



Battle for Soul of Society

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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES” *textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge*

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Hi Owen,

[...]

*I've attached a letter to the editor that I had published in my hometown newspaper in Sault Ste. Marie Ontario in May [2012] as a response to a particularly caustic and dismissive editorial column about the student movement and protests. It's small by comparison to what you all are doing in Mont Real and my perspectives are admittedly distant so connecting with you and Line [Grenier] and folks from Quebec is really interesting and important to me. As with any movement, little pushes here and there are what ***makes*** movement. Gotta hope so.*

By the way, I did my M.A. in your department, working then with Kim [Sawchuk], Marty [Allor] and others who were there 20 years ago! Hung out with Charles [Acland] when he was in Boston in the spring....Good memories of my Concordia experience.

*peace,
MF*

p.s.

Here's the link to the initial editorial that compelled me to respond with my letter:
<http://www.saultstar.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=3549937>

BATTLE FOR SOUL OF SOCIETY

Murray Forman, Boston, MA

As a university professor and former university student in Montreal, I am fascinated and, frankly, encouraged by the ongoing student protests that are rocking that city and Quebec.

As Montreal police chief Marc Parent stated, it is something "never before seen in Canada," but we should not necessarily frame it in negative terms (despite the media fixation on the isolated violence of a minority of trouble-makers whose actions are inarguably pernicious). This is not an isolated battle in the streets of a great metropolitan city, but a battle for the soul of society and an attempt to wrestle priorities back to educating our youths so they can succeed as responsible citizens.

In this context, the Quebec students are learning valuable lessons in media relations, mediation and crisis management, policy-making, national and global politics, developing keen analytical skills as they envision social and political alternatives. Students across the country and in the Sault might take notes.

During the initial phase of the protest, the main issue was defined as the opposition to government tuition hikes (which from my vantage at a private U.S. institution seem reasonable and even enviable). Increasing tuition in a sluggish economy seems heartless to many. Students and their families (including those affiliated with Sault College and Algoma University) are acutely aware that a college or university degree does not necessarily improve one's opportunities in a highly competitive and static labour market.

Students in Quebec recognize that the rationale of the Jean Charest government is consistent with neo-liberal trends on a global scale, placing the onus on a relatively defenseless public to fend for itself as world powers wheel and deal, negotiating the best financial outcomes for themselves at the expense of progressive and sustainable futures for citizens.

Students in countries such as England and France have similarly mobilized around these issues. This kind of language and thinking is generally reviled by those inhabiting the political right. Yet students are developing an evolved discourse for challenging systems not of their design, working hard to conceive and manifest alternative models for responsible governance.

Those in government or corporate boardrooms who lack fluency in this new language will soon be marginalized in public debates and the search for positive solutions. We are already seeing this as career politicians and other establishment figures express dismay and incomprehension with what they behold.

Though I am amused by the references to "the Maple Spring" (an analogy to the uprisings throughout the Middle East and North Africa), the Quebec student protests actually resonate most with the international Occupy movement of 2011. Quebec students have bundled their concerns into a larger list of legitimate grievances, demanding accountability that extends beyond the single issue of the government trying to balance its budget on their backs. They regard their struggle in terms of a wider and growing movement that aligns with global concerns and involves rapid mobilization of energies to enunciate opposition when it is appropriate. It should not be a surprise that this is happening now; indeed, we might ask why it took so long and when the students in the Sault might join in.

Young people in the Sault and across the country would do well to listen to what their counterparts in Quebec are saying so that they, too, will be privy to the modes of expression and political imagination that are emerging.