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DISENGAGING FROM POLITICAL ACTIVISM: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

ABSTRACT

The literature on political disengagement has proliferated since the global upsurge of mobilizations in late 2010. Studies show that disengagement is a highly dynamic process, shaped by the interaction of a multiplicity of factors at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. The article reviews the principal factors related to disengagement, revealing their varied impact, the significance of agential factors and the context-specific nature of disengagement. Given the different forms and degrees of disengagement, scholars have begun to challenge strictly defined dichotomies such as engagement/disengagement. The article concludes by noting some blind spots in the literature and providing suggestions for future research.

Keywords: *political disengagement, social movements, activism, demobilization*

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ΕΓΚΑΤΑΛΕΙΠΟΝΤΑΣ ΤΟΝ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΟ ΑΚΤΙΒΙΣΜΟ: ΜΙΑ ΚΡΙΤΙΚΗ ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΗΣΗ ΤΗΣ ΒΙΒΛΙΟΓΡΑΦΙΑΣ

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Στη βιβλιογραφία για την εγκατάλειψη του πολιτικού ακτιβισμού αποτυπώνεται ξεκάθαρα ότι η αποστασιοποίηση από τον πολιτικό ακτιβισμό αποτελεί μία δυναμική και σχεσιακή διαδικασία, που συνδιαμορφώνεται από τη συνεχή αλληλεπίδραση πολλαπλών παραγόντων στο μικρο-, μεσο- και μακρο- επίπεδο. Η επιρροή των παραγόντων αυτών ποικίλλει σημαντικά λόγω του κρίσιμου ρόλου των υποκειμένων, του σχεσιακού χαρακτήρα της διαδικασίας αποστασιοποίησης και της επίδρασης του εκάστοτε περιβαλλοντικού πλαισίου. Επιπροσθέτως, πρόσφατες μελέτες αμφισβητούν την εγκυρότητα αυστηρών διπόλων όπως πολιτική συμμετοχή/αποχή λόγω σημαντικών αποκλίσεων όσον αφορά τη μορφολογία και την έκταση της πολιτικής αποστασιοποίησης. Στα συμπεράσματα προσδιορίζονται αδυναμίες της βιβλιογραφίας και παρατίθενται προτάσεις για μελλοντικές έρευνες.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: *πολιτική αποστράτευση, κοινωνικά κινήματα, ακτιβισμός, αποκινητοποίηση*

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INTRODUCTION

Academic research on political disengagement was traditionally sparse compared to the abundant literature on political participation and mobilization. However, the global upsurge of mobilizations in late 2010 sparked substantial interest in the fate of the activists who participated in those waves of protest. This led to a proliferation of new studies on political disengagement (Beauchesne and Vairel, 2021; Menshawy and Al-Anani, 2021; Nez, 2021; Prado Galán and Fersch, 2021; Vacchiano and Afailal, 2021). Meanwhile, the literature on extremist organizations and political violence saw numerous new studies exploring activists' pathways to political disengagement (Bjørgo, 2011; Blee, 2016; Bosi, 2019; Della Porta, 2009; Horgan, 2009). The literature has since expanded to encompass highly heterogeneous case studies of the forms of political activism and repertoires of action (ranging from voluntary to clandestine organizations), the political contexts (from democratic to authoritarian regimes) and the countries involved (from the Global North to the Global South). The present article is a critical review of the existing literature on political disengagement; it focuses mainly on social movements but also takes into account different manifestations of political activism. The first section presents the academic debate on individuals' trajectories of political activism and the varying patterns of disengagement. Emphasis is given to the fact that a clear dividing line between engagement and disengagement cannot be drawn, due to the processual nature of disengagement and the varying degrees and forms of engagement. The second section presents the main factors associated with political disengagement (at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels) and elucidates their complex and often contradictory impact on activism. The third section delineates some of the blind spots in the literature and highlights new challenges that are posed by the literature's significant expansion. The article concludes with suggestions for future research.

TRAJECTORIES OF ACTIVISM – PATTERNS OF DISENGAGEMENT

Participation in political activism is neither a life-long nor a linear, continuous process. Activists may be persistent in their engagement; they may move in and out of contentious politics; or they may opt to break irreversibly with political activism. Klandermans (1994), studying the Dutch peace movement in its period of decline, distinguishes between (i)

persisters, referring to those who stay, despite the decline of movements; (ii) shifters, who opt to engage in other movements or causes; and (iii) terminators, who give up political activism. Similarly, Corrigall-Brown (2012) identifies four trajectories of activism: (1) persistent participation; (2) transfer, which refers to disengagement from the original organization and engagement in others; (3) individual abeyance, i.e. temporary abstention from protest politics and re-entry at a later stage; and (4) disengagement, meaning a permanent exit from contentious politics. To describe the multiple trajectories of activism and their evolution across time, Fillieule (2010) has coined the term 'activist career'. The term encompasses predispositions to activism, various forms of engagement, as well as variations in commitment across the entire life cycle of political activists.

