



ERIC MARTIN

Education and Popular Sovereignty

Québec's largest and longest student strike had some positive results: the Liberal government lost power, and the Parti Québécois has committed to repealing Law 12 (formerly Bill 78) and suspending the tuition fee increase. But the CLASSE, the left-wing flank of the movement, refuses to let its guard down. The fact the PQ forms a minority government, has its own education policy history, and openly supports of indexing tuition fees calls for prudence. The public education system in Québec is far from being freed of commercial pressures, and upcoming years will be crucial for its future.

The PQ will not solve the problem

The PQ won its victory by a few seats (54, whereas the Liberals got 50). The government could fall as soon as the next budget, and there is a distinct possibility the Liberals could be reelected at that time, even though they are now without a leader, since Jean Charest resigned following his defeat. Even worse, ex-PQ Education Minister François Legault has formed *Coalition avenir Québec* (CAQ), a business-minded, managerial and neoliberal party

which promotes an instrumental, commercial and productivist vision of education. This populist party also gains lots of support by promising to “clean up” Québec’s public finances. Legault publicly supports U.S.-inspired education reforms such as merit pay for teachers. The CAQ’s open support of Bill 12 and of the tuition hike thus makes their possible future election a gloomy perspective for students and actors of the education community. Therefore, although it might seem students have won this recent battle, nothing guarantees against further difficulties.

While CLASSE is calling for vigilance, moderate student federations feel the PQ’s victory puts an end to the recent student conflict. They seem to forget how the PQ is historically behind several cuts to education funding, tuition hikes and performance contracts imposed on universities. They also act as if the PQ promised a tuition freeze, but they know very well how the proposition that Pauline Marois will defend in a projected Education Summit will be indexation of tuition fees to the cost of living. Marois already admitted she thought defending free education was impossible. It is therefore very doubtful that the PQ’s policy will put a stop to tuition increases.

Education and state corruption by Capital

It must also be stressed that tuition increases, higher student debt, along with corporate governance reforms and the multiplication of teacher evaluations and “quality-assurance” performance indicators are all symptoms of the introduction of a quasi-market logic in the field of higher education. The introduction of competition between universities is a means to make the institutions vulnerable to the normative priorities of economic organizations. The university itself then becomes a porous sub-organization whose practices and content is derived from the priorities of corporations and markets, along the lines of what type of activity is deemed more productive and more able to generate value. Subjects (students and educators) are then trained so their abilities and psyche will correspond to the current imperatives of the value-production chain.

This submission to university is key for the ideological fantasy of “knowledge economy” to function: capital and growth will be saved by the instrumentalization of universities and knowledge. This is why universities are no longer presented as serving the self-governing of a political community, but more and more as hubs of international mobility. This is in part because capital and corporations favor the production of rootless subjects who care little about community and political autonomy. The new “Human capital” subjectivity which has replaced the “citizen” is foremost loyal to its narcissistic self — a good soldier for the multinational corporation.

In modernity, knowledge is supposed to enable subjects to take charge of their common world and historical heritage. Collective debates are supposed to be held in institutions which allow the formation of a general idea of the “good life” which will in turn give social practice its orientations.

Capitalism turns the project inside out: the production and infinite growth of abstract value is the only idea of “good life”. Capital uses human brainpower and collective institutions like the school to produce knowledge innovations which will allow value-production to overcome its inner contradictions so it can keep going. All real debate is forbidden in the public and political space: both are used strictly as an echo chamber for the self-legitimizing message of value production. Social policy is only justified on the basis that it increases economic competitiveness and maximizes economic growth. The only other important things are law and order and job security, to ensure the uninterrupted flow of uni-dimensional life based on production-consumption. Culture is expelled from university and replaced with ready-to-wear powerpoint thinking.

The university and the State are not the instruments of culture transmission and self-government; they instead alienate subjects/students so they come to *desire* alienation, and never feel more self-worth than when they subscribe to a business class, dreaming of working as a stock trader. Nobody tells them they will probably end up in an average-paid, boring technical job with lots of debt, or as a customer service employee somewhere in the large tourism area we used to call “world”.

Québec as a blocked society

The hijacking of collective institutions is no new phenomenon. Marx explained long ago how the modern State was contaminated by the mediation of social relations by abstract work in view of producing abstract value. Social-democratic institutions like mass public education were often gained by social struggles, but were also accepted by employers and governments because they could be used in job-training and served economic planning in view of increasing the GDP.

The situation in Québec is even more complex with the double domination of the federal capitalist state of Canada and the capitalist state of Québec on the population and the education system. Québec's general orientations — its social, economic or educational policy — is directly constrained by the de-multiplied pressures of Québec and Canadian capitalists, as well as both levels of government. The voting system, inherited from obsolete British parliamentary institutions, prevents the emergence of small left-wing parties in favor of independence. Therefore, the political space has been locked for decades under the domination of a duopoly: the Liberal party, or the PQ (which has long stopped seriously advocating in favor of independence), advocating a form of social-liberal provincial "good governance". No one has a plan to resolve the "national question"; M. Legault says it is no longer relevant to discuss independence. The dominant parties only care about managing economy. Education was barely mentioned in the campaign, even after the historical student mobilization. The only collective project the elite seems to have is to dissolve Québec into the magma of globalized capital.

