

Theory & Event

Theory & Event

Volume 15, Issue 3, 2012 Supplement

Johns Hopkins University Press



Article



Viewed

Saved to **MyMUSE library**

View Citation



Related Content

Additional Information

Creating Possibility:

The Time of the Quebec Student Movement

Alia Al-Saji — **(bio)**

Walking, illegally, down main Montreal thoroughfares with students in nightly demonstrations, with neighbors whom I barely knew before, banging pots and pans, and with tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people on every 22nd of the month since March—this was unimaginable a year ago.¹ Unimaginable that the collective and heterogeneous body, which is the “*manif [demonstration]*”, could feel so much like home, despite its internal differences. Unimaginable that this mutual dependence on one another could enable not only collective protection from traffic and police but the affective strength and audacity to take back the street—a mutual dependence that includes the masked demonstrators ready to help when gassed by police. Unimaginable too that we would be breaking the law daily,² that blocking traffic and seeing the city from the center of the street would become habit, and that as the “*printemps érable*” becomes summer, we would be investing our time in neighborhood assemblies, in weaving social bonds, and in sustaining and deepening the mobilization.

I say these actions were *unimaginable* not merely because the context that motivated the enlargement of the student movement into a popular struggle combines a number of unique features (a neoliberal government whose stubbornness seems policy, a resilient and surprisingly unified student movement, and a special law, bill 78, which goes well beyond what most would define as reason). Nor were they simply unimaginable because the Quebec I previously knew was marred by the Islamophobia and cultural racism made visible during the reasonable accommodation debates, a society whose mapping excluded

me and for whose sake it would have been difficult to protest.³ Rather, I say these actions were unimaginable because the possibility of this popular and inclusive mobilization *had not yet been created*. It is this possibility that the Quebec student movement has created, I argue, not only in quantitative terms by engaging so many, but at the level of lived subjectivities and intercorporeal solidarity. The evolution of the movement should be understood, then, both as a swelling of its popular base and as an intensification and qualitative transformation of ways of life.

The Illusion of Possibilities Mapped in Advance

Attempts to explain the current Quebec student movement in the media and by politicians have, with few exceptions, imposed on the movement predefined parameters and positioned it within an already mapped field of meaning. Even those sympathetic to the movement often cannot resist appealing to familiar narratives and preconceived schemas to render intelligible and to tame the dynamic complexity and multiplicity that characterize how this movement unfolds. While historical narratives can provide a context for understanding from whence the current movement came, the attempt to use such narratives to predict the outcome of the present “crisis” misconstrues the nature and temporality of this movement. Thus the common comparison with May 68 in France, though imaginatively fecund and not without resonance, is used to predict failure for the Quebec student movement in electoral terms (de Gaulle having been re-elected after May 68). Likewise, when the student movement is viewed simply through the lens of electoral politics, and our current system of representative democracy, a paternalistic and instrumentalist picture is drawn of its future: a certain quietism and electoral calculus is advised, since picket lines and daily demonstrations could provide a pretext for the current government to run on a “law and order” platform.⁴ Underlying these predictions is a quantitative treatment of the student movement that measures actions and events according to a single dimension or predetermined scale. Hence, the transformative effects of the student strike are measured by poll results and electoral outcomes, and its mobilizing power is filtered through the single variable of total number of protestors. That the sense, style and composition of protests change, that there might be multiple forms of resistance at work, and that the participation in the movement is itself diversified (linguistically, ethnically, racially and inter-generationally, in terms of gender and sexuality)—this qualitative differentiation and nuance are overlooked.⁵

Such interpretations of the student movement are not only reductive, flattening the heterogeneity of voices and diversity of tactics within the movement to a univocal register; they also forget the creativity of the movement, projecting a future based on an inventory of measurable accomplishments in the present. This is a *politics of the present* (or status quo) in which the possibility of the future is taken to be contained within and delimited by the contours of the present. And indeed, it is along these lines that *possibility* is usually understood. As Henri Bergson has argued in his critique of the idea of the possible, when possibility is taken to precede and predetermine the real, the openness and

unpredictability of the sense of futurity is lost. The future would then be no more than the *realization* of possibilities given in the present, a mere selection and copy of that which has already been mapped and defined but is not yet real.⁶ Here, time is construed as linear progression, an almost mechanical development: from present to future, from possible to real. But the open-endedness of this linear time is illusory, for it hides a circularity that closes off temporal creation; futurity is anticipated based on presence and possibility is modeled on what is given.⁷

