteristics (one need only think of the difference between the state of the French Communist Party during the Bolshevik years, marked by the loss of card-holding members, and during pre-war years when recruiting was more open). More recently, on a totally different plane, direct-dialogue marketing techniques (Lefèvre, 2007), *i.e.* actively hunting for new donors in the public sphere, have been adapted by various NGOs (*Greenpeace, Handicap International...*), no longer to find donors (Siméant, 2003) but to find activists to whom a commitment can be offered.²⁷ Lowering the dues in political parties is another symptom of the brain-storming going on to find the “niches” for activities (and identities) to offer potential activists. Those transformations must also be analyzed to see how organizational forms and models circulate, by looking at individuals who import new ways of doing things, whether they are wage-earners and political auxiliaries (pollsters and consulting firms for associations), or times when movements, such as social forums, coalesce. Self-fulfilling prophecies and detecting potential activists’ expectations (*e.g.* concerning decision-making and participation), arguments about the necessity and meanings of history (as in the necessary professionalization), are often proffered by those directly concerned and best adapted to such evolutions. Lastly, importing human resource techniques to manage a population of volunteers is just one sign that managing activism in the sector of associations is becoming professional, that the day activism-by-projects arrives, it will only be echoing the advent of the “City of projects” that Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello observed in their *New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Besides, the press coverage and mediatization of certain causes, combined with ever more professional fund-raising campaigns, may create a hiatus between the offer and demand for commitment: campaigns aimed at donors or a large public whose sympathy is being sought also affect future activists. Media exposure for a cause may in the short term channel the flow of candidates for commitment towards a particular organization, but the ebb may set in very rapidly if the newcomers are insufficiently looked after, if they are not given tasks to accomplish that are somewhat gratifying, or again if the social composition or ideological orientations of the organization and those perceived during more or less well-controlled media campaigns do not really match.

It would be particularly interesting to compare how militant organizations whose modes of institutionalization are very different recruit potential activists, how they mold and maintain their commitment (Willemez, 2003). The most institutionalized and objectivated organizations have the wherewithal to work out the appropriate forms of commitment for those who join. They (the organizations) make do, in the short term at least, with the unequal adaptation of each newcomer. At the other extreme, in the more fluid militant areas, recruiting will more likely take place by capillarity and affinity between people’s habitus – the risk being precisely to discourage potential members if they do not correspond to the organization’s social profile (age, diplomas...)²⁸ But with the passing of time, all organizations who welcome militant activities tend to provide the appropriate forms of “motivation”²⁹ that can be put into words, are “sayable” and legitimate, inviting their members to make them their own. In the case that bringing into line members’ beliefs and training concerns forms of commitment that were diversely institutionalized and

²⁷ On the offer and supply of commitment, see Klandermans (2004).

²⁸ Effects of closure may be generated with respect to potential newcomers in the association, who are repulsed by the strong bonds they observe among long-time members (Sawicki, 2003).

²⁹ “Motivation” is understood here less as a reality of one’s inner being, supposed to have caused the action, than as what the person taking on the commitment imagines his/her motives to have been

codified, the thinking produced by managing biographies, training managers or clerics, and more generally the legitimate forms of commitment manifested in the French Communist Party or the Church, should inspire further research. “Appropriate forms” are not only the result of learning an organization’s doctrine, either. They may also include an implicit or explicit recognition of the legitimate nature of certain individual gratifications (trips, encounters, benefits connected to the fact the leader of a political group occupies a position of power . . .), as long as they do not interfere with serving the cause.

