Environmental Movements in Iran: Application of the New Social Movement Theory in the Non-European Context

Simin Fadaee

Social Change 2011 41: 79
DOI: 10.1177/004908571104100104

The online version of this article can be found at: http://sch.sagepub.com/content/41/1/79
Environmental Movements in Iran: Application of the New Social Movement Theory in the Non-European Context

Simin Fadaee*
Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Philosophische Fakultät III, Institut für Asien und Afrikawissenschaften
simin.fadaee@cms.hu-berlin.de

Abstract
Social movements have been considered by many sociologists as agents of social transformation. Emergence, dynamics and development of social movements not only signal major transformations of societies; but, social movements are indicators of societal conditions, and capable of influencing social and political structures as well. By presenting the case of environmentalism in Iran, this article is seeking to provide an insight into the life of the Iranian social movements. Further, by implementing the new social movement theory in the Iranian context, it contributes to a better understanding of non-western social movements. The article first, establishes the fact that the emerged collective action around environmental issues in Iran can be regarded as a social movement. Second, it introduces the characteristics of environmentalism in Iran. Finally, it examines the relevance of the new social movement theory of Alaine Touraine, and Alberto Melucci in relation to the environmental movements of Iran.

Keywords
Environmentalism, Iran, social movements, new social movement theory

Introduction
Although the social movements have gained growing significance during the last few years, and especially with the rise of transnational social movements, one main...

* This article is based on my PhD dissertation which is under consideration for publication.
problem with their study which has not received enough attention is the dominance of existing western studies and theories in this area. The problem, however, emerges from the Euro-centric assumptions of social theory and its heavy reliance on European social structure and history in general. The embedded Euro-centrism in theories of social movement, therefore, either neglects the social movements of other countries, or studies them from the perspective of western societies. This has resulted in the failure of understanding the nature of the social movements in non-western contexts; being either completely ignorant about them or failing to give a true explanation about their reality. That is why; the importance of various non-European social movements and their significance in the world development has not gained enough attention. Seeking to contribute to these shortcomings, this article follows two objectives. One, it presents the case of Iranian environmentalism as a movement for social change, which represents a new set of issues, going beyond the frontiers of previous social movements of Iran. Two, by implementing the new social movement theory of Alaine Touraine and Alberto Melucci on the environmental movement of Iran, this article argues against the Euro-centric assumptions of the new social movement theory as a sociological theory. Its main claim is that, although the new social movement theory provides some insights into understanding the reality of non-European social movements (environmental movement in Iran in this case), its heavy reliance on European social structure and history disables this theory from providing a comprehensive analytical context for non-European (non-western) social movements.

The choice of environmentalism reflects several factors: one, environmental movements have been among the most important movements analysed within the framework of the new social movement theory. Focusing on environmentalism, therefore, makes the application of the new social movement theory in the Iranian case more feasible. Two, environmental damages during the last thirty years, since the victory of the Iranian revolution in 1979, have been extremely serious and have directly affected the lives of many segments of the society. Third, environmentalism is usually regarded as a western phenomenon, while it has a great meaning in other contexts as well. Finally, environmentalism is today, one of the most significant global issues.

Methodology

The article is based on the empirical research which was conducted in two phases: between July and September 2007, and in October 2008. In total, thirty seven indepth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the founding member, director, the information officer, or another senior official of thirty seven environmental NGOs. A single informed person was interviewed from each NGO. The interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire, and each lasted between one to two hours. Moreover, a few interviews were carried out with the officials within the Department of Environment, and some civil society activists. Further,
I attended a number of workshops and seminars held by the environmental NGOs, whilst spending a lot of time on observation. An analysis of the documentary materials of each organisation such as newsletters, posters, websites and other relevant materials has been taken into account as well. During my first phase of research I was confronted with the fact that many of the environmental groups are centred in Tehran, representing the dominance of the Iranian capital. These organisations, at the same time, have many branches in different parts of the country. However, apart from the Tehran-centred branches, each region contains many local groups, which undertake quite different activities and have a different orientation in comparison to Tehran. As time has been limited, I decided to focus on the environmental groups of Tehran (core) and one of the peripheral hubs (Rasht) as an example of the periphery. This combination has been chosen in order to mirror two important issues: first, to provide a more comprehensive study of the movements’ nature by avoiding a presentation of a homogeneous character from the movement; and second, to bring the voices of the activists, who are in the periphery, into my work. However, my aim has not been to present any representative of the periphery here, as the time constraints and the diversity of the groups make this an almost impossible task.