Writer Hubert Acquin said Québec's situation made it "culturally tired". A social movement as important as the recent student strike is a direct result of the political dead-end Québec has come to. Some important progress has been made in collective spirit and political awareness, especially in the youth, but also in the general population, and this is promising, especially for the future. But on a short-term basis, our current political deadlock prevents the ideas stirred up by students and the social contradictions their

awakening brought into light from finding any objective or institutional political translation. Direct democracy or free tuition are intolerable ideas in the impoverished imagination of neoliberal news-speak. Anarcho-syndicalism, combative unionism, horizontal organization and civil disobedience are associated with terrorism by mediocre politicians. Even more unacceptable to them is the fact that students refuse to simply serve as workpower for the money-making projects the elder managers have in store for their future, and their insistence on speaking out about other possible ways for society to walk forward when they are expected to stop discussing and start salivating about future paychecks.

The left wing of Québec's student movement is influenced by anarchist, ecologist and feminist practices inspired in part by the anti-globalization movements. Counter to other more reformist federations, this gives it a great ability to avoid the reformist traps laid out by governments. This insistence on independence from classical institutions (government, unions, etc.) and self-organization is doubled with an anti-electoral abstentionism and rejection of the national question (criticism of "bourgeois" nationalism) which, for now, inhibits any linkage with left-wing political parties or movements in favor of independence.

It also problematizes linkages with labour unions. Although they have offered the movement support, they were unable to mobilize their membership in favor of a social strike the students were pushing for.

The ability of the movement to gain support in more remote rural areas was also difficult, although several villages did participate in banging casseroles and hosting conferences featuring student activists. This is further complicated by the media monopoly in Québec, with two of the three major newspapers working overtly against the student movement and their ideas.

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Ties have, however, been built with the ecologist movement, most notably people protesting shale gas or mining developments. An extremely large protest (250,000 people) was held on April 22nd 2012 to defend “the common good”. Yet, there remains a lot of work to be done before one can talk about a real coordination of social, student and ecological movements. Some links were also established with other Canadian students, unionists

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and ecological movements and initiatives in the sense of a pan-Canadian solidarity of social struggles will most probably emerge in the near future. In a recent video presentation to Montreal participants of a socialist summer university, French thinker Christian Laval recently outlined the necessity of creating “a new student international” which could coordinate

with movements in France, Greece, Chile, England and around the rest of the globe, and the urgency of linking the student fight to other popular struggles against neoliberal and capitalist dispossession.

In the eyes of the elites, the most unbearable thing students are doing is creating links and ties in an atomistic society. First, they are linking particular social problems or pathologies with institutional and universal dynamics, and proposing global, paradigmatic changes. Secondly, they are practically recreating organization, face-to-face meetings and street demonstrations which replace everyday isolation of citizens and workers with concrete forms of action, information, education and decision, such as the popular assemblies which appeared during the strike in several villages and neighborhoods.

For now, moderate student federations have ties with a social-liberal party that has no real intention of going towards Québec

political independence, and offers no major shift away from neoliberal policy, although it can be expected that PQ will govern less harshly than did the Liberals. Radical, left-wing students reject the national question and stay clear of any involvement in parties, fearing — and this is not without basis — that their movement could be corrupted by electoral politics. Still, this is yet another expression of the historical blockage; the seemingly impossible dialectics in Québec between the social question and the national question. In Québec, the only way out of the dead-end is the realization of socialism (or a form of social republicanism) and independence, with particular focus on ecology, equality and defense of culture, in internationalist solidarity with the rest of Canada and other peoples. And yet, for now the objective conditions that would make this possible are far from resolved.

The movement embodied by the CLASSE is one that refuses to let the modern project of individual and collective autonomy die, one that places a social reason, that of community and nature, above one-dimensional capitalist rationale. But the movement has its own demons to fight. Seeking to incarnate another, better and future form of reason and spirit, (the CLASSE manifesto is titled “We are future”) students, at the same time, have trouble with overcoming unilateral refusal or negation of existing social forms. This is also a sign that our societies, including the left, have difficulty overcoming these social forms as well, which sustain hegemonic liberal individualism.

The only way to really beat the neoliberalism game is to reaffirm community and culture as something that precedes individuals, and serves as the only historical source for judgment criteria with which to replace capitalist abstract value. But many students, influenced by anarchist or postmodern thought, feel individual freedom can only be surpassed by voluntary association, and consider other cultural or political institutions as external, repressive or downright conservative. The subjective desire for freedom is therefore opposed, rather than reconciled, with the socially objective or institutionalized dimension of community. Of course, this is practical if the objective is criticizing alienated institutional forms in capitalism. But it can hardly lead to any

actual overcoming of these forms by the positing or recognition of an objective institutional form that could give freedom an embodiment superior to that of an outcry.

This criticism is in no way a disavowal of the student movement's intentions. It must simply be said that a real, profound change in individualistic, liberal and capitalist society is impossible if no alternative, institutionalized form of concrete ethics is substituted to contractual or market conceptions of social interaction or "exchange". The left, not only in Québec, but in Canada and the rest of the world, therefore needs more than renewed solidarity of combativity. We need to go beyond classical Marxist materialistic or anarchist standpoints to recognize the value of the symbolic heritage which makes humanity what it is, and the living communities where these visions of the good life are embodied. This would allow fighting for both public education and popular sovereignty in an internationalist perspective.

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