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Contentious Minds in Action

The true revolution is the one of the mind.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Margot is a seventy-year-old with a lifelong commitment to political activism. As a university student in the early seventies, she helped migrants coming from southern Europe settle in Switzerland, notably by delivering classes in French. She has pursued her social commitments since: joining labor unions, social workers organizations, migrants’ right contention, and various new left groups. Twenty years ago she joined Greenpeace, which now constitutes her sole political commitment. At Greenpeace, she dedicates her time to sensitizing students at public schools to ecological problems, participates in the organization’s national council, is involved in the ongoing construction of strategies and selection of thematic priorities, and engages in what Greenpeace calls “activists” groups—small intervention groups that undertake illegal actions to protect our environment. Her life has been one dedicated to the improvement of society.

Why has Margot been this committed? A number of explanations come to mind. She possesses the necessary resources: Margot is a highly educated member of the new middle class, typically overrepresented in post-industrial movements (Kriesi 1993). Another key factor is: the social networks. Having begun her activist career during her student days, she forged particular formal ties that bound her to contentious groups at an early stage. She is also embedded in an extensive network of friends—including her husband—who are committed socially and politically. Now retired, she is able to devote most of her time to ecological advocacy. These are the most probable explanations that we, social movement scholars, would think of. However, the focus of this book is on Margot’s mind, and that of other activists. We aim to show that the manner in which Margot perceives her social and political environment
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helps explain how she is able to participate and sustain her commitment to environmental protection.

Margot conceives of her commitment as an action that objectively improves people's lives. In her view, pollution, excessive consumption, the exhaustion of natural resources, and global warming starkly impact human living conditions. Environmental destruction threatens the livelihood of those who will follow in our wake, and Margot perceives this as a major injustice: “We inherited the earth, a place full of life. We use portions of those elements, and destroy others. But the earth is a common good and we are diminishing both our inheritance and our legacy.” The main object of her commitment—environmental protection—is to preserve a common good that affects everyone. In this respect, Margot understands society as a highly interconnected and interdependent ensemble: “Society exists thanks to social ties and human relations. Without such ties, societies can develop only in an imbalanced fashion. . . . We exist, as persons, because of those ties; we are merely fractions in a whole.” Margot's action is construed as an action for fellow citizens; her commitment goes beyond her own interests. Her picture of society is one that relies on a universalist dimension. For Margot, we all belong to the same world, and for society, this space is devoid of boundaries or lines between groups of people. As she asserts: “We should work toward a more open world: A world without social, faith-based, or cultural distinctions. This is an imperative for me.” Crystallized here is Margot’s perception of her social environment, or as we label it, her understanding of common good.

Margot further relies on a specific understanding of politics, including key actors in the domain. While economic actors are perceived as responsible for the destruction of our environment, state actors are viewed as chiefly accountable when it comes to regulating society as well as protecting and bringing about common good. Regarding environmental protection, Margot delegitimizes state actors on grounds of a lack of accountability: “I entertain a difficult relationship with state actors. They don’t go far enough because they are profit oriented. What we need are measures that seriously reduce futile consumption, but I doubt they will act in this direction.” Civil society actors are hence crucial in influencing political decision making and challenging state actors when they fail to protect the common good. For Margot, it is only through protest action that people can voice their concerns and place pressure on state actors: “I think civil society actors are absolutely necessary if one considers the political decision-making process. . . . Civil society actors
create a world carried by ideas and therefore have a crucial role in forming opinion and troubling political authorities.” To sensitize and inform the population appears a necessity, in addition to contesting state action. For Margot, this twin strategy is relevant for environmental protection and the protection of other types of common good. Margot thus understands politics as a field in which political intervention is required to increase state accountability.

Margot sees common good and politics with specific cognitive lenses. This brings a central question to the fore. Are these understandings strictly personal to Margot or are they synchronized with the understandings of other activists committed to Greenpeace? After all, Margot’s lifelong commitment could have given her a unique view. However, it could also be plausible that she shares these meanings with active and passive members of Greenpeace and even with activists from the same commitment community, namely, those committed to the defense of migrants’ rights and to the improvement of collective rights of minorities. And what about activists in other communities dedicated to providing social care to the deprived and who labor for better rights for workers? If all rely on similar specific worldviews regarding the common good and politics, we can consequently expect activists to be concerned about these issues, and this concern should translate to a particular conception of their role as political citizens within a democratic regime. What notions of democratic cultures—which circulate through society as a consequence of their action—do activists hold? We will seek to answer this core question by comparing activists engaged in contentious politics, volunteering, and unionism through survey and interview data.

A wider theoretical question follows from this discussion: What role does the mind play in enabling activist action? As we will see, social science is not silent on this issue. Yet more knowledge is required to grasp it in detail. Activists are embedded in commitment communities and are therefore exposed to interactional opportunities that enable them to put into practice the cultural scripts available in these sites. Those interactions shape their

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1 For Tilly and Tarrow (2007, 4), “contentious politics involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties. Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics.”

2 Cultural scripts capture values, norms, templates, guidelines, or models for ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting in a particular cultural context. As Goddard and Wierzbicka (2004, 153) underline: “Cultural scripts refers to a powerful . . . technique for articulating cultural norms, values, and practices in terms which are clear, precise, and accessible to cultural insiders and to
minds and enable them to participate and maintain their commitment. Questioning the influence of the activist’s mind on the participation and sustainability of commitment lies at the heart of this book.

Synchronized Minds

The central aim of this book is to demonstrate that activists rely on synchronized minds to perform joint action. During action, a process of synchronization occurs, one that enables activists to develop shared meanings about the aim and means of activism. This process leads them to perceive common good (aim) and politics (means) through similar cognitive lenses. We show the extent to which activists’ minds are synchronized within a commitment community and the depth of variation between activists’ worldviews across distinct commitment communities. To assess synchronization within, and the variation between, communities constitutes the first important element related to the central aim of this book. The second is to explain how this process unfolds. How do activists synchronize their understandings of common good and politics? What are the relational mechanisms that enable their minds to be synchronized, and what are the cognitive mechanisms that ensue and allow them to participate in and sustain activism?

The perceptions of common good and politics held by activists is crucial to the empirical consideration of understandings of political citizenship. The second aim of this book is to assess whether activists construct community-specific democratic cultures. Through a close examination of activists’ understandings of political citizenship, both within and between communities, we show that different democratic (and undemocratic) cultures are imagined and enacted in our societies, thereby entering the public sphere through collective action.

Our two aims matter for four main reasons. First, we need to provide more knowledge about the activist’s mind in order to explain why the mind matters for action. Compared to other factors of influence, the role of the activist’s mind in the mobilization process has been understudied. Piven and Cloward stressed “the necessity of cognitions” to participate in contentious activities and stated that “the emergence of protest entails a transformation of cultural outsiders alike.” Individuals involved in a specific community (and whatever the community is; e.g., family, work, activism, sport, etc.) use those cultural scripts to interact with each other. They actually practice cultural scripts.
of both consciousness and behavior” (1977, 3). For McAdam (1982) too, the emergence of the civil rights movement would not have been possible without a process of “cognitive liberation.” Their claims echo San Suu Kyi, who declared: “The true revolution is the one of the mind.” Activists’ minds should therefore play a pivotal role in the activists’ participation in contentious politics. While pioneering work has rightfully put effort into understanding the importance of collective meanings—such as frames, identity, or narratives—it unfortunately undermines the importance of the activist’s mind and fails to recognize how perceptions, among other factors, operate in commitment.

Furthermore, existing studies on activists’ minds yield controversial results about the causal link between mind and action. Jasper (1997, 10) stresses: “We often protest because our systems of meanings are at stake.” He thereby shows that specific views and understandings are essential for one to protest and enter into contentious politics. Worldviews are one of the key elements behind people’s impulse to join activism. Gamson (1982, 1992, 1995) and Klandermans (1997) found similar evidence: The mental world of activists intervenes in their joining protest actions. Studies that stress the importance of activists’ values also indicate as much (e.g., Abramowitz and Nassi 1981; Dunham and Bengtson 1992; Marwell, Aiken, and Demerath 1987; McAdam 1989, 1999; Sherkat and Blocker 1997; Whalen and Flacks 1989). Meanwhile, Munson’s study (2009) reverses the causality others have established. In a comparative study of pro-life activists and non-activists, Munson showed that activists hold ambivalent or even pro-choice positions once they join pro-life groups. It is only over time that their views on abortion change as initial ambivalence and pro-choice beliefs turn into pro-life sentiments. Thus, most of the activists Munson studied developed specific worldviews about the aim and means of their protest action only once they had committed.

These controversial results show that the role of activists’ worldviews in the process of commitment in contentious politics is far more complex than we initially thought: More research on what occurs in the activist’s mind is required.

In this book, we do not seek to untangle the problem of causality. Nor do we ask whether specific worldviews are key to a person’s becoming an activist, or whether these views develop once individuals engage in contentious action. Empirical evidence suggests that both causal links are present: Some people join activism because their systems of meanings are at stake while others develop specific understandings during action (Monsch and Passy
Our focus here falls on what occurs during action. First, we show that once activists are involved in commitment communities, they rely on shared understandings that enable them to perform joint action and to sustain their commitment. Second, we highlight how those shared meanings are constructed in activists’ minds by underscoring how various cognitions are interrelated and enable activists to perform action. Our contribution stems from the knowledge we provide on the role and importance of activists’ minds during commitment.

We rely on one-shot data in this study. As a result, we cannot empirically identify the synchronization process of activists’ minds that occurs during action. Our data show that once activists are involved in commitment communities, they rely on synchronized minds. This result suggests that a synchronized mind is needed to perform joint action at a specific point in time. Our comparative research design also enables us to suggest that the activists’ mind is different from the mindset of the general population and varies from one commitment community to another. Those findings come from data collected at one point in time—that is, when we interviewed and surveyed the activists.

We also show that activists who rely on synchronized minds are embedded in specific relational settings. Our data underscore that conversational interactions occur in activists’ formal and interpersonal networks. We also know from both interviews and survey data that embeddedness in those social networks precedes our data collection. We are therefore empirically aware that activists discuss and dispute ideas with their peers during their commitment and that this occurred prior to their being interviewed. This means that conversational interaction, a process that shapes the activist’s mind, occurred before our interviews. We thus have one empirical indication that conversational interaction occurs before we underscore that activists rely on synchronized minds to perform action. In addition, as we will discuss, knowledge from sociological theory clearly explains how and why interactions shape the human mind (e.g., Collins 2004; Emirbayer 1997; Mead 1934; White 1992; Zerubavel 1997). Therefore, both our data and social theory enable us to highlight how those shared meanings develop in activists’ minds by highlighting that a process of synchronization occurs during action.

We are nonetheless aware of the limits of our data. As tempting as it might be to use the life histories of activists collected in a longitudinal way to bring the development of activists’ understandings to light, they will always remain a reconstruction, influenced by the very moment and situation in which the
interview takes place. Consequently, we cannot identify when synchronization occurs and whether synchronization takes place before or after an individual joins a commitment community.

