Commentary

La grève est étudiant/e, la lutte est populaire: the Québec Student Strike

Kim Sawchuk
Concordia University

It is the end of summer in Montréal and the city feels empty. The clanging of pots and pans, so prevalent during April and May throughout Québec, has subsided. Many residents have headed out of town, while a number of the students who attend the plethora of universities, CEGEPs, and system of private colleges have gone home in search of employment or to be with their families. Yet not all is quiet, for as the summer wends its way toward fall, the rumblings of the September 4 provincial election can be heard.

In anticipation of this election, members of the student union La CLASSE, including its prominent former spokesperson Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, travelled to different regions in the province in an effort to instigate public debate on the state of democracy and education.¹ Their immediate goal may have been to highlight the impact of tuition increases, instituted in the provincial budget in March 2012, and Bill 78, the controversial law imposed in May to curtail mounting and widespread public protests.² However, the larger goal of these local “town halls” is to widen the discussion of the 75% increase in student fees over the next five years—a total of $1,625—and to connect this increase to a broader range of social and political issues, including the status of women, environmental policies, government corruption, healthcare and industrial development schemes in the North and the St. Lawrence basin. As a homemade banner hanging from a balcony in my neighbourhood proclaims: La grève est étudiant/e, la lutte est populaire.

The media in Québec and elsewhere are not always comfortable with the word “strike,” much preferring to call it a boycott of classes. Yet many of the students I have spoken to over the past six months have been firm: consumers boycott; workers strike. This has not been a boycott. Students who have chosen to strike do not see education as a consumer activity. While support for the tactics of striking have waned within the student movement, the decision to strike during the spring places the massive demonstrations and nightly “casseroles” in a lineage with previous student strikes in Québec. It affirms the students’ understanding of education as part of a public, social mandate rather than a way to better themselves as individuals. Striking students do not see ed-
ucation as a service that they are buying, but in participatory social terms as work that they do that actively contributes to their society. This is a refutation of a discourse that casts education as an “investment” that is only about individual advancement. No one denies that it is. However the debate over maintaining a tuition freeze is being articulated to a discussion of “the public good” as a political value.

As the pamphlets, blogs, and websites that have been generated by various student associations make clear, these tuition fee increases are a step in the wrong direction for those Quebeckers who assert “the public good” over individualism as a political value for many reasons. For Francophone student associations, in particular, the stakes are understood as exceptionally high. The increase in tuition fees is understood as a betrayal of educational policies instituted during the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and promises made to students and citizens in the late 1970s. For many Francophone students the tuition increases are a violation of the 1969 Parent Commission (1963-1966), the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Québec, which was part of the Lesage government’s important reforms of the entire system of education, including higher education. Until the late 1960s the numbers of Francophone students who had access to education was extremely minimal. Part of the Parent Commission’s mandate was to ensure that education was no longer considered to be a luxury, but rather a right, and the Parent Report attempted to set the conditions to ensure that everyone would have the same opportunities of access. The result was a radical increase in the number of Francophone students who finished high school, gained vocational training in CEGEPS, and were able to afford a university education. Québec now has the highest percentage of youth in postsecondary education in the country and one of the lowest rates of student debt after university. The current well-educated generation of politicians in the province, as the students have reminded us, owes their careers to these educational reforms and low rates of tuition.

The strikes are also a demand that the provincial government live up to Article 13 of a UNESCO declaration signed by the Québec government in 1976 asserting that “higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education.” The current discourse of “education as a right” has foundations in these two policy documents: the Parent report and the UNESCO declaration. And as students point out, this ideal of freely universal university education is a principal that is being upheld in countries like Norway, Sweden, Finland, France, and Brazil. It is these examples they invoke, rather than the example of the United States or the other Canadian provinces.

Québec is continually depicted as an “anomaly” in relationship to other provinces in media discussions of the strike, yet it is worth remembering that internationally, and nationally, that this is not the case. Tuition fees in at least two other provinces—Newfoundland and Manitoba—are almost the same as Québec’s. Although articles such as those in the National Post use numbers to graphically display fee differentials across the country (see Edmiston & Johnson, 2012), these charts do not tell the full story: no differences are shown between undergraduate and graduate fees, between international fees, or between in-province and out-of-province fees. No mention is
made of the use of ancillary fees by universities, colleges, and CEGEPS, which greatly
add to student debt. While students continue to be depicted in some branches of the
mainstream media as “spoiled children” or in racist terms as “The Greeks of North
America” (Wente, 2012), no mention is made that in the Canadian context, the cost of
tuition, as a percentage of college and university revenue, has doubled between 1985
and 2005, from 14% to 30% (“Student Debt in Canada: Education Shouldn’t Be a Debt
Sentence,” 2012).

Student strikes in the province in 1996, 2005, and 2012 have been waged in Québec
insisting that politicians uphold these promises rather than hiding behind dubious
austerity budgets. As they are asking, where does government and university money
go? Where is it invested? In Québec—as in the Rest of Canada (ROC)—social, cultural,
and political change are closely tied to budgets. Budgetary priorities in CEGEPS, Uni-
versities and the province are being questioned by striking students, as is the system
of taxation. Students frequently refer to a study by the research institute IRIS, which
shows that Québec could afford free postsecondary education for all were it to both
raise its corporate capital gains tax rate from 0% to 2.4% and its top-bracket income
tax rate by 1.4%. Freezing tuition or making it free in Québec would be less than 1% of
the government’s budget. Yet this is not considered a viable option for reasons that
are ideological, not economic (Majka, 2012).3

The carré rouge is worn as a reminder of the looming crisis of student debt. In
Canada, debt from loans is at $14.5 billion and growing, a debt that is estimated to be
closer to $20 billion, if we take into account private loans. Student debt in Québec is
the lowest. The average debt is $13,000 while in the ROC it is over $26,000 (Klein,
2012; “Student Debt in Canada,” 2012; “Le travail rémunéré et les études universitaires,”
2012). In the United States it is predicted that the next major financial crisis will be
the direct result of the enormous increase in student debt. In Canada, 14% of students
end up defaulting on government loans because they cannot get steady employment
after their studies. And here it is worth noting that there has been an increase in youth
unemployment to 14.7%, almost double the national average (Marshall, 2012; “Youth
Unemployment Is Robbing People of Hope,” 2012).