Why Environmentalism?

Environmental problems and catastrophes have been existing in Iran for many years. As the emergence of environmentalism goes back to the early 1990s, obviously its growth is not only because of the environmental disasters all over the country. Although the devastating environmental damages play a role in the emergence of environmental activism in Iran, a deep change and transformation in the cultural and social structure of the society must have occurred which have made the people become concerned about issues which were not important for them in the past. Since Iran did not experience an extreme exhaustion of its resources through over-consumption, the damages caused by industrialisation did not get that much of attention until recent years. Therefore, unlike the industrialised world, the post-material values in Iran only started to emerge in later periods in comparison to western countries. But with the expansion of the green ideologies of the West during the 1980s, the educated segments of the Iranian society started to be attracted to environmental issues. However, because until early 1990s any kind of civil activity was almost impossible, no organised collective action around environmental issues emerged. That is why; the environmental movement in Iran only started to develop in the 1990s. As the consequence of weak governmental organisations during the years after the revolution, explosive population growth, urbanisation, industrial mismanagement, as well as the devastation brought in by eight years of war with Iraq, numerous environmental problems emerged in Iran. However, the rise of environmentalism in the early 1990s has been directly linked to the emergence of the reform movement. After the 1997 presidential election,
Simin Fadaee

victory of Mohammad Khatami and the strength of the reform movement of Iran (which will be discussed later), the existing legal constrains were more relaxed. As Claus Offe (1987) argues, political exclusion of the actors play an important role in encouraging the individuals to join the social movements. In the case of Iran, the oppressive years after the Islamic revolution which were followed by the eight year war, led to a very restricted political atmosphere and the exclusion of the majority of the Iranians from the process of decision-making. It was only in the aftermath of the 1997 presidential election where the individuals, for the first time in the political history of Iran, were encouraged to take part in public activities and were exposed to the ideas such as individual and citizenship rights from within the government. From the very beginning of his presidency, Khatami started to reinforce the civil society institutions. His main concern was to strengthen all kinds of civil activity through constitutional law, and to make civil activities part of the legal rights of citizens. Therefore, the possibility of different kinds of civil activity became much easier than ever before. Rise of the civil society discourse established a new sphere of public life which paved the way for the emergence of new kinds of civilian activities.

Another important factor which played an important role in the emergence of environmentalism in the early 1990s has been the restructuring of the Iran Department of Environment in 1997, and launch of the National Action Plan for Environmental Protection. National Action Plan for Environmental Protection was a call for collaboration between related official organisations and the civil society. A committee for public participation was organised, which was mainly focused on the implementation of different programmes to unite various groups of people, associations, factories, and so on, around environmental concerns. Moreover in 1998, with the aim of assisting environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Public Participation Bureau was founded within the Iran Department of Environment.

Besides, Ms Masumeh Ebtekar, who became the first female vice president and the head of Iran Department of Environment during the administration of Khatami, played a significant role in influencing and encouraging the environmentalists. Under her administration, fifty seven branches of the department were established in different cities of Iran. The main goal of all these branches all over the country was to encourage environmental activities. To make this goal possible, many research institutes and laboratories were founded within these branches. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) named Ebtekar as one of the seven Champions of the Earth in 2006.

At the same time, in 1980s and early 1990s, environmentalism started to become a global concern. One, after many years of environmental activism throughout Europe and North America, environmental concerns became one of the most important issues of the western countries and their leaders. Two, as the environmental problems such as global warming, ozone depletion, destruction of tropical rain forests and other issues started to expand, environment and environmental problems started to attract many people of the world. The 1992 United
Nations Conference on Global Environmental Issues (known as the Rio Summit) where more than 120 nations of the world including Iran participated was an obvious symbol of the growing environmental concerns.

It was at The Women Conference of 1995 in Beijing where environmental and women issues were presented as one of the most essential problems of our current world. This resulted in the creation of a scientific and educational context for the environment within the universities and different organisations. Moreover, as many of Iranian environmental activists are West-educated people, they are directly influenced by the ideologies embedded in the environmental movements of the West.

Although one of the main objectives of the Islamic regime has been to control the influence of media, the advancement in new technologies during the last years made it impossible for the government to bring the role of media under its full control (Mohammadi, 2006). Therefore, as Manuel Castells (2004) emphasises, the presence of the environmental issues in media has legitimised the green values, and at the same time has led to identity construction. Technological advancements, specifically the widespread usage of satellite, and internet in Iran have played an important role in raising and shaping environmental awareness and activity. Therefore, the national media such as radio, television and the press has become one of the medium of environmental education. The numerous numbers of articles and reports on the environment in newspapers and joint activities of some environmental groups with public media are good examples of this claim.