The second reason behind our interest in the activist’s mind is that we want to examine cognitions in the making, or during action. Social movement scholars have produced numerous studies that seek to explain the recruitment process at work in protest politics (e.g., Chong 1991; Gould 1995; Jasper 1997; Klandermans 1997; Kriesi 1988; Marwell and Oliver 1993; McAdam 1988; Nepstad and Smith 1999; Opp 1989; Opp and Kittel 2010; Passy 1998a; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980). Initial engagement undoubtedly constitutes a pivotal first step in a citizen’s commitment. However, personal trajectories in activism go far beyond this. While scholars acknowledge that initial engagement is simply the initial phase in contentious participation—and some of them have conceptualized what comes after early recruitment (Klandermans 1997; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013)—we still know little about what happens afterward. Yet the sustainment of participation is equally important when it comes to understanding contention. Contention is not a single event or performance. As Tilly demonstrated in his seminal work, contention is made of a series of performances sustained in time (Tilly 1978, 1998a, 2004). Contentious politics exists through the presence of sustained interactions between people with common purposes and solidarity with opponents and authorities (Tarrow 1994). Although broad processes and macro-dynamics are crucial to sustaining contentious episodes (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), processes that occur at the level of individual activists play a significant role too. Without sustained participation, contention is improbable.

Sustaining commitment is not rare. In her study on patterns of protest, Corrigall-Brown (2012) showed that sustained participation can take various forms: persistence in the same group; commitment to other activist sites; or individual abeyance, whereby commitments are abandoned for a period of time and then resumed. Taking this variety of behaviors into consideration, Corrigall-Brown found that 56 percent of the citizens committed to activism in the United States sustained their participation over time. We found similar evidence in our study of mobilization in two organizations in Switzerland—the Bern Declaration and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)—where only 10 percent of those activists declared themselves to be newcomers who had committed within the year or two years before. Half of the other activists had been committed for four to ten years, and another half had sustained
their commitment for over a decade (Passy 1994, 1998b). Another study conducted with a representative sample of the Swiss population showed that of people involved in activism about 50 percent sustained their collective effort over time (Monsch and Passy 2018). While sustaining commitment is frequent, exactly what occurs once activists participate in collective endeavors remains obscure. We hope here to provide a unique insight into what goes on during action and how action impacts the activist’s mind.

A third reason for studying activists’ minds is that the interplay between commitment communities and activists is worth scrutinizing. Activism takes place in activists’ groups and is based on worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (WUNC, Tilly 2005). These groups can be highly organized and formalized (like those studied here) or informal and made up of low numbers. Even in the latter case, however, activists are not isolated but tied to fellow members (Blee 2002). Once a citizen joins in contentious action—as a formal member, sympathizer, active or passive member, or by any other form of action—he or she joins a commitment community, a network of collective actors and campaigns (Diani 1995, 2003, 2007). Although structures and shared interests organize a commitment community, it is also a world made of meanings, stories, and identities, and is therefore a space prone to the development and circulation of cultural scripts (Diani 2015; Diani and Pilati 2011; Tilly 2005). Activists who evolve in a commitment community practice the cultural scripts available in that community (Polletta 2008).

Many studies separately examine individuals who join and leave activism and groups (but see Mische 2007 and Auyero 2001 for exceptions). However, as the definition of commitment community already indicates, the individual and group levels are intimately bound to one another. We therefore cannot make sense of individual participation without taking into consideration the collective site where they evolve. Basically, we need a better grasp of the interplay between the micro- and meso-levels of activism. Mische (2007) has gone some way in illustrating this, as she scrutinizes how cross-talks enable individuals to bridge different networks and communities, to travel from one network to the other, with the potential to transform or change existing networks. In this book, we do not focus on processes between communities but on what goes on within communities. We examine how interactions among individuals within a specific community shape its members’ minds. While the empirical emphasis is on interactive and cognitive processes at work during action, these processes also have a bearing on the commitment community itself. These processes nourish the network with worldviews that
enable action and allow networks to distinguish themselves from others. A neat separation between both sociological levels is therefore counterproductive if we want to make sense of contentious participation and activism at large. Individuals and communities are tied together and influence each other during commitment.

An empirical example of the interplay between commitment communities and the activists we describe is the fourth reason behind our study of activists’ minds. We will show how types of embedded comprehensions of democracy exist in commitment communities and how varied they can be. This empirical endeavor allows us to consider culture in another light: not only as a structure bearing on individuals’ worldviews but as a dynamic and multifaceted entity. Examining things in this way doesn’t come at the expense of considering how cultures shape minds, but it stresses how minds simultaneously shape cultures. Collective understandings evidently exist within commitment communities and bear on activists’ minds. Yet these same collective perceptions are continuously challenged, adapted, and sometimes transformed through the interaction of activists who never cease to create meanings. By studying activists’ understandings of political citizenship, we want to bring a dynamic and changing idea of culture into social movement studies. It must be said that these understandings do not circulate only between activists’ minds and within commitment communities. Rather, they are concretely lived by activists and enter the public sphere through collective action. Activists thereby disseminate their idea of citizenship—their democratic cultures—within and across countries through their action. Hence, to assess activists’ comprehensions of democracy is to reveal one facet of how commitment communities contribute to ongoing processes of (de-)democratization through the creation of spaces where (non-)democratic cultures are constantly constructed and modified (Tilly 2007).

**Mind, Action, and Interactions**

As we have seen, Margot relies on a specific understanding of common good, articulated in universalist terms. For her, goods are meant to objectively improve people’s lives and should be shared by the whole population regardless of social groups. No citizens should be excluded from benefiting from goods that can improve their lives. Margot also conceives of politics in specific terms. She understands politics as a field of political intervention in order to
increase state actors’ accountability toward the common good. According to her, political conflicts carried on by civil society actors are essential to challenging state actors to promote, secure, and strengthen the common good. But how do those meanings enable her to act? How do meanings allow action to be maintained within a commitment community? To answer these questions, Chapter 2 will develop our theoretical proposal, which aims to show how the mind affects action and how (inter)actions shape the mind. We simply outline it briefly here.

The mind orients an individual’s action. The mind is an important element in human action. But what is the mind? Philosophers, sociologists, and social psychologists define the mind as a thinking and perceiving “inner box” composed of complex cognitive processes. Beyond this very broad definition, however, perspectives on the human mind differ across disciplinary boundaries. Relying on the epistemology of interpretative sociology, we consider individuals as “voracious meaning makers” (Weber 1978). Meanings permit individuals to perceive social realities, to make sense of them, and to act in their social environment. Without meanings, we cannot order a chaotic world and we are unable to act. However, apprehending the links between the mind and action requires us to consider the work of cognitive psychologists.

Two main axes of contributions by social and cognitive psychologists are relevant to conceiving of the manner in which the mind is tied to action. First, emphasis is placed on the notion that cognitions are domain-specific, tied as they are to a specific field of experience. This means that we need to specify the cognitive dimensions at work to investigate a specific action like activism. As we show throughout this book, understandings of aims (common good) and means (politics) of activism constitute two essential pillars of knowledge for committed individuals. To subjectively construct a sense of the aim of activism and to mentally elaborate on the means to act constitute two crucial

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3 We use the terms “mind,” “meaning,” “understanding,” “perception,” and “worldview” interchangeably.
dimensions of the process of joining in, maintaining, and disengaging from collective endeavors.

Second, psychologists urge us to specify the cognitive paths that bridge the mind to intentionality and which ultimately enable action. Perceptions and subjective constructions of our surroundings provide us with a motivational component that orients human action (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). The mind therefore sets intentionality and delineates the possible and preferable from the impossible. As shown in Figure 1.1, we disentangle the cognitive mechanisms that link the mind to action as follows: Broad perceptions of common good and politics enable individuals to elaborate specific cognitive components that set their intentionality in a specific way, eventually orienting their action toward particular political and social issues and forms of activism. Cognitive components span from broad understandings to a concrete intentionality required to perform action. The content of those cognitive components, as well as the way in which they intervene between understandings and intentionality, will be inductively identified through activists’ narratives like that provided by Margot. This cognitive path can be envisioned as akin to a funnel, where broad understandings guide action through more specific cognitive elements that set individuals’ intentionality. In our case, the latter is constituted by concrete answers to these questions: For whom, for what, and in which field do activists intend to mobilize, and what form of action do they choose?

Our theory not only suggests how the mind is tied to action but also elucidates how social interactions enable the construction of shared meanings. This is necessary because, with a few notable exceptions (Vygotsky 1978), most psychologists pay little attention to the cultural context in which cognitions are elaborated and transformed. As contributions from the field of interpretative sociology highlight, however, cognitions are always particular, contingent upon cultural contexts in which individuals evolve. Individuals hence possess a social mind rather than a singular mind (Zerubavel 1997).

Figure 1.1  Cognitive mechanisms at play in the specific domain of activism
They rely on socially shared meanings fashioned in concert with others through conversational interactions (Mead 1934). Interactions shape people’s minds, and such constant fluxes enable them to develop shared meanings. As we will show in our study, these interactions allow activists to elaborate shared understandings regarding the aim and means of activism, that is to say, about common good and politics. Joint action is improbable without these shared views and the related cognitive components behind the orientation of an activist’s action. Building on White’s (1992) idea that networks are “islands of meanings” we will demonstrate how conversational interactions enable activists to develop shared understandings. Talks and disputes lead activists to synchronize their understandings regarding the aims and means of activism. Conversational processes are as complex as cognitive ones: Not all types of conversational interactions have a part in shaping an activist’s mind. We will identify which relational mechanisms do help synchronize minds, as well as those that do not. A majority of the interactions that have an impact on the activist’s mind take place within commitment communities, leading to their inclusion in this study. By contrast, we do not examine how this interplay continuously shapes the scripts that circulate in the commitment community, preferring instead to focus on one element of White’s theory.

Finally, not only does the mind orient an individual’s action, but action itself reinforces or modifies the human mind (Albarracín et al. 2001; Boster et al. 2014; Fishbein and Ajzen 2010). We therefore are faced with a non-recursive link between the mind and action whereby influence between the two elements is reciprocal. Actually, performing action in commitment communities tends to reinforce activists’ understandings about the commitment itself. Previous understandings are strengthened and legitimized, with the consequence that commitment is stabilized over time. However, when action does not resonate with activists’ understandings, a dissonance between their action and their worldviews is created, inviting them to modify their views through peer interactions and to harmonize their action and thought; if the gap between action and worldviews is too wide, activists will tend to leave the commitment community.

In this book, we argue that a cognitive-relational process occurs during action, leading to a process of mind synchronization among activists. The interplay between the mind, action, and interaction takes place during action and we will show that this cognitive-relational process is essential to the performance of joint action: in our case, activism. This process is also central
when it comes to sustaining commitment, thanks to the reinforcement of shared meanings that ensure commitment is stabilized over time. The probability of leaving the commitment community thereby increases whenever the synchronization of minds does not occur.

