All Growing but Differently: Two Ideal-typical Forms of Continuity and Expansion Followed by Young German Activists

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Abstract. This paper seeks to further the discussions about what continuity in activism can look like, about the differentiated trajectories that activists can follow and how growth and continuity (as trait shared by all activists) might be differently patterned by factors at the micro- meso- and macro- levels. For this, the present analysis zooms into the trajectories of 9 activists and proposes two ideal typical kinds of trajectories (the abeyant-experimental and the lineal sustained) based on the patterns of growth, expansion, and change as narrated by the participants. The interview analysis suggests that activism has been experienced as an in-flux process during which growth and change have been constant. Participants report about gaining specific skills, expanding their networks, adopting new routines and repertoires of action, adopting different frames of cognition and even a experiencing changes in their self-perception due to their political engagement. The study proposes an analytical concept to further the analysis of activist trajectories and stress the differentiated expressions of growth and expansion revealed by activists.

Keywords: activism, abeyant-experimental, lineal sustained, political engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed numerous and diverse expressions of sporadic and sustained activism; the fast growth of networks and organisations like Fridays for Future, Last Generation, a revival of organised labour protest in many countries, the social protests in Colombia and Chile, the recent wave of protests in France, among many others. Consequently, media and academic debates have discussed the profile of the actors, the repertoires of action used, etc. Scholars have shown that networks and organisations have become important spaces for sustained political socialisation (Crossley 2003, 2004) and thus, help to produce more activists and an 'activist ethos'. Even more, analyses that take the actors' perspective reveal that activism is a fluid process that involves constant negotiation and growth (Corrigall-Brown 2020; Fillieule and Neveu 2019; Crossley 2003, 2004), and that activists often shape their own trajectories combining sustained action, sporadic events and different repertoires of action (Coe *et al.* 2016, Norris 2002, Dalton 2017, Pickard 2019).

This study assumes a definition of sustained activism as a long-term commitment with political causes that includes some regularity of activities and embeddedness in specific activist networks. This is usually channelled through an organisation, a grass-root initiative, or a network (Corrigall-Brown 2020; Pickard 2019; Fillieule and Neveue 2019). Following this definition and building on the previous literature that has explored sustained activist trajectories, I attempt to further the discussion about continuity in activism, the differentiated trajectories that activists can follow and how growth and continuity (as traits common to all activists) might be differently patterned by factors at the micro- meso- and macro-levels. For this, the present analysis zooms in on the trajectories of nine activists, and proposes two ideal-typical kinds of trajectories (the experimental and the lineal) based on the patterns of growth, expansion, and change, as narrated by the participants.

The analysis is based on nine biographical interviews conducted in Cologne between 2018 and 2020 as part of the EURYKA Project (Horizon 2020 grant agreement no. 72702). At the time of the interviews, participants were between 18 and 35 years old, and they were all active members of at least one activist group including political parties (3), a workers' union (1), a student union (1), an LGTBQ collective (1), a large environmental organisation (1), a left-libertarian grass-roots group (1), and a solidary economy collective (1).

2. ACTIVIST TRAJECTORIES AND SUSTAINED ACTIVISM

Sustained activism is a dynamic process (Corrigall-Brown 2012, 2020; Bosi *et al.* 2022, Klandenmans and Crossley 2003, 2004) shaped by different factors at the micro-meso-and macro-levels (Fillieule and Neveu 2019; Passy and Giugni 2000; Corrigall-Brown 2012, 2020; Bosi *et al.* 2022). Sustained activism can have long-lasting effects on views, career paths, and networks (McAdam 1989; Crossley 2003, 2004). Additionally, it has a strong socialisation potential given that through the sustained interaction with the group, there is an ongoing peer-to-peer political socialisation, and activists gain networks, identities, and routines, but also develop a 'taste' for protest and activism (Crossley 2003, 2004; Fillieuele and Neveu 2019).

Researchers have stressed the importance of availability, values, collective identity, and harmonic articulation between activism and personal life (Passy and Giugni 2000; Downtown and Wher 1998; Corrigall-Brown 2012; Goodwin *et al.* 2009). Downtown and Wehr (1998)

distinguish between situational and attitudinal availability; the former refers to the (given) life circumstances that facilitate (or not) sustained participation, while the latter refers to the possibility of creating time and acquiring resources necessary for activism. Among others, attitudinal availability relies strongly on an already existent belief in the relevance of 'the cause'.

Passy and Giugni (2000) emphasise the interplay between the person's "spheres of life" (work, family, leisure, activism), and present qualitative data suggesting that maintaining balance and harmony between life spheres is an important condition for long-term activists. The authors argue that besides ideological commitment, resource availability and embeddedness in networks, scholars need to consider the meanings given to activism, the group, and the causes. In this vein, they argue that the importance of the networks is not only to facilitate access, but also to be engaged in communities in which the meaning of activism, and the cause, is constantly reinforced (*Ibidem*: 121).