The launch of Global Environment Facility’s (GEF) Small Grants Programme (SGP) in 2001 in Iran has played an important role in promoting environmental activism as well. Funded by the GEF, SGP is implemented by the United Nations Development Programme. The main task of SGP is to support activities of non-governmental and community-based organisations (CBOs) in developing countries which are oriented towards climate change, conservation of biodiversity, protection of international waters, reduction of the impact of persistent organic pollutants and prevention of land degradation. In Iran, SGP has produced a supportive environment for cooperation between CBOs, civil society organizations (CSOs), the government and the United Nations organisations in issues related to GEF areas of concern.

In early 1990s, only a few numbers of environmental groups existed in Iran. Among them, the Green Front of Iran, the Women’s Society for the Campaign against Environmental Pollution and Mountain Environmental Protection Association have been the most prominent.

The Green Front of Iran was founded by four medical students in Tehran in 1989 and was authorised in 1994. Increasing public awareness on environmental issues has been the primary goal of this NGO. The Green Front of Iran has been the most popular of environmental groups with more than 5,000 members all over the country until the beginning of 2007, before structural changes took place in their organisation and membership.
The Women’s Society for the Campaign against Environmental Pollution is another example of early environmental NGOs. It was established in 1992 and was registered in 1994. Mrs Mahlagha Mallah, the founder of the group who is famous as ‘the mother of Iran’s environment’, is a France-educated woman concerned with environment and women. With many branches all over the country, the Women’s Society for the Campaign against Environmental Pollution is today, after the structural changes of the Green Front of Iran, the most popular among the people and the environmental groups.

The third, among the early prominent environmental groups, has been the Mountain Environmental Protection Association. This group started as an NGO focusing on the single issue of ‘mountain protection’ in 1989 and was officially registered in 1997. As the founder claims: ‘When we started to work together we even didn’t know what a NGO is. We just felt that the mountains were in danger of serious destruction, so we decided to protect them. But for some years we just worked without registering our group.’

It was only during the period of 1997–2005, when notable developments in the number of environmental groups occurred. According to the data provided by the Iran Department of the Environment, the number of environmental groups went up to 640 all over the country whereas it has only been around twenty environmental NGOs before this period.

Characteristics of the Movement

From 1979 until 1997, a monolithic political system was dominating Iran which used to plan and organise all aspects of social life for its citizens. Therefore, rarely an NGO was established. The reform movement was a response to the closed sphere of civil society, which was officially opened through the election of 1997. The reform movement brought about numerous changes in many aspects of Iranian society, leading to some structural transformations. One of the main transformations within this context has been the new state–society relations since mid 1990s. These changes, alongside the fundamental changes in most societies of the world, have led to the emergence of new kinds of social movements such as the environmental movement in Iran.

However, although president Khatami’s government facilitated the activities of CSOs, the heterogeneous nature of the political forces (Iranian government consists of two different groups of hardliners and reformists which oppose each other) has made the activities of the CSOs problematic. As the demands of the environmental groups cannot be easily met within existing institutional arrangements, there is a paradoxical attitude towards the government among some of the activists. While some of the environmentalists specify that they don’t have any serious problem with the government; for some, the government and the officials are the main problem and opponent.
One leader states:

We have so many problems with some officials. They cause us a lot of troubles. However, we need to collaborate with them on some occasions in order to be able to go on with our activities; in order to be able to bring some changes. Otherwise, we will not be able to work. There are some NGOs who accuse us of collaborating with the government. That is ignorance! They don’t know that in current Iranian political system, it is not possible to ignore the officials and do whatever you want.

The semi-authoritarian (semi-democratic) context in which the movement has developed, at the same time enables and limits the activities of the environmental groups. The environmentalists challenge the existing norms and structures of the society. Their main aim is to change the people’s lifestyle and governmental policies towards environmental issues.

Diversity is one central element of environmental movement in Iran and the groups differ in their ideology, activities, goals and size. The environmental groups vary in their ideological concerns, being involved with conservationism to challenging the social, political and economic structures of the Iranian society. However, in most cases a combination of different ideologies is behind their activities. Nonetheless, cultural change remains their central focus. Most NGOs are based in urban areas and concentrate on urban environmental problems. But there are some environmental groups which focus more on the rural areas and villages, and are mostly concerned with community development. This diverse nature of the movement has enabled the environmental activists to reach different sections of society and to gain attention and support from various sectors, institutions and groups. Although there are constraints which are defined by the government for the activities of the movement, the diversity within the movement has helped it survive the upheavals of the political situation.

