



## OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES”

*textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge*

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### Editorial

*Kim Sawchuk with Owen Chapman, Alison Loader, Magda Olszanowski and Ben Spencer*

It has been a scant three weeks since we first sent out a call for articles in response to Québec’s Bill 78 and the student strike.

At that time, the sweet sounds of the clanging of pots and pans dominated the nightly streets of our cities and towns. They have subsided in the wake of the increasing presence of riot police at public events in Montreal and Québec City. As the festival season begins, and the school term ends, the primary concern of those in positions of political power seems to be to maintain our urban centres as prime tourist destinations. This strategy has been evident in the police profiling of those who continue to wear the red square, particularly during the recent Formula One weekend.

Not all has been quiet. Court challenges against Bill 78 have been launched by student groups and on May 28 hundreds of Montreal lawyers marched in silent objection to the bill. On June 8, Fred Pellerin, a well-known Québec *conteur* (singer-storyteller), refused to accept honorific titles from the government in recognition of the present “social crisis” and in solidarity with student strikers. In a war of propaganda, the Minister of Culture and Communication, Christine St-Pierre, equated the wearing of the red square with the promotion of “intimidation and violence”. In response, over twenty-six hundred workers from the cultural sector – artists, actors, filmmakers, writers – signed a petition objecting to the Charest government’s position and St-Pierre’s contemptuous castigation of this most vital and effective symbol of the student movement (Madame La Ministre de la culture, 2012) – the red square. Her backpedalling ‘apology’ to “any artist she may have hurt with her comments” on June 14 is telling: St-Pierre reiterates the government’s position on the student increase and terms the strike a “boycott”.

Consumers boycott; workers strike. The distinction has been important to students and their supporters. This is not a boycott. This is a strike that places the events of the past six months in a clear lineage with previous student strikes in Québec. Striking students, who have put their bodies and education on the line for future generations, do not see education as a service that they are buying, but in participatory social terms as work that they do for themselves, yes, and as a contribution to their society.

It is in this spirit of solidarity between students, artists, and workers, that several of the submissions in this next installment of *open-wi* are from artists and designers

who offer their interpretations and documentation of events over the past several months, presenting a powerful set of images and counter-discourses to mainstream media depictions and government statements.

## Questioning Violence

One of the central terms used by the media and others to dismiss the student demonstrations is that of violence. This use of “violence” is addressed in several of the submissions we have received, for good reason. Bill 78 is in full force and to date it is estimated that over 3000 people have been arrested or detained and face fines, mostly for the violation of municipal by-laws. As the signatories of the petition against Minister St-Pierre argued most cogently, violence is incarnated in the “police corps who have multiplied the brutality against peaceful demonstrators” (Dutrisac, June 13).

Even some members of the police have begun to recognize the problem of the use of their deployment to quell dissent. As René Forget, a retired officer pleaded in an open letter to his colleagues, “The Canadian constitution, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and our entire system of law gives you the right to be independent, to think for yourselves. Even more, article 26 of the criminal code makes you criminally responsible for the force that you use.” Listing several incidences of police brutality, many of them documented by student media outlets, Forget suggests that the police should be protecting citizens from a government that has failed, asking who is being served:

*You have sworn to serve and protect us, the climate of social tension doesn't serve us, the loss of our rights and freedoms doesn't serve us and we have come to the point where we need you to protect us from our government that behaves in a manner that is greedy, treacherous, petty, confrontational and abusive toward us.*

Unfortunately, the Charest government is determined to behave in a manner that is “greedy, treacherous, petty, confrontational and abusive” and to undermine public education in favour of private interests (Forget, 2012). As we head into the summer the Charest government is under scrutiny for collusion and bribe-taking when issuing construction industry contracts. One also wonders about who is being targeted by police and why. On June 6, Québec MNA Amir Khadir was not only arrested in Québec City, but his house searched by police a day later. The Charest government refuses to listen to student requests to negotiate, to stop the proposed tuition fee increases, or to rescind Bill 78. Dismissive of all critiques of transformations to the educational system, they have simply added more money for loans – an ineffectual policy that will not broaden access to education and will create

yet more bureaucracy for those who must administer these loans. Instead, they have chosen to deploy armed force and intimidation in an attempt to silence legitimate objections to their policies. Not surprisingly, the Charest government and the federal Conservative regime have stood united in the face of the condemnation from the international community. On June 18 the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, criticized Québec, North Korea, Zimbabwe, and the Southern Sudan for restricting the freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

And so we return to the question of the meaning of the “carré rouge” and the issue of debt and work and the right to dissent, freely, without fear of police brutality or legal reprisals.