Some analyses have explored activists' trajectories (or careers) showing different stages activists undergo during their engagement (Klandermans 1997; Fillieuele and Neveu 2019; Fillieule 2010; Corrigall-Brown 2012, 2020; Bosi *et al.* 2022). Corrigall-Brown (2012) expands on Klandermann's (1997) activist trajectories (initial, persistent, and disengaged activists) to include the abeyant trajectory that, according to her research, accounts for over 50% of activist trajectories. The researcher contends that Klandermanns' persistent activist is extremely committed and experiences unusually profound consequences of their activism (Corrigall-Brown 2012, 229). Thus, she argues, that after the initial stage, many activists neither fully disengage nor do they display the profound commitment indicative of persistent activists. More frequently, activists will follow non-lineal pathways and go through stages of fluctuating commitment, and phases of disengagement and re-mobilisation; in such cases, they will draw from their acquired networks, know-how, routines to re-engage with the same or a different organisation (*Ibidem*). Activist trajectories are shaped by micro- meso- and macro-dynamics, meaning that biographic changes, personal crises, but also organisational dynamics and societal phenomena, can strongly shape activist engagement trajectories (Fillieuel and Neveu 2019; Bosi *et al.* 2022; Corrigall-Brown 2020).

Personal characteristics might shape an activist's decision to mobilise and choose an organisation (Corrigall-Brown 2020; Paschou and Durán Mogollón 2022), and persistence has been attributed to organisational factors (such as internal harmony, strong identity, affective networks, ideological direction, level of formalisa-

tion, routines), and how activists accommodate themselves to them (Bosi *et al.* 2022; Goodwin 2009; Corrigall-Brown 2020). Scholars identify four main factors that facilitate sustained activism: ideology, resources, availability, and social networks (*Ibidem*: 21, Fillieule and Neveu 2019; Crossley 2003). Given the interaction between micro- meso- and macro-factors, activism is experienced differently by activists, depending on their own profiles, the organisational dynamics and routines, and the societal developments.

Further analyses highlight the importance of the organisation in shaping the activists' trajectories: Bosi *et al.* (2022) present evidence of how the level of bureaucratisation, political orientation and the forms of action can shape activist trajectories at different stages of their engagement. The scholars reveal that during the mobilisation stage, the political orientation of the organisation appeared to be more relevant than the other aspects, but the level of bureaucratisation and forms of action gained salience in the stage of sustained activism. Additionally, the study reveals the importance of assuming specific roles and positions of responsibility in shaping activists' trajectories. Organisational dynamics, such as shared rituals, shared identities, regular spaces of encounter, internal harmony, and affective ties all influence activists' sustained activism, in particular the decision to continue engaging or not (Bunnage 2014; Corrigall-Brown 2020; Polletta and Jasper 2009; Klandermans 1997; Goodwin *et al.* 2009,). Naturally, organisational aspects do not occur in a vacuum, hence some scholars link these to personal and structural changes, which also change the activists' view of the engagement. Ideology is a «necessary but not sufficient condition» when it comes to accounting for participation, and specially for sustained participation (*Ibidem*). Social scientists have discussed a decline in formal organisational memberships (Dalton *et al.* 2017; Norris 2000) and have revealed the changing forms of political participation, many of which imply a greater interest in actions and networks that prioritise individual expression and creativity (Pickard 2019; Norris 2000; Dalton *et al.* 2017; Gozzo and Sampugnaro 2016; Alteri *et al.* 2016). Furthermore, some of these new forms of engagement are also linked to issue-based platforms (instead of broad overarching platforms) loser networks and a stronger interest in lifestyle politics. Lastly, the precarity that many young people experience creates additional hurdles not only for their own personal development (Furlong 2017), but also in shaping their relationship with politics, making them more prone to having sporadic relations with activism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

This article constructs two ideal-typical trajectories to present a direct comparison of the experiences in activism as recalled by participants themselves. The first one is a 'lineal trajectory', which includes characteristics of 'conventional' 'professionalised' forms of engagement: sustained activism within highly professionalised organisations (Dalton *et al.* 2017; Busse *et al.* 2018; Spannring *et al.* 2008). In addition, these trajectories expose less proclivity to disengage or experiment, and an interest in effectiveness. Conversely, the experimental trajectories were followed by activists who were more interested in individual, expressive and creative forms of engagement, including sometimes lifestyle politics (Pickard 2019; Dalton *et al.* 2017; Alteri *et al.* 2016); they were more likely to combine different forms of engagement or to start their own grass-roots initiatives or protest actions. Likewise, these trajectories revealed some traits of abeyance (Corrigall-Brown 2020); some of the activists had periods of disengagement during which they retreated from organised structures, but maintained an individual form of activism and were able to draw from their acquired networks and know-how to re-enter the spaces of organised action.

This analysis focuses specifically on the stages after activists' first enrolment, thus the stage called sustained activism (Klandermans 1997; Corrigall-Brown 2020; Bosi *et al.* 2022). It specifically zooms in on the ways in which activists have been making sense of the personal and political transformations they have experienced since they first mobilised, and also how they view a continuity in their activism and link the different stages to specific aspects in their lives, at the organisation and also structural levels. This article seeks to contribute to the discussions about the (micro- meso- and macro-) factors shaping activist trajectories by bringing nuance and details about different types of trajectories, and how these are narrated by the protagonists.

