

Bad Behaviours and Disorderly Public Spaces

Daniel Ross et Matthieu Caron

Volume 47, numéro 1-2, fall 2018, spring 2019

Bad Behaviours and Disorderly Public Spaces
Incivilités et désordres dans l'espace public

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1064874ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064874ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Ross, D. & Caron, M. (2018). Bad Behaviours and Disorderly Public Spaces. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 47(1-2), 5-9.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1064874ar>

Bad Behaviours and Disorderly Public Spaces

Daniel Ross and Matthieu Caron

Order and disorder coexist in the city. On the one hand, urban centres owe their success to density and difference: to concentrating people and resources in space and mixing them together. This is a messy process, one that produces new economic value, social relations, and ideas, but also overlapping claims, power struggles, and inequalities.¹ Cities do not have a monopoly on social conflicts or complexity, but they force the urban population to negotiate them daily, as anyone can attest who walks a downtown street, rides public transit, or looks out the window while driving through the city. On the other hand, urban life has long been identified with civility and order.² Urban areas have been hubs for cultural and creative achievements including the literary salon, jazz clubs, and the skyscraper, and the sites of ambitious projects of control ranging from modern policing to sanitation. At the intersection of these competing currents, between unruly heterogeneity and efforts to tame it, we find the rich historical reality of urban life.

This special issue of the *Urban History Review* brings together seven articles that explore historical tensions between order and disorder in Canadian cities, and their impacts on urban life. The idea came out of informal discussions with several of the contributors—in conference hallways and over coffee—during which we realized that despite our different approaches, we were all interested in transgressive behaviours and the ways they shape urban space. As Owen Temby noted in his introduction to the spring 2017 issue of this journal, urban history has always benefited from being a “big tent” able to include and learn from the work of scholars who study the urban past, while not necessarily identifying as urban historians.³ This was true in the 1970s and 1980s, when the subfield gained in theoretical and analytical depth by following developments in geography, sociology, and political science; it remains true today. It is in that spirit of productive dialogue across disciplinary boundaries that we planned this volume to share new research on the environmental, political, cultural, and social histories of Canadian urban centres since the late nineteenth century.

In our call for submissions, we asked potential contributors to think about the relationship between bad behaviour and urban public space. Our use of the somewhat unscholarly notion of “bad behaviour” is intentional. By employing the term, we want to highlight the subjective and normative dimensions of day-to-day conflicts over urban space. Bad behaviours as we understand them are behaviours that occupy a grey area between legal and illegal, right and wrong: in the context of twentieth-century Canadian cities, these include nude bathing, cruising for sex, graffiti, and public drinking, but normally not more serious offences against persons or property. These are practices that are not intrinsically “bad” but have been labelled as such in specific historical contexts, whether because they create discomfort, disrupt routines, or otherwise transgress social conventions and norms. As the literature on the history of moral regulation reminds us, this process of labelling is intimately linked to efforts to govern or discipline. Identifying a given behaviour and an associated population as a problem creates a field for regulatory action by a range of state and non-state actors, from police to neighbourhood activists.⁴ By studying the moments when behaviours become bad, we gain insight into neglected aspects of the urban past—street life, youth culture, leisure, among others—while also enlarging our understanding of historical projects and practices of urban governance.

Bad behaviours do not just happen in cities, they help make them. We take as our starting point that urban space is more than a container for historical action; it is a dynamic human creation.⁵ In this view, streets, parks, and the other shared spaces of the city are produced—that is, built materially, inhabited socially, and given meaning culturally—by a wide range of historical actors, from urban planners to street vendors, journalists to sex workers. Bad behaviours are part of this process, as are efforts to regulate them; both have the potential to shape how we use, think about, and organize the city. Studying the interplay between the two highlights several key characteristics of shared urban spaces. First, their accessibility and flexibility. If we consider a given space to be *public*, it is because it is not

static or controlled, but open to being reimagined and appropriated by the urban population.⁶ For this reason, such spaces are messy and unpredictable, sites where tensions between order and disorder are made visible in everyday life. Second, while public spaces are unique as meeting places for the urban population, those encounters do not take place outside of larger social relations. Urban public spaces are both products of and theatres for contestation and negotiation between groups, individuals, and institutions, as is made clear by the case studies of bad behaviour included in this issue.