Engagement and disengagement may signify, respectively, the beginning and end (temporary or permanent) of political activism; however, the two concepts should not be perceived as two distinct and opposite poles. Disengagement is not a single act. It is a process, involving multiple steps and a series of cognitive and emotional changes (Fillieule, 2015). This process is illustrated in Leclercq's (2011) analysis of the long path and different phases a former member of the French Communist Party traversed before leaving the Party. In a similar vein, White (2010, p. 351), analyzing the trajectories of members of Provisional Sinn Féin, emphasizes that for some activists "recruitment and exit were part of an ongoing social process and a specific date for exit is not applicable". Moreover, disengagement is a process that does not end with the decision to exit. It may have severe material and/or psychological repercussions. Thus, it often leads to the redefinition of one's identity and the meanings attached to it (Ferree, 1994; Mannarini and Fedi, 2012).

There are additional reasons why engagement and disengagement should not be perceived as two distinct and opposite poles. Membership status is not always as straightforward as many studies assume, while the dividing line between engagement and disengagement is often obscure. For instance, in unbounded groups (e.g. milieus) where boundaries are blurred, it remains ambiguous who is inside or outside the group (Bjørgo, 2009). Furthermore, individuals may relinquish a specific role but continue to be engaged in other roles related to the same cause (Horgan, 2009). Especially in authoritarian settings, activists frequently respond to state repression by exiting from a specific role and reorienting activism towards different, subtler forms of engagement or too low and sporadic involvement (Beinin and Vairel, 2013; Davenport, 2005; Duboc, 2013). Lastly, an incongruence

may exist between a person's actual involvement and her/his interpretations of that involvement. Blee (2016), who studied disengagement in racist organizations, discovered that some of her interviewees attended events and meetings without considering themselves as participants in the respective organizations, while others, who had little involvement, claimed membership. Accordingly, disengagement is a multifaceted phenomenon (objective and subjective). Strictly defined dichotomies such as engaged/disengaged or member/non-member do not capture the processual nature of disengagement, the variety of forms and degrees of engagement or the often ambiguous nature of membership.

Disengagement can be voluntary or forced, "depending on whether an individual makes a choice or is constrained to adopt certain behavior" (e.g. decline of a movement, dissolution of an organization, expulsion, imprisonment) (Della Porta, 2009, p. 68). It can also be an individual act or take the form of collective defection, as in the case of an organizational split (Shriver and Messer, 2009; White, 2010). How individual disengagement manifests itself is conditioned by the intensity and duration of participation. Klandermans (2003), examining both enduring forms of participation and sporadic engagement (e.g. occasional attendance at demonstrations or signing of petitions), concluded that, in the latter case, individuals could disengage by simply staying away, whereas in the former case, they had to take active steps to exit. He termed these two forms of disengagement "passive defection or neglect" and "active defection or exit" (Klandermans, 2003, p. 118). Introvigne (1999), in his analysis of a post-theosophical movement, formulated three ideal types of disengagement: defectors, ordinary leave-takers and apostates. Defectors negotiate an exit with organizational authorities to minimize the cost of defection for both parties. Ordinary leave-takers leave the organization in a non-contested manner because they have lost interest, loyalty or commitment. Finally, apostates become professional enemies of their former organization. Even though Introvigne labels these activists as 'apostates', they often perceive themselves as the carriers of the "true" principles of their former organization, which are betrayed by the remaining members (White, 2010). Apostates are the most visible leave-takers, however, the vast majority of those who leave remain unnoticed.