3. METHODOLOGY

Considering the appropriateness of qualitative approaches for this research purpose (Mattoni 2014, Blee/Taylor 2002), this analysis is based on a sub-set (9) of the total of 40 biographic interviews conducted in Cologne (Germany) between 2018 and 2020. The sampling sought to maximise variation along organisational and socio-demographic lines: activists with diverse educational, socio-economic and personal backgrounds engaged in groups of different sizes, ideological orientation, levels of structuration, repertoires of action, etc. Participants were between 18 and 35 years

old at the time of the interviews, and had been engaged in sustained activism for at least three years. They were recruited for the project through a snow-ball procedure that sought to interview at least four respondents from the following types of organisations: centre-right political party, a centre-left political party, a solidary economy group, a left-libertarian group, feminist/LGTBQ collective, a students' union, a major environmental organisation, and a workers' union. Additionally, a few further interviews with mixed activists were conducted given the researchers' interest in the peculiarities of specific trajectories. The sub-sample was constructed based on an initial stage of analysis, during which trajectories and their main characteristics were identified. This initial analysis revealed ideal-typical models of trajectories followed by interview participants. The sub-sample was constructed to maintain and best express the diversity of trajectories and the diverse ways in which activists make sense of their own engagement and what they expect from it. Hence, the sample analysed in this paper reflects some of the original organisational diversity (along ideological and structural lines), some diversity in socio-demographic origins but, more importantly, variation in the traits of the trajectories.

All interviews were conducted in person at locations chosen by the interviewees. They lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, and the conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed to facilitate the analysis. Prior to the interviews, participants were fully informed about the project's goals and asked to give written consent for the recording of the conversations.

The analysis is based on a multi-stage coding process. Initially, the process was more deductive, based on well-known categories developed by social movement scholars (Bosi *et al.* 2022), then was followed by more inductive steps of open coding in which new categories and concepts emerged (Strauss and Corbin 2008). During this stage, codes and subcodes were used to label excerpts from the text. Examples of such codes and subcodes included: first enrolment, expectations, personal connection, meaning of activism, turning points, personal transformations, political transformations, etc. The codes related to the turning points, transformations and expectations were interconnected to have an interpretative reconstruction of the activists' trajectories. Following these, trajectories were compared and grouped according to similarity. These steps followed an 'inductive but theory-sensitive approach' (*Ibidem*). The two ideal-typical trajectories were based on the trajectories of two activists, and represent the points of reference for this analysis.

The following table presents the full sub-sample analysed for this study, including their self-reported socio-demographic information, as well as a summary of their trajectories. All the names have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. The names of the organisations or groups have been either deleted or changed.

3.1. *The local and temporal context*

Cologne is the third largest city in Germany, with around one million inhabitants and is the location of numerous universities, centres for apprenticeships, private education centres, which become 'pull-factors' for young adults from other German regions, as well as other countries (Euryka 2019). The city hosts numerous organisations and activist networks. In a nutshell, 'the two worlds of political activism' present in Germany are represented in the city: on the one hand, a well-funded, highly professionalised and structured sector (including a robust segment of political parties, environmental organisations, workers' unions, etc.) and, on the other hand, a dense population of loose networks, grass-roots initiatives and more spontaneous forms of activism (Busse *et al.* 2015: 120). In addition to this, the activist worlds in Cologne reflect a strong middle-class bias (Dalton 2017; Kiess 2021; Gaiser *et al.* 2010), strong parental influence in the case of activists in more formalised segments of activism (Busse *et al.* 2015), and a significant under-representation of people of migrant descent and working-class origin in spaces of activism, especially in the more formalised spaces (*Ibidem*). In retrospect, the years 2018-2019 did not witness the intense upheavals of previous years, like the refugee crisis in 2015 and the intense backlash of xenophobic groups like PEGIDA, and they were certainly less intense than the years of the COVID-19 crisis. Nonetheless, at the time of the interviews, there were a number of issues that captured attention at the national and particularly at the local level/s: strong environmental protests, particularly the occupation of the Hambach Forest, which polarised activists and public opinion, intense protests against new police code, protest initiatives demanding affordable housing, the need for new apprenticeship positions and labour opportunities, among others. At the core, these issues continue to be highly relevant today, even if some new actors have emerged. Moreover, some other long-standing issues, such as the right to asylum, feminism, anti-racism, inequality, have strongly shaped many of the debates and positions of the interviewees.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. From outsider to insider

Participants described their trajectories as a succession of stages and events related to their sustained activism until the time of the interview. All of them see the start of their activist lives as the moment when they decided to officially join an organisation or network, even if they all reported about prior experiences attending demonstrations, volunteering for electoral campaigns, or in civic engagement. Thus, the analysis reveals a clear-cut differentiation between being occasional supporters of specific causes and being an enrolled activist.

As they talked about their first enrolment, participants often linked the decision to their prior socialisation and to situations linked to their interpretation of events at the micro-meso-and macro-level/s (Paschou and Durán Mogollón 2022). The choice of organisation was framed as an autonomous decision mostly linked to the organisations' political orientation (Bosi *et al.* 2022). Furthermore, most of their first enrolments took place at times of transition; after moving out of the family home, or locating to another city, or after spending time abroad, or starting university or a new traineeship. These were usually phases of change during which they were open to new experiences and contacts, which highlight the importance of availability (Earl *et al.* 2017) and the advantages of universities for mobilising and organising (Pickard 2019, *Earl et al.* 2017).

