



Collectif de recherche
Action Politique et Démocratie

Places of Struggle, Struggle for Places: On the Reconfiguration of Political Commitment in a World of Despair

“[All] scenarios about the future are nightmarish and difficult to change,” writes Gokmenoglu (2019). And still, the possibility for change persists. At the same time, a widespread sense of despair reflects a shared belief that a better future may no longer be possible. Activists often feel powerless, convinced that no meaningful progress can be achieved. Still, despite this dwindling sense of possibility, struggles for justice continue to arise, evolve, and gain strength. This tension—the persistence of political action even when hope falters—is the central paradox around which this conference is built.

The *apocalyptic narrative* suggests that catastrophe is imminent if we do not act, urging us toward technological innovation or institutional reform to alter our trajectory and avert disaster. In contrast, the *post-apocalyptic narrative* assumes it is already too late: that the damage has been done, and what remains is the task of adapting—through resilience, mitigation, or survival strategies (De Moor & Marquard, 2023). However, a decolonial lens unsettles both temporalities by asserting that the apocalypse is not an impending or recent event, but an ongoing condition (Kapo, forthcoming). From this perspective, the so-called crisis is not new but continuously anchored in the enduring structures of colonial violence and environmental degradation (Hartman, 2020; Alagraa, 2021). As Whyte (2017) argues, what we now recognize as ecological tipping points are, in fact, the intensification of long-standing colonial processes. The breakdown in relations—between colonizers and colonized, humans and the land—preceded the climate crisis itself (Whyte, 2000).

These narratives of apocalypse and aftermath, then, are not only analytical tools but political imaginaries that shape how struggles emerge, how futures are envisioned, and where hope—or its absence—is located. These accounts of crisis do not exist in abstraction—they take shape and are reconfigured through specific places and territorial struggles. Amid prevailing uncertainty and loss, place often becomes a grounding force: a site where political action, solidarity, and mutual care are not only imagined but enacted (Pulido & De Lara, 2018; Larsen, 2016). Still the role of place is not uniform, it varies according to the historical and cultural geographies that shape each region, each context, and each struggle (Dufour, 2021). For activists, places are more than settings—they are intersections of multiple realities, layered with intricacies, contradictions, and uneasy encounters (Massey, 2005; Pierce et al., 2011; Escobar, 2018; Van Neste 2020). How, then, can we make sense of the ways in which political commitments are formed, challenged, or transformed through place in this broader context of desperation? This question invites us to draw from diverse theoretical approaches across disciplines, especially those that foreground spatiality, embodiment, and relational politics in the study of social movements and resistance.



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This conceptual terrain sets the stage for deeper engagement with how political struggles are reimagined, grounded, and contested through place. Rather than offering answers, this conference invites participants to sit with these tensions and explore how different forms of action—and in-action—are conditioned by spatial, historical, and affective dimensions of crisis. We aim to hold space for theoretical inquiry and situated knowledge, with an emphasis on how movements are felt, embodied, and enacted across geographies of struggle.

Building on existing reflections and proposals, this conference aims to interrogate the ongoing reconfigurations of political struggle and the evolving roles of its actors, with particular attention to places and territories. At its core, this gathering seeks to foster dialogue—between researchers, artists, and activists—where analytical inquiry meets creative expression. We envision a space that not only explores the dynamics of contemporary struggles but also values the imaginative and artistic dimensions of political engagement. One of the conference’s central objectives is explicitly normative: how can different forms of knowledge—academic, situated, embodied—inform meaningful and actionable pathways for political transformation?

This question takes on particular urgency in a moment when anti-racist, decolonial, and ecological movements are increasingly subject to repression, even as frontline communities across the globe confront overlapping crises. While these shared struggles open possibilities for alliance-building and cross-pollination, such collaborations are fraught with challenges. As highlighted in the literature on coalitions and alliances (Néméh Nombré, 2024; Ferdinand, 2024; Lugones, 2003), activists often contend with divergent historical trajectories, uneven collective memories, and incompatible political cultures (Polletta, 1998; Blee, 2012; Sénac, 2021; Juris & Pleyers, 2009). On a more practical level, racial and socio-economic inequalities continue to shape activist circles from within, while asymmetrical power relations with institutions further complicate common ground (Gawerc, 2021). These tensions are neither new nor insurmountable, and similar challenges are visible across feminist, Indigenous, and other progressive organizing spaces.