Figure 1.2 highlights the process of mind synchronization. Once activists join activism, they actually integrate a commitment community. Participation in activism, regardless of its form, above all entails evolving in a community and entering in a process of conversational interaction. Through talks and disputes, activists practice cultural scripts available in the community that allow their minds to undergo a process of synchronization. Their meanings about common good and politics—about the aims and means of activism—synchronize with those of their peers. Yet this process of synchronization involves specific relational and cognitive mechanisms, which we explain in the next chapter. This synchronization process allows participants to construct shared meanings that, in turn, enable them to perform joint action and to continue the process of integration into a commitment community.

Common Good and Politics

Having briefly outlined our theoretical model, we now turn to the operationalization of our key concepts: common good and politics. As cognitions are tied to a specific field of experience, we now need to specify the cognitive
dimensions that partake in the performance of activism, which is the aim of this section.

Specific meanings linked to the aims and means of activism are behind an individual’s motivation to voice dissent, to care about others, or to fight social and political injustices. Activism is the sustained intervention of a group of individuals with the aim of achieving social, cultural, or political change (e.g., to improve citizens’ rights, to enlarge democracy, to advocate better working conditions, but also to restrict the right of minorities or to reinforce authoritarian regimes), to avoid the deterioration of a specific situation (e.g., the environment, rights withdrawal), or to provide specific populations with social care (e.g., deprived or sick people, migrants, or native people). Each case of activism is therefore about a particular aim within a particular domain.

We assume that activists construct a specific meaning about the aim of their commitment, which we call their relation to common good. For example, activists who mobilize against radioactive material stored in the English Channel may have two specific conceptions of common good in mind. Either they perceive mass pollution as a threat to the survival of human beings and our planet, and mass pollution is viewed as a universal threat which concerns everyone. Or they perceive mass pollution as a threat to the health of the population living on contaminated coastlines, meaning that mass pollution is a collective good but one restricted to a specific group of people. Hence, while the activists’ relation to common good is intimately tied to activism, the way activists perceive a common good can vary. Actually, common good constitutes the primary aim of activism, and activists develop a particular notion of common good either before joining an action or during it.

In addition to constructing specific meanings about the aim of activism, these groups also think about the particular means suitable to their action. Intervention can happen either through the enrollment of activists in politics in which state holders are challenged through a variety of tactics, or through the avoidance of politics all together. In both cases, however, activists construct a specific meaning regarding the means of their commitment, which we call their relation to politics. For example, activists mobilized against radioactive material stored in the English Channel may have two specific conceptions of politics in mind. Either they conceive the issue in terms of a political conflict and confront governmental passivity as a consequence, or they conceive the issue as one they can take care of, thus deciding to provide
social and health care to the contaminated population themselves. Whatever activists decide to do, they must think about the means through which they intervene in society and construct what we call a specific relation to politics accordingly.

To grasp activists’ understandings of common good and politics requires conceptual work. And the concept of common good is not an easy one to define. First, common good has undergone important reformulations from ancient Greek times to the present day (Geuss 2001; Miller 2004). Second, it overlaps with other related concepts, notably “the commons,” “public good” also labeled “public interest,” and “collective good.” As a historian of ideas, Geuss (2001) emphasizes history as “a continuing series of transformations in which the old is not simply obliterated and utterly deleted, but is taken up and preserved in a modified form” (p. xii). Said otherwise, the concept of common good, the commons, and public good overlap to a certain extent, as all possess semantic, material, and evaluative traces due to their genealogical roots. Nonetheless, Geuss highlights a major divide in the way social science and philosophy have understood common good. The concept’s revision by liberal theorists turned it into a “public good” (e.g., Hobbes [1668] 1994; Locke [1660] 1959; Rawls 1971). Nowadays, we face two distinct understandings of common good: a pre-liberal definition that draws on Aristotelian thought, to which the notion of the commons is associated, and a liberal definition that draws on the concept of “public good” (Douglass 1980; Smith 1999).

The pre-liberal definition of common good relies on the idea that goods should be accessible to all members of society. Those goods can be natural (e.g., land, water, air), cultural (e.g., mathematics, laws, art), or social (e.g., peace, education, rights). And the specificity of such goods is twofold: First, they are goods that objectively improve people’s well-being. Second, all social members should be able to share them: They are indivisible. For Aristotle, common good is “a good proper to, and attainable only by the community, yet individually shared by its members” (Dupré 1993, 687). It consists “in a number of specific objectives designed to promote general human well-being—such as peace, order, prosperity, justice, and community” (Douglass 1980, 104). In Aristotelian thought, common goods are conceived as objective goods that enhance people’s lives and benefit all members of society.

This Aristotelian conception clearly departs from the liberal definition of common good. And the conceptual move from “common good” to “public
“good” can again be said to be twofold: First, the term “public” refers to an aggregation of private interests and in the liberal tradition, the aggregation of individuals’ interests is thought of in terms of a majority (Barry 1964; Douglass 1980; Hobbes [1668] 1994; MacIntyre 1990). The “majority” is not an all-inclusive category and departs from the pre-liberal notion of commonness: Only a majority of people benefit from the common good. Second, the notion of “good” relates to personal preferences that are subjectively defined (Douglass 1980; Murphy 2005). Public good depends on the mood and preferences of individuals; therefore, in the writings of liberal theorists, common good is a good that is subjectively defined and shared by the majority.

We rely on the pre-liberal definition of common good based on Aristotle’s thought in our study and follow in the wake of contemporary thinkers who urge social scientists and philosophers to depart from utilitarian notions of common good, with the aim of restoring it as an all-inclusive category and heralding its objective definition (Barry 1964; Douglass 1980; Geuss 2001; MacIntyre 1990; Smith 1999). Relying on Aristotle’s definition of common good helps us grasp what a common good truly is: a good that effectively and objectively enhances people’s lives and that all individuals can equally access. Each individual benefits, or can potentially benefit (as in the case of public schools), such indivisible goods. Yet, relying on Aristotle’s definition of common good does not imply that all activists perceive common good in this pre-liberal sense.

NIMBY groups (“Not in my backyard” groups who protest against nuclear plants in their region, for example) are a typical example of a group that defends a collective good. The individuals involved in the group do not care if this good, which is objectively dangerous for inhabitants of any region, could be implemented in another part of the country. They simply say: “Not in My Backyard.” The principle of equality toward the good—in this instance, the protection of health conditions and the viability of a given territory—is not taken into account. Activists in these groups therefore do not defend a common good but their own interests. Similarly, groups mobilized for personal interests—like the construction of a public park only for one neighborhood’s children—are not committed to a common but to a collective good where only a happy few can enjoy the green space. Again, the principle of equality is neglected. By opposition, we can imagine similar groups as committed to the development of a common good when they aim to build a green space in the neighborhood that is open to everyone.
The dimensions of common good must be distinguished before we can grasp the activist's understanding of common good empirically. The Aristotelian definition of common good relies on two analytical parts: commonness and goodness (Murphy 2005, 134). Drawing on this distinction, we will explore how activists perceive common good. First, we examine how they apprehend “commonness.” We ask whether activists consider all society members as the beneficiaries of common good, or if they see the benefit as restricted to specific groups. Second, we examine how they understand “goodness.” We consider how goods are apprehended in general and how this relates to the specific good they are committed to.

Three sub-dimensions are required to grasp the tricky notion of commonness. Commonness refers to the possibility that an entire community shares a good. The concept helps us understand how individuals relate to society, how they conceive of fellow human beings, and whether they erect boundaries outside their social spheres. The first sub-dimension, labeled interconnectedness, enables us to see how activists relate to society and refers to the social ties that bind people together. We therefore examine whether activists perceive individuals in society as linked and dependent on one another. With the second sub-dimension, humanness, we focus on the manner in which activists perceive how individuals evolve in society. Do activists make sense of others in universalist terms, ontologically, or as socially constructed (e.g., class, religion, nation)? The last sub-dimension, inclusiveness, delves into cognitive boundaries that individuals create between their own social circles and others. We can therefore evaluate whether divisions between social spheres are perceived or whether a shared humanity is imagined. These sub-dimensions allow us to question whether individuals rely on a communitarian or universalist conception of society (Kymlicka 1995; Taylor 1994; Walzer 1997; I. M. Young 1990).

The second dimension—goodness—pertains to the perception and assessment of the good that objectively improves people's living conditions. For Aristotle, common good strengthens collective well-being. He points out that common good has various facets, one of them pertaining to justice (Smith 1999). Aristotle viewed injustice as a persistent feature of our societies, depriving people of their rights. Closer to our time, Gilligan (1982) argues that social problems can be seen in two different ways: through an ethics of justice or an ethics of care. The problem of poverty illustrates this distinction aptly. It can be seen as a social problem, through the lens of social justice, which considers that living under the social minima violates a
fundamental human right, or as a question of social care, whereby the poor require protection to survive. We accordingly examine whether activists perceive social problems in terms of axes of social justice or care.

Combining the perceptions of “commonness” and “goodness” pries open a conceptual space where four possible understandings of common good can be articulated, as shown in Figure 1.3. First, activists can rely on a perception of common good in terms of social justice for all. Common good is then perceived as a matter of rights and those rights pertain to all social members without restriction, leading to a *universal social justice* understanding. Second, activists can see common good as a social justice for a specific group. As with the former, common good is above all construed as a question of rights. However, those rights are restricted to a specific social group. Those activists possess a *communitarian social justice* understanding. A third possible understanding of common good is that of social care for all. Activists who view common good with this mental lens rely on a universalist perception of the beneficiaries of common good, nonetheless understood as a question of care, which we call a *universal social care* understanding. The fourth and final possible view of common good entails that an indivisible good is seen in terms of social care for a specific group, and this view can be called a *communitarian understanding of social care*.

Besides common good, the second central cognitive dimension we attend to is an activist’s relation to politics. In the political space, the central actor is the state. According to Tilly (1992, 1), states are “coercion-wielding organizations” implying that they are usually the most important and

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**Figure 1.3** Distinct understandings of common good
powerful actors within a given political space. However, in a democracy, multiple actors are present and try to voice their interests within a given political field by defending their position as incumbents or by contesting incumbents as challengers (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Multiple actors with diverse interests and different hierarchical positions hence interact in a political space, the locus where ongoing conflicts are regulated and interest negotiation takes place. Consequently, an understanding of politics is about the way activists perceive the actors who manage political interests and ongoing conflicts in any given political field. Two major actors are central in the field of activism: the state and civil society. We therefore examine an activist’s understanding of politics with the aid of two dimensions: the person’s perception of state actors and his or her understanding of civil society actors.

In the assessment of an activist’s perception of state actors we differentiate between two sub-dimensions. On the one hand, we consider how activists judge state actors’ accountability for common goods, and on the other, whether this judgment lends legitimacy to state actors. The distinction is therefore one made between state actors’ role and its evaluation by activists. In terms of the state actors’ role with regard to the accountability for common good, one can roughly establish a continuum that comprises two extremes: accountable states that are responsible for common good, and, by contrast, containing states that are not accountable. Activists who judge state actors to be accountable for common good desire a state that intervenes and assumes responsibility for the production and maintenance of common good, as opposed to activists who favor state actors’ containment and who wish for a state that promotes economic freedom and personal responsibility. In the latter view, state intervention must obviously be limited.