Youth, Place, and Rowdy Masculinities

In addition to this central dynamic between bad behaviour and public space, other common threads run through this collection of articles. Perhaps the most striking is a strong association between youth and disorder. Of the seven articles included in the issue, five present historical episodes in which the main perpetrators of bad behaviour—real or suspected—are adolescents, students, or young adults. This might be explained by the chronological focus of the articles on the post-Second World War era, and in particular on the 1960s and 1970s—decades marked by the adolescence and coming of age of the postwar baby boomers. Still, as work by historians including Cynthia Comacchio and Carolyn Strange reminds us, Canadian society's concerns with youthful autonomy and nonconformity are much older than the 1960s.⁷ The "problem of modern youth" was first and foremost an urban problem that emerged not from a particular generational moment, but from social and cultural transformations tightly interwoven with the emergence of the modern city.⁸ Urban life in this period offered young people in Canada new possibilities—education, wage work, and access to a mixed-gender culture of consumption, among others—even as it facilitated an unprecedented scrutiny of their lives by experts, institutions, and moral entrepreneurs. This dynamic is clearly visible in Greg Marquis's contribution to the issue, which helps push the timeline of debates over youthful bad behaviour back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The specificity of place is another shared concern in this volume. The articles assembled here are very much local histories, not in the sense of being parochial or limited, but because they are deliberately scaled down to focus on a single urban centre or site within a city. This has long been the preferred strategy for urban historians, whether in Canada or globally, since the local is the level of analysis that best captures the internal complexity of urban communities. From the centre of the city to its periphery, from crowded shopping districts to neglected parkland, one of this issue's strengths is that it zooms in to provide a "thick description" of the everyday life of urban spaces.⁹ There are, of course, dangers in this approach, since narrowing the interpretative lens can bring out the particular at the expense of the general. For example, it raises difficult questions about the common "Canadian-ness" of the histories presented here. This issue moves through a series of urban environments distinct in their geography, social composition, and places within the urban system: the three metropolises of Montreal, Toronto, and

Vancouver; the Rocky Mountain tourist town of Banff; and the Maritime industrial centre of Saint John. While these cities certainly have shared characteristics—similar legal and municipal structures, a northern climate¹⁰ that makes summer a season for exuberant occupation of outdoor public space—those commonalities are often overshadowed by local or regional specificities, or by historical trends that transcend the Canada–United States border. Here we can only acknowledge, not answer, the question of the salience of the category of the Canadian city, which has plagued—but also enriched—urban history in Canada since its beginnings.¹¹

Whereas the questions of youth and place are explicitly foregrounded in the issue, discussion of our third theme—masculinity—is more implicit. Nonetheless, it is a significant common thread. Whether in the context of juvenile delinquency in industrial Saint John, student demonstrations in 1950s Montreal, or public drunkenness in 1970s Toronto, troublesome boys and men surface again and again in this issue. Male groups gather in and appropriate public spaces, participating in disorderly homosocial subcultures; in gender-mixed spaces, men remain visible perpetrators of bad behaviours and the focus of related social anxieties and regulatory efforts. This is interesting for two reasons. First, these disparate episodes cannot be adequately explained as products either of chance or of biology: as coincidences, or "boys being boys." Instead, they point to the persistence of rowdiness or wildness as accepted masculine behaviours until well into the second half of the twentieth century, despite (or in response to) the hegemony of more ordered manly ideals.¹² In other words, behaving badly has been one way that men and boys have worked out their gendered identities in public. Second, the contributions to this issue support Peter Gossage and Robert Rutherford's recent observation that there is room for "a more physical reading of the history of gendered space" in Canada.¹³ New research on urban public space might ask, for example, to what extent and in what contexts it became more gender-neutral over the course of the twentieth century, and how that process interacted with the planning of the urban environment.¹⁴