Concerning the reasons that may lead to disengagement, Snow and Soule argue that "not only is disengagement the flipside of participation, but the factors that account for it are the obverse of some of the determinants of participation" (Snow and Soule, 2010, p. 145). The initial

reasons for engaging in political activism may have a bearing on decisions to disengage. However, it is often the case that individuals engage and disengage for different reasons. For instance, activists may join a group because they identify politically with that group, but disengage due to destructive affective ties (Klatch, 2004). Divergence of motives arises from manifold changes that occur during the post-recruitment period. Activists' identities, beliefs, emotions and social ties, as well as their relation to organizations and the broader sociopolitical context, all evolve and change during their participation in political activism (Corrigal-Brown, 2012; Fillieule, 2010; Owen, 2019). Accordingly, disengagement is inextricably linked to activists' constant reinterpretation and reevaluation of their experience of engagement, their life trajectory and the evolving sociopolitical context.

Individuals' lives after activism are often shaped by their previous experiences. Thus, the literature records that former activists usually pursue life course patterns that are consistent with their political values and activist history (e.g. being employed in teaching or helping professions, promoting social change in daily life, resisting conventional lifestyles) (Braungart and Braungart, 1986; Fendrich, 1974; Giugni and Grasso, 2016; Whalen and Flacks, 1980).

Next follows an overview of the principal factors associated with disengagement. Some of these factors (social networks, identity, commitment) affect both engagement and disengagement, while others (internal conflicts, disillusionment, burnout, barriers to disengagement) are linked primarily to the process of disengagement. The following analysis puts greater emphasis on the latter.

CONSTELLATION OF FACTORS LINKED TO POLITICAL DISENGAGEMENT

The literature has identified numerous factors at the micro- (individual), meso- (organizations, groups, social networks) and macro-level (sociopolitical context) that negatively affect sustained engagement. These factors, however, cannot be easily subsumed under one single category, considering that all three levels constantly interact and shape each other (Fillieule, 2010). Besides, activists are not a homogeneous group. The same configuration of factors may lead to diverse individual interpretations and behaviours (Owen, 2019). As a consequence, intragroup variations are always present. The overview begins with a combined presentation of the

main factors at both micro- and meso-levels and concludes with a brief analysis of macro-level factors that are linked to the broader process of demobilization.

A. The Micro- and Meso- Level

Biographical Availability

The literature on 'biographical availability' focuses primarily on recruitment to activism. Few studies explore the relationship between biographical availability and the sustainability of activism (Corrigal-Brown, 2012; Downton and Wehr, 1997/2019; Perez, 2018; White, 2010). According to the biographical availability hypothesis, significant role or life-cycle changes, such as full-time employment, marriage and family responsibilities, can reduce available time and energy, while at the same time they increase the costs and risks associated with activism (McAdam, 1986). As a result, biographical constraints may hinder initial participation in contentious politics or foster disengagement (Corrigal-Brown, 2012). Empirical findings, however, show that the relationship between biographical availability and political activism is complex. Biographical constraints may impede activism, stimulate it or have no impact on it at all (Corrigal-Brown, 2012). Since numerous studies have led to contradictory findings (Beyerlein and Hipp, 2006), the validity of the biographical hypothesis has been questioned (Snow and Soule, 2010). Several factors can account for these inconsistencies: (i) the biographical availability hypothesis has been tested across different forms of political engagement (e.g. volunteering/high-risk activism) (Saunders et al., 2012); (ii) besides the external/situational context, agential factors (e.g. emotions, commitment) also influence political engagement (Perez, 2018); (iii) subjective definitions of costs and risks differ (Wiltfang and McAdam, 1991); and (iv) human agency is significant in negotiating the various life responsibilities and in developing effective coordination skills (Downton and Wehr, 1997/2019). Finally, individuals may disengage from organizations due to biographical unavailability, but remain fully committed to a cause and reenter political activism at a later stage (White, 2010). Hence, to summarize, biographical unavailability may lead to disengagement in individual cases but does not preclude sustained activism.

Social Networks

Social networks play a critical role in facilitating recruitment to political activism and in sustaining activists' commitment during the post-recruitment period (McAdam and Paulsen, 1993; Snow et al., 1980). Networks are not simply structures, since "information, ideas and emotions" are exchanged through them (Goodwin and Jasper, 1999, p. 42). For instance, the bonds that are forged during engagement enhance activists' ideological affinity to movements and organizations by nurturing the development of a collective identity and enabling secondary political socialization (Fillieule, 2010; Passy and Monsch, 2014). Positive affective bonds provide significant emotional rewards, enhancing activists' endurance (Jasper, 1998; Taylor, 1989; Wood, 2001). Finally, activists' embeddedness in social networks increases their sense of personal and collective efficacy, strengthening further their commitment (Klandermans et al., 2008). Downton and Wehr (1997/2019), underlining the significance of social bonds, argue that the stronger activists' bonds to organizations, leaders, prevailing beliefs and fellow activists are, the higher their level of commitment will be.

