

The Quebec student movement boils over

The Quebec student strike that began in February has exploded into a broad popular movement following the passing of an Emergency Law that criminalizes any spontaneous gathering of more than fifty people. Popularly referred to as the ‘Truncheon Law’ (*Loi matraque*), this effort to stifle public protest has had the opposite effect, producing social upheaval unmatched since Quebec’s ‘Quiet Revolution’ of the 1960s, and broadening the debate around access to education to one around the privatization of what remains of the Commons in general.

Since the beginning of the strike students have organized demonstrations and engaged in creative direct action, ranging from painting entire government buildings red to liberating swarms of locusts in private business schools; from playful street theatre to detonating smoke bombs in the subway. This last provoked enormous controversy: the media began to categorize striking students as ‘terrorists’ and internal debates around appropriate tactics proliferated. With the end of semester approaching, a minority of students in certain schools obtained injunctions forcing classes to resume, but striking students and their parents blocked the doors and professors refused to teach. During the same period, another threshold was crossed: after a march convened in Montreal one evening, people continued to march every night since – now thirty-seven nights in a row. This nocturnal ‘snake-march’ with its spontaneous trajectory is despised by the authorities because it weaves around in fickle ways, annoying drivers and

successfully evading police. The new emergency law (Law 78) specifically criminalizes such spontaneity.

As soon as Law 78 came into effect, however, the intensity and spontaneity of rebellion increased. Many student groups immediately announced their intention to defy the law. A march pre-planned in Montreal for a few days later – 22 May, the hundredth day of the strike – attracted almost 400,000 people who marched against Law 78 as well as in support of student demands. By the following midnight, the police had kettled and arrested over 700 protesters. In response, an idea ripped through social media networks: if it is illegal to demonstrate, let’s stand on our balconies and bang pots and pans at 8 p.m. every evening. This tactic, traditional in Latin America – called a *cacerolazo* – is largely unknown in Quebec. The next day, not only did people make noise on their balconies but they went out, accumulated on corners, and when they grew to groups of forty-nine persons (just under the new ‘legal’ threshold) they began to walk around in the middle of the streets. Dozens of small noisy marches, including children, senior citizens and people in wheelchairs as well as the standard crowd of young people, covered the city, rendering the new law effectively unenforceable – and thus ridiculous. Throughout the week the phenomenon spread throughout the province, and every day the clanging crowds continued to grow larger.

It’s worth mentioning that those days also marked the first week of hot weather in Montreal. Anyone who has lived in the city knows that we go from six months



of sub-zero temperatures to 30 degree sunshine in a few short weeks; this year's spring fever has been even more intense than usual. By Saturday the *marches de casseroles* in Montreal were thousands strong (nobody seemed to care any more about the fifty-person limit). Many marches ended up bumping into each other and ultimately coalesced into one enormous crowd of 40,000 people, all of whom were banging on one thing or another and screaming as loud as they possibly could. Sometimes they screamed the already classic slogan 'We don't give a shit about your Special Law!' (*On s'en colisse de ta loi spéciale!*), and sometimes they just screamed cries of joy. Danceable rhythms rose out of the racket, and even cars that had been stuck in the mess for over an hour honked along happily with the emergent beats. People who lived along the way set up speakers outside and blasted music to complement it all, which the drumming crowd immediately echoed. Everyone was either dancing, laughing or crying in a trance of collective euphoria, some tearing their clothes off and skipping down the street completely naked. Whichever theoretical flavour you choose – 'eros', the 'carnavalesque', 'communitas' – one thing is certain: the police, following at a distance, looked completely terrified.

On a more serious note, autonomous neighbourhood general assemblies have formed in at least four neighbourhoods (probably more). These assemblies, which are taking place in parks, are not organized by or for students but rather among citizens concerned about our civil liberties being revoked, and are spawning debate about a wide range of social issues as well as creative plans to resist Law 78.

To understand why all this is unfolding so forcefully, it helps to understand the history of Québécois resistance – a cultural reservoir that fuels the current militancy. During the 1960s Quiet Revolution, which transformed Quebec society and furthered the development of a Québécois national identity, the demand for affordable French-language education was a central issue. The proposed 82 per cent tuition increase not only threatens access to education for most students, but is an affront to deeply held Québécois values. Ever since its Quiet Revolution, Quebec has had the most socialized welfare state among the Canadian provinces. The history of Québécois resistance has always involved a unique blend of nationalist sentiment and class struggle, because francophones were historically kept in a subordinate class position on the basis of their language. The current movement is

thus characterized by a bizarre pastiche of anarchist and nationalist symbolism that would otherwise be impossible to understand.

Understanding the organizational structure of the student movement is also key to understanding its staying power. Students are represented by one or another of the traditional institutional unions, but over 100,000 students also form part of CLASSE (la Coalition Large de l'Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante, ASSE), a broad coalition of student groups that have joined up with ASSE, the most militant of the student federations. CLASSE is not a hierarchical institution but rather a horizontal network of student associations and collectives that are articulated together via weekly General Assemblies where decisions are made democratically, with respect for a 'diversity of tactics' (those familiar with the global justice movement might recognize CLASSE as a sort of 'spokescouncil'). The government doesn't understand CLASSE's organizational logic and is infuriated by the resilience of this leaderless network. The media try to drive a wedge between the 'good protestors' and the 'violent protestors' of the CLASSE. The authorities are afraid of CLASSE – as perhaps they should be.

Whereas the traditional unions simply seek a tuition freeze, CLASSE has maintained an explicitly anti-capitalist position throughout the strike and demands free education for all. CLASSE links the current predicament faced by Québécois students with that faced by students in Chile and other countries undergoing neoliberal austerity measures, and proposes to fund education via a bank tax, starting at 0.14 per cent and increasing to 0.7 per cent over five years.

With his Law 78 having failed so magnificently, Quebec Premier Jean Charest once again had to enter into negotiations with students – which are again breaking off without a resolution as this issue goes to press. Unless the government concedes to a tuition freeze – and even if they do – it's hard to imagine a return to business as usual any time soon because the current unrest now concerns much more than tuition. Many think the only course of action the Liberal Party has left to try to reclaim some legitimacy is to call an election, and hope for an outcome similar to the one that helped stifle the May '68 protests in Paris. Whatever happens, this creative and tenacious social movement in Quebec is making waves that will echo for years to come. The pot is already boiling over and it will be difficult to put a lid on it.

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