

# Recentering the City

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## Abstract

*In The City and the Grassroots, Manuel Castells recentered the city as the site of distinctively urban social movements and reaffirmed the role of purposive social action in constructing a distinctively urban space. Although Castells' recitation of five centuries of urban political activism documents the consistent failure of such movements to achieve their goals, his account is persistently optimistic on at least three counts. First, recentering the city reminds us that, despite the failure of transitory political movements, the city endures as an opportunity for renewed political activism. The continual possibility of change offered by the city's ontological persistence is separate from the fate of any given political intervention. Second, regardless of its specific success or failure, each episode of urban activism establishes a new context for the next encounter, its legacy persisting in the collective memories — the stock of mnemonic capital — of which the city is the repository. Third, Castells' emphasis on political agency affirms that, while all action is ephemeral, its constitutive re-enactment ceaselessly provides openings for insurgency and transgression. This optimistic message is worth repeating today.*

Note the conjunction. In *The City and the Grassroots* (hereafter *C&G*), Manuel Castells (1983) recentered the city he had reduced to the status of an ideological prop a decade earlier in *La Question Urbaine* (1972; 1977). The move beyond structuralism re-placed the urban on par with the political. To each of a series of case studies of urban political conflicts, Castells posed the question: In what sense an 'urban' social movement? The question affirmed a reciprocal causality. While much critical commentary has viewed *C&G* as a discourse on social movements, its value equally lies in its foregrounding of the city as a defining influence on, and an outcome produced through, forms of political conflict. The book is unhesitatingly about the city, asking whether urban social movements are distinctive because they are urban and how distinctively urban social movements contribute to constructing the urban. Reread today, the book resonates as a prescient exemplar of the Lefebvrian idea of the city constructed through social practices. Read 20 years ago, *C&G* reaffirmed the centrality of the city and the value of political agency in an era dominated by structural imperatives.

In that seemingly overdetermined world, *C&G* offered a singularly optimistic beacon shedding valuable light on one urban experience in particular — the social upheavals and civil disorders that constituted a defining and disturbing moment for the city of the 1960s and the many urbanists who came of age during that tumultuous period. A brief vignette may clarify my reading of Castells' account of this period and elucidate my interpretation of its message.

In the spring and summer of 1965, as a third-year undergraduate, I spent six months working with two other college students to establish and operate an after-school tutoring and daycare program in what had been a vacant storefront on Seventh Avenue and 138<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem. When public school ended in June, we turned the after-school program into a summer day camp for 50 or 60 neighborhood children aged 5 to 15. Teenagers from the neighborhood worked as tutors and counselors, and we solicited businesses all over Harlem to donate furniture, paint, linoleum, juice, cookies, paper, crayons, balloons and everything else we needed to operate the program. Financial support also came from

HARYOU-ACT (Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited—Associated Community Teams), a New York City anti-poverty agency funded with federal dollars from the War on Poverty.<sup>1</sup>

This was a golden summer for a nineteen-year-old white kid from Queens. At the epicenter of the urban crisis, surrounded by endless blocks of boarded and abandoned buildings, the nightly television news filled with scenes of looting and arson and police brutality, we had transformed a vacant storefront into a vibrant, joyful place where children played games, learned arithmetic, sang songs, and made art from paper plates and macaroni. We firmly believed that, in that storefront space, we were creating a part of what Castells was to call ‘the new city’, that we were constructing a space of hope amidst the devastation of central Harlem, that we were part of that transformative movement that Castells described ‘arising in American cities from the ashes of the urban revolts of the 1960s’ (Castells, 1983: xv).

Yet when the semester began in September, I went back to my liberal arts college in the Midwest to occasionally wonder what kind of city was unfolding back on Seventh Avenue and 138<sup>th</sup> Street. I wondered if someone had picked up the torch, if that storefront day camp reopened the next summer and what had become of those kids I played with in the summer of 1965. When Richard Nixon announced in 1970 that the urban crisis was over and terminated the last of the redistributive anti-poverty programs, I felt that the nascent city of hope had been betrayed and I struggled to understand this failure.

Reading *C&G* nearly 20 years later placed my experience in a broader perspective. Castells’ review of major episodes of urban activism ranging from the sixteenth-century *Comunidades* of Castile to the anti-displacement mobilization in San Francisco’s Mission District in the 1970s revealed that, despite some successes, in *every* case these movements failed to reach their objectives. The Castilian cities of 1520 failed in their bid for expanded autonomy because, Castells (1983: 11) concluded, they overreached, ‘they tried too hard to create a new state’. The similar radicalism of the Paris Commune of 1871 was brutally repressed. The Glasgow rent strike of 1915, in contrast, turned class struggle over the exploitation of labor into a consumption struggle against the state. When the state capitulated (with the consent of enlightened capital) and instituted reformist housing policies, ‘for the first time in history’, Castells (1983: 37) noted, ‘a major urban struggle could be won by the popular masses . . . without fundamentally challenging the interests of the dominant class’.

