

The Student Movement and Political Conflict in Space

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Space, as a limited resource especially in urban areas, allows us to follow the lifecycle of social conflicts. Occupied spaces, spaces under attack, or patrolled spaces represent singular moments by which our collective action enters into history. Looking at the struggle for space during the student strike allows us to better understand power relations between the state and the spring 2012 insurgents—whether students, workers, or unemployed people—and this duality in the control of space makes visible the tectonic shifts caused by polarizing political events such as the student strike. Montreal’s urban fabric, which was at the heart of the social struggle that rocked Québec in spring 2012, serves as the background for this story of spatial conflict.

The Occupation of Space

The recent history of Québec’s student movement had been characterized by the use of occupations to affirm and defend political positions. During the 2005 student strike, several CEGEPs were permanently occupied by students both in Montreal and in the regions, giving striking students spaces to gather and organize. The CEGEP du Vieux-Montreal was emblematic of this reclamation strategy, and served as a convergence space for the entirety of the student movement during that strike. Occupied CEGEPs were at once spaces of political organizing and

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of communal living. This arrangement brought with it questions of how to live collectively in times of struggle, and in fact strike GAs spent more time discussing how to organize daily life than they spent on how to organize against the state.

This occupation-based strategy was also present in our confrontations with the state. During the 2005 general strike the majority of actions taken by students relied on barricading themselves into a ministerial or business office in order to transform it. People spent hours, sometimes days, occupying these spaces, usually ending with a SWAT team breaking down the barricades and arresting all of the occupiers. By the end of the 2005 strike most of the people who had participated in occupations were criminalized by the state, forcing them into a spectator role for years to come.

In the seven years between the 2005 and 2012 general strikes, occupations continued to be used by students to reclaim our institutions and destabilize the political and economic elite in their comfort zones. However, the police tactics employed against occupations changed during this time. In Fall 2007, the Liberal government imposed a tuition hike that caused a stir among students. Although the campaign to mount a general unlimited strike was ultimately unsuccessful, several CEGEPs and universities voted to conduct a number of days of action and attempted to occupy their institutions. Notably, several hundred students at the CEGEP du Vieux-Montréal defied their administration's lack of approval for a bed-in and attempted to occupy the CEGEP. They rapidly erected barricades at the CEGEP's entrances as the arrival of riot

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cops seemed imminent. In the end, a long night of clashes between students defending the CEGEP and riot police attempting to reclaim it ended in over 100 arrests and several injuries. This date remains known in the student movement as *le Mardi de la matraque* (Baton Tuesday). The intensified reaction of CEGEP administrations against occupations starting in 2007 prefigured the situation we saw in 2012.

In the two years leading up to the 2012 strike, a number of tactics were used to escalate the pressure on the authorities. This included a number of occupations of spaces of political and economic power, such as the offices of the Ministry of Finance and the Council of Regents and Principals of Québec Universities (CREPUQ) on the 24th and 31st of March 2011. No arrests were made during these occupations, as they did not use barricades and occupiers left of their own free will. Nonetheless, a few months later ten students were arrested at their homes under a variety of charges. These post hoc allegations of wrong-doing reveal the state's desire to criminalize all forms of occupation prior to the 2011-2012 mobilization campaign for an unlimited general strike.

In February 2012, when the latest strike began, the strategy of occupations seemed doomed to fail. We had proved unable to defend a space against several hours of police attack. On their ends, administrations and police forces had shown their complete unwillingness to tolerate any form of occupation and their intention to criminalize anyone making use of the tactic. Nonetheless there were several occupation attempts as the strike began. Notably, when the CEGEP du Vieux-Montréal went on

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strike several hundred people converged there, creating an energized but uncertain atmosphere in the halls. The administration declared early in the evening that it would call the riot squad. When the police finally intervened the majority of the occupiers had decided to leave, as they had been unable to collectively organize a sustainable occupation. The evening ended with the riot police charging into the CEGEP and eventually arresting thirty students. This event effectively shut down any possibility of future occupations. The next day, the administration of the CEGEP du Vieux-Montréal declared a lock-out, preferring to shut down all CEGEP functions including those not affected by the strike than to allow students to reclaim that space. As a result, students found themselves without a permanent site from which to organize.