The trajectories after this first enrolment were described as continuous processes of transformation during which they went from 'wallflowers' to embeddedness in affective and organisational networks. Lisa (Pol. Party Centre-Left) and Juan (Students' Union/ European Youth Network) talked about their early stages:

Lisa: Definitely. There are so many abbreviations and so many procedures, like how to bring in a proposal. There is, for example, GO (German initials) which means Rules of Procedure […], and then there are different hand gestures that are used. I don't even think about these anymore, but at the beginning, that did confuse me (to see) all of a sudden people raising their hands in the air while everyone stopped talking; I had no idea what was happening. By the way, there are seminars for new members where we have lists with all the abbreviations so people can read this […] So we hand these things out at the beginning so that everyone can understand because it is really like a language of its own.

Juan: It was hard to find myself within the group… most people had academic backgrounds and a university education.

Lisa and Juan's statements exemplify the feeling of 'otherness' that most participants recalled from their early days as activists; they lacked the knowledge about the groups' rituals and procedures, as well as the emotional bonds and shared language and identity. Still, these feelings of otherness were also nuanced: Juan stressed that at the start, he felt like an outsider because he was new, but also because of (perceived) differences in social and academic backgrounds between him and the rest of the group. This perceived otherness was shared by the other activists of migrant descent (Seyran and Dilek) and, to a lesser degree, by Lukas, who self-described as coming from a poor household.

During their early days, activists either connected or disconnected to the organisations on a personal, ideological, and/or tactical level. As they described the establishment of these connections, most of them talked about the personal affinities, opportunities of exchange, gaining skills and their own availability (Klandermanns 1997; Corrigall-Brown 2020; Bunnage 2014). Those who did connect (Lisa, Marius, Christian and Seyran, Sarah, Anna, Juan, Ludwig) reported a gradual process of shared political socialisation (Fillieule and Neveu 2019; Crossley 2003, 2004) during which they gained skills, established new friendships, and found a place within the organisation. Those who did not connect (Lukas and Dilek) concentrated on the lack of personal affinity; Dilek linked this to feeling like the cultural 'other' due to her familial and social background, and to the internal conflicts of the organisation. Lukas, on the other hand, was not convinced by the organisation's routines and personnel, and also stressed that he did not feel like spending much time with the people in the group.

Still, all activists continued embedded (albeit differently) in networks of deliberation and political socialisation. Whether they persisted with their initial groups, or shifted to combine or develop their activism in accordance with personal, organisational, and structural changes (Coe *et al.* 2016; Corrigall-Brown 2020), they described the trajectories as continued processes of socialisation and reflection during which they experienced different forms of personal and political transformation:

Lukas (Left-Libertarian): I actually know all of this through my political activity… (to) use encrypted telecommunications or turning off the phone during meetings and discussions. It's unusual to even think about those things in this society; we are all buying Alexa or Google Home or Siri […] these are all microphones… fucking shit. So, I would say this whole thing with data security and data sovereignty I have learned through my political activity. I have learned a lot about this and I have also learned that

for good political work, you need to debate a lot, this plenum culture [...] So I think it is a broad learning field, this (exercise of) finding solutions together, as a group, and I think I learned my political engagement this through.

Juan: In general, you become more sensitive and you learn to deal with the media more critically and not just (say things) like: "Angela Merkel needs to go!"; that's a thing (people are saying) now, but instead, you should ask why? Because you become more sensitive... so when you listen to the radio you watch out for (news about) Europe and politics... and this is directly interesting, right? So, you are awake right there (if you hear the words Europe, Politics).

Lukas and Juan were not the only ones who recognised significant personal transformations thanks to their activism. Besides gaining rhetorical and deliberation skills, participants admitted that their engagement has shaped their interpretations and led them to often frame problems politically. In addition, interviews reveal an overall positive view of activism where they recognise the 'costs', but overwhelmingly stress the positive transformations they have experienced: extended friendship networks, feelings of belonging and recognition, contextualising specific knowledge, critical and rhetoric skills, teamwork, new routines, recognition and a stronger self-identity. In most cases, these transformations reveal a process of development and self-recognition, wherein each participant has found and capitalised on their own strengths for the good of a specific cause:

Seyran: I give seminars and then (seeing) this "click effect" on people's faces, that's my motivation to give the next seminar. Because you talk about something like capitalism and redistribution and how much money the rich have and how much money the rest of the world has (and) witnessing this "click effect" on people when you explain it to them [...] I also have been told that I am a funny guy when I give seminars and I think that's my strength.

In addition, sustained activism inspired Seyran and Juan to pursue their advanced school certificates and apply to university. Both of them had initially completed apprenticeships and often stressed how this made them different from most other activists, sharing an assumption of a middle-class academic over-representation in these spaces (Dalton *et al.* 2017, Pickard 2019).