The second sub-dimension relates to how activists evaluate state actors. Social movement scholars have stressed the relevance of the concept of (de-)legitimization in this regard. Piven and Cloward (1977) have noted that protesters undergo a process of cognitive transformation. More precisely, activists do not accept the authority of rulers anymore and accordingly delegitimize state actors. Similarly, Gamson et al. (1982) have described how legitimacy is undermined when authorities act unjustly. More recently, Klandermans (2010) has found that activists who demonstrated against the war in Iraq also delegitimized state actors by displaying feelings of opposition against the general mechanisms of democracy, emitting doubts about
political efficacy, and expressing low levels of trust in their national social and political institutions. Contentious activists here delegitimize state actors. But is this the case for all activists? Moreover, do activists delegitimize state actors solely regarding the issue they are concerned with, or do they develop a more generalized form of delegitimization? While the state is a set of multiple actors, activists are likely to have it figure as a heterogeneous actor (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). State actors could either be delegitimized (or legitimized) solely for the issue activists are mobilized for or generally delegitimized (or legitimized).

Alongside their perception of state actors, activists also develop a perception of civil society actors. Activists channel their action through collective actors and develop a sense of this community or, at least, of the specific organization they are part of. Two different action types of civil society actors can be envisioned: Either there is a contentious understanding, whereby civil society actors intervene in politics to urge state actors to produce, maintain, or enlarge common goods, or the emphasis is placed on the capacity of civil society actors to substitute and minimize state intervention. In addition, the legitimation of civil society actors will be assessed. Piven and Cloward (1977) have stressed that activists not only undergo a process of delegitimization of the ruling authority but also come to understand organized protest as a means of changing their own situation. Gamson et al. (1982) call this process “loyalty-building to the challenger,” a process through which challengers legitimize the protest action they are involved in. It seems reasonable to suggest that activists who are not challengers legitimize the civil society actors they are part of. Because different forms of civil society actors exist—either contentious or substituting—we also take the range of legitimization into account, that is to say, we ask whether activists legitimize different types of civil society actors.

As a summary of activists’ perception of politics, Figure 1.4 crosses activists’ perception of state and civil society actors, resulting in a conceptual space with four possible ideal types. Starting at the upper left corner, individuals could understand politics as a field of intervention for accountability. For them, state actors are accountable for common good and are delegitimized whenever they do not fulfill their responsibility. In addition, the role of civil society actors is to intervene in political decision making, which is a legitimized role. Thus, they perceive politics as a field of political intervention in which state accountability can be increased. In the lower left corner are shown activists who perceive state actors as accountable for common good.
By contrast to the first category, they legitimize civil society actors who substitute state actors. Having lost faith in state actors, they perceive politics as a field of substitution for accountability. Activists with such a worldview perceive politics as a social substitution to replace state accountability. Turning our attention to the right side of this conceptual space, we have individuals for whom state actors are not accountable for common good. They legitimize state actors’ containment and want civil society actors to intervene in politics to advocate less state intervention. They perceive politics as a field of intervention for containment. Politics then becomes a field of political intervention where the aim is to reduce state accountability. Finally, individuals who perceive politics as a field of substitution for containment also desire a weak state. In order to accomplish this, they do not want civil society actors to intervene in politics but would rather see them substitute the state actors’ intervention.

The relation to common good and politics not only represents the aims and means of activism, but it also enables us to assess how activists conceive of political citizenship. These understandings are important because they represent democratic cultures imagined in activists’ minds which are transformed through interactions in commitment communities, which are experienced by activists, and which enter the public sphere through collective action. Simply put, activists disseminate their notion of political citizenship within and across society through their actions. Democracies are living entities that can be strengthened or weakened in many ways, and one
way they are shaped is through civic participation, in and beyond institutional politics. Democratization and de-democratization are therefore ongoing (and sometimes parallel) processes (Tilly 2007). We question what types of democratic cultures activists—committed to contentious politics, volunteering, or unionism—have in mind. At least theoretically, activism is a form of action that allows ordinary citizens to be active in society in the promotion or strengthening of common goods. To a certain extent, activism partakes in the model of participative democracy which relies on politically active citizens who get involved beyond electoral politics (Barber 1984; Pateman 1970). Can activists all be characterized as “strong citizens” concerned by both common good and politics? In other words, do all activists in this study place common good before their private interests, deliberate, and take part in politics?

To understand how these democratic cultures play out in the activist’s mind, we consider how they relate to the question of political citizenship. We examine whether activists are concerned by the aims and means of activism, that is to say, by common good and politics. The first dimension is an activist’s concern for common good where we consider whether activists are citizens who adjust their own life plans to the exigencies of a shared world. However, as all activists already defend a specific type of common good through their commitment, we assess the range of their concern to evaluate their concern for common good. We underscore whether activists are concerned by multiple common goods, or rely only on a limited concern.

The second dimension addresses whether activists are concerned by politics. Individuals who are concerned by politics consider politics as enacted by state actors but also by citizens. This entails citizens being politically vigilant and participative. Rather than rely on a representative idea of democracy, they prefer participatory institutions that allow them to fully partake in the democratic process. Accordingly, we consider whether activists are politically vigilant by being watchdogs who monitor political elites and events, as well as whether they are willing to participate beyond institutional politics and challenge state authorities whenever necessary. We therefore scrutinize whether activists express a willingness to control state action, to monitor governmental actors when they do not fulfill their roles, and to enter the political sphere by means of contentious action.

4 The term “strong citizen” developed in this book is one inspired by the work of Barber (1984) and his notion of “strong democracy.”
Figure 1.5 combines the two dimensions of strong citizenship—the concern for common good and politics—into a conceptual space with four possible combinations. Activists who are concerned by common good and politics are *strong citizens*. They are concerned by multiple types of common good and are politically vigilant, ready to partake in contentious politics. They are citizens who are aware of the importance of common goods such as migrants’ and minorities’ rights or ecological issues, and prioritize such goods that objectively improve people’s living conditions. *Social citizens* also place multiple common goods before their private interests. But by contrast with strong citizens, they are not concerned by politics and are therefore not concerned with the importance of political vigilance and participation in political life. Rather, they trust the government and are confident that a blend of state, civil, and economic actors can work together to provide common goods. *Resistant citizens*, the third ideal type, are concerned by politics but not by common good. These individuals are vigilant and participate in politics but only to promote a collective good pertaining to a specific group of the population. Finally, *weak citizens* are concerned neither by multiple common goods nor by politics. According to these two dimensions, four different democratic cultures are conceivable. Do activists of the commitment communities examined in this book all share a similar type of political citizenship? Or do different types of political citizenship exist, thus enabling the dissemination of various democratic cultures through collective action, and, by extension, contribute to democratization processes in different ways? We answer these questions in the empirical part of this book.

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**Figure 1.5** Distinct understandings of political citizenship
Comparing Commitment Communities

We have specified the cognitive dimensions at work behind the performance and sustainment of activism. In Chapter 2, we elaborate on how broad understandings of common good and politics set an activist’s intentionality. Before doing so, we discuss methodological points. For this study, we surveyed and interviewed activists at one point in time.\(^5\) We used the member lists of five distinct organizations to identify them, a strategy that has implications for the scope of our study. All the activists in this study are members of at least one organization. While one could imagine that activists may work on their own or participate at protest events without being a member of a group, the activists studied here are all involved in more or less formally organized collective groups. They are engaged in collective action and try to achieve a common objective. We further divide this type of activist into two broad categories: active and passive members. Passive members invest money only while active members invest time. The distinction between these two types is crucial to our research, as passive members lack opportunities to enter into direct communicational interactions with fellow activists. Consequently, we wondered whether a similar process of mind synchronization could be observed among passive members of a particular commitment community. And if this is indeed the case, how is it achieved if passive members do not directly interact with other members?

Surveying and interviewing activists during action only once further oriented our study. The research design we opted for is appropriate to the examination of how an activist’s mind is synchronized at a specific point in time and highlights the impact of meaningful interactions. However, this means that we are not arguing that an activist’s mind allows the individual to join collective endeavors. Rather, we argue that the minds of such individuals enable them to be committed and to sustain their commitment. We do not want to suggest that causality exists between activists’ understandings and their engagement in contentious politics, unionism, or volunteering action as we simply do not have the appropriate data to back such a claim. During the long interviews we had with activists, most of them recounted their life stories and the narratives behind their commitment, referring to past events, experiences, and thoughts. As attractive as such past accounts

\(^5\) All data used in this study stem from the research project “Why Stand Up for Others?” financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Nr. 100017-122246).
can seem, we cannot make use of them to subject to scrutiny a person’s entrance into activism. Retrospective accounts do not provide appropriate data to analyze this process. As we all know, we talk about our past with the lens of the present. We reconstruct it and reshape the meaning of events (e.g., Schacter 1995). Consequently, without a longitudinal research design, we do not know the extent to which the activist’s mind is transformed after commitment has begun. Similarly, we are unable to highlight whether particular cognitions are necessary for a person to engage in activism.

Hence, we examine the understandings of activists who have already committed to varied causes. Comparison is accordingly a crucial element in our study. We compare the minds of activists involved in contentious politics with those of ordinary people who devote their time to institutional and volunteering action. Why opt for such a comparative analysis? As previously highlighted, we suppose that activists who enjoy conversational interactions in their commitment community relate specifically to their social and political environment, that is to say, to common good and politics. We therefore postulate that participants engaged in a specific commitment site should possess a specific mindset. A comparison is necessary to put this conjecture to the test.

But why do we compare distinct forms of activism? Social science has become more specialized and, some might say, fragmented into sub-fields that fail to communicate with one another. Social movement studies are no exception. In the last thirty years, scholarship in the field has witnessed an extraordinary growth but has increasingly developed into an enclave (McAdam and Schaffer Boudet 2012; Walder 2009). Protest lies at the center of the research cosmos. Although we acknowledge that this focus enlarges our knowledge of social movements, it also presents important drawbacks. One major problem of this autocentric research practice is the presumption that this form of activism is specific and distinct from other types of commitment. We are actually unable to support or discredit this conjecture as long as we do not compare contentious participation with other forms of political and civic commitments systematically.

In this book, we focus on the mental world of activists. Comparing three distinct (and important) forms of civic commitment in Western democracies,
we investigate whether the mental world of social movement activists is specific enough to depart from that of unionists and volunteers. We question whether the understandings of common good and politics of contentious activists are particular, setting a specific intentionality that orients them toward contentious politics rather than other forms of activism. Moving away from the centric view of social movements studies and toward a comparison of activists mobilized in contentious politics, unionism, and volunteering action, our research design aims to produce two types of comparison: within a community, and between communities.