By organization, we do not only mean a formalized entity registered according to law, but any form of instituted action and the constraints it imposes on members, as well as the selection that its *modus operandi* makes among new arrivals. Fresh attention should be given to an organization’s doctrinary conceptions. Certain organizational forms seem very legitimate today (when they bear on decision-making), others less so (the more hierarchical models). But the latter still exist and must therefore justify themselves by referring less to preserving “unity” or being “avant-garde” than to efficiency, to the indispensable “professionalism” or, given the hostility of the adversary, the secrecy made necessary before a risky operation (*Greenpeace*, DAL . . .). The consequences of certain organizational practices interpreted as being ideological and identity banners should be more closely examined: whether it be the time-consuming dimension of decision-making practices that may as a result exclude employees with family responsibilities, or the space and amount of time allotted to speaking out (by turns or spontaneously), thus excluding more or less completely those who have trouble speaking in public. Jo Freeman (1972) was right to recall the undemocratic effects of the lack of hierarchy in feminist groups; Rémi Lefebvre and Frédéric Sawicki pointed out the paradoxical and excluding consequences of generalizing decision-making practices in the Socialist Party (Lefebvre and Sawicki, 2006). Generally speaking, the transformations undergone by organizations, both due to macrosocial changes and variable temporal investment on the part of activists, are the source of generational and overall social disparities that may become reasons to drop out. The same attention should be given to activists’ insider descriptions. How do members of an organization refer to themselves and their counterparts: do they talk about volunteers (on them, see Prouteau, 1998; Simonet-Cusset, 2002)? Members? Militants? Activists? Unpaid workers? Do they mention sympathizers? Do these categories reveal an actual division of internal labor or an unequal value attached to different ways of being activists?

From that angle, “professionalization” and the debate it stirs up—which cuts across many militant organizations (Kleidman, 1994)—are good indicators of the transformations of activism and its legitimate conceptions. On one hand, they refer to the real transformations of public action, marked by sub-contracting whole areas of social, health or environmental policies (Smith and Lipsky, 1993), delegated to associations, and to the corresponding finances that accrue in their direction, and on the other hand, to the fact that associations enter increasingly into systems of concertation inciting them to invest in different forms of expertise. The norms imposed by the sponsors—in the associations who depend on them at least in part—often end up by relegating volunteers to inferior tasks . . . when there are any left to be done: for even when a political initiative receives public financing, it is more profitable to pay outside help to carry out certain jobs (such as posting bills, which has become easier to reimburse if done by a commercial company); tasks are thus increasingly taken away from unqualified activists. Finally, we are all well aware of the vicious circle that besets trade-unions accused of bureaucracy, which contributes to reducing their membership and increasing the number of chores that must be done by union employees, in turn making it possible to accuse them of wanting to take over.

At this point, in order to understand that not all organizations are equally able to attract, retain and attach new members, it becomes necessary to reason in terms of organizational scope; if

not, we risk falling from the unsatisfactory model of the organization as “receptacle” for individual dispositions developed elsewhere, into the just as unsatisfactory, *deus ex machina* model of commitment. Their scope is, among other things, linked to the selective nature (or not) of the activities they organize. Certain associations remain attractive precisely because they manage better than others to offer not too technical or too ideologically loaded activities, as illustrated in France by the *Restos du cœur*³⁰ (see Duchesne, 2003), or, internationally, by Mother Teresa’s volunteers (Zunigo, 2003). In the latter case, the organization is not only attractive on a religious level (atheists also belong to it) but because it responds to a desire for commitment that is not always capable of finding a corresponding organizational offer. In a way, it allows for a sort of lay access – and lateral in the sense that it does not depend entirely on the way the organization defines it – to salvation. But every organization cannot propose activities that cost so little, and those that do also practice a strong division of internal labor in order to avoid letting the less noble and qualified tasks cast a bad light on the organization’s image or reputation for effectiveness.

At the other extreme, an organization that demands scarcer and more time-consuming aptitudes, and which refuses to pay wages to a part of its members (though similar sister organizations do), is often sacrificing the chance to stabilize their commitments over the long term. In the end, it is likely that the activists most faithful to the cause will be tempted – activism and conviction being equal – to earn their living by it, if given the possibility in another organization.³¹ Similarly, particularly in the case of an association, appearing not very sound technically may – because of the doubt cast on its reputation – make activists feel that belonging to it is less gratifying. Thus, though it is incorrect to consider that professionalization is the antithesis of commitment and imagine two totally separate circuits of recruitment according to whether one is speaking of wage-earners or volunteers, it is wrong to ignore the tensions linked to the intensified division of labor that professionalization induces³² – to the point that organizations today must make a strenuous effort at re-enchantment to combat the disappointments caused by the division of labor in their midst. Thus is it to the large spectrum of interactions taking place at the heart of an organization that it would be necessary to turn researchers’ attention now.