Predictions and prescriptions, which attempt to tell the story of the Quebec student movement and foretell its future as if it had already unfolded, thus effectively misconstrue its temporality and freeze its becoming. This is not only because, by taking it to be a thing, plan or set of principles, they miss its nature as *movement*. It is also because this movement is not the mechanical repetition of the same, but an *élan* (in the sense of both impetus and momentum) that has transformed itself as it evolves. In this way, the unfolding of the unlimited general student strike (*grève générale illimitée* or *GGI*), which began this Spring and is still in effect, escapes definitive—complete or final—comprehension.⁸ This is not simply an epistemic or psychological limitation that has to do with our capacity to grasp this event, but an ontological feature of the movement itself. For the unlimited general strike has an *open* duration, which means, to evoke Deleuze's formula, that the whole is not given, and that the movement cannot be grasped as a totality.⁹ This is, first, because its future is not written in its present, but also, second, because its present remains indeterminate and incomplete, awaiting futures in which it can find its sense, just as, third, its past is perpetually open to reconfiguration by the present (as I will argue below). Thus the “unlimited” and open-ended time of the student strike should be understood, I think, as more than a quantitative accumulation of days; there is a difference in kind between this unlimited strike and strikes of fixed duration. Close attention to the student strike, and to the popular movement that it has become, reveals a non-linear time in which possibility is not pre-given only to be realized but needs to be created. (And this creation can be witnessed not simply at the political level, but experienced in perception, affect and imagination.)

The Unlimited General Strike as Creation of Possibility

In an interview from May 4th 2012, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois—one of the spokespersons of the CLASSE (considered the most militant of the student associations in Quebec and whose organizational structure is based on principles of direct democracy)—makes a telling comment. He notes that many students did not believe that it was possible for their schools to go on strike, or even to have general assemblies. Yet, “they just did it and they just were [on strike]”.¹⁰ Examples abound within the student strike of 2012: Anglophone universities that engaged in a strike in a context where the history of student strikes had been predominantly francophone, where linguistic divisions still define political identities,

and where their university administrations refused to recognize the strike. But also: the ability to sustain the strike for so long and to remain unified in the face of state efforts to divide the student movement; the swelling of the mobilization into a popular uprising with the *casseroles* movement, after the passage of bill 78; and the creativity and proliferation of cultural production that has been part of the student strike. To give this list is not yet to touch on, or feel, the transformative *élan* of the student strike for Quebec society and the subjectivities acting and becoming therein. To understand this, a different sense of possibility must be evoked— possibility that does not precede, but is created with, transformative actions and revolutionary events.

Bergson points to such an alternative sense of the possible when he notes: “in duration, considered as a creative evolution, there is perpetual creation of possibility and not only of reality”.¹¹ In this sense, not only did the unlimited general strike not exist prior to its mobilization, *it was not yet possible*; thus my claim that our actions this year were previously *unimaginable*.¹² This means that the student movement makes itself possible at the same time that it becomes real; its actions are also imaginary inscriptions. Two senses of the possible can be distinguished here. (1) In the logical sense, the student strike was always “possible”, in that nothing impeded it in theory. But this is a negative and empty sense of possibility; it has neither ontological hold, nor social efficacy, nor does it make a difference for lived experience. (2) In the positive or generative sense of possibility, however, the conditions were not yet united to give rise to the unlimited general strike.¹³ Indeed, the creation of these generative conditions (of possibility) is immanent to, and inseparable from, the creative movement of the strike itself. Bergson argues that in taking the possible to precede the real, generative possibility is confounded with mere logical possibility; possibility is thought to pre-exist as idea, ready-made and waiting to be realized, whereas it still needs to be created.¹⁴ Interpretations of the student movement, which reduce it to the realization of a preconceived schema, repeat this mistake. In this way, they elide what has been the power and promise of this movement, its creation of possibility.

To say that possibility is created is to indicate that it is not copied from the given or mapped in advance. In order to understand this generative sense of possibility, we must cease thinking of the possible as an unreal *thing* that prefigures the real; rather, the movement of possibility has an inverse directionality. It points to a *non-linear opening* of time, a way of holding open present and past for future inscription. This instantiates a *politics of the future*, where the future is not read from the present but, in its unpredictability and newness, holds the promise of reconfiguring the present.¹⁵ Bergson calls this the “retrograde movement of the true”: the logic by which an event, once posed, begins at that very moment to *have been possible*.¹⁶ On my reading of Bergson, this retrograde inscription of possibility is not merely a psychological reinterpretation of the past, but an ontological transmutation.¹⁷ In other words, the past is not a closed sum of events, but a virtual and unconscious whole that remains incomplete and open.¹⁸ This is because the past is dynamically reconfigured as events pass and are virtually inscribed