Overview of the Volume

The first article, by Dale Barbour, takes us to an intersection between Toronto's natural environment and its industrial heritage with an examination of the youthful masculine bathing culture that grew up along the Don River during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Within elite and middle-class circles, the Don River had a reputation as a polluted sink for urban industrial waste and sewage. For working-class Torontonians, however, the river was an important communal space, a natural bathing spot for parents and their young children. Barbour's careful study of everyday recreational uses of the river upends assumptions about class, the urban environment, and the presentation of the male naked body. He argues that the presence of boys bathing in the hybrid spaces along this semi-industrialized river redefined its possibilities within a cultural, social, and especially corporeal experience. The city's middle-class population

Bad Behaviours and Disorderly Public Spaces

indulged the bathing boy and presented them as pre-industrial folk figures at odds with modern urban life. Ultimately, however, pollution, heightened safety expectations, and new regimes of knowledge in medicine and hygiene combined to remove bathers from the river from the 1920s on. This is reflected in the discourse of city's middle-class population on the subject of the bathers, which presented them as pre-industrial folk figures at odds with modern urban life. Through bathing culture Barbour locates a green public space where gender and sexuality were performed, produced, and verified.

Similarly, Greg Marquis addresses the intertwined histories of childhood, the natural environment, and industrial urban space. The subject of his article is the 1902 murder of seventeen-year old Willie Doherty and the subsequent trials of his friends Frank Higgins and Fred Goodspeed for the crime. This story, argues Marquis, should be viewed as a critical event that crystallized the justice system and a social reform movement in Saint John. Bringing together urban history, legal history, and the history of Canadian youth, the story of Doherty's murder helps us understand how urban parks at the turn of the twentieth century offered a degree of unprecedented freedom for young boys—a freedom, Marquis is quick to add, that was not uncontested. Parents, reformers, and authorities claimed that certain urban environments, such as parklands, contributed to the working-class delinquency problem. They voiced their concerns in public forums, which were then picked up by newspapers and echoed in sensationalist media coverage. Such concerns involved boys avoiding school and work, joining gangs, using foul language, smoking cigarettes, reading inappropriate literature, carrying weapons, and committing petty crimes. These bad behaviours, Marquis demonstrates, were both products and constitutive elements of a “boys’ world” that operated out of the reach of adults in the industrial city.

The notion that urban green spaces facilitate transgressive behaviours is also the subject of Matthieu Caron's article, which focuses on Montreal's Mount Royal Park in the mid-twentieth century. Placing the park at the centre of his narrative, Caron connects the efforts of municipal authorities to engage with and suppress bad behaviours with the environmental history of the city's largest public park. He looks specifically at the effects that municipal tactics and techniques of surveillance had on Mount Royal Park's “Jungle,” a hillside environment overgrown with bushes and trees that was conducive to transgressive nocturnal activities. The social reality of the people who frequented the Jungle and the different ways they used the space remain an obscure part of the story; however, Caron argues that Montreal's anglophone press, by sensationalizing illicit homosexual encounters, helped create an inescapable pressure to tame the Jungle. Pointing to the prevalence of delinquency and other immoral behaviours, the police and municipal administration opted to clear-cut the Jungle and redesign Mount Royal Park's landscape. However, the story did not end there. In the aftermath of this destructive intervention, civic actors mobilized around a restorative strategy for the park's eroding ecology,

including the planting of thousands of new trees. In this way, Montreal's efforts to control bad behaviours contributed to transforming the urban environment.