We therefore chose to compare activists across five separate organizations. Three groups of activists are committed to contentious politics: Greenpeace, Solidarity across Borders, which defends migrants' rights, and the Society for Threatened Peoples which promotes human rights, and the rights of autochthonous populations in particular. This comparative strategy enabled us to pay attention to variations within a commitment community. The second comparative perspective, between communities, lies in our study of activists mobilized for Unia, the most important syndicate in Switzerland, in charge of the promotion of labor rights in the private sector, and Caritas volunteers, who support the poor. The selection of these five cases was directly related to the size and importance of these organizations. They have enough members to carry out a survey and, due to their size and their nationwide scope, also incorporate a representative character for the particular commitment communities under scrutiny.

However, forms of activism—contentious politics, unionism, and volunteering—do not overlap with the notion of commitment community. Indeed, various commitment communities exist in contentious politics, and this remains true for unionism and volunteering action, too. For example, people committed in the post-industrial movement do not evolve in the same contentious community as skinheads do. For these two groups, there is no overlap in their network of commitment and their network of meanings. The activists studied here are hence not only committed to distinct forms of activism but act in distinct communities as well. Greenpeace, Solidarity across Borders (SAB), and the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) are all protest actors who operate in the same contentious community. They are part of the huge protest network that emerged in the sixties in Western democracies, under the banner of the post-industrial or the left-libertarian movement (Della Porta and Rucht 1995; Jasper 1997). As these activists are mainly
engaged in the defense of moral issues (Jasper 1997), we labeled this network of collective actors the moral voicing community.

Comparing activists within this community allowed us to question the extent to which they rely on shared understandings of common good and politics. While Greenpeace, SAB, and STP activists belong to the same commitment community, they are engaged in struggles for distinct moral causes, and the nature of the political challenge they are confronted with varies: Their concern is modulated by the different forms of common good they pursue and the variety of state actors that regulate them. Different political constellations hence arise. Here, we compared two mainstream or consensual causes (environmental protection and the rights of minorities) with a highly challenging political issue (migrants’ rights). This comparison sought to question whether moral voicing activists perceive common good and politics through the same lenses and whether conversational interactions within this community shape a specific contentious mind.

Greenpeace activists are committed to environmental protection. With more than 150,000 members, they form one of the biggest social movement organizations in Switzerland and are mobilized for one of the most consensual protest issues in the country. Even when it comes to energy policies, arguably the most challenging sub-field within environmental politics nowadays, the Swiss authorities support alternative energy forms and have rejected a proposal to construct new nuclear plants (Swiss Federal Office of Energy 2014). Thus, state actors are supportive of challenging actors when it comes to environmental protection (or at least more so than in other domains). Activists who engage in this kind of protest action are therefore involved in a mainstream cause that reduces the risk of political conflicts with state actors and the general public.

Individuals committed to the Society for Threatened Peoples in the human rights sector are similarly positioned. These activists provide social and political support to persecuted minorities worldwide. Given the prominent place of the Swiss humanitarian tradition within the public discourse (Fanzun 2003), it is unsurprising to observe that activists of the Society

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7 Evidence from a public opinion survey shows that a majority of the Swiss population is rather anxious about environmental problems in general (more than 70 percent) and more than half of them think that no cause is more important (Stähli et al. 2014).

8 More information about the organizational characteristics and history of all organizations of this study can be found in the Appendix A.1.
for Threatened Peoples are mobilized on a mainstream issue that is usually supported by the public and state actors. Moreover, activists of the Society for Threatened Peoples challenge Swiss state actors less than they do those of other countries. Consequently, activists who join the Society for Threatened Peoples mobilize for a mainstream issue that involves low levels of political conflict, like those Greenpeace activists face.

Solidarity across Borders is the third organization in the moral voicing community. It is the umbrella organization in Switzerland for the defense of migrants’ rights, a field otherwise composed of small groups active in their respective regions. People who defend migrants’ rights are mobilized in one of the most challenging protest fields in the contemporary Swiss context (Giugni and Passy 2004). Over the last decade, the rights of migrants were repeatedly reduced and the only political party that places migration issues on the political agenda is situated at the right of the political spectrum and is the strongest party in the country in terms of constituency. In addition, public opinion on the matter is harsh.9 These factors ensure that the position of defenders of migrants’ rights with regard to the state and public opinion is far more challenging than is the case for activists of the two other organizations.

Comparing three organizations within the same community that vary with regard to the common good at stake, and the level of political challenge faced, offered a prime opportunity to test whether these differences have a bearing on an activist’s relation to common good and politics. For example, activists who defend migrants’ rights may have developed a stronger political opposition and challenging relation to state actors. Or Greenpeace activists engaged in environmental protection may entertain other relations to common good than those of activists who defend particular social groups. The challenging question here was whether the moral voicing community shares a similar perception of common good and politics.

After comparing activists within a community, we compared different communities with each other. Caritas is a volunteering organization of the so-called third sector (Anheier and Seibel 1990; DiMaggio and Anheier 1990). In Switzerland, the sector is split into secular groups having no relevant ties to confessional actors, and organizations that are either embedded in, or close to, religious actors. Volunteering actors therefore evolve in two

9 More than half of the Swiss population thinks that immigration numbers from former Yugoslavia and Albania are too high and that young immigrants contribute to increased levels of violence and vandalism in the country (Selects 2011).
distinct communities. Caritas’s history is one tied to Catholicism and other Christian aid organizations. Caritas activists are hence not representative of all types of organizations included in the third sector but rather of a specific case in terms of volunteerism in Switzerland. The organization’s volunteers evolve in a commitment site we have labeled the Christian aid community, which departs substantially from the moral voicing community. It is an aid community because it provides help to individuals who face life difficulties. Within the Swiss third sector, Caritas belongs to the group of non-profit organizations that endorse the principle of subsidiarity, which means that they carry out state actors’ responsibilities and are supported by the state (Salamon 1981). This can therefore hardly be called a challenging cause. We included activists from the organization’s three regional branches: Caritas Geneva, Luzern, and St. Gallen. It is important to distinguish these activists from activists of the better-known Caritas Switzerland because they are committed to different ends. Indeed, while activists in Caritas Switzerland are engaged in international humanitarian aid, the Caritas activists in this study provide help to the poor locally. They offer concrete social and legal support, give emergency relief, assist with the integration of problematic youth, provide companionship for the sick and people in mourning, and organize leisure activities for the elderly (Caritas Geneva 2014).

In addition to the moral voicing and Christian aid communities, we included the radical workers’ rights community represented by the activists of Unia. Comprising around 200,000 members, Unia is the largest union in Switzerland specialized in the defense of working conditions and labor rights in the Swiss private sector. In particular, they negotiate collective labor agreements, strengthen rights of employees, and take a political stand for a more sustainable model of social security (Unia 2015). Unia was founded in 2004 after a merger of the unions of engineers and watchmakers, construction and industrial workers, and transport and foodstuff workers (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). This composition remains visible in Unia’s membership base: 21 percent from craft, 29 percent from construction, 48 percent from industries, and 12 percent from the service sector. Unia is composed mostly of blue-collar workers from the private sector, but the union is expanding its membership base to include white-collar workers.

10 Such as the organizations of the Protestant Social Centers, the Emaüs or Bread for All.
11 We relied on these three regional sections of Caritas because they work on similar issues, ensured a sufficient number of active members, and allowed an assessment of whether there are differences between German- and French-speaking activists of the same organization.
While Unia is the largest union in Switzerland, it is not the only one, and therefore the minds of their activists do not necessarily encompass the views of all Swiss union members. Although many mergers took place over the last twenty years, the union landscape remains fragmented. A sectorial division exists between the left-wing organizations and the more moderate unions with a Christian background. Unia belongs to the radical workers’ rights community, a markedly leftist syndicate engaged in the defense of employees in the private sector.

As far as Unia’s relation to politics is concerned, we can safely assume that Swiss state actors support unionists far less than they do Caritas. However, in contrast to challengers from the moral voicing community, they are not complete outsiders either, relying on access to political decision making through tripartite institutions. Yet unions are in a weak position due to the specificities of Swiss corporatism. They face a powerful business community and must bargain for collective labor agreements at the level of each industry and company (Calmfors and Drifill 1988; Fluder and Hotz-Hart 1998; Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). As with the defenders of migrants’ rights, Unia activists are committed to a challenging political issue. They defend their defiant claims with both contentious politics strategies (e.g., petitioning, sit-in, street demonstrations) and institutional means (e.g., negotiation with their economic partners and state actors) in order to stand a chance in tripartite negotiations.

The comparison between the moral voicing, radical workers voicing, and Christian aid communities allowed us to investigate whether activists who operate in distinct commitment sites possess distinct minds. Do those activists perceive common good and politics differently? Do they rely on distinct cognitive paths that set their intentionality to perform joint action, and to sustain it? Do they have similar understandings of political citizenship in mind? This comparison allowed us to highlight the plurality of an activist’s mind. However, the research design did not allow us to cover the whole spectrum of activism, or politics, in Switzerland. Activists studied here remain mainly of a leftist bent. But our aim was not to be representative of the variety of activists’ minds that exist in Switzerland. Rather, we sought to underscore the cognitive-relational process that leads activists to commit and sustain their commitment in collective endeavors.

12 With voicing, we want to stress that this group speak up for workers’ rights.
Swiss Understandings of Common Good and Politics

In order to limit the variation of contextual influences, the comparison of these three communities is located in one single national context: Switzerland. Yet collective understandings exist within a nation and have a bearing on activists’ mindscapes. We therefore briefly outline in this section the understandings of common good and politics available to activists living in Switzerland through interactions that occur within the national context. While we expect activists to depart from these worldviews and to construct specific shared meanings within their commitment communities, some common features may exist, as activists evolve in a particular national context in which specific cultural scripts circulate.