within it. This inscription is not a mere addition of events to the past; rather, it is a reconfiguration of the directionality and sense of the past.¹⁹ Significant events act as magnetizing elements, reorganizing the web of past relations and affectively redistributing memories—making prominent, in this way, previously concealed connections and structures. There is no doubt that the current student strike has recast the social history of Quebec in multiple registers (from the unfulfilled promise of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, to the imperceptible ascendancy of neoliberal economics, and the systemic violence of the state.)²⁰ The past is thus recast by the present in a nonchronological time—while, concurrently, this virtual and reconfigured past continues to push on the present, actualizing itself differently there. Though Bergson does not define it as such, the retrograde movement of possibility can be understood as a *virtualization* of the actual: the dynamic (trans)formation of the past simultaneously with the present.²¹ In this way, what was unimaginable becomes possible; the past comes to hold new possibilities, inscribing different virtual planes and dimensions of sense.

An Interval of Hesitation

It is in this sense that the Quebec student movement has created possibility—not by realizing the present out of an inventoried past, nor by copying the future from a fixed present—but in keeping past and present open and making them generative.²² In refusing to consent to a field of possibility mapped in advance, striking students have wagered on creations and actions that can institute their own field of possibility, with all the risk and hope that this implies.²³ For to create possibility requires not only audacity but an ability to live with unpredictability—to live a present that hesitates, waits, and depends, at least in part, on others for its sense. This present, in other words, exists in the mode of the future anterior, as that which *will have been*, precisely because it is open to and awaits future searching and elaboration. This brings us back to the time of the unlimited general strike; for this is a strike that needs *to take time* to become what it is. The open-ended nature of the strike, in addition to exerting pressure on the state to negotiate, frees up the time for students to participate in strike actions.²⁴ But this hiatus is also more: it interrupts the habitual structuring of time by educational institutions and provides an interval wherein critical reflection and discussion can take place. In my view, the strike is an *interval of hesitation*—not a negative to be avoided, but a rupture in habitual social life through which possibility can be created. This is not only because a strike suspends the everyday course of activities and because protest disrupts economic and social flows; it is also because this suspension has been mobilized as an opening to something more, generating both solidarity and critique.

A common complaint, reiterated in the media and by politicians, has concerned the time taken by some student associations to make decisions. This criticism is usually leveled against the CLASSE, since its direct democratic structure means that its positions are

generated from, and need to be discussed and agreed to by, its base.²⁵ Yet close attention to the positions that emerge and to the process itself sheds a different light. For the general assemblies, which student associations hold during the suspended time of the strike, can provide the time and space for discussion, debate and co-existence—enabling intellectual and affective bonds to be woven and a heterogeneous yet cohesive movement to be built. In assemblies and in demonstrations, a transformation can occur at the intersubjective and intercorporeal, not simply individual, level; a fluid collective forms, which is more than the sum of its parts. This assemblage should not be understood to be monolithic, homogeneous, or without hesitation. In demonstrations, intercorporeal solidarity does not imply following others blindly, but collectively reconfiguring public space by differentially interrupting its mapped uses and transforming the ways it is lived, perceived and felt.²⁶ Assemblies hesitate when they think; this hesitation can instantiate receptivity to internal critique and sensitivity to the difficulties of weaving solidarity through difference. A striking example was seen when the CLASSE congress hesitated to accept funds from the *Coalition des humoristes indignés (CHI)*—a group of humorists who had held a fundraising show in support of student legal aid—because of critique from feminist and other members of the congress who pointed to the “sexist, racist, and homophobic” discourse present in the CHI’s show.²⁷ Though this case is complex, it is the non-hierarchical space and inclusive non-teleological time of direct democracy (the mode of organization of the CLASSE) that allowed critique to take voice and guarded against co-option.²⁸ In the interval that direct democracy opened, a feminist and anti-racist reconfiguration of hidden structures of oppression was possible—rendering these mappings of power, which go politely unmentioned even in progressive movements, visible.

Conclusion: Seeing, Living, Imagining Differently

This is finally what the creation of possibility in the vigilance of hesitation amounts to: forming a critical vision. In reconfiguring the past, the student strike not only creates new possibilities, it also institutes within this past new dimensions of sense. Many of the actions and creations of the Quebec student strike were not only unimaginable but also unintelligible according to received registers of meaning. It is difficult for observers, who see the issue in terms of relative differences in fees, to understand why so many students who will only marginally be touched by the tuition hike hold to the strike.²⁹ Rather than following the scales of utility, and reacting within the parameters imposed by the state, striking students have opted again and again to create their own registers of meaning—sketching in this way alternative social directions. As it has unfolded, this student movement has instituted new dimensions according to which we see; more so, it promises to hold these dimensions open for future inscription and critique. By transfiguring the past through possibility, it has created the conditions of its own intelligibility. It has reworked not only the real but also the imaginary. And in so doing it has kept the future open.