Wildcat demonstrations, blockades, and spaces of conflictual convergence

The defeat of the occupation as a tactic led students to modify our strategy for retaking control of space. The new tactics for reclaiming physical public space took four forms: the 'wildcat' demonstration, the blockade, the temporary autonomous zone, and the space of conflictual convergence.

Like any social movement the 2012 student strike was punctuated by numerous demonstrations in the streets of Montreal. Students formed almost daily demonstrations ranging from one hundred people to tens of thousands. One element of these demonstrations created regular tension with the police and more broadly with the state: the itinerary. In Montreal, and to a lesser degree in the rest

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of Québec, non-collaboration with the police had been a widespread practice in social and student movements. In practice, this meant refusing to inform the police about plans for a demonstration, including its intended path, in order to allow the demonstration to retain autonomy and to make changes as appropriate in the moment. This freedom of movement in the streets of Montreal became an object of contention with the police and the government from the very earliest weeks of the strike. The SPVM proclaimed within the first few weeks that the strikers' demonstrations were illegal due to their refusal to reveal their planned itinerary. On March 29th, students held a demonstration making fun of the SPVM's position on masks and itineraries: under the theme of a "grand masquerade", 3000 masked students marched along four simultaneous paths blocking traffic across the entirety of downtown Montreal. This demonstration was meant to show that even when the trip was given, it was possible to disrupt downtown Montreal.

Beginning the night after CLASSE was excluded from negotiations with the government, a tradition of nightly demonstrations began. Ranging from festive demonstration to riotous march, the night demonstrations allowed for Montreal's population to express itself in immediate response to the current political climate. Making spontaneous decisions about their direction at each street corner, these demonstrations allowed students to reclaim control of the nocturnal urban space. In contrast to occupying academic institutions, this reclamation was done in such a way as to avoid police control and therefore transform the streets of downtown Montreal into a regularly occupied territory.

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Demonstrations were one way in which the strike movement reclaimed physical public space. But the reclamation of Montreal's urban fabric was also achieved through the numerous blockades that began after the first large parade on March 22nd. Unable to occupy spaces or invent communal living from within them, the spirit of the movement turned to blockades, born from a desire to sabotage the routines of daily life first in CEGEPs and universities but eventually throughout the economic and political world. At its heart, a student strike aims to prevent access to teaching institutions. After a month of striking the blockade of universities and CEGEPs was stable and students began to expand economic disruption actions. The CEGEP blockades were extended to the nerve centres of Montreal's and Québec's economies in order to slow the flow of goods and capital. Very early in the morning hundreds of people would meet up at a given point to make their way towards one of the bridges leading onto the island of Montreal, the bridge to the Montreal Casino, the SAQ (Québec Liquor Control Board) depot, or a downtown office tower, with the aim of controlling access to it by physically occupying the space by which it was accessible. In other words, roving picket lines blocked, daily, the flow of goods and workers necessary to the functioning of capitalism.

Students' inability to occupy campuses permanently also did not stop us from reclaiming university spaces in a temporary way. In March, students at UQAM organized an event called a "craft night" whose goal was to reclaim university space by occupying it. The university administration promptly responded on the day of the event by declaring a partial lock-out. All university

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Shows
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NUIT DE LA CRÉATION



LUNDI 12 MARS DES 18H00 À L'UQAM

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buildings except administrative offices were closed for the whole day. Very quickly, students converged in the De Sève building and began occupying it, redecorating the inside of the building. The highlight of the evening was not the occupation of the university, however, but the occupation of St. Catherine Street in front of the university. University furniture was brought outside, while three demonstrations and two general assemblies were converging on UQAM in order to occupy the street, which became a space of political and artistic expression. Spontaneously, musical performances were organized in the street while people wrote messages on the pavement and on the walls of the university. For a day, students turned the De Sève building and St. Catherine street into a temporary autonomous zone. This example illustrates how the difficulty of occupying our campuses in the face of administrative and police repression led us to leave the university setting to occupy urban space and mark it with our presence.

Political actions through reclaiming space can also be found in moments of conflictual convergence. The events around the Plan Nord salon and the Liberal Party convention in Victoriaville are such example. In what was called the Plan Nord Salon, the Liberal government brought together the political world and mining companies ready to invest in developing northern Québec; later, the Liberal party elite converged on the small town of Victoriaville for its convention. In both cases, the convergence called by the government was met with an answering convergence from the striking students. This double convergence of elites and insurgents turned in both cases into a violent confrontation between the police and the indignant crowd gathering outside. These moments created a space of

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conflictual convergence that represented in physical space the social conflict happening in Québec's society.