When it comes to the relation to politics, Swiss democracy and political authorities in particular are deemed trustworthy. Switzerland is a small central European direct democracy. The Swiss population generally displays high levels of political trust compared to other European countries (Bauer, Freitag, and Sciarini 2013). This is rather exceptional given global political and economic crises. However, four reasons might explain why the Swiss maintain relatively high levels of trust in national political authorities. First, direct democratic institutions offer repeated opportunities to influence political decision making (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). As we will see, activists frequently mention this point in their narratives: Most perceive direct democracy as a major advantage of the Swiss political system. Second, the nature of Swiss federalism weakens the notion of the nation-state, which allows political implementation to be adapted regionally (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). This further results in an acute proximity regarding political issues and politicians. Indeed, it can be said that structures of direct democracy and federal institutions permit the population to evolve in a rather open and accessible state. A third reason for high levels of political trust is

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13 The most recent instance of the European Social Survey (ESS Round 7, 2014) confirms results obtained by Bauer, Freitag, and Sciarini (2013), who based their findings on the ESS data from 2010 (Round 5). Based on a score of 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust), Switzerland (6.2) figures among the European countries that place the most trust in their national parliament together with Scandinavian countries (Sweden 6.2, Norway 6.7, Denmark 5.7). Other European countries (Central Europe: Germany 5.0, France 4.0, Austria 4.8; United Kingdom 4.4, Southern Europe: Spain 3.7; Portugal 3.2, Eastern Europe: Czech Republic 3.9, Hungary 3.9, Poland 2.8) score considerably lower. The averages were weighted by post-stratification and population size weights. While difficult to compare, the population of the United States also shows low trust levels in their Congress. According to World Values Survey data (2011, Round 6), only a little more than 20 percent claim to be very or somewhat confident in Congress (Dalton 2017).
the relatively low levels of perceived corruption. In that regard, Switzerland scores fifth on the corruption perceptions index compiled by Transparency International.14 Finally, political trust can be understood as related to the political performance of governments (Mishler and Rose 2001). Compared with other Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries, Switzerland scored high on indicators for economic performance, such as unemployment rates, inflation rates, and the general government debt (Schmidt 2014).15 Therefore, the opportunities to delegitimize state actors remain rare. The president of the Federal Council in 2015, Simonetta Sommaruga, clearly expressed as much in an interview.16 “For me, Switzerland is tantamount with reliability. . . . I am proud of our direct democratic political system, of the fact that four times a year, citizens can have their say on important aspects of our country’s future.”

In addition to relatively high levels of trust in state actors, a strong opposition to state intervention is another important perception broadly apparent in the Swiss national context. Swiss federalism means that the notion of a centralized state remains rather weak. However, this does not necessarily mean

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14 The corruption perceptions index established by Transparency International (2016) considers Switzerland to be a very clean country. Based on a score of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean), Switzerland (86) scored fifth, neighbored by Scandinavian countries (Denmark 90, Finland 89, Sweden 88, and Norway 85) and New Zealand (90). The variation in other European countries is quite high (Central Europe: Germany 81, France 69, Austria 79; United Kingdom 81. Southern Europe: Spain 58, Portugal 62. Eastern Europe: Czech Republic 55, Hungary 48, Poland 62). While Canada also obtained a high score (82), the United States (74) scored somewhat lower.

15 The OECD data (2016) showed that Switzerland presented an unemployment rate of 4.9 percent. In international comparison, this is low when compared to Scandinavian countries (Sweden 7.0 percent; Norway 4.7 percent; Finland 8.8 percent; Denmark 6.2 percent), similar to other central European countries (Germany 4.1 percent; Austria 6.0 percent; United Kingdom 4.8 percent) with France figuring as an exception (France 10.1 percent). Countries of Southern Europe showed higher unemployment rates (Spain 19.6 percent; Portugal 11.2 percent) and the rates in Eastern Europe were similar to rates in Switzerland (Poland 6.2 percent; Czech Republic 4.0 percent; Hungary 5.1 percent). Finally, the United States showed the same unemployment rate as Switzerland (4.9 percent).

We also use OECD data to compare inflation rates (measured by consumer price index). In 2016, Switzerland had a very low inflation rate (−0.4 percent). This seems to have been a common feature across Europe (Scandinavian countries: Sweden 1.0 percent; Norway 3.5 percent; Finland 0.4 percent; Denmark 0.3 percent. Central Europe: United Kingdom 0.7 percent; Germany 0.5 percent; Austria 0.9 percent; France 0.2 percent. Southern Europe: Spain −0.2 percent; Portugal 0.6 percent. Eastern Europe: Poland −0.7 percent; Czech Republic 0.7 percent; Hungary 0.4 percent), as well as in the United States (1.3 percent).

Finally, according to OECD data, Switzerland has a very low general government debt (measured as a percentage of its GDP) of 45 percent. Only half of the Scandinavian countries come close to this percentage (Sweden 60 percent; Norway 43 percent; Finland 76 percent; Denmark 53 percent). The other European countries (Central Europe: United Kingdom 123 percent; Germany 78 percent; Austria 101 percent; France 120 percent. Southern Europe: Spain 117 percent; Portugal 146 percent. Eastern Europe: Poland 72 percent; Czech Republic 54 percent; Hungary 97 percent), as well as the United States (128 percent) showed substantially higher general governmental debt.

16 Published in Le Temps on October 3, 2015. Translation ours.
that cantonal political actors are strong. They operate with few administrative resources, hardly intervene, and rely on civil society actors when possible. In fact, Switzerland has been described as a “coordinated economy in which policy consultation has played an important role in the elaboration of public policies” (Afonso 2010). Switzerland can therefore be said to belong to the group of nations characterized by democratic corporatism (Katzenstein 1985). However, what distinguishes the country from typical forms of corporatism is the fragmentation of political consultation between different policy sectors and the veto power conferred by direct democracy (Afonso 2010; Mach 2006). Civil society actors, and employers’ associations in particular, therefore play an important part in political decision making and reduce the capacity for unilateral state intervention. A consequence of this corporatist setting is the organizing principle of subsidiarity, characterized by a strong civil society. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are viewed as crucial actors when it comes to the production and maintenance of the common good. An example of this subsidiarity principle is the domain of HIV prevention. Civil society organizations have played a tremendous role in fighting the epidemic and even managed to shift their position within this political field—from challenger outside the political regime to subsidized actor responsible for policy implementation (Bütschi and Cattacin 1994; Kübler 2001). Regarding activists’ understanding of politics, few cultural resources are available for an accountable state. By contrast, there is a firm belief in substitution, meaning that the conception of civil society actors as capable of solving social problems without state intervention remains strong.17

Turning to the relation to common good, the Swiss population generally has a communitarian view of society. We could even say that a communitarian identity exists, pertaining both to cultural differences within the

17 To assess the level of support for state accountability, we considered the ratio of people who "strongly agree" that the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels (one out of five categories: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). The Swiss population does not lean toward an interventionist state with regard to income distribution. Only 18 percent strongly agree that the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels. The Swiss share this perception with the populations in Scandinavian countries (Sweden 20 percent; Norway 18 percent; Denmark 8 percent). By contrast, the populations of other European countries favor a more interventionist state (Central Europe: United Kingdom 20 percent; Germany 22 percent; Austria 39 percent; France 35 percent. Southern Europe: Spain 50 percent; Portugal 44 percent. Eastern Europe: Poland 39 percent; Czech Republic 23 percent; Hungary 49 percent) Source: European Social Survey (ESS Round 7, 2014) weighted by post-stratification and population size weights. To compare with the United States, we looked at an indicator based on a score of 1 (government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for) to 10 (people should take more responsibility to provide for themselves). The result was an average of 6.4. Source: World Values Survey (Round 6, 2011).
country and beyond. Within the country, the canton constitutes an important identity factor. Cantonal identities were historically constructed around religion and not, as one might assume, around language (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). Indeed, the establishment of Swiss federalism was a compromise between Catholic and Protestant cantons and as such can be seen as a product of nation building, an attempt to “transcend class and linguistic boundaries” (Wimmer 2002, 246). This process was only possible through a transfer of power to the cantons. With secularization, the relation between religion and cantonal identities has diminished. Nevertheless, the canton remains a strong cultural identifier “to a community with a common culture and a common origin” (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008, 11). Moreover, a strong national identity is grafted onto the communitarian view of cantonal difference, and a number of scholars have demonstrated that Swiss nationalism is based on a communitarian understanding of citizenship (Eugster and Strijbis 2011; Giugni and Passy 2004; Koopmans et al. 2005). Civic institutions are regulated by a restrictive and assimilationist access to the nation, an example of which is the initiative against mass immigration approved in 2014, heavily supported by nationalist arguments. Hence, there is largely a communitarian understanding of society within the country.

These elements stress how the minds of Swiss activists can be shaped by the national context, which various interactions in the Swiss context enable them to integrate. Indeed, they surface in their narratives as understandings that are both to be appropriated and challenged. To what extent do activists’ understandings adapt to the national context they evolve in? Do activists also trust state authorities, oppose state intervention, and hold a communitarian view of society? Or does their participation in commitment communities influence their minds toward acceptance of other understandings of common good and politics? Will specific mindsets accordingly emerge? We begin answering these questions in Chapter 3. But we need to explain how we went about studying activists’ minds beforehand.

**Studying Activists’ Minds**

Our comparative research design depends on the study of activists in action through interviews and surveys. Such a strategy follows the logic of a convergent mixed methods design with a QUAL/QUANT approach involving quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis at similar times and
with the same priority (Creswell 2015; Morgan 1998; Morse 1991). Why choose these types of data collection? Why are interviews and surveys more appropriate than ethnography doubled by participant observation? While an ethnographic approach would be adequate for studying activists in action and over time, this technique overlooks the most common and most invisible of activists: passive members. In Greenpeace, for example, 99.7 percent of members are passive. And even Solidarity across Borders, the organization with the largest share of active members in our study, includes 82 percent passive members. A better understanding of the commitment processes of passive members was needed given that they represent such a huge share of all activists and that their support guarantees the organizations’ financial survival. Despite this, they remain neglected in the literature. Here, we systematically examined, in our analysis of both the interview and survey data, whether our argument applies to passive members within commitment communities. That said, the examination of passive members was not the only reason we opted for interviews and survey data.

The main reason is that the combination of their intrinsic strengths enabled us to tackle our two main aims: namely, to examine the process of mind synchronization during action, and to assess activists’ understanding of common good, politics, and political citizenship. Survey data present two key advantages. On the one hand, they allow for the collection of representative samples of case studies and let us draw inferences on the populations under study. Simply put, quantitative data enable generalization. On the other hand, survey data with standardized questions permit a systematic comparison between activists of different organizations and the wider population. This allows us to assess whether activists entertain a specific relation to common good and politics.

Indicators do what they are meant to do: They indicate. Even a battery of indicators prevents us from comprehending the complexity of an individual’s understandings in detail. For example, we measured an activist’s relation to state actors by two indicators: the level of trust, and the perceived willingness of state actors to improve on a given common good. While these two indicators are certainly valid and cover a substantial part of the concept, they do not capture the entire spectrum of meanings individuals construct. It is also difficult to reveal cognitive paths with quantitative measures. Survey data are simply insufficient to reveal the full complexity of the human mind, and interview material is hence necessary to gain a fuller grasp of activists’ meanings (Monroe 1996). We therefore conducted in-depth interviews in
a conversational format with activists from the five groups. These data were useful for three research aims. First, they provided a deeper view of the activist’s understandings of common good and politics. Second, they allowed us to sort out the cognitive mechanisms that link an activist’s understanding to that person’s intentionality. In other words, they highlight the cognitive paths that let activists elaborate the cognitive components that orient their action. Finally, narratives allowed us to home in on the conversational interactions in a commitment community. If networks are indeed “islands of meanings,” we needed to examine how talk and ties shape activists’ minds in detail. Narratives fulfill these purposes. Interview and survey data hence crucially complement one another.