Alia Al-Saji

Alia Al-Saji is Associate Professor of Philosophy at McGill University. Her work brings together and critically engages 20th century phenomenology and French philosophy, on the one hand, and critical race and feminist theories, on the other. Running through her thought is an abiding concern with time and embodiment. She has published many articles in such venues as *Continental Philosophy Review*, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, *Research in Phenomenology*, and *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, among others. She serves on the executive committee of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy and is the Feminist Philosophy section editor for *Philosophy Compass*. Alia can be reached at alia.al-saji@mcgill.ca

Notes

1. These demonstrations are illegal under both bill 78 and Montreal municipal by-law P-6, both of which require a march's itinerary to be given to police in advance. Bill 78 requires eight hours notice for demonstrations of 50 or more people, and P-6 requires notification directly before a march. So far demonstrations in Montreal have only been declared illegal under P-6. (I will follow common usage in referring to the special law as "bill 78", a number that recalls its contested passage, rather than "law 12" which it became once it had passed.)

2. Now weekly in my neighborhood, as the protest movement of *casseroles* morphs into other forms of organization and mobilization.

3. From 2006 to 2008, there was intensified discussion of the "reasonableness" of certain accommodations perceived to have been granted to cultural-religious minorities in Quebec. The debate tended to focus on controversial cases in the media (mainly having to do with Muslims and Hasidic Jews), some of which were not properly cases of "reasonable accommodation" as defined under the Canadian charter. The discussions often employed the "intolerability" and "oppressiveness" of cultural-religious practices as a justification for cultural racism and exclusion. The debate culminated in the work of the governmental commission headed by Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor ("Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles" whose final report was published in May 2008 under the title *Fonder l'avenir: Le temps de la conciliation*). Due to the scope of this paper, I do not have space to address how the current student movement offers a different image of Quebec, a social project critical of past exclusions.

4. Jean Baillargeon, "Mouvement étudiant: le défi électoral", *Le Devoir*, 6 July 2012; Marie-Andrée Chouinard, "Conflit étudiant—Le tout pour le tout", *Le Devoir*, 13 July 2012; Jean-Félix Chénier, "Scénarios pour la rentrée du mois d'août", *Voir*, published online in "Le blogue du voisin", 18 June 2012, accessed on voir.ca 19/06/2012.

5. One phenomenon that has been overlooked by the focus on numbers (and the obsession of certain media with describing the movement as "running out of steam [*essoufflement*]") is the change in composition of demonstrations. Thus, while college and university associations are still present at the large monthly marches (on every 22nd), the marches since June have included neighborhood popular assemblies that have formed since the introduction of bill 78 and the *casseroles* protests.

6. Henri Bergson, "The Possible and the Real" in *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1992), 91–106; *La pensée et le mouvant* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1938), 99–116. Henceforth cited with English then French

pagination.

7. Bergson calls this reduction of the future to the present a retrospective “illusion” (*Creative Mind*, 101/111). I will discuss how this differs from what Bergson calls the “retrograde movement of the true” below.

8. The unlimited general student strike is ongoing over the summer, awaiting strike votes in August before the legislated return to classes. In the meantime, students have effectively been “locked-out” of their institutions by the provisions of bill 78.

9. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 104; *Le bergsonisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), 108.

10. Interview, “How did Quebec Students Mobilize Hundreds of Thousands for Strike?” *The Real News.com*, May 4, 2012. Accessed June 1, 2012 on www.therealnews.com. Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois’ comment begins at 9:09 minutes. Nadeau-Dubois adds, quoting Mark Twain: “They did not know it was impossible, so they did it.”

11. Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 21/13.

12. An example from Bergson helps clarify this: when he was asked to predict what the next great dramatic work of the future would be, Bergson famously replied that had he been able to conceive it, he would have written it. The work was not yet possible; it would become possible, once it was created. (*Creative Mind*, 100/110)

13. While Bergson hints at this distinction, Vladimir Jankélévitch makes it explicit, referring to the second kind of possibility as “organic possibility” or germ. “Generative” possibility is my term. See Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), 216–18.

14. Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 102–3/112–13.

15. Jankélévitch suggestively calls the generative or organic sense of possibility a *promise* rather than a permission. (*Henri Bergson*, 217)

16. Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 22/14 and 101/111.