Student debt is on the rise despite the fact that more and more students are work-
ing while they attend classes. As well, they cannot always find sufficient work during
the summer months (Canadian Student Survey, 2010; Serebrin, 2012). We see these
students in our classes struggling to find a way to pay for an education. The present
system of loans and bursaries, it is argued, has unrealistic thresholds for students from
many middle-income families. There is merit in this claim. Students, after all, are not
the only ones in debt. Statistics Canada reports that household debt in relation to dis-
posable income has reached a new record at 152%, much of it due to falling incomes
rather than increased borrowing (Chawla & Uppal, 2012). There has been a dramatic
escalation of debt for all people in Canada—a boom for the financial sector and banks,
which year after year record profits, posting an average profit of $22.4 billion (Schmidt,
2012). Yet, in Canada, the tax rate for the richest has dropped from 43% in 1981 to 29% in
2010, while the cost of corporate tax cuts is more than $10 billion yearly. In this sce-
nario the proposed tuition increases in Québec, to bring them up to the “national av-
“average,” are not something to emulate. As it is, consumer debt represents a significant burden on the young and a boon for the financial sectors of the economy, who make significant amounts of money off of each and every one of us.

The proposed increase in Québec tuition is significant, not only in relationship to current tuition fees, but also because of what students earn while going to school and what they earn after their education is completed. In Canada, as in Québec, the gap between rich and poor is growing. It is estimated that the richest 10% made 24% more in 2006 than the richest in 1976, middle-income earners 6.4% more, while the poorest made 10% less (“Canadian Income Inequality: Is Canada Becoming More Unequal?” 2011; Yalnizyan, 2010). A more general burden of debt is being foisted onto individuals as this gap grows. What must also be remembered is that the students have not been asking for an increase in taxation to make up for university budgeting shortfalls. The request of students is for more accountability by university administrators for their spending as well as the accountability of governments for their collusion with industry over government contracts.

As such, they ask: Will an increase even create a better system of education? Where will the increases in revenue go? To more teachers and professors? To school facilities (such as libraries) and teaching resources? Or into the pockets of administrators who are also the benefactors of lucrative severance packages—as well as all manner of bonuses—as a part of the new corporate culture of the university system? How does this new corporate culture affect the relationship between students and teachers, or professors and their research?

As professors, the onus is more and more on us to be “entrepreneurial” and to find ways and means to support students through research grants. Yet these too are shrinking. This is another important aspect of the strike and why many faculty have questioned the proposed tuition increase. The Québec provincial budget contains an injunction and incentives that demand academics and institutions to find more and more funding resources through partnerships with private corporations. How will the proposed restructuring of educational funding, which rewards university-corporate alliances, affect the type of research that we are able to conduct? It is at this crucial provincial and national conjuncture that the student movement is asking for a continuation of the freeze on tuition.

The phrase in the CLASSE manifesto “Nous sommes avenir/Share Our Future” underscores the inseparability of youth from what is to come as a result of these changes. Rather than seeing democracy as a formal procedure, enacted every four years, that then gives governments an unstoppable mandate to do what they please, they ask for ongoing participation in the political process. For the students who are involved in the student movement, the discussions that have taken place over the past 140 days of the strike are being discussed and debated for how they speak to a larger governmental agenda moving Québec toward the privatization of education, the corporatization of academic research, and taxation that puts the universal provision of public healthcare in peril.4

Their is a demand for a discussion of these fundamental values. But there is, as well, a demand for the revitalization of democracy and public discussion on “the fu-
ture” that is direct and not only between political elites but by “the people.” The people in their manifesto are not only les Québécois et Québécoise pure laine. This cause is not only expressed in nationalistic terms, but in terms of social solidarity with other groups who also are in danger of being disenfranchised through current budgets and policies: women, First Nations people, and newcomers to the province for whom education and public health are vital means of entry and enfranchisement. The casseroles are quiet, but the student movement continues to try and build alliances with other social organizations, reminding us that objections to an increase in tuition fees and the strike have never been only about “money” but a debate about where we are going as a society.

Acknowledgments
Thank you to the editorial committee and my co-authors for the special issue of Wi: Journal of Mobile Media—Owen Chapman, Alison Loader, Magdalena Olszanowski, and Ben Spencer—for permission to use portions of that editorial for this commentary (http://wi.mobilities.ca).

Notes
1. Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois resigned from his position as spokesperson on August 9, 2012. He has been replaced by Jeanne Reynolds. CLASSE stands for the Coalition large de l’association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante.

2. It is estimated that over 3,000 people were arrested, detained, or face fines as a result.

3. Despite the clamour over education these past eight months, the question of education has largely been ignored in these election debates, except by Québec Solidaire.

4. In addition to the new fees, the last budget included provisions for a new health tax of $200 per year per person in the province, regardless of income.

References


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