



# Bodies-Streets

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## OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES” *textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge*

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### **Bodies-Streets**

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*The city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies [...] The city orients and organizes family, sexual and social relations insofar as the city divides cultural life into public and private domains, geographically dividing and defining the particular social positions and locations occupied by individuals and groups. (Elizabeth Grosz, Bodies-cities, 1992, p. 250)*

Marching south on rue St-Denis in our nightly #casseroles protests, I am struck by how different my neighbourhood looks from the middle of the street. Looking from an imaginary viewpoint directly above, the street says a lot about the organization of cities. Thin strips of sidewalk at either side are for pedestrians. The vast middle is for cars. That simple division of space speaks volumes about the order of things physically inscribed into city life.

So much of the controversy over the tuition strike and Law 78 has been about the politics of possibility and the politics of space. The politics of possibility surround the fundamental questions of the tuition strike. Arguments around the strike rehearse controversies we have heard all over the world regarding neoliberalism: what, exactly, is the horizon of reasonable expectation for everyday people? What are the obligations of the state to their populations and how do those obligations relate to the politics of high finance? The politics of possibility consist of struggles over what we are allowed to imagine as alternative to the present social order, which imagined social and economic relations are admissible to serious public political discussion. Proponents of the hike argue that the province cannot afford to keep funding education without raising tuition. They argue for a very restricted social imagination, one that hews closely to the current social order and keeps the large portfolio of provincial economic and policy priorities intact. Opponents of the increase point back to the promises of free tuition that came with the Quiet Revolution and ask us to reconsider who should pay for education, how and when. The call for free college and university tuition might sound outrageous to some, but this is precisely because of a limited imagination – whether intentionally or unintentionally. Germany has done just fine with such a system, and anyway, there

was a time not so long ago when free education for primary and secondary students was also a radical proposition.

We can say the same thing about the protests. Law 78 resulted from the failure of the Liberals to persuade enough people to limit their imaginations to existing social relations. If people won't accede freely to limited politics of possibility, then perhaps they could be coerced. Law 78 decried and criminalized bodies out of place, 50 at a time, because they interfered with normal urban flows – flows of people and flows of money.

The *Montreal Gazette's* daily sensational headlines also argue that the problem with the strike is that it disrupts normal flows of people and money, and in the process they implicitly argue that some economics are more important than others. On the 30<sup>th</sup> they ran a [mostly fictional story](#) about how the strike “could” hurt student enrolment and faculty recruitment, despite the fact that no reliable source would corroborate the proposition. On the 31<sup>st</sup>, they ran [a story about the “human cost”](#) to service workers, and yet the sources quoted claiming there was a cost were not service workers or unions, but rather business leaders. Of course strikes and protests inconvenience people – that is the point, after all. Of course it has economic ramifications, though if the concerns about the economy are paramount, we must question the lack of coverage of the effects of student debt, which is also a serious financial concern not just in Quebec but in many countries. My own university's injunction against striking clerical staff last fall followed a similar logic. The basis for the injunction was that the noise of the strike could be heard in offices and classrooms. But the noise of university-sanctioned, corporate-sponsored parties during frosh week can be heard all over campus as well, yet they continue each year unabated. The point is clear: inconveniences for business purposes are fine. Inconveniences for meaningful politics are not.

Inside the manifs casseroles the percussion is overwhelming, beating a rhythm of phenomenal collectivity that is entirely immersive because it is so loud. At some distance, the noise tickles neighbourhoods, enticing some neighbors to join in while others, like Montreal's mayor, cringe at the protesters' extended touch. (For more on the sound of the protests, see my contribution to [Sounding Out!](#) to appear Monday 4 June).

Because they happen collectively and in the streets, the casseroles protests materialize and metonymize a critique of the horizons of possibility as set out by the provincial liberals. Many commentators have pointed out that the manifs casseroles have brought out groups that are otherwise unconnected politically: students, nationalists, anarchists, union activists, religious groups, the elderly, and so on. But this is to miss the point entirely. All politics are about connection, and any political movement or political party is made up of what Stuart Hall (following Ernesto Laclau

and Chantal Mouffe) called articulations: non-necessary connections among disparate elements to create a temporary “whole” (Hall, 1986; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Slack, 1996). We know this about political parties; they are all bundles of contradictions when you look under the blanket. But we forget and talk about the party as a unified thing. The same should be said for the movement. Sure, it contains contradictions, but the movement is united in refusing Law 78, and in reaching out to other possible social arrangements. As [I argued with Natalie Zemon Davis](#), it is an attempt to collectively redress a violation of the community.

This utopian dimension of the manifs is most strongly manifested in the middle of the street, in disrupting the presumptive organization of the city. Bylaws that prohibit people from walking where cars are supposed to go obviously enforce a measure of safety, but they also enforce what Ivan Illich calls a “radical monopoly”: “Cars can thus monopolize traffic. They can shape a city into their image – practically ruling out locomotion on foot or by bicycle in Los Angeles. They can eliminate river traffic in Thailand. That motor traffic curtails the right to walk, not that more people drive Chevis than Fords, constitutes radical monopoly” (Illich, 1973, p. 52). The organization of movement is thus closely tied to political and social organization – just look at which neighborhoods on this continent have access to good public transport and which do not. So to take back the streets in the form of marching, especially in light of a law banning 50 people from gathering *anywhere* outdoors without prior notice to the police, is a way of interrogating that order of rights and mobilities. Writing of cars in the United States, Zack Furness argues that the automobile “functions as both the literal and symbolic centerpiece of a narrative equating individual mobility and personal freedom” (Furness, 2010, p. 7). Though the story is slightly different in Quebec, the manifs casseroles and larger street protests in Montreal function a lot like the critical mass protests Furness chronicles. They “slow down the world,” (Furness, 2010, p. 88) creating opportunities for encounters between people. Although they are not themselves particularly dialogic – it is hard to talk over the din – they show that local organization can happen, that the city can be taken over by the people who live in it. Walking with thousands of my neighbors down the middle of the street, in a space reserved by law for cars, in a procession banned by law because of its size, I greet the people I see night after night, we make music together, and I know an alternative social order is possible. I know it physically because of where my body – and the bodies of my neighbors – have been together.

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