Individuals, however, do not participate solely in social networks in the realm of political activism (Mc Adam and Paulsen, 1993). They also engage in numerous other social networks (formal and informal) in their diverse life spheres. How they subjectively evaluate and consequently structure their numerous engagements affects the sustainability of their political activism (Passy and Giugni, 2000; Stryker 2000). Thus, the less activists' political engagement is connected to the social networks in their central life spheres (such as family, studies, and work), the more probable it is that their political commitment will gradually fade away. Additionally, in the multiple social networks that individuals engage with, they are subject to various interpersonal influences, which may also involve pressures to disengage (Kitts, 2000; McAdam and Paulsen, 1993). Finally, when activists drop out of organizations or movements, the propensity of the remaining members to disengage increases, especially if friendship ties are involved (Sandell, 1999). In short, social networks "have multivalent effects", meaning that besides sustaining engagement they may also foster disengagement (Kitts, 2000, p. 242).

Identity

Individuals are pulled into political activism by social ties. Often, however, they engage despite the absence of social ties, either because they identify with organizations or movements, or because they want to express their values and confirm their identities.

Specifying the impact of identity on political activism is complicated since significantly diverse perceptions of the concept appear in the literature (Stryker, 2000; Gecas, 2000; Taylor and Whittier, 1992). According to Stryker (2000, p. 28), individuals have multiple identities, which are "organized in a salience hierarchy". Concerning activism, the more salient, prominent and central the activist identity of participants in organizations and movements is, the more likely it is that their engagement will be persistent (Corrigall-Brown, 2012; Mannarini and Fedi, 2012). Biographical continuity usually increases the chances of a highly salient activist identity (Flacks, 2019; Roth, 2000). Still, significant life, organizational or environmental changes and the experiences of activism in themselves may alter the salience and centrality of activists' identities, impacting the sustainability of their activism (Fillieule, 2010).

Social movements construct collective identities, which signify "the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity" (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p. 105). Collective identities enhance the sustainability of individuals' engagement, since they strengthen their commitment and feelings of solidarity (Gamson, 1991; Hunt and Benford, 2004; Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Both the formation and maintenance of collective identities require continuous identity work throughout the different stages of a movement to accomplish the alignment of personal and collective identities (Snow and McAdam, 2000). If this alignment weakens, then disengagement is a potential outcome (Nascimento et al., 2021). The process of collective identity construction is very complex since the multiple and intersecting identities (in terms of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, citizenship status, etc.) of the participants must be affirmed. Otherwise, it may lead to exclusion, prompting disengagement (Gamson, 1997). As the previous analysis illustrates, what a movement means may differ across subgroups, often leading to internal conflicts and factionalism (White, 2010). If these conflicts concern the core identity of a social movement organization, then schism is a potential outcome (Sani and Reicher, 1998).

Organizational Forms – Internal Conflicts

In addition to social networks and identity, organizational forms also play a critical role in sustaining or undermining activists' engagement (Barkan et al., 1993; Bunnage, 2014; Corrigal-Brown, 2012). Centralized hierarchical organizations usually limit members' ability to have effective control over organizational affairs, thus eroding their identification with and commitment to the organizations they are involved in (Kleidman, 1994; Knoke, 1981). Moreover, high levels of hierarchy reduce members' ability to forge and maintain extensive social bonds with fellow members or leaders, undermining further the sustainability of activists' engagement (Corrigal-Brown, 2012; Downton and Wehr, 1997/2019). By contrast, "social relationships and political forms that express ideas of empowerment and community help produce a sense of agency and long-term commitment" (Gamson, 1991, p. 49; Hirsch, 1990). Nonetheless, some studies have shown that commitment can be sustained in bureaucratic organizations (Knoke, 1981; Osterman, 2006) or, conversely, be undermined in horizontal organizational models (Eschle, 2018; Freeman, 1972). Besides, organizations are complex phenomena, integrating often diverse aspects of organizational logic, cultures and practices (Ferree and Martin, 1995; Minkoff, 2002). Lastly, the effectiveness of specific organizational forms (hierarchical/horizontal) or boundaries (rigidified/permeable) in averting disengagement also depends on the upswing or downswing phases of social movements and broader environmental changes (Staggenborg, 1996; Taylor, 1989; Whittier, 2002).