Despite these strengths, interviews are not without their difficulties when the aim is to produce a deeper understanding of activists’ cognitions. Indeed, the information provided may be biased through several mechanisms. First, an interview is a speech act (Searle 1969): a particular performance within a specific context. In our case, the activists’ thinking, their understandings, is biased through language and through the particular context of the interview setting in which the activist has to recount his or her life to an academic. Second, the data we collected may only reflect the organizational frames and not the individual’s own thinking. Finally, we risked not accessing participants’ deeper understanding and remaining with superficial perceptions. These difficulties necessitated the development and execution of an interview technique that comprises several measures that guard against such pitfalls. The outcome is the collection of information pertaining to the manner in which activists perceive the world and the cognitive dimensions that matter to their activism.

We conducted two interview sessions with each interviewee. Each interview session lasted around two hours, adding to a total of four hours with each interviewee. For the participant’s convenience, both interviews were conducted at his or her home. We also made sure that the interviewee was alone to avoid third party influence. We tried to instill a convivial and intimate atmosphere in which the interviewee felt comfortable sharing deep understandings. We always began with a positive verbal and non-verbal attitude, demonstrating our interest in the participants as individuals, ready to listen to their personal history without judging their perceptions. At the same time, we were professional, explaining our affiliation to the university and informing them about our procedure for ensuring anonymity for all respondents. As both authors conducted half of the interviews, it is possible
that differences in the interviewer’s age and sex might have led to slight variations in respondents’ narratives. However, we had established guidelines that helped to standardize our interviews.

Inspired by the framework of a psychoanalytical interview (Kvale 1999; Lane 1972), both interviews were open conversations with minimal intervention on the interviewer’s behalf. The main task of the first interview was to produce a life history (Bertaux 1997; Denzin 1989) and activists narrated their lives in relation to their political commitment. The instruction given conformed to the genre of life history: “In this first meeting, I would like to get to know you and your personal history. Who are you? Where are you from? What led you to your commitment?” The interviews were then open conversations and did not impose questions or suggest answers. Most activists had enough time to tell their stories as they chose, and we steered the conversation back on course only if the response deviated too far from our main questions. When we intervened, it was using the words of the interviewee and with the insistence that we were interested in their words. For example, activists repeatedly told us that they viewed institutional politics as useless. We then asked: “For you, what do you mean when you say that politics is useless?” Three main research questions drove the first interview: How do activists make sense of the world around them? Do the cognitive dimensions theoretically postulated emerge without the interviewer’s intervention? And, do other cognitive dimensions emerge? The most impressive aspect of the first interview was that all activists talked extensively about their relation to common good and politics without any prompts on our behalf.

The second interview was an in-depth interview that took place about a week after the first one. It was somewhat more structured with two main purposes. It allowed us to elaborate on points barely touched on during the first interview, such as matters we wanted to clarify, and life periods and understandings the interviewee scarcely talked about. We always picked up the words of the interviewees and asked them to provide examples. For instance: “During our last interview, you said that common goods are important to you. Can you give an example for this? What type of common good is of particular importance to you and why?” The second aim was to ask

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18 All the interviews (as well as the collection of the survey data) were done by the two authors. This certainly helped a lot to standardize the collection as well as the analysis of these data.
19 The interview guideline is attached in Appendix A.2.
20 All the interviews were conducted in French because both authors are not fluent in German. In addition, the quantitative data suggest that there are no systematic differences between the two language regions.
open-ended questions related to the research, centering on the participants’ understandings of common good, politics, and their social interactions. We therefore attempted to delve deeper into their minds and collect useful information for the analysis. Regularly, the interviewee also wanted to address topics they had forgotten to discuss in the first interview. Often, the interviewees had reflected on the first session during the following week and gave us information that provided a more refined understanding of their minds.

To select individuals for interview, we chose our cases ex-ante following a content analysis strategy. The logic behind case selection was to achieve heterogeneity within our target population. Therefore, within commitment communities we selected activists by applying what Patton (2001) called a “maximum variation strategy” based on available information (gender, age, profession, and commitment intensity) prior to contacting the interviewees. We thus opted for a systematic sample strategy to select the activists interviewed, and this selection was carried out before data analysis. This strategy should not be confounded with a theoretical sampling using an iterative approach as it is done in the grounded theory tradition moving back and forth between sampling and analyzing data and where the analytical findings inform further sampling choices until saturation as explained below (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Kuzel 1999; Miles and Huberman 1994; Patton 2001).

With a theoretically inspired strategy such as this one, we aimed to interview four passive and four active members per organization, resulting in a large sample of eight interviews per organization, or forty interviews in total. Indeed, we ended up with forty interviews, but these were distributed slightly differently. We conducted ten interviews with activists from Solidarity across Borders because we carried out two pre-tests to evaluate our interviewing techniques and guideline. Unfortunately, we only managed six interviews with activists from the radical workers’ community. Convincing Unia members to do an interview was extremely difficult. The main reason for this is probably the challenging nature of their activism, as their professional lives are at stake: they must conceal their commitment out of fear of losing their jobs. In addition, the majority of unionists work full-time in demanding sectors like construction work, which meant they were reluctant to consent to four-hour long interviews. Despite this small asymmetry, we ended up with a sufficient number of interviews.

As we interviewed all forty activists twice for about two hours for one interview, we ended up with roughly 160 hours of interview material.
Conducting forty interviews was a manageable amount for the two of us to handle. More important, we determined the number to be sufficient. The aim of this large selection was to make sure that we had enough cases and variation in our qualitative sample. To stress the existence of synchronized minds within a specific commitment community, we opted for variation to better examine this hypothesis. Using variation as the criteria for selecting activists in our sample (see our discussion above), we strategically relied on a conservative research approach. If, with this strategy, we found that the interviewees shared similar understandings, it would mean that they really do synchronize their views to perform joint action. In addition, we had to keep in mind that the main feature of interviews is to produce a high quantity of information for a small number of participants. Yet the risk with a small number of interviews is, of course, that one selects only particular cases, so-called outliers. As we had survey data to test whether we were examining a general pattern or outliers in our interview cases, we did not run this risk.

However, this large body was not adapted to allow a fine-grained interpretative analysis. The study’s feasibility was challenged (we should keep in mind that we also had a huge set of quantitative data to analyze). Thus, once conducted, we transcribed all the interviews and carried out a pre-analysis of the entire data set. We carefully read all interview transcripts and started to identify activists’ understandings of common good, politics, and citizenship. The next step was then to proceed to a deeper and detailed analysis we describe below. To analyze one case, or four hours of interviews, took about two weeks. To keep this type of meticulous analysis feasible we reduced our body of interviews.

We made use of a clear strategy to reduce the number of interviews: variation. This strategy was aimed at avoiding the analysis of similar cases and to ensure the heterogeneity of our target population. We could rely on this selection strategy for two reasons. First, with the pre-analysis of our data we had a clear idea of the content of each interview and how the variety of activists interviewed perceive common good, politics, and citizenship. Second, we selected our interviews in a deductive way. Our work is not situated within a grounded theory logic of theory-building but in a deductive logic where each choice is inspired theoretically. Therefore, both our sampling strategy based on theory and empirical findings from our pre-analysis guided our selection

21 To maximize the standardization of the interviews, the two authors conducted (and analyzed) all of the interviews.
of the cases for a fine-grained interpretative analysis. This becomes very clear when we look at how we excluded cases.

We first excluded all interviewed activists of the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP). These activists belong to the moral voicing community together with the members of Greenpeace and Solidarity across Borders (SAB). Both the quantitative analysis in Chapter 3 and the pre-analysis of the qualitative material showed that these activists share a common understanding of common good, politics, and citizenship with Greenpeace and SAB members. For the fine-grained qualitative analysis, we decided to keep only members of Greenpeace and SAB because they commit to two different issues (environment and human/migrants rights) while STP activists are engaged on a similar issue as SAB activists: human rights. We further reduced our data for analysis by excluding two out of eight interviews per organization. We systematically excluded one active and one passive member for each organization with considerable overlap with cases included in the final analysis. This amounted to a total of twenty-four cases for in-depth analysis.

Table 1.1 gives an idea of the diversity among the twenty-four interviewees. They are evenly split on levels of commitment intensity and gender, with a relatively wide distribution in terms of age and professions. We also took seriously systematic use of all cases, and all are equally represented throughout chapters 4 and 5. To bring the reader into the activists’ inner world, we applied a strict “one plus three” formula: We illustrate activists’ understandings through the story of one activist per group drawn from the six narratives systematically analyzed. We then discuss the activists’ relation to common good and politics in more depth by using excerpts from three out of the five remaining people interviewed. The selection was made not because it serves our argument but because their narratives allow us to illustrate and deepen the results of the survey data. Whenever relevant, we explicitly emphasize differences.

Not only did we conduct all the interviews, but we also analyzed all of them ourselves. To assure inter-coder reliability, we analyzed the first two interviews together and each of us continued to get the co-author’s opinion when needed. The analysis did not rely on classical content analysis but rather required the use of a classical interpretative approach (Denzin 1989; Paillé and Mucchielli 2012) inspired by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 22 A table with all forty interviewees can be found in the appendix A.4, Table A.2.
23 A table with a count of each case used can be found in the appendix A.5, Table A.3.
Table 1.1  Twenty-Four Interviewees, Different Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Commitment intensity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adriana</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Political work for a peace NGO</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colette</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Retired laboratory assistant</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilhelm</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Retired theologian</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yan</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margot</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Professor of social assistance</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Computer scientist</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierrette</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Apprentice in a jeweler’s store</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyne</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>University teacher</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Telephone saleswoman</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yves</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Retired tailor</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisabeth</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Retired secretary</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathieu</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Retired engineer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jérémie</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Retired engineer</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwige</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>Retired librarian</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmanuelle</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Clothes-saleswoman</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joao</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Balm manufacturer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuno</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Mason, Taxi driver</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiago</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Foreman</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>André</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Mechanic</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All information was accurate at the time of the interview.
1967). And we developed a *systematic analytical framework* that allowed for comparisons to be drawn between activists. The main challenge of the analytical process was to remain close to the words of activists during the various interpretative steps and to avoid overinterpretation. To do this, we moved carefully from the interviewee’s words to common themes, from themes to categories, and finally, from categories to concepts, such as the activist’s perception of common good and politics. Five distinctive steps progressively helped us rise in the level of abstraction. First, the recorded interview material was transcribed using a rather simple technique whereby only the content of the interviews—devoid of intonations, pauses, and emotional conduct—was transcribed. Second, we coded the transcriptions with the aid of a theoretically inspired codebook. At this point, the coding strategy involved the systematic coding of large parts of the narration including the interviewer’s question (if there was one) and coding some sentences before and after the section of interest. We applied this method to avoid losing the context in which interviewees dealt with a particular theme. This provided narratives in which the interviewee’s statements are linked to each theme. These include their relation to state actors, to goodness, or to their social interactions about commitment shared with friends or fellow activists. Third, we elaborated a descriptive summary of activists’ statements for each theme using our own words but remaining close to what activists had said. Fourth, we wrote an interpretative summary organizing different sub-themes into a coherent framework labeled with short titles. Finally, we used the titles within this framework to create more abstract categories and sub-categories that helped us compare and describe the content of the activists’ perceptions and interactions. This process allowed us to gain in analytical generality while keeping the possibility of returning to the interviewee’s words. We hence possess a rich and detailed body of data to describe and understand webs of social interactions, activists’ understandings of common good and politics, and the contingency between perceptions and intentions. This analytical strategy also leads us to differ from grounded theory, as our intent was not to build a theory. Rather, we relied on a deductive approach to derive our main analytical categories. Once we identified those categories in our data, we then made use of an inductive approach to define the content and the meanings provided by the interviewees about said categories. This approach

24 The coding procedure was based on Atlas.ti software to organize the qualitative material thematically. The codebook is available in Appendix A.3.
was essential to our work and yields important findings. For example, the relation of activists to human beings (humanness) and to community (interconnectedness) derives from the interviewees’ interpretation. Likewise, the way activists differentiate types of action carried out by civil society actors stems from our inductive approach. We therefore began our analysis with predefined concepts and categories and then examined how activists interpret and perceive those categories inductively.