Raising consciousness about the environmental issues and encouraging people to be active citizens in social and political sphere are the two common goals followed by most of the environmental groups.

However, as each environmental group represents a special form of environmental action, there is no single model of environmental group. For example, within the multiplicity of the movement in Tehran, we can discern eight major strands around their main focus to the issue of environment, or in other words, according to the issues around which the groups are organised. However, this does not mean that the mentioned groups are only concerned with the mentioned issues, but the categorisation highlights their focus.

According to the main focus around the issue of environment, only one major strand of environmental groups are to be recognised in Rasht. It’s astonishing that all environmental groups of Rasht are concentrated on the issue of nature conservation, although there are differences among them.

The following section provides a brief explanation of these different strands of environmentalism. While all strands were recognised in Tehran, the last strand belongs to the city of Rasht (which was studied as an example of the movement periphery).
**Climate Change-Pollution**

The activists of this strand are either professional athletes or environmentalists with some interest in the issue of climate change. Two different kinds of environmental groups are recognised within this strand. Groups being concerned with mountains and issues related to mountain conservation, and one NGO which only focuses on promotion of bicycle riding. Their activities are mainly concerned with symbolic actions, publications, campaigns and lobbying with officials. Moreover, they hold seminars, workshops and meetings on relevant issues. Besides, they work in joint projects with some governmental bodies. Their members range from 100 to 2,000. However, the core members of 50–200 remain permanently active.

**Research-Scientific**

This strand includes a huge number of NGOs. The activists of this group are all professionals (professors, experts, graduate students) from different fields of environmental sciences to human sciences. However, except one group which is concerned with pure scientific work, all other NGOs join symbolic actions, protests and campaigns. This shows that although the activists within this strand are concentrated on scientific issues, their activities go beyond pure research. Their main activities remain consciousness-raising through scientific publications and workshops. On an irregular basis, they also take part in joint projects with some official organisations. Number of their members varies from ten to twenty scholars.

**Women-Environment**

These groups are based on two significant assumptions: one, they are conscious about the historical role of women in environmental conservation. Two, they are aware of the importance of women empowerment in a society where women have always been suppressed. More than that, most of their leaders and activists are women. Through publications, seminars, workshops and lobbying with officials, they bring out environmental knowledge and contribute to the task of consciousness-raising. They have been able to attract members in large and small scale from 100 to a few thousands.

**Youth-Environment**

Two issues of ‘environment’ and ‘the youth’ are combined within this strand. Authorised by the Youth National Organisation (an official organisation which was established under Khatami’s presidency to improve the life standards of
the youths all over the country) within the period of 1997–2003, they all received strong support from the Youth National Organisation in the beginning of their establishment. Their leaders and members are all young people aged from sixteen to thirty five, who are interested in socio-political participation by way of collective action. Their activities are mainly holding workshops and seminars for youth, research and publications, scientific trips, street shows, demonstrations, exhibitions and in some cases participation in joint projects with municipalities. The number of activists in the smallest organisation of this type is fifty while the largest could gather 1,000 members. However, the presidential election of 2005 and decline in the support of the Youth National Organisation, has led to a dramatic down turn in the activities of many of these groups.

Wild Life
Preserving the ecosystem and its species is the commonality of these groups. They mostly focus on the endangered species such as Persian cheetah, the animal–human relationship and the laws that regulate these relationships. Holding workshops and seminars, community building and research are among their main activities. The two case studies of this group have attracted 3,500 and 350 members.

Single Issue
This strand contains groups which only focus on one specific issue. Two case studies of these kinds of groups show two different kinds of focus, namely water and agricultural issues. Through workshops, seminars and different projects, the important role of water in the life cycle is emphasised. Further, rural development, peasant empowerment and campaign against the widespread use of pesticides have been launched. The membership within this strand remains rather limited, not exceeding fifty members.

General Issue
Being concerned with environmental issues in general, without focus on any specific issue, characterises this strand. Through symbolic actions, such as tree plantations, taking part in demonstrations and campaigns, holding seminars and meetings, these groups have been contributing to consciousness-raising and growing public awareness. Apart from this, they have implemented several projects in urban and rural areas. Their membership ranges from forty to 5,000 members.

