

The Emergence and Prominence of the Environmental Movement Internationally

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Abstract: *This article examines the emergence, evolution, and theoretical framing of the global environmental movement. Drawing on key literature from political sociology, environmental studies, and organizational theory, it explores how these movements challenge dominant economic paradigms, promote post-materialist values, and foster public participation in ecological advocacy. The article analyzes the movement's structure, strategies, and ideological shifts, emphasizing its role in reshaping collective action. It further highlights the interplay between rational strategy and emotional engagement, offering insights into the transformative power of environmental activism across global contexts.*

Keywords: environmental movement, post-materialist values, collective action, social movements, ecological justice

1. Introduction

In recent years, the global system, under the influences of globalization, liberalization, and the deregulation policies it upholds and enforces, has evidently strengthened conditions that exacerbate its own vulnerability and ambiguity. In other words, an unchecked and persistent exploitation can be observed, carried out by those who hold significant cultural and economic capital against others, facilitated by the unfettered globalization of natural resources and national economies. Nonetheless, the sustainability of continuous economic growth appears questionable, as it perpetuates and reinforces a framework of inequalities and multi-dimensional and frequently obscured socio-economic inequalities. This framework frequently remains imperceptible to the subjects involved in social life, effectively marginalizing a substantial portion of the global public sphere (Martínez-Alier, 2020).

Furthermore, it is noted that the majority of engaged citizens find themselves, often through no fault of their own, caught in a dilemma, that is, either to adapt to the entrenched realities shaped by the globalized market-society, or to position themselves outside of this system, with all the consequential risks this entails. Importantly, such individual decisions rarely influence the overall functionality of the economic system, as they do not pose a significant threat to its continuation (Meyer & Laschever, 2015; World Bank Open Data, 2017). The reinforcement of these conditions is fundamentally supported by opinion makers, including intellectuals, academics, authors, journalists, and politicians, who often act in accordance with their personal and substantial economic interests (Longhofer et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the structural manipulation within global markets, which consolidates the economic and cultural hegemony of a few, is not immutable. It can change both internally and externally, as it does not possess eternal or unalterable characteristics. Consequently, this contradicts the principles of common sense and, in many cases, poses challenges to contemporary liberal political ideologies. The emergence of new realities is so powerful, absolute, and tangible that it effectively creates an imperceptible yet inevitable pathway for all citizens to adapt

to these evolving circumstances (Aydin et al., 2017; Mouzelis & Pagoulatos, 2017).

Against this backdrop, various social movements adopt inclusive, multi-strategic approaches –encompassing ideological, operational, and strategic dimensions– they attempt to restore balance and harmony in the face of systemic dysfunctions and societal rigidities. Social movements, therefore, act as agents of change, striving to counterbalance the adverse effects of globalization. These dynamics may concern power relations, social norms, values, or broader societal structures. This article aims to examine the emergence and development of environmental movements globally, analyzing their theoretical foundations, organizational forms, and their role in shaping new societal values and public engagement (Feenstra et al., 2015; Rohlinger, 2015; Barca & Leonardi, 2018; Tran, 2022).

Conceptualizations and definitions of social movements

Struggles within a complete or incomplete social system predominantly define collective behavior, which emerges as a response to prevailing conditions. It is argued that the strength of neoliberal ideology lies in its foundation on a form of social Darwinism, where the strongest and most capable invariably prevail. Yet, contemporary poverty and deprivation should not be seen as intrinsic components of social progress. This has given rise to new social movements that challenge the trajectory toward globalization, emphasizing that "*the paradoxical nature of capitalism represents a popularized myth from which society must extricate itself*" (Hardt & Negri, 2002). Understanding social movements requires grappling with complex concepts such as collective interest, which itself can only be fully understood through the lens of collective action and its interactions with a network of related concepts (Villamayor-Tomas & Garcia-Lopez, 2018; Yasin, 2022).

In continuation of the above reasoning, a critical need arises for the restructuring and reorganization of social institutions, political, economic, and cultural relations, labor relations, and ultimately, the rejection of the notion that the economy is the core of human existence. The economy should return to its original function, serving as a means to sustain human life rather than an ultimate goal that drives humanity toward

destruction and the erosion of human values. This orientation is vastly misaligned with the aspirations and mindsets of citizens in contemporary Western societies, who often exhibit indifference or self-interest. Consequently, genuine participation in political and social programs remains minimal, undermining collective action (Akbulut et al., 2019).