Castells reached a similar conclusion regarding the social revolts in US cities 50 years later. The riots and their aftermath produced redistributive federal programs, expanded welfare rights, introduced the phrase ‘maximum feasible participation’ into the policy lexicon and prompted cautious experiments in community control. ‘Nevertheless’, he concluded (1983: 66), ‘such a series of major achievements met with serious shortcomings. The basic mechanisms of the economy were not altered; the efforts of social reform were limited to the places and times where the waves of the popular storm had superseded the established patterns of social control; the national political scene actually became more conservative, when Middle America had its usual “Law-and-Order” reflex’. In yet another case, the mobilization in San Francisco’s Mission District foundered on the inability of participants to integrate divergent interests — gays, Latinos, the homeless — into a coherent strategy and vision. ‘The limits of the success of the Mission mobilization’, Castells (1983: 171) claimed, ‘stemmed from its inability to transform the coalition into something other than an accumulation of interest groups’.

So what can I/we conclude from this sweep of history? That our insignificant storefront experiment could hardly have succeeded where such massive interventions had already failed? That some cases failed that tried too much, while others tried not enough? These conclusions are self-evident but offer little in the way of guidance for future action. The broader lessons of *C&G*, instead, are threefold.

1 Forty years later, an internet search on HARYOU-ACT produces 116 hits, many in the form of oral histories and recollections by individuals currently active in the arts, culture and academia crediting their participation in the organization’s summer youth programs.

First, Castells' recentring of the city was an inherently optimistic act. The failure of political practice to transform the city is neither the failure of the city nor the end of history. If, at some level, the political interventions seeking to reshape the city all failed, nonetheless the city itself prevails as an ontological fact and thereby persists as an opportunity for renewed political activism. For the city to remain constituted as a site and object of future activism requires its resuscitation as an object of inquiry rather than its repudiation as a mere epiphenomenon and necessitates a counter to the discursive representation of the city solely in terms of failure and decline. By distinguishing between the enduring city and the transient movements to transform it, *C&G* reasserted the continual possibility of urban change separate from the fate of any given political intervention. The closure of that storefront day camp neither obliterated the fact of its (however ephemeral) existence nor precluded the possibility of renewed activism in the same or different form in some yet-to-be determined future.

Second, the reassertion of the urban alters the meaning of success and failure of political movements to shape the city. Each finite episode of urban activism, each 'cry and demand' for the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996: 158) might ostensibly fail, might not 'light the path to a new city' (Castells, 1983: xvi), and by this rule could be judged futile. Yet each episode changes history and establishes a new context for the next encounter. Even when the material evidence of urban activism is obliterated through the relentless rebuilding of urban space, its legacy persists in individual and collective memories of which the city is the repository. Such memories in part constitute the particularity of the city as a place and provide a stock of mnemonic capital with which to infuse new rounds of future activism. The children, parents, counselors, funders, donors, onlookers and others whose daily paths constructed a space of hope, if only on one block for one summer, contributed to that stock of memory and thus altered the course of history in however subtle and perhaps unknowable ways.

Continuing in this relentlessly optimistic vein, *C&G*'s third lesson is that change is indeed possible and that actions matter in constituting the urban. Castells' project was to map 'the decisive input of purposive social action in the shaping of space and material conditions of everyday life' (1983: xv). Once again, Castells prioritized the city in this view: at issue is the shaping of urban space. This was not to present the city as a container of uniquely urban types of social movements, where social movement dynamics necessarily change at the city's edge. The point, instead, was to disclose how distinctively urban social movements comprise particular modalities of action whose characteristics produce spaces that we know as the urban. Social practices, 'purposive social action' among them, produce urban space as urban; practices unfolding through other dynamics and modalities produce other (perhaps non-urban) spaces. Without actions to construct them, cities would cease to exist or would exist as something else — suburbs, perhaps, or wastelands. Such dependence of the urban on constitutive action affirms that all action is ephemeral and partial, perpetually requiring re-enactment and repetition but also, thereby, ceaselessly providing openings and opportunities for insurgency and transgression.

Castells' optimism persists through *C&G*'s brief concluding paragraph. 'Notwithstanding the threatening storms of the current historical conflicts', he observes (1983: 336), 'humankind is on the edge of mastering its own future, and therefore of designing its good city. At last, citizens will make cities'. This is a message worth repeating today. In an era when 'the threatening storms of the current historical conflicts' appear even more menacing, when war, terrorism, neoliberalism and the eclipsing of rights appear all-pervasive, it is important to reassert the potential of social action and political practice through which 'citizens . . . make cities', even if it is one day and one storefront at a time.

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## Résumé

*Dans The City and the Grassroots, Manuel Castells repositionnait la ville en tant que lieu de mouvements sociaux spécifiquement urbains et réaffirmait le rôle de l'action sociale réfléchie dans la construction d'un espace typiquement urbain. Même si l'échec régulier de ces mouvements par rapport aux objectifs fixés ressort des cinq siècles d'activisme politique urbain relatés par Castells, son texte demeure optimiste au moins sur trois points. D'abord, recentrer la ville nous rappelle qu'en dépit du fiasco des mouvements politiques transitoires, la ville demeure une opportunité pour un militantisme politique différent; la possibilité permanente de changement qu'offre la pérennité ontologique de la ville est indépendante de l'issue de toute intervention politique quelle qu'elle soit. Deuxièmement, qu'il soit un succès ou un échec, chaque épisode d'activisme urbain instaure un contexte nouveau pour la prochaine lutte, son héritage survivant dans les mémoires collectives (réserve de capital mnémonique) dont la ville est le dépositaire. Enfin, l'intérêt de Castells pour l'agence politique confirme que, si toute action est éphémère, sa ré-appropriation constitutive procure constamment des ouvertures à l'insurrection et à la transgression. Ce message d'optimisme mérite d'être répété de nos jours.*