The seeds of the New Left in Canada were sown in the first nuclear disarmament movement born in November 1959 in Montreal. The Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CUCND), after organizing the first student demonstration in the country’s capital city of Ottawa, spread rapidly from coast to coast in December; every university campus set up a chapter. At first, the campaign focused on preventing Canada from joining the nuclear club and acquiring nuclear weapons for a set of anti-aircraft missiles. Then, the CUCND went on to adopt a policy position favoring non-alignment. By 1963, however, despite its considerable influence and high level of activism, which melded with other organizations like the Canadian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Voice of Women, the movement failed: the Liberal Party of Canada, having won the elections, reversed its anti-nuclear stance and imported nuclear warheads for the Bomarc missiles—anti-aircraft missiles developed as a joint US-Canadian effort against the Soviet threat.

Bitterness among activists was widespread; cynicism among citizens in general was rampant. As a result, the CUCND transformed itself in 1964 into the Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA), the New Left of Canada, in Regina, Saskatchewan. The logic of the group’s founding was as follows: the institutions of liberal democracy, being unable to reflect popular will, were flawed. Thus, it was necessary to start a movement that would articulate and promote participatory democracy and a non-violent revolutionary approach, bringing the powerless in civil society together to act in concert to effect much needed social change. Although Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, a Montrealer, eventually removed all nuclear weapons from Canadian soil, by that time the youth movement had been radicalized by students undertaking grass-roots organizing projects across the country from 1964 to 1967. With an action program centered on the “primacy of peace,” the movement ultimately aimed to create new, democratic, decision-making citizen institutions that would transform Canada on the international stage into a non-aligned country. Such Third Bloc countries were trying to shift the balance of power to reduce the tensions between the two superpowers and reverse the Cold War.
SUPA surpassed the CUCND in influence and image. Its impact on other youth organizations was legendary. As SUPA tried to root itself in the various communities where it planted its projects, however, its links with the campuses shriveled up. After internal disagreements and political mistakes of various kinds occurred, fatigue brought an end to the organization by 1967.

Democracy, democracy, more democracy

Nonetheless, a new wave of New Left activism was not long in coming. During the fall of 1967, hundreds of students got involved in direct actions at the Universities of British Columbia, Toronto, and Waterloo over the presence in Canada of the US-based Dow Chemical Company, which manufactured the napalm used in Vietnam. The campuses of Memorial University in Newfoundland, Bishops University in Quebec, as well as Sir George Williams University and McGill University in Montreal, likewise, were rocked by campaigns to democratize education and give students more power.

In 1968, members of this new New Left movement declared that their direct actions involving civil disobedience were “acts of solidarity” with the poor in the ghettos and elsewhere. Invariably, they linked their demand for student power with their desire to make the university relevant to the need for social and political change in industrial/technological society. At McGill University, for example, a student uprising led to the occupation of the administration building. The community, including the UGEQ (the Quebec student union, which advocated student syndicalism), displayed its solidarity with the students and offered support. However, the revolt failed to achieve student power or social change: it ended with police heavy-handedness and student and faculty arrests.

Links within the North American New Left and beyond

As the CUCND-to-SUPA transition was taking place from 1964 to 1966, leading activists in the New Left of Canada and the US established many cross-border links. In time, links also developed with Mexican students when they began to agitate for social change, culminating in the pre-Olympic horror of the Tlatelolco massacre on October 2, 1968. That year North America witnessed an upsurge in extra-parliamentary political activity in all three countries primarily involving students, youths, blacks, and certain segments of the industrial working class. College students led protests across
the continent on an unprecedented scale, and in Canada, they were joined by an increasing number of high school or secondary school students for the first time. Canada also witnessed more labor strikes in both 1967 and 1968 than in any year since 1947. By October 1968, direct actions taking place in schools proved more potent than the 55 terrorist bombings carried out by the Front de Liberation du Quebec (a leftist-nationalist organization). Strikes and school occupations marked an organizational advance in direct-action methods, inspiring the class-conscious population (it gained minimal trade union support, for example), but did not involve the student body at large.