4.2. Moving in different directions: lineal and experimental trajectories

The way in which interviewees reflected about their post-enrolment experiences was shaped by what they understood as their first enrolment and what

expectations from activism were. Interviewees reveal how their sustained political engagement is characterised by constant peer-to-peer socialisation (Fillieule and Neveu 2019; Crossley 2003, 2004), and frequent changes in the intensity and the nature of their engagement (Bunnage 2014; Corrigall-Brown 2020; Klandermans 1997). Moreover, in making sense of their pathways after the initial enrolment, activists see themselves as agents who are constantly changing, as are the organisations and the broader societal contexts.

4.2.1. Lineal Trajectories

The lineal trajectories were those of activists who experienced less movements of disengagement or transfer, and who reported about a strong ideological, tactical, and personal connection with a specific organisation. These activists tended to attribute most of their growth to the organisation, and their narratives suggest they have 'found a place' within these groups. Marius (centre-right party) and Lisa (centre-left party), as well as Seyran (workers' union) were the ones with pathways closest to this ideal-typical trajectory. They remained at the organisation of their first enrolment; they had barely any activities as independent activists outside of the organisation. Besides them, Christian, an environmental activist in a large organisation (ENVGROUP), also reported about a trajectory closer to this ideal-typical model: he remained active in the organisation of his first enrolment; he had acquired roles and networks within the organisation and had a strong identification with it. Marius talked about the ideological connection that drove him to the party and how the organisation has fulfilled his expectations ideologically, tactically, and personally:

Marius: The other political parties seemed to be too stubborn and too focused on certain things. For example, the Green and Left (parties) are, in my view, too ideological, because I have a moderate approach to issues and don't approach them with a fixed opinion or stick to a specific area. What convinced me was what I have said several times; this idea of doing politics with a sense of moderation, which is important, and to be reflective and to approach everything with serenity. For me, this party best represented these ideas at the time and, so far, this has been confirmed.

Marius and Lisa preferred broad platforms and conventional actions over issue-based and confrontational activism (Dalton 2017; Pickard 2019). Marius stressed his ideological connection with the party and referred to macro-phenomena, such as the refugee crisis, the hous-

ing crisis, the environmental crisis, to assert that these discussions keep confirming that he is in the right place, given that he feels his party continues to present 'moderate' positions. Even more, the interpersonal affinity, and the adoption of roles of responsibility, have strengthened his connection with the party:

Marius: I am a member of the district's board of directors, so yes, I feel committed. I don't know what others think of me, but I get along pretty well with the group, […] and many of them have become my friends.

Lisa had a similar experience, as she managed to quicky connect with the group and grow within the organisation. She attributed her quick adjustment to the group to her family's social-democratic orientation, to the fact that she knew a few of the other party militants before, and to her positive experience as a campaign volunteer. Besides connecting her permanence to specific organisational and personal factors, (Corrigall-Brown 2020, Goodwin *et al.* 2009, Bosi *et al.* 2022), she also mentioned macro-phenomena that created the conditions for a better start in the organisation, as well as greater feelings of commitment and relevance to her own activism (Corrigall-Brown 2020):

Lisa: I mobilised in the summer of 2015, and that (the refugee crisis) started in the autumn, that means right on time. […] *We offered help to refugees, so we offered language courses together with the student union* […] *so you could immediately do a lot of things at the local level and so you could see something happening; the refugees were arriving at the train station so you had to directly figure out what to do and that was really helpful at the beginning. Politics can be very abstract; you write proposals and then they land somewhere* […] *and at the time, I saw my work made a difference and, in that sense, it was good that I caught this specific point in time to start because it really motivated me.*

Interestingly, by the time of the interview, Lisa felt much more confident with the procedures and with drafting proposals and, in general, with the "abstract" aspect of activism. But she still valued that her start was shaped by a great deal of direct hands-on action, which gave her an instantaneous feeling of gratification and recognition. Seyran followed a similar path in that he also established a shared identity and deep feelings of friendship and commitment with the workers' union (Goodwin *et al.* 2009; Fillieuele and Neveu 2019). One of the caveats he brings into the picture is that he attributed much more of his initial political socialisation to this precise organisation and the possibilities for interaction and politicisation that it offered (Crossley 2003, 2004), and the second one is his assertion that he has managed

to turn his 'cultural otherness' (being a working-class activist of migrant descent) into an asset:

Seyran: I have an advanced degree now, so depending on the audience, I know how to talk to them; I can bring out my 'academic slang' or my ghetto-slang.

Lineal trajectories are also the result of interaction and negotiation between the activists' expectations, their lived realities, the ideological and personal realities of the groups, and the changes at the societal level (Passy and Giugni 2000; Corrigall-Brown 2020; Fillieule and Neveu 2019). Moreover, as reported by the activists, even the more consolidated organisations are not completely homogeneous actors, but are also shaped by different and contending factions. In that sense, for some of the activists, the lineal trajectory implied finding roles but also finding specific spaces within the factions and learning to negotiate the disagreements.

Lisa: There are factions within the party. Our local group here is very centrist, which means it's not leaning in any particular direction; Manheim is very pragmatic and then in Berlin, for instance, if I went to Berlin, that would be too far left […] In Manheim, there were definitely more people who agreed with me than here; here I have to fight more often.

