

New Social Movements Article Reviews

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Nelson A. Pichardo's "New Social Movements: A Critical Review"

Nelson A. Pichardo's 1997 article, "New Social Movements: A Critical Review," examines a body of theory developed largely to explain movements that appeared difficult to fit into older class-centered models. Environmentalism, feminism, peace activism, gay and lesbian liberation, student protest, anti-nuclear campaigns, and movements for cultural autonomy often emphasized identity, lifestyle, participation, and the quality of everyday life alongside material redistribution. Pichardo reviews how European new social movement theory explains these developments through postindustrial social change, the growth of a new middle class, conflict over culture and identity, and experimentation with decentralized organization. The original review correctly identifies student mobilization and postindustrial change as important, but the article's argument is more critical than a simple history of recent movements. Pichardo asks whether the category "new" exaggerates differences from earlier collective action and whether theorists have neglected continuity, class, political institutions, and organizational resources. (Pichardo, 1997)

What Makes a Social Movement "New"?

New social movement theory emerged partly because some late-twentieth-century movements did not define themselves primarily through wages, ownership, or the industrial working class. Their participants frequently demanded recognition, bodily autonomy, environmental protection, democratic participation, peace, and freedom from cultural domination. They also questioned bureaucratic organization and conventional party politics. "Newness," however, does not mean that earlier movements lacked identity, morality, culture, or decentralized activism. Abolitionism, women's suffrage, religious reform, nationalism, and labor movements combined material and symbolic claims. Pichardo therefore treats the new/old distinction as an analytical question rather than a settled fact.

Postindustrial Society and Changing Conflict

One strand of new social movement theory argues that advanced capitalist societies shifted from industrial production toward services, knowledge, communication, consumption, and administration. As living standards and education expanded for some groups, political conflict increasingly concerned environmental quality, gender roles, sexuality, peace, identity, and democratic control. This claim should not be read as evidence that economic inequality disappeared. Deindustrialization, precarious

labor, and welfare-state change created new material conflicts at the same time. The value of the postindustrial argument is that political power operates through culture and institutions as well as through workplace ownership.

The New Middle Class

Pichardo discusses theories that locate many new movements within a highly educated “new middle class” employed in professional, public-sector, cultural, and service occupations. Such participants may possess skills, networks, and values favorable to activism while experiencing tension with bureaucratic authority. The category helps explain some environmental, peace, and student movements, but it can become too broad. Movements are rarely composed of one class, and marginalized communities have often led struggles later associated with educated professionals. Class remains relevant through resources, risk, time, and access to institutions. A critical review should therefore ask who leads, who participates, whose labor sustains the movement, and whose concerns receive public recognition.

Identity and the Politics of Recognition

New social movements often challenge categories through which people are defined. Feminist movements argued that family, sexuality, reproduction, and domestic labor were political rather than merely private. LGBTQ+ movements contested medicalization, criminalization, and compulsory heterosexuality. Racial and Indigenous movements defended cultural identity while demanding institutional change. Identity politics is sometimes criticized as fragmenting universal goals, but identity claims can reveal how supposedly neutral institutions privilege particular groups. Pichardo’s review helps explain why symbolic recognition and redistribution should not be treated as opposites. Legal status, cultural representation, bodily safety, employment, and access to public services are often interconnected.

Organization, Participation, and Prefigurative Politics

Many movements attempt to organize internally according to the democratic society they want to create. Horizontal decision-making, rotating leadership, consensus, local autonomy, and participatory structures can be “prefigurative”: the movement practices desired social relationships in the present. The original review notes that some movements replicate the governmental form they envision. This can build commitment and protect against rigid hierarchy. It can also create slow decisions, hidden informal leadership, burnout, and exclusion of people without time for lengthy meetings. Formal structure is not automatically undemocratic, and informality is not automatically equal. Pichardo’s critical approach encourages examination of how organizational ideals operate in practice.

Strategy and Institutional Engagement

New social movement theory sometimes emphasizes distance from parties, unions, and the state. Yet movements frequently use courts, elections, legislation, regulatory agencies, universities, media, and professional associations. Environmental groups may combine protest with scientific expertise and litigation. Feminist campaigns may create autonomous services while seeking legal reform. The distinction between institutional and extra-institutional action is therefore strategic rather than absolute. Movements gain influence by moving among public disruption, cultural persuasion, organization building, and policy negotiation. Institutional access can produce results, but it may also moderate demands or elevate professional representatives above grassroots participants.