A recurring theme in the literature is that high levels of intra-organizational or intra-movement conflicts may lead to individual disengagement, collective defection or schisms (Barkan, 1986; Shriver and Messer, 2009; Zald and Ash, 1966). Several factors may increase the probability of internal conflicts. For example, the sudden growth of organizations and movements or the presence of different political generations and micro-cohorts may enhance heterogeneity and breed conflict (Chironi, 2019; Roth, 2000; Whittier, 1997). In addition, organizations and movements evolve constantly over time, facing diverse challenges. However, significant shifts in their identities, strategies and organizational culture may give rise to severe internal friction (Nascimento et al., 2021; Owen, 2019; Staggenborg, 1988). Apart from internal factors, external factors (e.g. such as achieving some gains) may also magnify divisions and conflicts within organizations or movements (Balser, 1997; Robnett, 2002). While some conflicts are accommodated (King, 2008; Kretschmer, 2017), others are not, leading to individual disengagement, collective defections or schisms.

Commitment

A fundamental premise in the literature is that (voluntary) disengagement is the manifestation of the erosion of activists' commitment (Gamson, 1991; Hirsh, 1990; Kanter, 1968; McAdam, 1989; Nepstad, 2004). Klandermans (2003) discerns three different forms of commitment: affective, continuance and normative commitment. He argues that, while the degree of decline of the three forms of commitment may differ, the three forms may balance each other out. According to Klandermans, declining levels of commitment, coupled with insufficient gratification, result in a growing inclination to disengage; if a critical event tips the balance, then actual disengagement will occur. Fillieule (2015) in his analysis emphasizes the relational and context-dependent nature of commitment, by linking its erosion to multilevel developments, including structural, organizational and agential factors. For Fillieule (2015, p. 283), the erosion of commitment is the outcome of the "exhaustion of the rewards of involvement, the loss of ideological meaning, and the transformation of relations of sociability". Consequently, activists' level of commitment is neither given nor fixed but instead is relational, context-dependent and evolves constantly over time. Since commitment is a dynamic process, organizations and groups pursue various strategies to constantly support and reinforce it to deter disengagement. These strategies may include "cultural and social insulation, conversion…surrendering or donating personal resources…in-group/out-group polarization" and rituals (Snow and Soule, 2010, p. 144; Kanter, 1968; Taylor and Whittier, 1992).

Commitment is also affected by another factor, which receives less attention in the social movement literature, namely collective action per se. Although collective action may strengthen the activist identity (Nepstad, 2004; Fillieule, 2012; Hirsch, 1990; Drury and Reicher, 2005; Vacchiano and Afailal, 2021), it may also foster disengagement. Failure to advance collective mobilizations' stated goals is often a traumatic experience, leading to feelings of disappointment, hopelessness or even despair (Verstergren et al., 2017; Karmel and Kuburic, 2021). While some activists may mitigate the negative impact of disempowering experiences by placing them in a wider context or by positively reframing them, others may lose their commitment and disengage (Barr and Drury, 2009; Beckwith, 2015; Prado Galán and Fersch, 2021).

Disillusionment

Studies of emotions have proliferated in social movement literature in recent decades (Goodwin et al., 2004; Jasper, 1998; Van Ness and Summer-Effler, 2019). However, analyses of disillusionment remain sparse. By contrast, disillusionment is extensively analyzed in the literature on militant extremism (Bjørgo, 2011; Horgan, 2009; Jensen et al., 2023; Windisch et al., 2019). Disillusionment is a common reference in activists' accounts of the causes that led to their disengagement (Accornero, 2019; Altier et al., 2017; Beauchesne and Vairel, 2021; Belghazi and Moudden, 2016; Prado Galán and Fersch, 2021). The origins of activists' disillusionment lie in the existing incongruence "between idealized expectations and the every day realities associated with those same expectations" (Simi et al., 2019, p. 12). However, disillusionment is not merely the outcome of divergence between activists' expectations and reality. It is a cognitive process that involves activists' positive recollection of the past or their initial expectations and their negative interpretation of the present (Latif et al., 2020). Thus, disillusionment always involves a subjective and comparative evaluation of the past and the present. This cognitive process also has strong emotional components. For instance, if activists perceive that reality contradicts fundamental beliefs that are deeply valuable to them, then disillusionment may lead to a "state of existential concern", where the sense of loss of meaning in life is coupled with feelings of hopelessness and despair (Maher et al., 2021, p. 3). Disillusionment may be caused by a multiplicity of factors, ranging from disagreements over ideological issues and strategies (Altier et al., 2017; Horgan, 2009; Menshawy and Al-Anani, 2021) to the failure of or discrepancy between initial objectives or expectations and the actual outcomes of collective mobilizations (Adams, 2003; Ferree, 1994; Prado Galán and Fersch, 2021). According to Tarrow (2011), the more ambitious social movements' objectives are and the greater the gap between expectations and outcomes, the higher the level of activists' disillusionment will be. The impact of disillusionment on activists' engagement varies. It may range from temporary disengagement to total exit from activism (Karmel and Kuburic, 2021; Tarrow, 2011). In the latter case, exit may be coupled with cynicism and disinterest in politics in general (Accornero, 2019).