While this systematic interpretative technique reduces overinterpretation within the cases, survey data limit overinterpretation across them. To collect survey data, we distributed a standardized questionnaire with comparative indicators to activists from the five organizations. The questionnaire included multiple questions borrowed from general population surveys to test our assumption that activists possess specific understandings when compared to the general population. We selected random samples in two stratification layers: one for language (French and German) and one for commitment intensity (active and passive members). The stratification for language follows the organizational structure, which is usually divided between the French- and German-speaking regions in Switzerland. One can therefore assume that interactions and meanings differ between these two regions. However, the analysis of differences between French- and German-speaking activists did not reveal systematic differences and we therefore did not feel the need to introduce a weighting for language to correct the overrepresentation of French-speaking activists. In addition, active and passive members are never equally distributed among members. And, as active members always feature in smaller numbers, we introduced a second stratification layer to overestimate this category. We also decided against introducing a weighting for commitment intensity, as it would have led to ridiculously small weightings for active members and extremely large ones for passive

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25 We used indicators from the World Values Survey (WVS 2007), the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP 2004), the Swiss Electoral Studies (Selects 2007) and the European Values Study (EVS 2008).

26 We excluded the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, which makes up 5 percent of the population if one considers the four official national languages as the main criteria (de Flaugergues 2016), in order to avoid translating the questionnaire into a third language.

27 Nevertheless, we note that activists evolving in the French-speaking regions have somewhat more trust in state actors compared to their German-speaking counterparts.

28 Distribution for commitment intensity within all organizations: Solidarity Across Borders: 18 percent active members, 82 percent passive members; Greenpeace: 0.3 percent, 99.7 percent, Society for Threatened Peoples: 0.1 percent, 99.9 percent, Caritas: 9 percent, 91 percent, Unia: 5 percent, 95 percent.
members. Yet each analysis monitors differences in commitment intensity, and the distinction between active and passive members is taken seriously.

After an invitation and two follow-ups for each activist, we gathered a low response rate of between 10 percent to 44 percent. Three main reasons help explain this result. First, surveys are overused in our society. Public opinion, consumer, and satisfaction surveys abound and lower an individual’s willingness to respond. Second, respondents received a letter of invitation to participate in the survey. The letter offered them the possibility of filling out the questionnaire online or calling us to ask for a paper version. The procedure had the advantage of being inexpensive, but it lowered response rates considerably. Finally, the questionnaire was rather long, including fifty-six questions from the research. We also provided each participating organization the chance to ask questions of their own members, which resulted in an additional section, comprising around ten questions. Respondents needed an average of forty-five minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The low response rate required that we question whether the data collection procedure had an impact on the representativeness of the data. We controlled the socio-demographic indicators (gender and age) obtained from the organizations first. Based on this information, we produced representative samples for Solidarity across Borders (SAB), Greenpeace, Caritas, and Unia. However, the sample from the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) made us realize that young activists were underrepresented. We then compared the social profile, values structure, and social networks of STP activists with that of activists who belong to the same movement sector. The analyses show that STP respondents are comparable to activists of other post-industrial organizations in terms of their sociological profile. Yet this socio-demographic control does not provide any information pertaining to our research question: Are our samples representative in terms of activists’ cognitive profiles?

To answer this, we needed to know which types of activists were most willing to respond to our questionnaire. As is the case with every survey, we expected some bias within our samples. While we cannot offer a final answer to these questions, we assume that the activists willing to respond identify

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29 We worked with response rates of 44 percent for SAB, 10 percent for STP, 25 percent for Greenpeace, 24 percent for Caritas and 18 percent for Unia.
30 A table with these numbers can be found in Appendix A.6, Table A.4.
31 Electoral surveys, for example, are often confronted with samples that are biased in the sense that respondents are more interested in politics and participate more in politics than the general population (Sciarini and Goldberg 2016).
with and participate in their organization more than those who refused. For example, STP relies extensively on street recruitment, allowing the organization to advertise specific political campaigns. Whereas this resulted in a tremendous increase in their activists’ base, the downside seems to be that an important part of their activists (especially youth and women) do not know which organization they are members of. We also noted that active members are generally more inclined to respond than passive members. As a result, we feel confident stating that the samples used are representative for activists who identify with their organization. We nevertheless acknowledge that we probably have a slight bias for activists who pay only a small annual fee or contribute on an irregular basis.

Do activists in the same commitment community rely on synchronized minds to perform joint action? Do they share their understandings of common good and politics, and their mental conceptions of democracy? And what are the cognitive and relational mechanisms that bind activists’ minds to action? To come to a conclusion on the questions we ask here we triangulated quantitative and qualitative methods on the same problem (Tarrow 1995). Our methodological approach is characterized by an iterative process, a systematical comparison between interviews and survey data.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature and deploys the theoretical toolkit with the purpose of explaining why the mind and conversations enter into play in sustaining activism. We start by clarifying why the mind is central to our study and for human life in general. We then highlight our contribution to the social movement literature, which is twofold: broadening the set of meanings to explain commitment and sustaining participation, and specifying the cognitive paths that link broad understandings to action. With the help of the contributions from the field of psychology, we are able to grasp how the mind sets activists’ intentionality concretely. Returning to sociological considerations, we underline that the mind is formed by social interactions. We continue by specifying the relational mechanisms that

32 Response rate for active and passive members for all organizations: SAB (active members: 55 percent, passive members: 29 percent), STP (10 percent passive members), Greenpeace (34 percent active, 21 percent passive), Caritas (47 percent active, 13 percent passive), Unia (17 percent active, 18 percent passive).
shape the activist’s mind and expound why these cognitive and relational mechanisms both enable activist action and help sustain it. Chapter 2 hence details the nexus between an activist’s mind and conversational interactions to maintain action, thereby resulting in the thesis that a cognitive-relational process is at play in the sustainment of commitment.

In Chapter 3, we begin to assess our theoretical assumptions empirically. With statistical support, we begin by presenting the activists’ social and political profile before providing a first empirical appraisal of the synchronization of activists’ minds. Whether activists rely on socially shared meanings to perform joint action and to sustain it constitutes the chapter’s driving question. We proceed in three steps: first, we show that activists rely on a specific understanding of common good and politics that departs from that held by the general population. Second, we consider how their inclusion in a specific commitment community provides them with a particular understanding of common good and politics. Comparing the activists who partake in the moral voicing, Christian aid, and the workers’ voicing communities, we show that each type of participant sees both common good and politics through specific cognitive lenses. Third, to subject our hypothesis to a final test, we examine whether activists who evolve in the same commitment site, but who are mobilized in distinct organizations and on different social problems, rely on shared meanings to perform joint action. Comparing the activists committed to Greenpeace, Solidarity across Borders, and the Society for Threatened Peoples, we observe that moral voicing activists rely on similar views about common good and politics. Similarly, active and passive members involved in the same organization apprehend common good and politics through the same cognitive lenses. From these primary analyses, we demonstrate that activists rely on socially shared meanings that are distinct from one commitment community to another. Their minds are synchronized with those of their peers and enable them to perform and sustain joint action.

Chapters 4 and 5 develop the topic of mind synchronization further. Based on activists’ narratives, we delve into their minds in more depth to see this synchronization in its complexity and to trace the cognitive processes that bind broad understandings to intentionalities. First, we scrutinize activists’ understandings of common good and politics by offering a fined-grained analysis of the way they comprehend both cognitive pillars of activism. The statistics of Chapter 3 provide a representative picture of the activist’s mind but one that is rather cursory due to raw measurements of common good
and politics. In chapters 4 and 5, we investigate the intricate ways common good and politics are understood inductively. In a second step, we examine how activists’ broad understanding of common good and politics enables them to develop mental constructs that orient their action specifically. We highlight the cognitive paths that set activists’ intentionality and orient their action on a number of aspects: toward certain groups of people; and to act on particular social problems, in a specific field of action, and with particular forms of action. Finally, the in-depth analysis of the activists’ understanding of common good and politics enables us to grasp the types of democracy activist adhere to. Chapter 4 delves into understandings of common good, while Chapter 5 investigates activists’ views about politics.

Chapter 6 proposes an explanation of the findings advanced in previous chapters. Why does an activist’s mind differ from one commitment site to another? And why are people’s minds synchronized when they are engaged in the same commitment community? More specifically, the chapter adds a relational layer to the cognitive mechanisms dealt with in chapters 4 and 5, in that we show how conversational interactions shape the meanings activists construct about common good and politics. The chapter also shows that not all interactions shape the activist’s mind and that specific relational mechanisms are at work to synchronize activists’ understandings. First, we demonstrate that face-to-face interactions are the key mechanisms behind the construction of socially shared meanings. By contrast, mediated interactions (through discursive outcomes of the organization such as newspapers or newsletters) are insufficient to shape an activist’s mind. Second, we highlight how face-to-face interactions in interpersonal networks allow passive members to construct socially shared meanings with fellow activists. Third, we show that redundancy and abundance of interactions are not essential to nourish the activist’s cognitive map. Finally, the density of interactions is a crucial relational mechanism for cross-committed activists. This chapter ultimately shows the importance of conversational interactions to the synchronization of the activists’ minds.

Chapter 7 wraps up the book’s main findings. Our study is motivated by a theoretical agenda: to highlight the interplay between mind and social interactions that helps explain the process behind the sustainment of commitment. This concluding chapter returns to this theoretical agenda and highlights its implications for the study of social movements and activism more generally. We begin by emphasizing the necessity to bring the mind back in, and its inherent complexity. Second, we argue for the necessity of
taking into account considerations on the interpretative dimensions of social networks. More generally, we call for an integrated relational perspective that rests on the structural, instrumental, and interpretative dimensions of social networks. Third, we advocate a better integration of culture in the study of social movements that effectively values the role of culture in shaping a person’s mind, and argue that the integration of this aspect provides finer theories of mobilization. Finally, as with any research, this study faces limits that we expose in this final chapter, providing us with the opportunity to point toward avenues for further research.