

Informal Resistance in the Global City

Responses to Socio-Spatial Polarization in Toronto

By drawing on concepts of two sociological fields, urban sociology, and social movement theory, I study the emergence of forms of informal resistance which can be interpreted as responses to urban dynamics that have emerged in global cities. Global cities are sites where socio-economic fractures and processes of exclusion become visible. Using the concept of resistance allows for taking into account not only mass mobilizations but also informal practices that are part of the city dwellers' everyday life. Drawing on the resistance studies paradigm, I discuss the contributions of Michel Foucault, James Scott and Michel de Certeau, whose approaches are considered particularly fruitful for the analysis of informal everyday resistance. I study the practices of marginalized urban actors by taking Toronto and, more specifically, the neighbourhood Parkdale as an example. Known as a portal for immigrants coming to Canada, Parkdale is a meeting place for heterogeneous actors with diverse cultures and identities – and home to many low-income individuals who suffer from a shortage of affordable housing options. With an ethnographic research design based on participant observation and walking interviews with inhabitants, I seek to better understand how city dwellers respond to increased socio-spatial polarization and try to participate in the making of their city. By framing the city as a site of agency even for the most marginalized inhabitants, I further investigate if and how small-scale resistance leads to the emergence of new ideas and claims concerning the future of the city. The research project not only addresses a gap in research on urban mobilizations in Toronto but also deepens theoretical reflections on small-scale urban resistance in global cities.

The analysis shows that by focusing on everyday, informal practices and their connection to organized resistance, responses to urban dynamics that would not have been visible with a 'classical' social movement theory approach come into focus. The emergence of resistance practices in the Parkdale context – taking into account the history of activism in the neighbourhood, the high density of community centres and activist networks, and the diverse composition and socioeconomic status of its inhabitants – is influenced by the way city dwellers interpret the concrete and local effects of the polarizing dynamics of the global city. Among the responses to contemporary urban dynamics, one observes evasive strategies, adaptation, playful reappropriation and manipulation of urban space as well as organizing. Their struggle not only concerns economic distribution but, on the symbolic-discursive level, also definitions and interpretations, the negotiation of identities and the reorganization of urban power relations. Informal resistance, such as the non-conforming use of urban space and creative forms of and appropriating the city, resist the subtle filtering mechanisms that aim to regulate access to urban space and resources. These tactics temporarily create spaces that run counter the dominant logic of the global, competitive city and have the potential to nourish alternative ways of 'using' and imagining the city.