Burnout

A common cause of disengagement from political activism is burnout. According to Rettig (2006, p. 16), "burnout is the act of involuntarily leaving activism, or reducing one's level of activism". Activist burnout is "more than temporary frustration or occasional weariness…[it] is the long-term, accumulative, and debilitating impact of activism-related stress" (Gorski et al., 2019, p. 364). Activists engaged in social justice education who had experienced burnout described their symptoms as (a) "deterioration of psychological and emotional well-being"; (b) "deterioration of physical well-being"; and (c) "disillusionment and hopelessness" (Gorski and Chen, 2015, p. 395). Burnout leads to exhaustion, cynicism and reduced self-efficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). Even though burnout is a recurring problem in political activism, not all activists are susceptible to it. According to Pines (1994, p. 383), activists who try to derive "a sense of existential significance" from their political work are more prone to burnout. Similarly, Gorski et al. (2019), in their study on animal rights activists in the United States, demonstrate that those activists who experienced burnout were the ones who described activism as their core purpose in life. Thus, it is the most highly committed activists that are susceptible to burnout. The negative consequences of burnout can be mitigated if activists develop and implement burnout prevention strategies (e.g. scale down and/or diversify their activities, adopt self-care strategies, shift to other organizations or forms of activism) (Downton and Wehr, 1997/2019; Gorski and Chen, 2015; Nepstad, 2004). Nevertheless, the ability to implement these strategies is seriously circumscribed in adverse sociopolitical contexts that magnify activists' physical and emotional exhaustion. For instance, Peña et al. (2023), in their analysis of human rights activism in Colombia, Kenya and Indonesia, illustrate how repressive repertoires by state and non-state actors, together with negative social conditions (e.g. crime, corruption, economic constraints), make burnout a prevalent feature of activists' daily existence.

Barriers to Disengagement

Many factors may prompt activists to disengage, but each activist confronts a unique configuration of barriers that may deter her/him from successful disengagement (Jensen et al., 2023). Barriers to disengagement span the micro- to the macro-level, ranging from individual psychological factors to macro-factors such as state repression. In general, the higher the sacrifices and personal investments that organizations demand from their

members, the higher the psychological or material cost of disengagement will be, making disengagement less probable (Fillieule, 2010; Kanter, 1968; Zwerman et al., 2000). Strong friendship ties to co-members can be another deterrent to successful disengagement, especially in cases where inclusion in an organization is followed by renunciation of all social relations external to it and the latter becomes a "substitute family" for its members (Bjørgo, 2009, p. 40; Menshawy and Al-Anani, 2021). Activists may also enjoy social privileges or economic benefits, which may keep them involved even though they may have become disaffected (Jensen et al., 2023). A critical factor affecting the probability of disengagement is activists' perceived availability of attractive life-course alternatives (Horgan, 2009). In this regard, activists with stigmatized identities, limited educational or employment opportunities and few social ties outside their organization lack "the essential safety net" for disengaging successfully (Latif et al., 2020, p. 379). In some cases, obstacles to disengagement tend to cluster (e.g. past incarceration, limited social mobility, poor education), making the prospects of an alternative life course even less viable (Jensen et al., 2023). Lastly, disengagement also depends on organizations' rules and practices vis-à-vis defectors (Filieulle, 2010). Hence, if organizations apply violent negative sanctions to 'traitors', the fear of reprisals may act as an effective barrier to disengagement (Bjørgo, 2009; Windisch et al., 2019). To sum up, even if activists distance themselves ideologically or emotionally from their affiliated organization, exit is not always an available or attractive option for them.

In addition to the numerous factors at the micro- and meso-levels that affect individual disengagement, the broader environmental context also shapes activists' dynamics of engagement. At the same time, activists' disengagement may contribute to the decline of movements, if movements fail to recruit new participants.