Contemporaneous with the refashioning of Mount Royal Park, in 1955 Montreal's streets became a theatre for political contestation and disorder, as students protested a scheduled hike in transit fares. Daniel Poitras's article uses the understudied “Tramway Riot” to explore the political mobilization of the student population in mid-twentieth-century Montreal. Poitras examines how the demonstration brought together students from both anglophone McGill University and the francophone Université de Montréal, giving rise to a citywide discussion on appropriate student behaviours. In the wake of the extensive property damage caused by the riot, municipal officials, faculty members, and the local press questioned what had taken place and re-evaluated the role of students in city politics. The dominant interpretation of the event was characterized by a sharp distinction made between the legitimate activism of students from the city's two elite universities and the hooliganism of working-class rioters considered responsible for the disorder. Poitras argues that the streetcar riot and the subsequent back-and-forth between students and authorities constitutes an important, but neglected, piece of Montreal's political history, prefiguring the larger-scale appropriations of urban space for protest that characterized the Quebec student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Playing on the uniqueness of the Alberta town of Banff, Ben Bradley's contribution explores not a park within a city, but the history of an urban area located inside a national park. Bradley focuses on “youths in transit,” groups of mostly white middle- and working-class young people who arrived each summer in the resort town to experience its natural spaces and find work, mainly in the tourist industry. His account addresses how Banff—which, while lacking municipal status, became, in season, the most populous urban centre in the Canadian Rockies—faced the challenges of this influx during the “long 1960s” and the resulting conflicts between countercultural youth and the local permanent population. In this context, free, easily accessed urban and natural public spaces which had long attracted tourists became sites of tensions over bad behaviour. A single-industry town, Banff's permanent residents relied on its spotless public image and reputation as a vacation destination. The drinking, drug use, and general rowdiness of young seasonal workers, whose labour was so essential to the town, could only be tolerated insofar as it was kept out of sight. Using a variety of archival sources, ranging from church records to oral interviews, Bradley shows how tensions around the summer counterculture scene challenged Banff's identity as a natural oasis, divorced from modern urban life.

The challenges of managing public space and its use by the urban population are at the centre of Daniel Ross's article, which explores Toronto's Yonge Street pedestrian mall project of the early 1970s. He argues that closing the street to cars enabled the intermixing of a diverse group of actors, including citizen activists, downtown merchants, youth, sex workers, and

municipal officials. Their encounters—both in public debates over pedestrianization and in the day-to-day street life of the crowded mall—created an exciting but fundamentally disorderly urban public space. People appropriated the car-free street in a wide range of ways, transforming it, depending on the time of day and the weather, into a market, a meeting place, and a spectacle of urban life. The idea of “people space” proved just as malleable as the pedestrian mall itself, taken up successively as a revitalization project, an exercise in environmental outreach, and a protest against the automobile-focused urbanism of the postwar decades. For Ross, the Yonge Street pedestrian experiment provides not just a fascinating example of a contested public space, but also a point of entry into downtown’s place in the Canadian city in the second half of the twentieth century, as urban transformations—including suburbanization, demographic change, and private redevelopment—dramatically reshaped its form and meaning.

Finally, Jamie Jelinski’s article breaks new ground in examining how Vancouver’s tattooists negotiated their presence in the city during the second half of the twentieth century. As he demonstrates, the city’s tattooing scene thrived in marginal neighbourhoods, amid uncertainty about its legality or acceptability in the wider society. Jelinski pays particular attention to the efforts of municipal officials, and especially the City of Vancouver’s Health Department, to regulate the practice of tattooing, which was frequently—and erroneously—associated with the spread of infectious disease and other health risks. His article helps us understand the resulting interactions between tattooists and civic authorities as a key chapter in the longer history of tattooing’s move from the margins to the mainstream of urban culture in Canada, from a bad behaviour to an art form and legitimate business. One key element of this process was Vancouver tattooists’ active work within and against regulation, which allowed them to demystify and publicize their craft while addressing concerns about its dangers.

Conclusion

It was a pleasure for us, as urban historians and scholars working in Canada, to edit and contribute to this special issue. Individually and collectively, the articles published here inspire us to think differently about the city. First, by centring their analyses on practices and subcultures that were (and in some cases still are) perceived as marginal or transgressive, they give us access to understudied elements of the urban past, whether the culture of nude bathing in the industrial city, or the counter-cultural scene of a 1960s mountain resort town. Read together, these seven case studies make a strong argument for understanding such bad behaviours not as footnotes to the historical urban experience, but as a thread woven through it. One thread among others, of course; we cannot understand the city’s history by devoting our attention entirely to tattooists and street vendors, just as we miss a great deal when we remain stuck in the boardrooms and council chambers of the elite. This is particularly true when it comes to the study of urban public spaces,

which are contested, appropriated, and developed by a range of historical actors, authorities, and everyday users alike.