Lisa recognised some of the ideological lines within the party yet still confirmed that this was the right place for her. Similarly, Marius and Seyran also acknowledged a few ideological or inter-personal conflicts, but the attachment to the organisations is strong enough to stay. Christian addressed some of the criticism often made to ENVGROUP and its vertical and highly bureaucratised structure:

I think that's a matter of effectiveness. I don't think it would be as effective if everything was decided democratically at every single level… that's what I think, that's why I like it the way it is conceived and no one is limited; if someone wants to work on a completely different issue, they can do it maybe outside ENVGROUP.

These reveal their continuity and their engagement as a constant process of negotiation and growth, in which they are aware of the limits and the boundaries between their ideas and those of the group, and still choose to remain. Lisa, Marius and Seyran are deeply embedded within their respective organisations: they have positions of responsibility, they have ideological and personal connections and have created a shared identity with the group (Fillieule 2013; Klandermans 1997; Goodwin *et al.* 2009); they see this as a constant

process of shared socialisation (Fillieule and Neveu 2019; Crossley 2003) and considered combining their affiliation with a secondary one, but the interviews revealed that the commitment is very high and they have lacked situational and attitudinal availability (Downtown and Wehr 1998). Christian was the only one who was active in a second organisation, one engaged in local action related to environmentalism and re-distribution. Still, he stressed that ENVGROUP was his central affiliation, given that he lacked significant affective or ideological ties with the second one; he had positions of responsibility at ENVGROUP, as well as important routines, identification, and personal ties. Activists closer to this ideal-typical category were members of more structured and bureaucratised organisations (Davis *et al.* 2015; Bosi *et al.* 2022). The exception to this was Dilek, whose first enrolment was in a political party and she, nonetheless, followed an experimental trajectory.

4.2.2. The middle ground: between lineal and experimental trajectories

Constant political socialisation and reflection about the macro- meso- and micro-levels triggered new interests and expanded issues of concern in all activists, which led to further forms or intentions of commitment and activist development (Crossley 2003, 2004). Shifting allegiances, or at least combining multiple activism (Coe *et al.* 2016) was often considered, but the ways in which they lived and dealt with the idea of multiple allegiances varied. Likewise, the reasons behind these shifts were also nuanced.

Sarah (solidary economy-environmentalism), Anna (feminism/LGBTQ environmentalism) Juan (Students' Union, Pro Europe Network) and (to a lesser extent) Ludwig (Students' Union, LGBTQ networks) came around the middle of the spectrum between lineal and experimental because they were actively looking for different possibilities, but they did not really abandon their organisations, and they retained a clear idea of what their main engagement was. Anna and Ludwig both identified their first enrolment during their school years: she joined an environmental project, triggering her interest in environmentalism, and he started as a class-speaker and grew within school politics. They both recognise the socialising effects of these early experiences and see a continuity between them and their ensuing steps. The first shifts took place because they outgrew school, but both continued in similar forms of engagement; Anna started her own environmental group and he joined university politics. The expansion to LGBTQ networks is linked to personal identities and to the

expansion of their networks and the acquired ability to frame issues politically (Crossley 2003, 2004; Fillieuele and Neveu 2019).

Ludwig: I am very active and connected to the students' unions from other universities, and then I've met people from political parties, too; I have very good relationships with them, as well. Because of this, I came in contact with the LGBTQ networks and this is part of my identity, so I think it's important to get involved and talk about these issues.

Anna: […] I have very good arguments and I have good videoclips to really say 'look, this (feminism) makes sense.' If you look into everyday life, and say, ok I'll do my heter-onormative thing and I'll adjust, then you really don't need it (feminism) because you don't run against the boundaries because you fit into the system; that's my theory, at least, and that has a lot to do with my outing […] I no longer fit into the system.

Perhaps the most salient caveat is that Ludwig's trajectory is still closer to the lineal one, and his expectations for the future remain closer to institutionalised action (Pickard 2019; Dalton 2017), while Anna has a strong identity as an independent activist and values creativity, horizontal structures, and alternating between groups and issues (Pickard 2019). Much like Marius, Lisa and Seyran, Sarah established positive connections with the organisation she first joined: she found thematic, personal, and tactical affinity (Corrigall-Brown 2020; Bosi *et al.* 2022). Additionally, she was pleased that the organisational structure allowed for horizontal decision-making, creativity, and individual input (Pickard 2019). Still, the ongoing political socialisation and increased interest in political and societal issues, have led her to combine this primary affiliation with two other projects with a pragmatic approach, waste reduction and a local emphasis:

Sarah: I have been with (solidary economy) for about three and a half years, but then I felt like the issue of reducing waste or plastic was missing. I felt like this is an increasingly salient topic and it really bothers me, plus I also wanted to do something at the local level and we do operate locally with Rescue Groceries, but it was somehow not enough, I was missing something. With Reduce Rubbish, I really completed this.