Social movements, therefore, represent proactive projections into unknown future conditions, distinct from the immediate conflicts and constraints of the present. They function as vehicles for envisioning and pursuing alternative social orders, emphasizing the collective capacity to influence change through organized action. Eyerman and Jamison (1991) conceptualize social movements as organizations of temporary cognitive interests, noting that movements may fragment as their cognitive frameworks weaken. It is crucial, however, not to conflate the organizations associated with social movements with the movements themselves. While the definition captures essential elements, it overlooks the dominant power structures that movements challenge. Doherty (2002) identifies four defining features of social movements: a) The use of protest as a form of action and identification through non-institutionalized networks of interaction, b) partial operation outside established political institutions, c) rejection of authoritarian forms of power and, d) conscious collective identity (Satheesh, 2021).

Additionally, the identity of social movements is shaped by several constitutive elements:

- The element uniting diverse movements into a holistic theory is ambiguity, which drives all movements and the call for change. In essence, actions are directed toward the recognition of the need to transform the system, either within a specific group or society at large. A social system is realized only when its structural elements are fundamentally altered to achieve systemic change (Scheidel et al., 2020).
- Complementary elements include membership defined by belief in the movement's goals, informal participation structures, ideological cohesion, differentiation of members according to ideology and objectives, and the correlation between causation and outcome. Social movements persuade society to adopt moral values and pursue societal change, with indeterminate duration and sustainability as defining characteristics (Habermas, 1981; Reddy, 2014; Berny, 2018).
- Movements exist to advance social goals, whether maintaining the status quo or advocating for change in the social order (Sanz & Rodríguez-Labajos, 2021).
- They reflect the belief that individuals can self-determine the trajectory of their societies, shaping collective norms and aspirations (Avila, 2018).
- The absence of codified leadership allows flexibility and adaptability, enabling movements to pursue long-term goals without rigid institutional constraints. Leadership often emerges organically among members who develop effective strategies (Berny, 2016; Rahman & Hasan, 2022).

In new social movements, the "silent principle" emphasizes solidarity, fostering international connections and enabling participants to act as proactive agents. Innovative forms of

engagement emerge, allowing resistance to entrenched systems, promoting inclusive participation, and excluding self-serving minority interests (Saito, 2023; Tetreault, 2022). These characteristics ensure the defense of humanity's highest cultural values, positioning social movements as a fundamental form of resistance to the logic of immediate profit in a globalized market (Bourdieu, 2001; Saes et al., 2021).

The case of the environmental movement

During the 1960s and 1970s, a distinct type of social movement emerged. Unlike earlier movements focused on material rights, such as equality or suffrage, new social movements sought to cultivate new identities, providing participants with frameworks through which they could challenge established social norms and assumptions (Tsutsui, 2018). These movements allow participants to reframe and reassess their lived experiences and understandings (Mitra & Borza, 2011; Marshall et al., 2014). Importantly, the objectives of these movements are not the acquisition of state power but rather the transformation of cultural and material structures and the challenging of stereotypes promoted by powerful global interest groups. The peace movement, feminist movement, and environmental movement exemplify this category of new social movements (Temper et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2020; Yasin, 2023). The environmental activism of the 1960s cannot be fully explained using earlier theoretical frameworks. Its objectives are not easily aligned with specific socio-economic classes, and the opponents of the movement are not easily identified as discrete individuals or interest groups (Saes & Bisht, 2020). The environmental movement, like other contemporary movements, does not seek to reject industrial civilization outright. Instead, it promotes choices grounded in ecological and social criteria, not in profit maximization or market logic (Wagner, 2020).

Buechler (1995) emphasizes the utility of new social movement theories for highlighting the variations and nuances of these movements. These theories note the significance of symbolic action in civil society, prioritizing autonomy and self-determination over the pursuit of power. First, most branches of the new social movements emphasize in the cultural sphere or in the civil society the symbolic action, as an important arena for collective action together with the instrumental action in the state or political sphere. Second, the theorists of the new social movements highlight more the importance of practices that promote self-determination and autonomy, rather than strategies that intentionally aim at maximizing their power and impact. Third, there exist also some theorists who, in contrast to conflicts over material resources, overemphasize the role of post-materialist values in the more extended part of contemporary collective action. Fourth, the theorists avoid referring to assumptions and conjectures, where the interests of the conflicting groups are structurally determined, but on the contrary, they think and consider that they are due to the fragile process of constructing collective identities and defining the interests of these groups. Fifth, the various problems of the group do not derive from the structural position of this group, but from the socially constructed nature of ideology and problems. In conclusion, the new social movements do not presuppose that centralized organizational forms are a prerequisite for successful mobilization. Rather,

they acknowledge a diverse array of latent, temporary, and underground networks that, in most cases, sustain and support collective action (Svendsen & Laberge, 2005; Rodriguez-Labajos et al., 2019).