Virtual Environmentalism

Facing the barrier of censorship on other mediums, internet has provided a space for generation of ideas. The most common use in this respect has been personal weblogs. These websites are a site for open criticism, discussions and consciousness-raising.

Nature Conservation

Nature conservation has been the main existing strand in the city of Rasht (centre of the Gilan province). Gilan province is among the most forested and green provinces of Iran which lies along the Caspian Sea. Therefore, the forests and the sea are two most important features of life of the people in the province. However, in the recent years as the consequence of wrong policies and fast growth of tourism in the region, environmental damages (especially sea pollution and deforestation) have been enormous. This has led to environmental issues becoming a livelihood issue. Many of the environmental groups, therefore, have concentrated their work on forest and sea conservation. Consciousness-raising through seminars, workshops, and so on, and organisation of campaigns to clean the beach, the forest and the rivers are among the most important activities of these NGOs. Protests and demonstrations, besides lobbying with officials, have also been one important strategy in achieving their goals.

Although environmental movements in many developing countries such as Brazil, India, Malaysia, and so on, draw their support from lower classes (Gadgil and Guha, 1994); in Iran, similar to Europe, the social base of environmental activists is the middle class. However, the attention of the middle-class environmentalists is mostly directed towards promoting environmental awareness among the lower strata of the society. The leaders of the environmental groups are mostly from educated section of the society. However, the core of the middle-class educated people is mostly surrounded by students, and housewives.

Both sexes have been represented among the leadership or founders of the NGOs. However, the strong linkage between feminism and environmentalism helps us explain the reasons behind the presence of huge number of women in the leadership, as well as in the main body of the movement. The enormous number of women activists and presence of feminist principles and ideologies within many organisations indicates the overlap of women’s movement with environment movement. Although the women’s movement in Iran has a long history, it has gained a new form and strength during the last few years. Despite many restrictions which were imposed on women after the Iranian revolution of 1979, and regardless of the dominant patriarchal culture, which has suppressed the women for long, in the aftermath of the revolution, because of the provision of educational facilities in the rural and tribal areas, many traditional women who were invisible in the pre-revolutionary society, find their ways in the
newly-established society. Therefore, the society faces an educated generation where girls could even perform better than boys in many cases. The Iranian women today are not anymore only limited to their traditional roles as mothers or wives in many big cities. This has led to the participation of many women in various spheres of social life (Khosrokhavar, 2004).

The existing link between women’s movement and the environmental movement has been explained as eco-feminism. The main claim of this school of thought is that the women have a closer relationship with nature than men. Some of the interviewees, while asked about the reason behind the presence of massive numbers of women within the environmental movement, expressed reasons embodied in the eco-feminist school of thought. One environmental activist explains that:

The women have never had the chance of showing their abilities and needs. They were always considered as second sex, and were limited to their traditional roles. Today, by participating in collective actions they can be part of the social life. They can feel that they are doing something… that they are changing something…

One leader states:

Women’s role in conservation of natural resources through the history is not deniable. Women have always had a close relationship with the nature. In Iran the traditional roles of women have always made them the main guardians of natural resources. Moreover, women have an important role in training the next generation. Being aware of their important role can bring many positive changes in the society.

Moreover, because many groups carry an enormous number of student activists especially in the ‘Environment-Youth’ strand of the movement, beside the linkage of the environmental movement with women’s movement, the environmental movement overlaps with student’s movement as well. Further, drawing considerable attention on the younger generation is one of the main concerns of many of the environmentalists.

Nevertheless, the environmental movement does not have any mass support, even in the big cities. In order to understand this, we should consider two important factors: one, motivations of the participants, and two, the structure within which the participation takes form, that is, the political structure. Two main motivations have been important in explaining why people decided to participate in the environmental movement. The first motivation has been of a political/instrumental kind. This means, in the absence of free political parties, and a platform for political participation, some people with political interests have decided to become environmental activists. Some others hold higher educational degrees in natural sciences, and have professional interests behind their environmental collective action. The second group of motivations can be of a personal/social kind. In many cases, the leaders of the group hold higher education degrees in
human sciences and their motivation is in bringing the people to the public sphere. In some cases, starting a collective action around environmental issues has been considered as an achievement in social status and social mobility terms. However, in most cases, there is a combination of these two sets of motivations which make the people join a social movement. The groups which survive are the ones that find a balance between political/instrumental and personal/social needs (Gross, Smith and Wallstone, 1983: 72).