Sarah combined all three affiliations and the amount of attention and time devoted to each depended mostly on organisational aspects (pending projects, availability of members, etc.). She recognised that many of her fellow activists were also members of two or all three organisations, and that it was common for them to alter-

nate between different organisations, to occasionally support environmental and consumption-critical events. In sum, she revealed strong and multiple ties and, at the same time, a strong interest in self-expression and creativity in activism (Coe *et al.* 2016; Pickard 2019). These expectations were well-met by the organisations' repertoires of action, political orientation and levels of bureaucratisation (Bosi *et al.* 2022).

Juan highlights his strong ideological and personal identification with PEN, as well as the paramount relevance of this organisation in his political socialisation and connection with networks of activists (Crossley 2003, 2004; Fillieuele and Neveue 2019). Precisely this expansion triggered important personal transformations: returning to education, reading more about politics, having an interest in leadership. He joined the students' union, and, at the time of the interview, he had managed to combine both high intensity engagements with his studies. Besides this, he was exploring political parties because he wanted to engage in his main priorities: environmentalism, healthcare, and inequality. In his case, he has constructed his own activism, alternating between movements (Coe *et al.* 2016), but with a strong tendency towards more bureaucratised groups (Bosi *et al.* 2022), closer to institutionalised and more conventional forms of action (Pickard 2019; Dalton 2017). His story resembles Ludwig's in that they have both had positive experiences within institutionalised participation, they both feel comfortable in positions of leadership and feel motivated to find a place for themselves within partisan structures. Moreover, through their first engagement, they have both explored further interests and connected with activists outside their own groups. The middle-ground reveals a mixed-bag; some of them are activists who can make strong commitments to single organisations while maintaining an element of lifestyle politics, individual expressions of activism and a general interest in experimentation (like Sarah and Anna). In contrast, some are activists whose expectations come closer to those of the lineal activists (Juan and Ludwig), but who combine allegiances in line with their personal identities and the general conditions of their own organisations. They sought to expand partly because their organisations did not offer long-term perspectives, or had a narrow scope, compared to political parties. Hence, it makes sense that both Juan and Ludwig have expressed interest in joining political parties in the future.

4.2.3. Moving sideways: Experimental trajectories

Activists who reported about experimental trajectories were those with a greater tendency to switch or alternate between issues, networks, organisations, and individual action (Corrigall-Brown 2020; Pickard 2019). These activists were more inclined to combine different forms of action (Dalton 2017; Pickard 2019), more likely to be initiators (of new groups and/or projects), to have extended and dispersed networks across issue lines, and strongly self-identify as independent activists. Furthermore, they were more likely to reveal contentious elements in their view of activism, since they tended to engage in groups that challenged power and sought to open new spaces and mechanisms of action (Tarrow 2008; Dalton 2017). Dilek and Lukas followed experimental trajectories; they have both moved within contentious networks (Tarrow 2008), and within a left-wing spectrum. They both come from working-class backgrounds and saw themselves as 'exceptions' in the spaces of activism. They were dissatisfied with many organisational aspects (internal harmony, repertoires of action, bureaucratisation) after their first enrolment and disengaged from their initial organisation. Still, they recognise a continuity in their trajectories, precisely because their dissatisfaction was rooted in organisational aspects (Corrigall-Brown 2020; Bosi *et al.* 2022), though not in a lack of determination to remain politically active.

Lukas: I was in ENVGROUP […]; they have these rigid structures and procedures and meetings every two weeks, and I found this sort of interesting, but it was clear (that) everything was so pre-made; (it is) such a rigid structure organisation. And I didn't feel like I could make a real contribution, so I thought that I would like to do something with my friends, instead of engaging in ENVGROUP with people you don't really get along with. In my current group, we are close friends, and we want to do this together.

Dilek: When I started studying, the local campus group was relatively new, I mean the party's campus group […] Apparently there were some internal problems in the group, as I found out later, and there were also language barriers. I didn't understand the discourses and I didn't have the impression that they were trying to integrate the newcomers because they were in their own bubble, and so I abandoned the group pretty quickly. I was still politically interested and also active, and I did attend some demonstrations whenever I cared about something; I met with people, discussed, and read a lot.

After they disengaged from their initial enrolment, Dilek and Lukas established networks of like-minded peers, engaged in discussions, supported demonstrations and different small-scale grass-roots initiatives. They report about important experiences of peer-to-peer socialisation, and a growing interest in activism and social justice (Crossley 2003, 2004). Moreover, they have

been able to draw from their gained experiences, know-how and networks to engage in different forms of activism (Corrigall-Brown 2020). Dilek decided to return to the party after some time:

> *Dilek: I started engaging there again; what enraged me at the time was that there was a lot of discussion about racism in the group, but there were very few people there who had actually experienced racism.*

> *Dilek: Yeah, so this was the problem and that's why it was important for me to be active, and I think this initial hurdle that I encountered was no longer there… firstly, because the personnel had obviously changed and secondly, because of my own readings, my activities and my own research, I understood certain things better, […] because I had dealt with them, so it was no longer so difficult to be part of the group.*

After she returned to the party, Dilek quickly developed and established strong emotional connections, became acquainted with the jargon, repertoires of action and even assumed positions of leadership (Goodwin *et al.* 2019, Corrigall-Brown 2020; Crossley 2003). Still, she preserved a strong identity as an independent activist, and combined different forms of action and affiliation (Coe *et al.* 2016; Pickard 2019): she was a member of the student parliament, joined a small reading and discussion group for peoples of colour, and organised "safe spaces" at the university. As she recalls, she became deeply embedded in friendship and activists' collaboration networks: «I could organise a demonstration for basically any issue… climate change, feminism, anti-capitalism, racism because I know the people», and decided to alternate between different forms and spaces of action (Coe *et al.* 2016). Her second disengagement is linked to a structural factor with repercussions in the local group: public statements made by then party president, Sarah Wagenknecht, about migrants triggered intense discussions which led her to question her own support for this party and to "re-orient" politically (Corrigall-Brown 2020). Throughout this time, and until she returned to the party, Dilek remained active in networks linked to capitalism-critique, environmentalism, anti-racism.