Pichardo's Critique of European Theory

Pichardo compares several European theorists and notes that their frameworks emerged from particular political histories. Applying them to the United States requires care because American movements developed within a different party system, racial order, welfare state, federal structure, and tradition of voluntary association. U.S. scholarship on resource mobilization and political process focused more heavily on organization, opportunities, and strategic action. Pichardo's review suggests that new social movement theory is strongest when combined with those perspectives. Identity and culture explain why people define a grievance as meaningful; resources and political opportunities help explain when mobilization becomes sustained and effective.

Historical Examples and the 1968 Protests

The student and worker protests of 1968 in France, Germany, Italy, the United States, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere became symbols of a new protest era. Participants opposed authoritarian universities, war, capitalism, imperialism, bureaucracy, conservative culture, and political exclusion. These mobilizations cannot be reduced to middle-class lifestyle concerns. In France, student protest expanded into a general strike involving millions of workers. In Italy, protest cycles connected factories, universities, feminism, and autonomous politics. The examples demonstrate both novelty and continuity: new cultural claims intersected with older labor and class conflict.

Strengths of Pichardo's Article

Pichardo's article is valuable because it does not accept the language of newness uncritically. It organizes a complex theoretical field, identifies themes shared by different theorists, and compares European approaches with American movement research. It also reminds readers that the choice of theory shapes what becomes visible. A class-only model may miss sexuality and culture; an identity-only model may miss economic power; an organizational model may miss meaning. The review

encourages synthesis rather than a search for one universal cause.

Limitations and Contemporary Relevance

Because the article was published in 1997, it predates the large-scale influence of digital platforms, networked protest, algorithmic visibility, and data surveillance. Contemporary movements such as climate strikes, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Indigenous land defense, and trans-rights activism combine identity, redistribution, institutional reform, and online communication. Digital tools can lower coordination costs and amplify marginalized voices, but they also encourage misinformation, harassment, shallow participation, and platform dependence. Pichardo's central questions remain relevant: what is genuinely new, which older structures continue, and how do culture and material power interact?

My Evaluation of Pichardo

I agree with the original review that Pichardo covers a large theoretical field effectively. The article's greatest contribution is not simply listing causes of movements; it teaches the reader to question categories. Social movements may begin through local grievances, but their expansion depends on shared interpretation, organization, resources, allies, political openings, and emotional commitment. I would strengthen the review by emphasizing that movements do not follow a single path from micro-level discontent to national influence. Many disappear, fragment, become institutionalized, or transform into new organizations. Pichardo provides a foundation for asking why.

Sidney Tarrow's "Cycles of Collective Action: Between Moments of Madness and the Repertoire of Contention"

Sidney Tarrow's 1993 article examines protest cycles—periods in which collective action spreads rapidly across groups, sectors, and locations. The original review describes these episodes as containing both "madness" and organized contention, but Tarrow is not using madness as a clinical diagnosis. He refers to moments when established political routines appear suspended, new actors enter public life, and previously unimaginable claims become possible. Protest cycles combine innovation and imitation. Early challengers demonstrate new tactics, authorities respond, organizations compete, and other groups adopt or modify the repertoire. The cycle eventually declines through repression, exhaustion, institutionalization, reform, or fragmentation. Tarrow's framework therefore explains movement dynamics over time rather than assuming that protest appears randomly. (Tarrow, 1993)

Political Opportunities and the Opening of Contention

Collective action becomes more likely when political conditions signal vulnerability or access. Divisions among elites, changing alliances, reduced repression, electoral shifts, or influential allies may encourage challengers. Opportunities do not cause protest automatically. People must perceive them, organize around them, and interpret them as meaningful. A government concession can encourage further claims, while repression can either deter participation or provoke outrage depending on context. Tarrow's approach connects structural change with strategic interpretation.

The Repertoire of Contention

A repertoire is the historically learned set of protest methods available to a population. Demonstrations, petitions, strikes, occupations, boycotts, marches, sit-ins, blockades, public meetings, and digital campaigns are not invented anew for every grievance. Activists select from familiar forms and innovate at the margins. Authorities also learn how to manage or repress those forms. The repertoire concept explains why protest is patterned rather than infinitely creative. It also shows why tactics that were once disruptive can become conventional and lose some impact.

Diffusion and Scale Shift

During a protest cycle, tactics and frames travel. One successful sit-in may be copied in another city; a slogan may connect distinct grievances; a local conflict may become national through media and networks. Scale shift occurs when action moves from local to regional, national, or transnational levels. Diffusion is not simple duplication. Groups translate tactics according to their own identities, risks, and institutions. This process helps explain why a cycle can appear suddenly widespread even though local organizing preceded public visibility.