### **Speaking of Debt**

Québec is continually depicted as an “anomaly” in relationship to other provinces in media discussions of the strike. Yet it is worth remembering that tuition fees in at least two other provinces – Newfoundland and Manitoba – are almost the same as Québec’s. While articles such as those in the *National Post*, use numbers to graphically display fee differentials across the country, these charts do not tell the full story: no differences are shown between undergraduate and graduate fees, between international fees, or between in-province fees and out-of-province fees. No mention is made of the increase in costs to attend CÉGEP, the system that Québec high school students enter after grade 11. No mention is made of the use of ancillary fees by Universities, Colleges and CÉGEPs, which greatly add to 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 Quebec is the lowest. The average debt is \$13,000 while in the ROC (rest of Canada) it is over \$26,000 and as such, Quebec has the highest percentage of youth in post secondary education ( *Education Shouldn’t Be A Debt Sentence*, 2012; *Le travail rémunéré*, 2012; Klein, 2012). In Canada, 14% of students end up defaulting on government loans because they cannot get steady employment after work. 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*, March 2012).

Student debt is on the rise in all other provinces and is a major looming crisis, not because students do not want to work. Indeed, more and more students are working while they attend classes as they cannot always find sufficient work during the summer months (Canadian Student Survey, 2010; Serebin, 2012). We see these students in our classes. We are those students, struggling to find ways to pay for an education.

## **We are all students?**

Students are not the only ones in debt. Statistics Canada reports that household debt in relation to disposable 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 record profits, posting an average profit of 22.4 billion, yet continue to increase administration fees to customers (Schmidt, 2012). 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 dollar yearly. In Canada, as in Quebec, the gap between rich and poor is growing. 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, 2011; Yalnizyan, 2012).

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 this scenario the proposed increases in Québec, to bring them up to “national average” is not something to emulate. It represents a significant burden on the young and a boon for the financial sector. Students in other provinces are beginning to ask the question of how and why the increase in tuitions in their own provinces has occurred. Students are contributing more and more and they are asking questions. The costs of tuition, as a percentage of college and university revenue has doubled between 1985 until 2005 doubling from 14% to 30 %. (Education Shouldn't Be A Debt Sentence, 2012). 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).

Despite these figures, students continue to be depicted in the mainstream media as “spoiled children” or “The Greeks of North America” (Margaret Wente, 2012) the problem isn't because of a sense of entitlement but because of clawbacks to taxation to the most wealthy, and a reliance on loans which do not benefit students but increase the burden of debt. A more general burden of debt is being foisted onto individuals as the gap between rich and poor grows.

## **Suspended sentences: back to Québec**

In the meantime, the suspension of the school year has meant that colleagues, including faculty and staff, at CÉGEPS and in those institutions where students have been on strike most consistently, such as the University of Montreal and University of Québec at Montreal, are facing increased workloads over the summer. The

semester for schools that have been closed due to the strike will open again in August to finish their winter term by the end of September. What *that* means for CEGEP students who are supposed to enter university this year or the universities who have accepted them is unclear. What *is* clear is that Bill 78 prevents any union of school workers (faculty or staff) from effectively protesting the increased workload that is likely to result. One of the reasons Bill 78 was so vehemently opposed by faculty Unions and associations is that it is being used to trump provisions in our collective agreements governing conditions of work.

What is also forgotten is the request of students for more accountability by university administrators for their spending. 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 other teaching resources? Or into the pockets of highly paid administrators who are also given cushy severance packages as a part of the new corporate culture of the University system? How will the proposed restructuring of educational funding which rewards University-corporate alliances affect the type of research that we are able to conduct? Will we be able to conduct research with and alongside those who need our work the most, but have no way to partner up?

The suppression of the right to dissent at the University continues. At our own institution students who were on strike now face potential reprimands and the use of the University code of conduct that could penalize them and jeopardize their academic futures, a move that we strongly oppose.

The casseroles are quieter, but the student movement continues to build alliances with other social organizations reminding us that this has never been only about "money" but about a fundamental debate on the values of a society that increasingly penalizes all collective forms of action, unless like the Formula One, it is a gathering that brings in profits to the coffers of the city. In closing, we thank the contributors to this special open issue of *wi: journal of mobile media* that is also committed to understanding the present social movement and the turbulence that lies beneath the surface of the summer calm.

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