Lastly, it must be remembered that “professionalizing” commitment is not a linear process. It would be worth thinking out the question with reference to work on the legitimacy of new political personnel (Offerlé, 1984) and on the professionalization of partisan activity at the turn of the 20th century (Offerlé, 1999). They show how some social worlds gradually became autonomous and tended to invalidate the more dilettante forms of their activities – as long as one does not consider these processes inevitable, and manages to link them up with the actors’ social properties and the competencies they are bound to generalize. Logics of professionalization and social selection are here in a give-and-take relationship.

The research directions we are suggesting might encourage scholars to re-examine the history of traditional activist organizations in the light of contemporary interrogations, but also to take better stock of the organizations’ work and the logics that contribute to molding their offers of commitment. Not only do these directions plead for theoretical decompartmentalization, but more

³⁰ A charity founded in 1985 by the French comedian Coluche, the *Restos du Coeur* is one of the main volunteer associations that distributes food and clothing to needy people in France. Every year, 52 000 volunteers in nearly 1 950 centers welcome ca. 800 000 beneficiaries.

³¹ For an example of coexistence between two modalities of investing esoteric knowledge (the law, here) in defence of wage-earners, see Michel and Willemez (2002).

³² Such dilemmas crop up particularly when the themes proposed by rival associations are very similar; leaving an organization to take on a paid position is reproved more severely in partisan milieus

generally for more attention to be given to the macrosociological transformations such as those that affect education, labor or culture.

The sociology of commitment was right in not being satisfied with just one version of the conditions of felicity of involvement. But we are not far removed today from approaches which, for fear of being accused of reasoning *ex-post* or missing the uniqueness of their object, appear very near-sighted, or at best hastily sketch a macrosocial fresco as a backdrop for their subject of study. It is paradoxical, when studying mobilizations, to “fall” once again into militant basins of recruitment – Christian networks, hazy clusters of lay people, fragments of the Communist conglomerate . . . – or into large, institutionalized, activist organizations – albeit in critical situations (trade-unions) – whose existence is presented as self-evident – “black boxes” – while the sociology of these black boxes stirs up less scientific interest than the sometimes microscopic mobilizations that would probably not even exist without them. It is doubtless necessary not to satisfy oneself any longer with generalities about what transformations are liable to affect activism – “globalization”, “tertiarization”, “wanting to participate” . . . – but to include them in the analysis, to have the means of evaluating the relevance of the transformations under way depending on the specific social situation. Taking better stock of macro- or meso- logics is not contradictory with the ethnographic sensibility that typifies a good part of French research on activism. On one hand, because these social transformations, whose relevance must each time be assessed *in situ*, are also – some of them – the object of an ideological mediation on the part of militant organizations. On the other hand, because really taking account of the impact of macrosocial logics (in matters of working time, for instance) means that more attention must be given to militant practices: demonstrating is not the same as arguing with an adversary during a meeting, scrambling up on an oil platform is not equivalent to signing a petition on the internet, etc. The difference is measured in terms of the amount of time given to commitment, the degree of expertise and self-control, in terms also of personal satisfaction and the opportunity to express one’s preferences.

It is this last aspect that might be investigated afresh: the question of social exclusion in militant milieus, due precisely to new, simultaneous forms of division of social work, on the macro level, and to the social division of labor at the heart of organizations, which are not limited to the iron law of oligarchy. One might well wonder about the retracting of “executive politics” (to quote Michel Verret, 1988, p. 225), to qualify the privileged way workers relate to politics, which he opposes to “representative politics”. To understand the exclusion of those who are activists first and foremost because they want to “act”, we would have to interrogate the discrepancy between the offer and demand of commitment – which we suppose is the case, given the renewed vitality of festive forms of mobilization; as if the reaction of potential activists to the growing rationalization of militant work were to reclaim every possible demonstration as a reason to celebrate.

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