Moments of Innovation

Tarrow's "moments of madness" are periods of extraordinary political imagination. Ordinary people act beyond established organizations, social boundaries loosen, and new futures seem possible. These moments generate energy and creativity but can be unstable. Lack of structure may make coordination difficult, while rapid expansion can attract participants with conflicting aims. The phrase should not be used to stigmatize protesters as irrational. Tarrow is describing the temporary suspension of what society had treated as politically realistic.

Violence and Peaceful Action

The original review discusses coexistence of violence and peaceful protest in Italy between 1966 and

1973. Protest cycles often include multiple organizations and tactical tendencies. Most participants may engage in marches and strikes while smaller groups adopt property destruction or armed action. State violence can also escalate conflict. It is therefore misleading to describe an entire movement as violent because some actors use violence, or peaceful because official organizations condemn it. Tarrow examines how tactical competition, repression, and polarization can move parts of a cycle toward radicalization.

How Cycles End

Protest does not continue indefinitely. Participation is costly, media attention shifts, organizations compete, authorities learn, and initial unity breaks down. Some demands are absorbed into policy, political parties, unions, or professional advocacy. Some activists become discouraged; others radicalize. Repression may close opportunities, while reform may reduce urgency. The decline of visible protest does not mean the cycle failed. It may leave new organizations, identities, laws, leadership, and cultural expectations. The outcome should be measured across several dimensions rather than by whether demonstrations continue.

Leadership Emerging from Movements

The original review agrees that movements can produce new leadership. Protest cycles create public speakers, organizers, legal strategists, artists, intellectuals, and community institutions. Leadership may emerge informally before receiving an official title. The process can democratize politics by bringing previously excluded people into decision-making. It can also create internal inequality if media and funders focus on a few visible figures. A movement's leadership structure should therefore be examined alongside its public claims.

Strengths of Tarrow's Article

Tarrow explains why collective action clusters historically rather than appearing as isolated events. His framework connects political opportunities, tactical innovation, diffusion, organization, and decline. It avoids treating movements as spontaneous explosions caused only by deprivation. Many societies contain serious grievances without sustained mobilization. A protest cycle requires networks, frames, opportunities, and demonstrations that action is possible. This dynamic explanation is the article's greatest strength.

Limitations and Later Developments

Political-process approaches can overemphasize the state and understate emotion, culture, race, gender, colonial power, and everyday organizing. Opportunities are also difficult to measure independently of movement outcomes; analysts may label a system "open" because protest

occurred. Later research has examined emotions, framing, digital networks, transnational activism, and the repression of specific communities. Tarrow himself expanded his work in these directions. The cycle concept remains valuable when used as a flexible tool rather than a universal law.

My Evaluation of Tarrow

I agree with the original response that Tarrow's historical examples make the theory understandable. The article clarifies that protests do not recur at perfectly regular intervals. A "cycle" is a wave of interaction, not a calendar schedule. It also explains why legitimate grievances may produce both disciplined civic action and episodes of disorder. I would add that public awareness is not always the main result. Movements can change policy, institutions, personal identity, organizational capacity, and the language used to define injustice. They can also provoke backlash and stronger repression.

Comparing the Two Articles

Pichardo and Tarrow ask different but complementary questions. Pichardo reviews theories concerned with the social bases, identities, values, and organizational forms of movements often called new. Tarrow explains the timing and dynamics through which contention expands and contracts. Pichardo helps explain why environmental, feminist, peace, and identity claims become central; Tarrow helps explain how tactics and participation spread during political openings. Neither class nor culture should be treated as sufficient alone. Movements are built by people located within economic structures who interpret their experience through identities, values, networks, and political opportunities. (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015)

Conclusion

The two articles offer a stronger understanding together than separately. Pichardo shows that late-twentieth-century movements challenged older theoretical assumptions by emphasizing identity, culture, autonomy, and participatory organization, while also warning that claims of novelty may conceal historical continuity and class. Tarrow shows how protest waves develop through opportunity, innovation, diffusion, tactical interaction, and decline. Both reject the idea that collective action is simply an irrational response to deprivation. Social movements require interpretation and organization, and their effects extend beyond the moment of protest. The original reviews correctly valued the authors' historical reach; an expanded analysis reveals that their most important contribution is theoretical: they provide tools for explaining who mobilizes, around what meanings, through which structures, and at what historical moment. (Porta & Diani, 2020)

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