B. Macro-Level

Demobilization

Demobilization refers to multiple, diverse but interrelated phenomena, such as individual disengagement, the demobilization of a social movement organization, the ending of a campaign or the demobilization of a society's entire social movement sector (Fillieule, 2015; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015; Zeller, 2020). Demobilization at the macro-level does not signify merely

the de-escalation of collective protests (Demirel-Pegg, 2017). It refers to a process by which the patterns of interactions within the polity become restabilized and re-routinized, leading to a new equilibrium (Koopmans, 2004). Demobilization, like mobilization, is the outcome of interactive processes between a multiplicity of actors (social movements, their allies, governments, oppositional forces, the mass public, etc.) (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). It is shaped by both the internal dynamics of movements or organizations and external factors (Demirel-Pegg, 2017; Zeller, 2020). Finally, how demobilization unfolds is strongly related to the dynamics and the features of the mobilization phase (Demirel-Pegg, 2017; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015).

Studies have traced multiple external factors which may increase the probability of demobilization under certain conditions and in interaction with other factors. These mainly involve repression, institutionalization, the electoral cycle, countermobilizations and changes in the political climate.

Studies on the impact of state repression on dissent have led to inconclusive findings (Davenport, 2015). They do show, however, that the levels, forms, types and agents of repression (e.g. selective or indiscriminate, hard or soft repression, state or private agents), as well as the timing of repression, play a critical role in shaping its impact (Earl, 2006; Francisco, 2005; Zeller, 2020). Besides its direct effect on collective protests, repression also harms 'internal' organizational dynamics (e.g. factionalism, deterioration of members' affective bonds), thus increasing the chances of demobilization (Davenport, 2015; Klatch, 2004).

Institutionalization may be part of the dynamic of a cycle of protest (Della Porta and Tarrow, 1986; Demirel-Pegg, 2017). Following the early phase of a cycle of protest, competition develops for mass support between the different social and political actors engaged in collective mobilizations. When participation starts to decline, this competition becomes fierce, leading to polarization between two main wings of the movement sector, the moderates and the radicals. Authorities usually respond by co-opting the moderates and repressing the radicals, further intensifying the existing polarization. The radicals respond to repression by resorting to more violence, while the moderates forward their interests through established institutional channels. As Della Porta and Tarrow (1986, p. 613) observe, when "the cycle winds down…institutionalization and increasing violence accompany and feed upon one another". On the other hand, Davenport coins the term "positive demobilization", to underline that demobilization may

be the outcome of a movement's success (gaining access and acceptance, achieving policy changes or alteration of existing political structures) (Davenport, 2015, p. 22; Fillieule 2010).

Elections also influence the dynamics of social movements, since they may change activists' perceptions of existing "opportunities" or "threats" affecting their willingness to engage in protest politics (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010). Elections may also channel discontent via the electoral process (Chabanet and Royall, 2015). Additionally, the question of whether social movements should engage in electoral politics may exaggerate divisions and conflicts within social movements, undermining their dynamics (Heaney and Rojas, 2007). Finally, electoral shifts may lead to shrinking political opportunities and curtailment of institutional support to movements, contributing to their contraction (Jenkins, 1983; McAdam, 1982). Especially long-term shifts in "electoral regimes" bear a strong imprint on social movements' dynamics (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010).

Countermobilization is another critical factor that may contribute to demobilization (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; Zeller, 2021). Voss, in her study of the American labour movement, clearly illustrates how the interplay between frames, countermobilization and the role of the state led to the collapse of the Knights of Labor (Voss, 1996).

Finally, changes in the political climate may drive demobilization, since the urgency and saliency of specific issues may decline and the social value attributed to certain causes, political ideals and models of activism may change (Edwards and Marullo, 1995; Fillieule, 2010; Klandermans, 2003; McAdam, 1982). Negative environmental changes do not affect all activists evenly. Usually, movements or organizations' core activists, who are the most strongly committed, are less affected (Corrigal-Brown, 2012; Tarrow, 2011).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The proliferation of research into the diverse motivations and manifestations of disengagement has significantly transformed the literature on the subject. Disengagement has ceased to be a peripheral subtopic in the social movement literature and has become a subject of analysis in its own right. The expansion of the literature and the quality of existing studies have enriched our understanding of the complexity of disengagement. Numerous case studies illustrate that disengagement is the outcome of a dynamic process involving the continuous interaction of a multiplicity of