A college culture had spread across the North American continent that *Fortune* magazine characterized as having a “lack of concern” about making money (original italics), with 40 percent of American college students embracing extreme and dissenting positions. In an opinion research survey, *Fortune* magazine in October 1968 reported that approximately 750,000 people aged 18–24 identified with the New Left. In this context, American, Mexican, and European examples of insurgency powerfully influenced the student and youth of Canada, who followed quickly on such models with their own actions.

The violent Mexican student uprising of July–October 1968 came to Canadians’ notice not least from an article in the Montreal-based magazine *Our Generation* in its December 1968/January 1969 edition. Author Nardo Perello not only described the horrific events but also composed a section pointing out similarities to Canada. That such articles on Mexico (and others on Czechoslovakia) were published in this Canadian journal demonstrates that Canadians (and the world) were watching such events through the radical media.

I myself provided a link with events in Europe, and especially Czechoslovakia, when I went there in the summer of 1968, making lots of contacts along the way. In July, I left Montreal for Europe with two colleagues to attend the SDS convention in Frankfurt and went on to Prague for ten days. My train left Prague traveling south to Vienna and Ljubljana (Slovenia) on August 20, the very day that Warsaw Pact armies were crossing the northern border.

In Ljubljana, I attended a conference of the International Confederation for Disarmament and Peace (ICDP), a non-aligned umbrella of NGOs in many countries that the Canadian New Left had helped to create. It made the occupation a major priority, beginning early with
an emergency session, in which it resolved to have leaflets written in a number of languages that would encourage nonviolent resistance to the invasion; it also sent three delegates to Prague immediately to distribute these and make contact with the opposition to the occupation. The ICDP also helped facilitate the first international meeting of leading New Left activists from several countries including the USA, Germany, the UK, Yugoslavia, and Canada. One action discussed was a German SDS march on and occupation of the Soviet Military Mission in Frankfurt to protest the invasion.

**Meanwhile in Canada**

These few notes on international links and meetings show that the Canadian New Left did not simply rely on traditional means of communication. The pipeline into Canada came through Montreal. This city was the hot zone and crossroads between the French-speaking world, Europe, and the movement. Montreal played a crucial role with its ample publications for reporting, analyzing, and evaluating what was going on and why. As close as we were to the American New Left, we were different from most of its members in our efforts to know what was happening elsewhere, and we often provided the information link between militants for them. Hence, when American draft-dodgers and military deserters began to cross the border, Montreal attracted a great many of them. With thousands of such refugees arriving in Canada, it was rumored around 1968 that US government spies numbered in the several hundreds in Montreal.

Despite these important functions for Montreal and the Canadian New Left, SUPA, the premier organization of the movement, disintegrated by 1967. A combination of factors led to its demise. First, even though its image, driven by its ambitious rhetoric, influenced most of the student and youth organizations in the country, SUPA was conventional in its strategy. There were also ongoing tensions and disagreements between the liberal-minded SUPA in Toronto, and its more radical leftist centers in Western Canada and Montreal. Furthermore, there were a number of issues that the movement failed to adequately address: there was a lack of understanding of the psychological burden of our colonial status, a lack of intellectual rigor in understanding the nature of liberal corporatism and neocapitalism, an incapacity among those outside Montreal to openly sympathize with the Quebec’s struggle for self-determination, as well as a fear of nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience.
However, it was not long after SUPA’s demise that a series of New Left organizations sprang up on campuses to replace it in six of Canada’s ten provinces. In the Pacific province of British Columbia, students organized the New Left Students for a Democratic University (SDU). A strike in October 1968 at Simon Fraser University got 114 arrested, with $26,000 in fines or two months in jail on their heads. In Alberta, an SDU was founded on the campus of the University of Alberta, and a radical secondary student movement emerged in Calgary in the spring of 1968; the spring and fall of 1969 also witnessed a series of militant actions and a lecture tour by Karl-Dietrich Wolff, head of the German SDS. Next door, in the underpopulated province of Saskatchewan, 1,000 students demonstrated in the early fall of 1968 over university democratization; this action in turn led to the formation of an SDU. In Winnipeg, Manitoba (population of 550,000 in 1968), an intense New Left militancy against Dow Chemical Co. and the Vietnam War took place and a Free University was established. In university-rich Ontario, the Toronto Student Movement (TSM) was founded in the summer of 1968, focusing primarily on the education system. Student groups emerged in five universities in a matter of weeks, and by the fall of 1968, the TSM was also supporting striking workers in various cities. These groups employed a full-range of actions from sit-ins and occupations to confrontations with reactionary public speakers. By December, thousands of secondary school students protested the extension of their school year. By early 1969, a new, major free university was founded, Rochdale College, and the first women’s liberation group came onto the scene.