Game theory offers a framework to understand strategic interactions within environmental movements. Actors, according to this approach, make calculated decisions during their actions, adjusting tactically and strategically in response to their opponents (Aras & Crowther, 2010; Ghazoul & Kleinschroth, 2018). The concept of equilibrium in game theory identifies scenarios in which no player benefits from unilaterally changing their strategy (Berny & Rootes, 2018; Raphael, 2019). All potential outcomes are considered open-ended, allowing for flexibility and adaptation. Certain strategic decisions may seem irrational at first glance, but may later demonstrate significant benefits for the actor involved (Bargheer, 2018). This perspective emphasizes that self-interested rationality often coexists with emotional and moral motivations. The integration of affective considerations with rational calculation reflects a more comprehensive understanding of human behavior in collective action. Environmental movements, therefore, strategically navigate between rational planning and emotional engagement, enabling them to mobilize supporters effectively (Tilly, 1978; Global Witness, 2019; Evans et al., 2020; Walter & Wagner, 2021).

Framing is a key tool used by environmental movements to structure public understanding and perception of environmental issues. By presenting ecological concerns through carefully constructed narratives, movements can guide how the broader public interprets events. According to Snow and Benford (1992), the success of a dominant interpretive frame depends on its resonance with the worldview of potential supporters. Environmental movements aim to replace the prevailing “social construction of nature” with alternative interpretations that are equally persuasive and actionable (Martínez-Alier, 2023). Collective emotions, such as love, anger, and passion, are integral to these framing processes. They become part of the collective identity, motivating participation beyond purely rational considerations. Solidarity and empathy constitute vital sources of social capital for movement participants. The daily practices, experiments, and innovations within these movements reflect a deliberate challenge to dominant cultural codes and societal norms, often reimaging collective moral and ethical frameworks (Burns & Tobin, 2017; Del Bene et al., 2018).

2. Conclusions

Understanding the evolution and current strategies of environmental movements is crucial for grasping their influence on global ecological governance, cultural transformation, and democratic participation. The central challenge faced by most contemporary social movements, including environmental movements, lies in resisting pressures imposed by industrial modernity, capitalist “progress,” and the relentless expansion of global markets. These movements advocate for the protection of workers’ rights, environmental preservation, and the safeguarding of community traditions. They confront the unchecked

exploitation of natural resources, the relentless drive for profit accumulation, and the rapid modernization that threatens local ecosystems and social cohesion. Unlike traditional movements, which often relied on negotiation with political and economic authorities to achieve their objectives, new social movements—including environmental ones—operate as identity-based movements. Their demands are non-negotiable and transcend class interests, reflecting universal concerns such as environmental sustainability, education, and peace. In doing so, they reorient collective action around ethical, moral, and post-materialist values rather than material accumulation.

Environmental movements, specifically, exemplify this post-materialist shift. They prioritize ecological integrity, social justice, and human well-being over the accumulation of wealth and industrial growth. This approach underscores the necessity of rethinking the role of economic development in society, moving from a utilitarian pursuit of growth to a framework that emphasizes sustainability, equity, and long-term social resilience. By fostering public participation, these movements cultivate citizen engagement and create avenues for collective action, thereby reinforcing democratic principles and societal responsibility. Furthermore, environmental movements utilize a combination of strategic planning, emotional engagement, and cognitive framing to achieve their objectives. They create narratives that resonate with supporters, mobilize collective action, and challenge dominant social and economic paradigms. Emotions such as solidarity, empathy, and shared passion play a central role in sustaining participation, complementing rational strategic decision-making. These movements innovate continuously, experimenting with alternative methods of activism and community engagement to challenge prevailing norms and envision new social futures.

The significance of environmental movements extends beyond the immediate protection of ecosystems. They foster cultural transformation, challenge entrenched socio-economic hierarchies, and promote global awareness of ecological interdependence. Through this multi-layered approach, they contribute to the development of a more conscious, participatory, and sustainable global society. By advocating for ecological and social justice, environmental movements embody a holistic vision of human progress that integrates moral values, post-materialist ideals, and strategic collective action. In essence, the environmental movement exemplifies the power of contemporary social movements to enact meaningful change. By combining strategic rationality, emotional resonance, and normative framing, it mobilizes citizens to rethink and reconstruct societal values and practices. Its legacy and ongoing efforts demonstrate the critical role of collective action in shaping a sustainable, equitable, and culturally enriched global future.

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