Lukas' story bears some similarities in that he also became embedded in strong affective and political networks of friends who are also activists; this furthered his political socialisation (Crossley 2003, 2004) and his interest in hands-on creative and individualised forms of activism (Pickard 2019). He started his own group and remained active, both individually and within other networks. He realised the importance of personal affinities in doing activism (Goodwin *et al.* 2009) and in having flex-

ible, creative, and individualised action. Besides his networks, ideologies and expectations, Lukas mentioned that becoming a father had also shaped his trajectory, leading to his continued engagement, but devoting less time:

> *Lukas: Political engagement for me includes going with a spray can and writing political statements in specific places, where it is important for me to get people thinking. Maybe in a very rich mansion to ask to what extent is it cool to have something like this in the city. I find in this way protest is individualised and I can do it easily whenever it suits me…*

> *Lukas: what I'm still doing are some of my independent projects, like, for instance, a film screening about police brutality, which is already planned, and invite people from our circle; we already have a long mailing list of people.*

Experimental trajectories reveal pathways in which the main commitment is rooted in specific causes or aspirations to social justice, rather than in organisational loyalties. Furthermore, these trajectories, and the ways in which Dilek and Lukas have negotiated their sustained political engagement, reveal much about their expectations from activism: both have a tendency towards contentiousness (Tarrow 2008) and have created strong personalised networks and activities to best express their values (Coe *et al.* 2016; Pickard 2019).

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper zooms in on the details of sustained activism and reconstructs the stories based on the testimonies of activists. In doing so, it provides a nuanced picture of the interplay between expectations from activism (including ideology, tactics, personal connections, perceived effectiveness, personal growth) and the realities of the experience. The ideal-typical trajectories propose a conceptual tool to bring greater nuance to the continuities and transformations that shape activists' experiences, by taking the actors' perspective and seeking to understand how the interplay between activist, group(s) and societal context is experienced differently.

The sample provides important variations in organisational types and orientation, and the analysis reveals how these traits influenced the decisions made by activists (Bosi *et al.* 2022). Additionally, the article brings nuance to the processes of persistence, disengagement and shifting since participants alluded to different organisational, personal, and structural reasons (Corrigall-Brown 2022; Bosi *et al.* 2022), and to the development of activist identities (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Goodwin *et al.* 2009).

All participants identified as activists and saw this as a crucial part of their personal identity, but these identifications were rooted differently, either in organisational instances, affective networks, or notions of social justice. Personal identities, self-perception, and even personal backgrounds, proved relevant in adopting new issues (as was the case of those who entered LGTBQ networks), finding common ground within the activist groups, and even in framing issues politically. Interviews reveal that activists with migrant and working-class backgrounds often perceived themselves as 'cultural others' in activist circles, which resonates with much of the literature (Dalton *et al.* 2017, Pickard 2019, Kiess 2021). Still, interviews also suggest that some organisational settings (such as Seyran's union, Juan's Pro Europe Network) might have dynamics and structures that facilitate the incorporation into the group. Even if the activists mostly framed their narratives with personal and organisational themes, the reference to macro-phenomena served participants as points of reflection to either confirm or question their sustained participation, or even to motivate them to explore other options, and alternate between different activities.

Emotional and personal ties, as well as a feeling of commitment, the adoption of routines, and frames of analysis were common to all activists, regardless of the type of trajectory they followed. Likewise, they all saw a continuity between their experiences, networks, and transformations. The salient difference is that those closer to lineal trajectories experienced most of these transformations within a given organisation, whereas those closer to the experimental lived these transformations alternating between organisations, networks, and issues. Lineal trajectories were most common among activists who joined more professionalised and formalised organisations; this can be linked to the expectations and ideas that many of them have of activism, the meanings attached to this, and also to the very possibilities offered by these types of organisations. Conversely, experimental trajectories were more common among those who valued self-expression and individual input. Dilek was an interesting example of a partisan activist with ties within institutionalised and bureaucratised spaces, and with the more spontaneous grass-roots ones

Further research could explore how the trajectories of activists engaged in non-mainstream parties might vary with respect to those who militate in mainstream parties. Furthermore, the salience of biographic availability (Earl *et al.* 2017) was raised by activists in this sample, but this aspect could be addressed in greater detail by further research focused on activists with longer trajectories patterned by numerous turning points. Lastly, scholars could take the meso-perspective and

explore the losses and gains for organisations of having fluctuating and changing memberships.

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