

New Social Movements Article Reviews

Posted on July 28, 2022

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Introduction

Nelson A. Pichardo's "New Social Movements: A Critical Review" and Sidney Tarrow's "Cycles of Collective Action: Between Moments of Madness and the Repertoire of Contention" examine different dimensions of collective action. Pichardo asks why environmental, feminist, peace, LGBTQ+, student, and cultural-autonomy movements seemed difficult to explain through older models centered mainly on industrial class conflict. Tarrow examines why protest expands in waves, how tactics spread among groups, and why periods of unusually intense contention eventually decline. Read together, the articles challenge the idea that social movements are spontaneous explosions caused by dissatisfaction alone. Grievances are common, but sustained mobilization requires shared interpretation, networks, resources, organization, political opportunities, and tactical learning. Pichardo is especially useful for understanding identity, culture, and the changing social bases of activism, while Tarrow explains timing and interaction. Their combined insight is that movements emerge when people define a condition as unjust, discover ways to act collectively, and encounter political circumstances that make mobilization appear both necessary and possible (Pichardo, 1997; Tarrow, 1993).

Pichardo and the Question of "New" Social Movements

New social movement theory developed partly because many late-twentieth-century campaigns emphasized identity, environmental quality, bodily autonomy, peace, sexuality, democratic participation, and cultural recognition alongside material redistribution. The category "new," however, requires caution. Earlier abolitionist, women's, religious, nationalist, and labor movements also combined economic interests with identity, morality, and culture. Pichardo therefore treats newness as an analytical problem rather than a settled historical fact. One strand of the theory links recent activism with postindustrial change, including the growth of service and professional employment, higher education, communication industries, and new forms of bureaucratic control. Another emphasizes the role of a highly educated "new middle class" with resources and skills favorable to activism. These approaches explain some patterns but can obscure movements led by workers, racialized communities, Indigenous groups, or people whose claims remain deeply economic. Pichardo's strongest contribution is to show that class, identity, and culture should not be treated as

mutually exclusive explanations. Movements often connect symbolic recognition with access to work, safety, public services, and political authority.

Organization, Identity, and Prefigurative Politics

Many movements associated with the “new social movement” label experimented with decentralized organization, rotating leadership, consensus, local autonomy, and direct participation. These structures can be prefigurative because activists try to practice internally the democratic relationships they hope to create in society. Horizontal organization can encourage commitment and protect movements from rigid bureaucracy, but informality is not automatically equal. Hidden leadership, unequal access to time, burnout, and differences in expertise can shape decisions even when formal titles are absent. Identity also influences organization because people mobilize not only around material interests but around the meaning assigned to experiences of gender, sexuality, race, disability, environment, or national belonging. Pichardo’s review shows why cultural and organizational questions matter, yet movements rarely remain entirely outside institutions. Environmental groups may use protest, litigation, scientific expertise, and regulatory lobbying at once. Feminist organizations may create autonomous services while seeking legislative change. Institutional and disruptive action are therefore strategic options rather than separate types of movement. The challenge is maintaining grassroots participation while gaining enough structure and access to influence policy.

Tarrow and Protest Cycles

Tarrow’s concept of a protest cycle explains why collective action often clusters historically. Political openings, elite divisions, shifting alliances, declining legitimacy, or weakened repression can encourage early challengers, whose actions then demonstrate that protest is possible. Other groups imitate tactics, adapt slogans, and translate grievances into their own settings. Tarrow’s phrase “moments of madness” does not describe protesters as mentally irrational. It refers to periods when established political routines appear temporarily suspended and previously unrealistic demands become thinkable. During such moments, new actors enter public life and familiar boundaries loosen. Innovation then becomes part of a wider repertoire of contention: marches, strikes, occupations, boycotts, petitions, sit-ins, demonstrations, and other learned forms. A tactic that is disruptive when first used may later become conventional as both authorities and activists adapt. Protest cycles eventually decline because participation is costly, organizations compete, reforms absorb some demands, repression raises risks, or activists become exhausted. Decline in visible protest does not necessarily mean failure because movements can leave new laws, organizations, identities, leaders, and cultural expectations.

Diffusion, Violence, and Movement Outcomes

Diffusion is central to a protest cycle because ideas and tactics travel across cities, organizations, countries, and issue areas. A successful occupation or march may be copied elsewhere, but diffusion is never simple duplication; groups adapt tactics to local identities, institutions, and risk. This helps explain why a movement can suddenly appear widespread even though local organizing existed long before national attention. Tarrow also shows why one movement cycle can contain both peaceful and violent action. Large mobilizations include multiple organizations with different strategies, while state repression can itself escalate conflict. It is therefore misleading to label an entire movement violent because a smaller faction adopts armed action or property destruction, just as it is misleading to call a cycle uniformly peaceful because its formal leadership condemns violence. Outcomes should be measured broadly. Movements may obtain policy concessions, change public language, build durable organizations, expand political participation, provoke backlash, or produce stronger repression. A movement can lose one immediate demand while still transforming the identities and networks available for future action.

Contemporary Relevance and Theoretical Limits

Both articles were written before social media became central to contemporary activism, yet their questions remain relevant to movements such as climate strikes, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Indigenous land defense, and campaigns around gender and sexuality. Digital platforms can reduce coordination costs and allow marginalized voices to reach large audiences, but they also create new dependencies on algorithmic visibility, data surveillance, harassment, misinformation, and commercial platforms. Pichardo's focus on identity and cultural conflict helps explain why online representation matters, while Tarrow's diffusion model helps explain how slogans, videos, protest tactics, and frames travel rapidly. Each approach also has limits. New social movement theory can understate continuing class inequality, while political-process approaches can overemphasize state openings and understate emotion, colonial power, race, gender, and everyday organizing. No single framework explains every movement. The more productive approach combines identity, resources, political opportunity, emotion, organizational form, repression, and historical context, asking which mechanisms are most important in a particular case rather than assuming one universal theory.

Conclusion

Pichardo and Tarrow provide complementary tools for understanding social movements. Pichardo shows why late-twentieth-century activism challenged class-only models by emphasizing identity, culture, autonomy, and participatory organization, while warning that supposed novelty should not erase historical continuity or material inequality. Tarrow explains how contention expands through political opportunities, tactical innovation, diffusion, imitation, and interaction with authorities before

declining or becoming institutionalized. Together, the articles reject the idea that protest follows automatically from deprivation. People must interpret grievances, build relationships, learn tactics, and believe collective action can matter. Their frameworks also show why movements cannot be judged only by whether demonstrations continue or one demand is immediately achieved. Collective action can alter leadership, public language, law, organizational capacity, and the range of political possibilities available to later activists. Contemporary digital movements introduce new technologies, but the underlying questions remain recognizable: who mobilizes, around which identities and interests, through what networks and tactics, under which political conditions, and with what lasting consequences for institutions and social life.

References

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