17. There is a certain ambivalence in Bergson’s presentation of the “retrograde movement of the true”, which means that this movement is sometimes read as psychological illusion. (*Creative Mind*, 101/111, 26/19) In my reading of Bergson, this movement becomes an illusion when the possible is reduced to a copy of the real, and this mimetic logic is projected onto the future. (See my article, “When Thinking Hesitates: Philosophy as prosthesis and transformative vision.” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 50, 2 (2012): 351–61. <http://dx.doi.org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2012.00095.x>)

18. To rephrase Deleuze’s formula, cited above, the whole is not given even at the level of the past. It should be noted that the past in general is, according to Bergson, unconscious (recollection being that part of the past that has become conscious). But this unconscious is not inert; it seeks actualization in, and makes a difference for, the present.

19. This should not be taken to mean that time is reversible, for the past, though it snowballs and transforms itself (in Bergson’s image in *Creative Evolution*), cannot be undone. See Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1998), 4–6; *L’évolution créatrice* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1907), 4–6.

20. For example, when in a demonstration, the May 68 slogan “*Police partout, justice nulle part*” rings out, this is not a simple repetition of schemas from May 68, but a gesture that at once makes relevant that past, draws differentiated links with it, and reveals the ground of violence upon which the state continues to rely.

21. Although Deleuze is critical of “the possible” along the same lines as Bergson, I believe that the generative sense of possibility I have outlined is akin to the *virtual* that Deleuze finds in Bergson’s philosophy. But while the concept of the virtual allows us to understand the process of actualization, possibility describes a movement of virtualization. In other words, possibility explains how the passage of the present makes a difference for the virtual past.

22. To clarify, in my reading of Bergson, the “retrograde movement of the true” becomes an illusion when the possible is *copied* from the real. Possibility that is created along with the real, as the atmosphere which accompanies events and keeps them open, characterizes the movement of “truth”.

23. Refusing to accept a predefined social mapping of possibility does not mean overlooking this mapping, but rather challenging it. To refuse is not to forget the past, as if it could be left behind, nor to ignore social mappings while continuing to perceive and act according to their schemas. I see this refusal of predefined possibility as a feature of social movements that seek to overcome oppression, since oppression functions by closing down not only action but also the *possibility* to imagine and the *ability* to act. As Simone de Beauvoir notes in *The Second Sex*, we should not merely say that “in the present state of education and customs” woman’s capacities have not been realized, but that they have not yet been made possible. (*The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 45–6, 279; *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949), 1:73, 2:9.)

24. These are the two purposes of an unlimited general student strike according to the document “Qu’est-ce qu’une GGI?” on the website of the CLASSE: www.bloquonslahausse.com. Accessed June 1, 2012.

25. These complaints were especially pronounced when the Minister of Education at the time asked that the CLASSE “renounce violence” before she would admit them to the negotiating table (April 2012). Since the CLASSE had to wait to discuss this at its weekly congress (which unites delegates from all the member student associations), its spokespersons could not address the question immediately. The position that the CLASSE adopted at its congress, on April 22, involved the nuance of distinguishing physical violence against persons, which it condemned except in cases of legitimate defense, from the civil disobedience that it defended.

26. Anyone who has participated in the spontaneous demonstrations in Montreal this year (demonstrations with no predefined route) has experienced how the “*manif*” can hesitate at intersections and “decide”, based on the affective pull of the group, which route to take. (When this is unclear, an explicit discussion or vote sometimes occurs, or the demonstration may divide in two.)

27. Marie-Andrée Chouinard, “Conflit étudiant – Gardiennes du Senti”, *Le Devoir*, 28 June 2012; and Stéphanie Proulx, “Spectacle de la CHI: De l’indignation à la fierté”, *Voir*, 26 June 2012. The motion was introduced at the CLASSE congress of June 17, 2012 and tabled at the congress of July 3, 2012. In the meantime, the CHI had already withdrawn its funds because of the controversy.

28. Rather than virtuous intent on the part of its executive, this case makes clear that critical voices

from the student base kept the CLASSE to its feminist, and more recent anti-racist and anti-colonialist, commitments. See “Des féministes étudiantes rétablissent les faits sur la Coalition des Humoristes Indignés”, *L'axe du mad*, posted 3 July 2012, www.laxedumad.com accessed 4/07/2012.

29. Since they will have graduated by the time the total amount of the hike comes into effect (whether 75% over five years, or 82% over seven years).

Copyright © 2012 Alia Al-Saji and The Johns Hopkins

Additional Information

ISSN	1092-311X
Print ISSN	2572-6633
Launched on MUSE	2012-08-30
Open Access	No