Moreover, because of the historical past, Iranians are more familiar with political protests, campaigns and movements. Therefore, environmentalism and environmental issues are still odd and unknown concepts for most segments of the society. As the environmentalists are aware of this unknown essence of environmentalism, they have kept distance from the masses, and have focused to organise actions among themselves. Furthermore, in a society where large segments of the population face economic problems such as poverty, unemployment and declining life standards, environmentalism cannot become an attractive issue for the masses.

Further, within the semi-authoritarian political system of Iran, where everything is under direct control of the regime, it is not easy to mobilise big segments of the society. That is why, the environmental movements have remained small scaled and concentrated around local policies, and environmental issues which are not sensational. For example, despite the importance of the nuclear programme for environmentalists, there is no anti-nuclear group in the country. Therefore, we can conclude that in order to be able to survive, the environmental groups follow a ‘depoliticised politics’ and ‘self-imposed censorship’. Thus, the environmental movement continues to exist, but fails to become a wider massive movement.

Although since the presidency of Ahmadinejad in 2005, the movement has become weak and less active compared to the period of 1997–2005; it is still active, and is among the few social movements, which is relatively tolerated by the regime.

President Ahmadinejad’s approach towards civil society has made a pessimistic atmosphere for civil society activists. He considers the civil society as a Trojan horse and a project for velvet revolutions. Further, he regards CSOs as the alliance of pro-reform groups and opposition. Furthermore, because of its populist approach civilian activities are considered as intruder upon a system which claims to be in direct touch with the masses (Razzaghi, 2007). As the consequence of this approach, since 2005 the movement has distanced itself from the politics, and has focused on professional environmental activities. In some cases, in order to be able to survive and pursue the movement’s goals, some of the leaders have moved towards compromises with their adversaries in politics. Some leaders have become less concerned with campaigns and protests, and have redirected their activities towards fund raising and protection of the organisation. Therefore, we can say that, the present Iranian environmental movement is more concerned with its struggle to survive, rather than pursuing the movement’s goals.
New Social Movement Theory and the Iranian Environmentalism: A Critique of Euro-centrism

Among the different theorists of the new social movement paradigm, Alaine Touraine and Alberto Melucci’s perception of new social movements follows the same line, and is considered as one of the most influential theories within this paradigm. The theoretical framework of this section is based upon the new social movement theory of Touraine and Melucci.

Touraine and Melucci distinguish the old and new social movements seeing the old movements linked to the ideals and norms of industrialism and concerned with economic issues and the state. Further, they focus on the advancement in capitalist modes of production and rapid pace of industrialisation in western societies, which paved the way for the emergence of post-industrial societies. Alaine Touraine refers to the post-industrial society as ‘programmed society’, (see for example Touraine 1995), while Alberto Melucci calls this new kind of society the ‘complex society’ (see for example Melucci 1996a).

As Touraine (1996, 2000) and Melucci (1980, 1984, 1989) believe in the fact that the post-industrial society is a new kind of society and different from the industrial society, they also argue that post-industrial society generates ‘different’ kinds of social movements than that of the industrial society. The new social movements, that is, the movements of post-1960 have been perceived as the successors of the old movements. Unlike the old movements, the new movements are considered outside the old left or labour movement (Cleveland, 2003). The new movements of post-industrial society replace the old movements of industrial society while their identity, forms of organisation and goals are linked to the post-material age.

From the very beginning these suppositions bring us to the conclusion that in other parts of the world, where the societies did not experience the industrialisation and the post-industrialisation of the European model, there are no social movements. Moreover, in the contemporary world, where the impacts of globalisation are felt everywhere and no society is left untouched, there is rarely a country which can be considered wholly post-industrialised, programmed and information based. There is always a level of post-industrialism or programming in each society. So being programmed or not is a relative concept and cannot be defined in absolute terms (Scott, 1990: 80).