Second, the articles published here also inspire us to think expansively about urban history, and about the place of the city in other historical narratives. The issue contributors come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, write in English and French, and live and work in urban areas across Canada. We are connected by our specific research interests in bad behaviours, by common approaches and ideas, and by networks within the small world of Canadian history. These connections helped bring us together to produce this issue. But equally important, in our view, is the fact that as historians of the contemporary period we share an urban orientation that has, implicitly or explicitly, contributed to structuring the way we think about Canadian history. For at least half a century Canada has been a predominantly urban society, and for much longer many of the major economic and social transformations that have shaped its history have originated in its cities.¹⁵ Whatever our research agenda—whether we study migrations or literary culture, gender or settler colonialism—it follows that we have to come to grips with the city as both a place *where* things have happened, and a factor influencing *how* they happened.¹⁶ This has certainly been our goal with this issue, and we hope that it offers an example of urban history’s potential as a hub for this kind of conversation.

Notes

- 1 On order and disorder, see Gerry Mooney, Steve Pile, and Chris Brook, *Unruly Cities?: Order/Disorder* (London: Routledge, 1999), esp. 1–7.
- 2 On (in)civility, see Jon Bannister, Nick Fyfe, and Ade Kearns, “Respectable or Respectful? (In)civility and the City,” *Urban Studies* 43, no. 5/6 (May 2006): 863–78.
- 3 Owen Temby, “Developments at Canada’s Urban History Journal,” *Urban History Review* 45, no. 2 (2017): 6.
- 4 Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3–11. On the history of moral regulation in Canada, see Tina Loo and Carolyn Strange, *Making Good: Law and Moral Regulation in Canada, 1867–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); and Marcel Martel, *Canada the Good: A Short History of Vice since 1500* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014).
- 5 This active idea of space has its roots in Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), esp. 38–9.
- 6 Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 10–11. For a concise exploration of issues around urban public space see Peter Goheen, “Public Space and the Geography of the Modern City,” *Progress in Human Geography* 22, no. 4 (1998): 479–96.
- 7 Cynthia Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of Modern Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 17–44; Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).
- 8 See Tamara Myers, *Caught: Montreal’s Modern Girls and the Law, 1869–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).
- 9 Timothy Gilfoyle, “White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneyland: The New Paradigms of Urban History,” *Reviews in American History* 26, no. 1 (1998): 177.

Bad Behaviours and Disorderly Public Spaces

- 10 For a brief discussion of climate and the everyday life of the city—surely an understudied topic in Canada—see Nicolas Kenny, “Corporeal Understandings of the Urban Environment,” in *Metropolitan Natures: Environmental Histories of Montreal*, ed. Stéphane Castonguay and Michèle Dagenais, 60–5 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).
- 11 For a discussion of this topic, see Richard Harris, “Canadian Cities in a North American Context,” in *North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent*, ed. Thomas McIlwraith and Edward Muller, 445–62 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).
- 12 On cultures of rowdy masculinity in an earlier era, see Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 90; on more disciplined masculinities, see Chris Dummitt, *The Manly Modern: Masculinity in Postwar Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).
- 13 Peter Gossage and Robert Rutherford, eds., “Introduction,” in *Making Men, Making History: Canadian Masculinities across Time and Place* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), 15.
- 14 On the potential of such an approach, see Daphne Spain, “Gender and Urban Space,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 40, no. 1 (2014): 581–98.
- 15 Measurements of urbanization are always contestable, since they expose our differing definitions of the urban. For the first time, the national census showed a majority of Canadians living in communities over 1000 inhabitants in 1931, but it was not until well into the postwar period that the majority lived in recognizably urban areas.
- 16 Charles Tilly, “What Good Is Urban History?” *Journal of Urban History* 22, no. 6 (September 1996): 710.

Daniel Ross is an assistant professor in the history department at the Université du Québec à Montréal, where he teaches and researches Canadian and urban history. He is also a member of the editorial collective at *ActiveHistory.ca*.

Daniel Ross au Département d'histoire à l'Université du Québec à Montréal, où il enseigne et poursuit des recherches dans les domaines de l'histoire canadienne et urbaine. Il est également membre de l'équipe éditoriale de *ActiveHistory.ca*.

Mathieu Caron is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of Toronto. His work focuses on nocturnal social culture in Montreal.

Mathieu Caron est doctorant au Département d'histoire de l'Université de Toronto. Ses travaux se penchent sur les sociabilités nocturne à Montréal.