

The 2012 student movement in Quebec: fair shares, commodification and saucepans Clara Lea Dallaire-Fortier

In 2012, a policy to increase university tuition fees, and a large student mobilisation against it, led to a broad debate on education, accessibility and public institutions in Quebec.

The education system in Canada falls under provincial governments' jurisdiction. Tuition fees in Quebec are below the Canadian average and its institutions are relatively underfunded. In other provinces, the debate on the public education system had no repercussions and the basis of the student struggle was perceived as foreign to their societal priorities. In Quebec's debate on public education, citizens influenced by the rise of neoliberalism were at odds with the values of others who thought the increases undermined notions of collectivity.

The right-wing Liberal Party in Quebec had planned two consecutive hikes in university tuition fees, the first by 30% from 2007 to 2012. This increase was not publicly discussed: some media even claimed there was no increase (Nadeau-Dubois, 2013). The second increase of 127% was planned for the period of 2012 to 2017. This would have raised the cost to CA\$3 793 (about US\$ 2 880). Between 2007 and 2011, students began to plan actions for 2012. Student associations undertook extensive research on accessibility and university finances, and mobilised in universities and CEGEPs, the general and vocational colleges which teach a post-school degree unique to Quebec.

The student mobilisation caught the general public's attention after a wave of student votes opposing the increases and committing to suspend classes. The student unions FEUQ, FECQ and ASSÉ conducted the student votes and orchestrated the mobilisation. The vote mandates were often for what was called a *grève générale illimitée* or unlimited general strike, and done by show of hands in general assemblies. The first vote was in Valleyfield's CEGEP on 7 February, 2012. The results were close, but adopted the mandate for a class boycott, which started the wave in a large portion of Quebec's universities and CEGEPs. The symbol of a red square, indicating support for the movement, soon became iconic.

It is important to mention that the movement was diverse. For instance, some students opposed fee increases while others demanded free education, and some underlined a gender dimension to the hikes while others emphasised the socioeconomic dimension.

On 22 March, more than 300 000 students demonstrated on the streets of Montreal – a number never seen before in the history of the province – to send a message to the provincial government which was meeting to table the budget. It was a turning point in the movement's legitimacy, described as a historic moment in Quebec, in which a sense of collectivity came to the fore.

At the same time, a large part of the population did not support the movement, and the government kept rescheduling an invitation to discuss with student representatives, setting various conditions for a meeting such as, in April, an obligation to condemn violence in the demonstrations within 24 hours. The short notice prevented CLASSE, a broad student association created by the student union ASSÉ, from reacting to the government ultimatum, given their structure. CLASSE, which represented more than 40 000 students (around 70 000 at its peak), functioned through direct democracy in a weekly general as-

sembly of members. These young student unions chose direct democracy rather than conforming to a traditional working structure.

Polarised debate

For the government, the hikes were justified in comparison to average tuition fees in other Canadian provinces, inflation, the need to increase the quality of research, and the argument that students must pay their 'fair share' (Quebec Province, 2011). The increase must be understood in the context of austerity measures, where the Liberal Party was making large investments in exploitation of natural resources while cutting funds for public institutions (Bachand, 2012). After 2012, austerity in higher education weakened but continued in other spheres of society. This framed the 'user pays' logic, that students should pay for the service they received. To many citizens, this criticism seemed legitimate and was fed by an aversion for a potential tax increase.

For mobilised students, the notions of 'user pays' and 'cost-benefit analysis' limited the discussions to the nominal cost of higher education. To the advocates of the movement, these reflected a commodified understanding of education in which students are consumers. The movement wished to define education as a collective process whose value could not be measured in monetary value and whose benefits were collective. This collective vision partially explains why environmental and community-based organisations and unions in Quebec supported the student movement.

In 2012, the semantic of 'fair share' used by many politicians and journalists tended to displace the complexity of this notion by portraying students as egoistic and lazy (Turmel, 2012). Student associations presented economic and social analyses of the effects of education in broader society, which raised the questions: how do we take into account the spillover effect and the cultural impacts of education? And, what does 'fair share' imply for the division of cost between tax, private shareholders and tuition?

The discussion also centered on accessibility to higher education: the movement underlined the increasing difficulty of repaying student debt, the small purchasing power covered by minimum wage jobs and the deterioration of the employment condition of graduates, such as a decrease in jobs and increasing part-time employment. Academics in Quebec linked the fee increases to neoliberal discourse that tends to undermine the role of financial institutions in the citizen's ability to pay (Tremblay-Pépin, 2011).

The role of media and police

Public opinion and media shaped the development of the student struggle. An overview of the media coverage of the events by the company Influence Communication concluded that the right wing occupied a large space in Quebec's public discussion, and that a strong majority of the fifteen media pundits were opposed to the students. Many journalists described students and their

academic supporters as dangerous radicals: 'The campus was invaded by masked demonstrators. Armed with poles and hammers, they broke equipment, terrorized students and employees, spread liquid soap on stairs, stopped classes by invading classrooms and threatening teachers' (Gagnon, 2015). The police force internalised this image of students. A policeman anonymously reported that they developed a 'profound hatred' toward students (Nadeau-Dubois, 2013). Police brutality increased as the strike continued. On 4 May, two students lost an eye each during an episode of police repression.

Political changes, citizen mobilisation and unions

On 17 May 2012, Bill 78 was adopted by the provincial government. Amnesty International declared it in breach of Canada's international human rights obligations (Amnesty International, 2012). The bill suspended the semester until August 2012, restricted protesters' capacity to gather in the streets – it was made illegal for more than 50 people to demonstrate without submitting an itinerary to the police – and threatened heavy fines for protesters. There was a major community response to the bill. On 19 May hundreds of citizens, young and old, went into the streets in an act of civil disobedience, using wooden spoons and saucepans to make themselves loud. These started taking place every evening at 7pm and for some, the demonstrations continued to the city center for night rallies. The citizen mobilisation became very large: monthly, 300 000 persons demonstrated, including professors, students and labour unions, associations of parents and citizens, political parties such as Québec Solidaire, and artists.

In September 2012, the Liberal Party of Quebec called an election and the Party Québécois became the majority party. It favoured a fee increase comparable to the increase in the cost of living.

Throughout the events, the civil union movement provided tactical support like paying demonstrators' transport or the fines received by student. However, unions which had focused on industrial relations since the 1980s were, at the time, associated with the Party Québécois, and both only timidly supported the students. Nevertheless, after the large mobilisation, many unions created positions of political advisors and mobilisation officers for previously active students, understanding the changes in the nature of political struggle brought by the new generation.

The conflict underlined different views of education and society. Since the advocates of the movement saw education as a collective good and their opponents saw it as a commodity, dialogue and mediation should have been at the core of conflict resolution. However, neither the Liberal Party nor the Party Quebecois opened such space with the student associations. Nevertheless, the 2012 movement was an important exercise of public education in Quebec, and periodically, some militants start new actions intending to revive the movement. This historical moment represents a collective reflection on democracy that will affect this young generation and their construction of Quebec society.

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