Further, the assumption of seeing modernity (in its European sense) and enlightenment as the pre-requisite for understanding the essence of (new) social movements becomes problematic. The circumstances under which the notion of subject has emerged, the assumptions of state–society relationships and democracy are all defined with reference to the framework of European modernity, neglecting the historical development in other parts of the world. This negligence of non-European societies shows that a linear path of modernity is expected from all societies of the world and this is the European path of modernity.
A very precise example in this regard is the case of labour and anti-capitalist movements. Many industrial societies have experienced strong anti-capitalist movements which have been the direct consequence of rapid growth of capitalism and industrialisation. The mass mobilisation which occurred through the anti-capitalist movements of industrial societies made them the representatives of the old movements in these societies. However, Iran has never been an industrial society in the European sense. This means, although Iran has experienced capitalist system and capitalist modes of production, the growth of capitalism in Iran has followed a much slower pace than that of the industrialised countries. Therefore, the working class has never carried the characteristics of the working class in Europe. Although Iran experienced a communist movement and a communist party, communism never became a popular movement in Iran. The communist party, after its establishment in 1941, played an important role in mobilising the people in two grand social movements of the century, that is, national oil movement and the revolutionary movement of 1979. However, communism unlike its western counterparts never developed into a central movement in Iran. Moreover, because of the historical past, Iran’s social movements have been anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian instead of anti-capitalist. Therefore, contrary to the European old movements (labour movement), the carrier of the Iranian old movements have been mainly the middle class, and not the lower classes.

The environmental movement in Iran started as part of the reform movement (since early 1990s), which is mainly a pro-democracy movement. The main goal of the reform movement has been broadening the scope of citizenship rights and civil society. Further, the reform movement of Iran is rather a general movement with a broad scope of goals and promises. In addition, unlike many contemporary European movements the reform movement does not focus on only one specific issue. It is rather a general movement, opposing the dominant political structure of the society. It criticises the dominant discourse as a whole and focuses on new principles and programmes. From the beginning the main focus of the movement has been on certain fundamental values such as civil society, and individual and citizenship rights. To put it differently, the reform movement emphasises on the importance of the citizens as social actors, while aiming at transforming the existing situation. However, at the same time, the reform movement has given rise to some issue-specific movements like environment and women’s movement. Nonetheless, different from the reform movement, the environmental movement as an example of these single-issue movements focuses on the formation of new identities, norms and lifestyles, which are deliberated as promises of the new social movements, according to the new social movement theory.

Due to the contextual differences which have been mentioned above, the environmental movement in Iran functions under different circumstances, and faces different limitations than that of the European environmental movements. The activities of the environmentalists in Iran are influenced by many factors such as the semi-authoritarian political system, the unclear essence of CSOs, and the cultural, demographic and economic problems. Furthermore, because of the nature
of Iranian state–society relation, which is unclear, the environmental movement is not an entirely independent movement from the state. Although the movement is comprised of many bodies, it mostly functions through NGOs which are registered with the government.

Nonetheless, the environmental movement regarding its identity, its organisation and goals, is ‘new’ in the history of Iranian social movements. This embedded ‘newness’ of Iranian environmentalism is, however, not explainable in reference to the differences of the industrial and post-industrial society as it is argued in the new social movement theory. The ‘newness’ of environmentalism in Iran is only understandable in comparison to the previous social movements of Iran. First, the Iranian environmental movement emerged out of the reform movement which is a distinct social movement from the last grand social movements of modern Iran. The reform movement in 1990s is comprised of two layers. On the one hand, the reform movement follows the earlier movements’ master frameworks, that is, frameworks of ‘national sovereignty’ and ‘individual sovereignty’ (Poulson, 2006). On the other hand, emphasis on the discourses of public sphere and civil society has given rise to the emergence of a new layer within the movement. Formation of new discourses, narratives, counter-narratives and new forms of resistance (such as environmental movements) has been the consequence of emergence of this new layer.

The second novel feature of the environmental movement is linked to the fact that the movement is led by the intellectuals in the Gramscian sense of the word. This means the leaders of the movement are people who try to educate the masses about how to successfully fight oppression (Cleveland, 2003). These intellectuals belong to the middle class and they are mostly from university or they are ex-university students. That is why; the environmental movement overlaps with student and women’s movements.

Considering the modern social movements of Iran, that is, the social movements of the 20th century, two main sources of social conflict, that is, state/citizens or nation/imperialism cleavages have led to the emergence of social movements. Although the reform movement emerged around the state/citizen conflict, but a new set of movements rose out of it, which are mostly concerned with the cultural issues. So environmentalism emerged from a movement which was centred on traditional grievances namely state–citizens’ conflict, but it raised new grievances itself.

Finally, unlike the traditional social movements of Iran, the environmentalists don’t express themselves through direct political action. They rather raise cultural challenges to the social practices and the dominant codes. Moreover, they are mostly concerned with influencing the public opinion and the authorities. Adoption of new confrontations to the existing order, such as concerns in changing the lifestyle and searching for innovative ways of civil participation are examples of the new challenges they raise. However, this does not mean that the environmentalists’ action is not political. Environmentalists criticise the political order, but in a different way from the traditional movements. This means the environmentalists
do not seek to take control of the state and economy, but similar to the western new social movements (Cleveland, 2003), they challenge the boundaries of conventional politics and try to introduce a new paradigm. That is why their definition of politics is also different.