factors at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. Moreover, disengagement is not an isolated instance in the life course of activists. Instead, it is affected by and in turn affects their life trajectories. Some patterns can be deduced from several case studies of the main factors affecting disengagement and the individual or collective pathways to disengagement. At the same time, however, deviations from these patterns can also be observed. As the case studies demonstrate, the relation between disengagement and the multiple factors outlined in the literature may vary significantly across individuals, organizations and movements, as well as sociopolitical and temporal contexts. Accordingly, any abstract overgeneralization would miss both the significance of agential factors in shaping disengagement and the relational and context-specific nature of disengagement. The complexity of the process is further increased by the varied forms and degrees of engagement and disengagement, as well as the varied subjective meanings attached to them. Given this complexity, there are few comparative studies on disengagement from different organizations or movements, and these are usually restricted to single national contexts. Thus, the literature consists mainly of single-case studies, which delve into the specific trajectories of individuals or the variations in activists' trajectories within single organizations or movements.

There are some blind spots in the literature, which are mainly because studying disengagement from political activism involves several challenges (theoretical and methodological) that are not easily resolved. The term 'social movement' is an abstraction that is difficult to operationalize. Accordingly, most studies focus primarily on "bounded forms of activism" (McAdam, 1986, p. 67), such as social movement organizations and groups. However, this orientation in the literature has some implications. Social movements tend to be conflated with social movement organizations. Moreover, the literature's emphasis on organizations is also reflected in the scarce analysis of individualized modes of political activism, like lifestyle politics or digital activism (Driscoll, 2018; Lindgren, 2019). In consequence, the question of whether individuals who disengage from offline activism turn to online engagement or vice versa is rarely addressed (Chu and Yeo, 2020). Finally, members of organizations or groups are usually more committed and likely to engage in high-risk activism than unaffiliated individuals. In general, there are fewer studies on low-cost, low-risk activism and intermittent engagement than on high-cost, high-risk engagement, even though the former cases are more common than the latter (Corrigal-Brown, 2012; Giugni and Grasso, 2016). Blind spots

in the literature are also related to the lack of longitudinal data. Since disengagement is a process, longitudinal research is required to explore activists' political trajectories and the sequence of steps that lead to their disengagement (Fillieule, 2015; 2010). However, most studies are retrospective, relying on activists' recollections of their trajectories and life histories (Klatch, 2004; Prado Galán and Fersch, 2021; Blee, 2016).

The remarkable expansion of the literature and the incorporation of many dissimilar case studies give rise to some new, interesting questions. The analysis of most studies in the literature rests on the assumption that political engagement is voluntary and the choice of adult individuals. Yet, this is not always true (especially in the Global South), as some empirical studies demonstrate (Nascimento et al., 2021; Viterna, 2006). Are the disengagement pathways in these cases dissimilar? The literature also involves cases of political activism that span the whole political spectrum. Most studies in the literature do not investigate the relationship between the ideological underpinnings of political activism and disengagement. They focus primarily on exploring the determinants, the process and the varied forms of disengagement, as well as its impact on activists' future trajectories. Thus, the question of whether activists' different or even conflicting political identities may affect the process of disengagement remains peripheral in the literature. However, organizations and movements are grounded in belief systems, values and norms. They socialize participants in specific visions of the world. Moreover, these values and norms shape individuals' perceptions and interpretations of an activist identity and their respective expectations from activism (White, 2010). As Gecas (2000, p. 100) underlines, values inscribed in movements' ideologies, "become important aspects of members' self-definition…with implications for individuals' commitment to the social movement". Finally, ideologies are embedded in and shape the multiple factors that are associated with the process of disengagement in the literature (e.g. collective identities, social networks, organizational forms). It is not suggested that ideological factors are fixed and independent variables that are passively internalized by activists and per se affect the disengagement process. On the contrary, it is acknowledged that participants in organizations or movements engage actively in the construction and reconstruction of values, beliefs and principles, which may vary significantly across them. A suggested topic to explore further would be in which cases, under which circumstances and to what degree the ideological underpinnings of political activism may affect the multifaceted process of disengagement, especially since comparative

studies of activists' trajectories on both the Left and the Right are very scarce (except for analyses of extremism). The findings of these studies are inconclusive. In one study, ideology did not play a role in the sustainability of activists' engagement (Corrigall-Brown, 2012), while in another it affected the factors that shape the disengagement process (Windisch et al., 2019). Further research involving case studies across ideological lines and activists' political orientations would provide critical insight into not only the commonalities but also the differences concerning the disengagement process in ideologically disparate political actors.

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