Two of the remaining provinces saw intense protest activities in specific cities—among the blacks in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and in the militant student and faculty organization Canadian Struggle for a Democratic Society in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Unfortunately, these activities were poorly reported—a weakness typical of Canada, which functioned more like a subcontinent than a unitary country according to Peter Warrian, the president of the Canadian Union of Students, in the May-June issue of Our Generation in 1968:

> In reality we are a colony of a neo-capitalist metropoles mostly centered in the United States. The consequence of this is that, at one and the same time, our economy serves the further development of an imperial metropolis and
generates the structural underdevelopment of various Canadian regions. If students and faculty ally to take over the whole or parts of the university, then its fundamental redirection must be part of the process. Concretely, this will mean a struggle for democratization, which is of necessity an anti-imperialist struggle.

Incidentally, it was in this same issue of Our Generation that John and Margaret Rowntree published the famous essay “Youth as Class” with comments by Edgar Z. Friedenberg and Marcel Rioux, which influenced the emergence of the Revolutionary Youth Movement in the US following the SDS.

But the 1968 protest wave was hottest in Montreal. The technical and junior colleges of Montreal experienced a general strike of 50,000 students that lasted six weeks. On October 22, 1968, 10,000 students and unemployed youths marched along Sherbrooke Street (between St. Urbain and Jeanne Mance) in downtown Montreal, in solidarity with all strikers, proceeding past the Ecole des Beaux Arts and flying the black flag of freedom, and past the Ecole Polytechnique flying the red flag of revolution.

These and many other actions formed part of a tableau illustrating an entire society awakening to the power of popular action. It was the theory and practice of student syndicalism first propagated in the mid-1960s that laid the groundwork for this student revolt in Montreal. While it was known in the rest of Canada through SUPA and in the US through the SDS, it was most deeply rooted in Quebec.

By 1969, this stream of student actions was shaping itself into a revolutionary youth movement. This movement, in turn, sought to expand into a broad extra-parliamentary opposition with a
distinct New Left program and action strategy. The political bent of all of this was clearly a form of libertarian socialism, waiting to be fully born, predicated on a severe critique of parliamentary democracy.

All this New Left activism in and around 1968 helped transform Canadian universities. Reforms included electing students to university governing councils, establishing procedures for student evaluation of faculty, and allowing universities to cooperate directly with their neighboring communities. The notions of public participation and consultation that swept the country at that time profoundly affected the whole of the educational system and other public policy institutions.

The legacy of ’68 and the ’60s influenced the social movements that emerged in the 1970s. Although these single-issue movements were driven by “identity politics” and thus contributed to a fragmented view of social change, they nevertheless embodied many of the same organizational values, such as horizontal decision-making and developing a sense of community. What was missing was a sense of movement—common movement—across the board for the radical transformation of society from the bottom up.

The legacy of participatory democracy is best embedded to this day in the new urban movements that seek to create new cities. In Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, and other large cities, a multi-issued approach focusing on community-organizing—with goals like developing participatory budgets, decentralizing urban governments in the direction of citizen councils, carrying on efforts toward gender equality, and balancing urban life with nature and the bio-region—exemplifies continuity with the previous generation. Equally significant is the goal of these urban movements to seek to connect with the World Social Forum as part of the worldwide anti-globalization movement and to network with people engaged in similar struggles across the planet. In such discourse, one hears echoes of the New Left ideas of the ’60s throughout. The seeds have firmly taken root.

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