However, as the nature of civil society in Iran is still not precisely defined, the Iranian new social movements are not located out of the sphere of politics. Therefore, the essence of state and society and the activities which are located in civil society sphere are different from that of Europe. That is why the assumption of the new social movement theory that the new movements function separately from the state is not of relevance in the Iranian case. The Iranian new movements were born out of the reform movement, which was a political movement, mainly inspired from within the government (at least in the beginning of its emergence). The concerns of many of the new movements are still the state and its performance on many occasions. Due to the hyper-politicisation of the society and its institutions, for example, CSOs, many of the social movement activists are also clearly conscious of their political role. For example, the founder of one NGO which is mainly concerned with research and scientific activities complains that:

We have always had problems with other environmental NGOs because they wanted us to follow them and we had our own way. They were telling us we are doing wrong in not being political. They wanted us to participate in their campaigns, demonstrations and protests. But we wanted to do more scientific work. At some point we were excluded from all other groups and most of the environmental groups didn’t care about our work anymore.

Moreover, because of the lower level and slower pace of capitalist development and industrialisation in Iran as compared to Europe, post-materialist and anti-consumptionist values, which are the most important components of European new social movements, are only one aspect of the Iranian environmental movement. Therefore, unlike new social movements of Europe, which according to Habermas (1992) are against the ‘colonization of the life world’, the new social movements of Iran, including the environmental movement, struggle for new identities and cultural codes and confront the dominant structures of the Islamic republic and its influence on their everyday life. Further, they seek new kinds of rights which have been unknown in the previous social movements. (Yaghmaian, 2002).

However, apart from the mentioned shortcomings, the new social movement theory is capable of explaining three aspects of the Iranian environmental movement. One, referring to increased importance of cultural dimensions of human action, which can be seen in the emergence of environmental concerns and their modes of action, we can accept that there are some problems such as environmental problems, which affect each of us as individuals directly and therefore some aspects of the change has planetary dimensions leading to the interdependence of global problems (Melucci 1996a and 1996b). Further, similar to what Touraine (2000) and Melucci (1996a) explain in their theory, the Iranian environmental
Environmental Movements in Iran

movement has a loose structure and the composition of the movement participants (as was explained the environmentalists are from the middle class and the educated strata of the society) is not far from the European environmentalism.

Media has played an important role in making information available to the people towards environmental issues, and in mobilising them in Iran. Concerning the fact that an important weight is given to the role of the mass media and information technology on shaping of the public opinion in the new social movement theory, we can conclude that the increasing role of the media in influencing the new social movements is of relevance in the Iranian society as well. However, censorship and lack of democracy compels the media to function differently than in the western societies and the new social movements of Europe.

Conclusions

Whereas in European countries environmentalism reflects the challenges of the post-industrial society; in other parts of the world, environmental concerns reflect other concerns. As was seen in the Iranian case, emergence of environmentalism above all reveals the fact that the society is in need of democratisation of social life where environmentalists struggle to find their way and legitimacy within the sphere of civil society. But, at the same time they aim at implementing environmental protection and challenging the inefficiency of political institutions. As has been discussed, the new social movement theory with its heavy reliance on the European context disables us to provide a comprehensive understanding of social movements of the non-European societies, such as Iran, which have different social and historical backgrounds. Any kind of theory which claims to be a comprehensive one should combine two different levels of analysis, that is, structural analysis and conceptual analysis. In such an analysis society and generation of social movements should be seen in terms of structures and structural transformations, but our understanding of social structures should either be based on a few major concepts or ideas which are general and global (for example, concepts such as modernity and civil society should be regarded as general concepts and not in their European meanings), or it should limit itself to a specific region or historical context. The latter should then consider the relativity of various concepts in different social settings. However, this can only provide a starting point for further understanding and hypothesis about social movements of different parts of the world.

Notes

1. Although there has been small group mobilisation concerning the environmental issues in the earlier stages of Iranian history, it was in the late 1990s and especially 1997–2000 period when environmentalism started to gain shape as a social movement. Although there have been many attempts to define a social movement, there is still not one generally accepted definition of the term social movement. However, three characteristics...
namely, shared goals in bringing societal change, loose organisational level and systematic collectivity are widely accepted as important elements of a social movement.

References