And yet, certain places of struggle—or struggle *for* places—generate unexpected or intentional encounters that shape the course of political and militant mobilizations in profound ways. Whether commemorative, reactive, or prefigurative, these sites catalyze solidarities, reorient priorities, and reconfigure trajectories of resistance. We are thinking, for instance, of Land Day, a key moment of Palestinian commemoration; of protest waves sparked by acts of police brutality that galvanize cross-community solidarity; or of physical and digital occupations such as Palestine solidarity encampments, “zones à défendre” (ZAD), or temporary autonomous zones (TAZ). These are joined by urban neighborhood movements contesting the erasure of unequal development histories, linking abolitionist demands with climate justice (Ranganathan & Bratman, 2021), or online platforms mobilized against antifeminist, masculinist, or supremacist attacks. This conference proposes to

examine such spaces of militant encounter—or, conversely, of absence—and the kinds of political reconfigurations and place-based commitments they help generate.

With this proposal, we seek to challenge simplistic or self-referential interpretations of struggles in a world marked by despair. Instead, we advocate for a rigorous, sustainable, and multidisciplinary approach that bridges urban studies and critical geography with the sociology of social movements. Earlier scholarship has already identified the ambivalent role of place: as a locus of state repression and surveillance, but also as a site of relational possibility, solidarity, and grassroots meaning-making (Nicholls, 2008; Pierce et al., 2011). More recent contributions have turned toward affect, embodiment, and the materiality of struggle—foregrounding the felt and lived dimensions of injustice and the ways place renders them visible and shareable (Näre & Jokela, 2023; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021; Veillette, 2024). This conference thus asks: how do these developments transform our understanding of social movements? What do they reveal about the evolving role of place as both context and catalyst for political action?

Themes:

To guide our collective inquiry, the conference will be organized around three interrelated themes that reflect the spatial, material, and experiential dimensions of political action in a time of despair:

Theme 1 — Reconfigurations of Struggle Through Places: Visibility and Invisibility

What places become visible or politicized as sites of struggle—and which remain ignored or depoliticized? This theme invites reflections on spatial tactics such as the sabotage of production sites and polluting infrastructures (e.g., oil platforms, concrete plants), fare evasion in public transit, or direct actions like hostage-taking in financial institutions—as seen in Lebanon and Greece. How are current spatial strategies and repertoires of action evolving in response to new political and environmental urgencies?

Theme 2 — The Materiality of Places and the Geographies of Mobilization (Including Digital Spaces)

How do places—both physical and digital—anchor movements, shape imaginaries, and scale local struggles to global resonance? From university encampments in solidarity with Palestine, to Occupy protests in Montréal and beyond, to sites like Cop City (Atlanta), Fonderie Horne (Québec), and unionized Amazon warehouses, this theme explores how certain sites become mythic symbols of renewed political commitment¹.

Theme 3 — Embodied and Situated Activist Experiences at the Intersection of Struggles

How do activists experience and negotiate the convergence of multiple struggles in concrete places? From the Standing Rock and Wet'suwet'en resistance to urban occupations and square movements, this theme

¹ <https://www.ledevoir.com/economie/844810/manifestants-exhortent-quebec-rompre-liens-amazon?>

engages the lived heterogeneity of activist involvement—how these spaces shape (or fail to shape) political subjectivities, solidarities, and tensions.

CAPED Organizing Committee

Pascale Dufour (Université de Montréal), Leslie Kapo (INRS), Sophie L. Van Neste (INRS)

Practical Information

Calendar

- **June 2025:** Call for papers released
- **September 15, 2025:** Abstract deadline (500 words)
- **End of October 2025:** Notification of acceptance
- **February 2026:** Submission of full texts
- **April 9–10, 2026:** Conference dates

Conference Format

- **Day 1:** Keynote presentation and conference panels (public)
- **Day 2:** Conference panel (AM) and workshop (PM) to collectively work on publication (closed, for authors only)

Language & Location

- The conference will take place **in English** to facilitate international dialogue, thus papers are expected in English too.
- Location: **Montréal, at Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS) and Université de Montréal (UdM).**

Support Provided

- Complimentary food and accommodation for participants
- **Limited financial aid for travel** available for early-career researchers without other support options

Publication

This conference will lead to a publication in English (not only academic audience).



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How to Apply

- Send your **500-word abstract** (academic or artistic proposal) to: pascale.dufour@umontreal.ca AND pol-caped@umontreal.ca
- We also welcome **artistic or community-based projects**: zines, installations, performative pieces, or other formats rooted in place-based struggles. Please include a short synopsis of your artistic proposal alongside your submission.

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