A third example of this type of double convergence is found in the events around the Formula 1 Grand Prix in June in Montreal. Traditionally the Montreal Grand Prix sees North America's economic, sports, and cultural elites converge in Montreal. In the streets, this transnational elite encountered the spirited student movement. The occupation of space through conflictual convergence revealed the buried social conflict between students and their allies on one side and the political and economic elite on the other, gathered around the Liberal party.

State repression and the return to the neighbourhoods

In the face of these different tactics for reclaiming space, the state felt obliged to respond. The first legal response from the state to retake control of spaces blocked by students was a series of injunctions in CEGEPs and universities aiming to return campuses to order. These injunctions failed when heavy picket lines prevented a forced return to class, demonstrating the political legitimacy of blocking campus for as long as student associations are on strike. After the failure of this first strategy, the Liberal government adopted a special law, Bill 78 or Law 12, in late May. This law was most importantly designed to retake control of Montreal's urban space by targeting the tactics that had been developed by students over the course of the spring to derail the normal flows of daily life for Québec society.

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First, Law 12 addressed the blockade of academic institutions by suspending the session, a response to the state's inability to reopen campuses. If such blockades occurred after the session was suspended, they were to be harshly sanctioned by the state, which gave itself the power to impose heavy fines on students and their organizations. The law also affected actions outside universities, making all demonstrations of more than 50 people illegal if they did not give the police their itinerary beforehand and allow the police to modify it as they chose. The special law also included a section specifically pertaining to economic and institutional blockades, providing for sanctions for anyone organizing or participating in one. At the same time as the Liberal government was adopting this special law, the city of Montreal was modifying its municipal by-law on illegal assembly: it became illegal to wear a mask at a demonstration, organizers of a demonstration were required to reveal their itinerary, and the fines to which violators would be subject increased.

In both cases, provincial and municipal, the goal of these exceptional laws was to retake control of the urban space that students had been occupying since February. The state acted on physical space by legislating the possibilities for the students' social movement to continue their political activities. The state acted legislatively to pacify public space, but the application of legislation depends on the armed forces. Following the adoption of the special law Montreal's Latin Quarter was ablaze three nights in a row with night demonstrations turning to riots. The SPVM, with the support of the provincial police, tightly patrolled the urban space around the Latin Quarter and specifically Emilie-Gamelin park, from which most demonstrations

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departed. This heightened policing of public space reached its apogee during the Montreal Grand Prix when the metro and the island where the race track is located swarmed with police detaining and searching anyone wearing a red square. Urban space was thus forbidden to anyone who might appear to belong to the student movement. In the face of the students' creativity at reinventing their tactics and forms of struggle throughout the spring, the state was forced to also reinvent its way of responding to demonstrations by adding new weapons to its tactic for repressing public space.

After the imposition of the special law the movement did not drop dead from the state of exception imposed by the state. A “casseroles” movement arose as a way of circumventing the law by anchoring the struggle in the neighbourhoods in lieu of university spaces and Montreal's urban core. At 8:30 pm, every night, Montreal's population went out on their balconies with pots and pans and then came down into the streets to join their neighbours. Spontaneous neighbourhood demonstrations ensued, growing as more people joined at each street corner. This type of demonstration allowed for the creation of spatially-anchored communities of struggle, identifying themselves by their shared territoriality in Montreal's neighbourhoods. The spontaneous nature of these gatherings made it impossible for participants to give their itinerary to the police beforehand. The special law adopted by the Liberal government was thus contradicted by its inability to be enforced on such spontaneous demonstrations and on the family crowd that was mobilizing in Montreal and across Québec.

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As we have seen, the spring 2012 movement in Québec existed in the physical space of the city of Montreal. The dialectical relationship between insurgents and the state was inscribed in this embattled space day after day. The concept of a diversity of tactics used by the student movement is illustrated in this narrative of spatial conflict. Each attempt by the state to control students' tactics of spatial reclamation led students to readjust their free movement in the urban fabric. The tactics mentioned above each in turn allowed the conflict to exist in Montreal's physical space while avoiding traps such as the criminalization of occupations and the exceptional laws voted at the end of the spring.