

# **'Urban Political Opportunity structure' and Collective Action in a Changing Metropolis: a Spatial View of Montreal's Student Movement**

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This paper uses the concepts of 'urban political opportunity structure' and collective action to explore the spatial dimensions of Montreal's student movement during two specific campaigns: the student up rise of 1968 and the more recent one of 2012. We focus here on specific protest events unfolding in urban space to understand how a changing urban context can influence collective action, claims and more precisely the movement's relation to space. These two periods correspond to intense social activity for urban youth in Quebec's metropolis during which the province's student movement was the main organisation supporting their claims.

Many authors have pointed out that cities have been a fertile territory for popular contentions and struggles over modern history. Castell's pioneering work on Madrid's popular comities in the 60s and 70s has showed us how cities are social spaces marked by the contradictions of capitalism and where emerges a new form of social conflict directly related to the collective organization of lifestyle (Castells 1973). More recently, many urban scholars, building on Henri Lefebvre's work have tried to understand the impacts of capitalist forms of urbanization on social justice and the struggles of "right to the city movements" (Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer 2012). If these researches have help us understand the claims of urban social movements and the issues they are addressing it is also necessary, as noted by Cerny (1995), to look at the changing role of cities in relation to states and globalisation to understand changes in forms of collective action and organization.

Building on this reflection our paper seeks to understand how student organisations and collective action have mutated both spatially and in relation to time in regards to urban space in a changing global context and what Germain and Rose (2000) called 'Montreal's quest for a metropolis'. To understand these changes and their impact on collective actions and social movement strategies we propose the concept of 'urban political opportunity structure'. Like the one of political opportunity structure in relation to State, this concept refers to the interaction context between urban authorities and power relations and the broader urban environment in which social movements evolve.

Montreal carries a rich history of political protest and stood out from other major Canadian cities since the 1960s as a breeding place for social mobilization (Mills 2011; Austin 2013). Take for example the tumultuous period of the Quiet Revolution in the late 1960s when Montreal was the epicenter of the Quebec sovereignty movement, of the Black movement and of Quebec's student movement. Social protests have then slowed down, but not disappeared, in the 80's and 90's after considerable social gains and the appearance of a 'welfare state' with greater access to higher education and free healthcare. But, in a changing global economic context where cities became central actors of economic growth, governments have adopted state rationalization policies and austerity measures that have resulted in an increase in popular protest as well as social movement activity in Montreal in the past ten years. The climax of this last cycle being the student mobilization of 2012, dubbed 'Maple spring' by the media, against a rise in tuition fees by 75%. As the most important youth organisation in the province, the student movement - composed of local and national unions – mainly based in Montreal has been at the forefront of both contestation cycles.

This paper draws on a doctoral research project in which I interrogate the relations between place, space, time and collective action by studying the history of the student movement in Montreal. Data

comes from newspaper archives and individual interviews with student activists and leaders. Using qualitative data analysis software and geographic information systems, the analysis aims to understand collective actions on a city scale focussing on transgressive behavior and collective claims to public space and social justice. While newspaper articles informed us on factual data following the protest event analysis method, interviews gave us a more personal, indepth input on individual trajectories and youth identity. Preliminary analysis of our data suggests a transformation in the relationship to space and time of the student movement with the urban territory. For example, virtual spaces of organization and communication seem to result in a change of spatial aggregation logics. Our data also suggest that the spatial and economic reorganization of the city following its metropolitan affirmation changes the spaces of confrontation as well as local authorities' intervention methods.

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