

Reflections on the 2012 Quebec Student Movement

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In the recent special issue of the journal *Theory & Event* that I edited with Brian Massumi and Cayley Sorochan on last year's student strike in Quebec, we made reference in our introduction to Hannah Arendt's stipulation that judgment could really only be accomplished if it was sufficiently detached from political action so as to be impartial. In Arendt's late, unfinished work on the contemplative life, political judgment was conceived in the mode of storytelling, as the judgment of theorists and historians, spectators sufficiently removed from the scene of action that they could be relied upon to give accounts uncorrupted by partisanship.

For anyone who took part in the events of the student strike in Quebec last year—and I am going to assume that most people have some idea of the basic trajectory of those events; the best account I know of is Cayley Sorochan's chronology of the strike published in our special issue—the luxury of detachment remains unavailable, even now. This is why, when Ira Wagman invited me to come here talk with you about the strike, I could offer only “informal, personal reflections,” and not scholarship. What I shall have to say about these events should be understood as the issue of a situated, partial perspective. That said, mine is the perspective of a left-wing political theorist (at least on my favorite days), and so what I will have to say will unavoidably reflect the blurred line between theory and experience that was part of the exhilaration and agony of my own engagement in and with the strike.

At the end of May, shortly after the massive demonstration of May 22 marking the strike's 100th day, colleagues at Concordia decided to devote a special issue of the journal *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media* to a broad range of immediate responses to these events by Montreal media and cultural studies scholars. My contribution to that issue took the form of a list of fifteen reasons “why I wear the red square,” the symbol of the student strike. As you can see, these reasons were presented in the form of a series of clipped half-sentences that left a lot of room for interpretation. What I want to do today is to elaborate upon a few of these by way of reflecting on the events of the strike.

Before getting to the list, I want to return to the matter of mine being a partial and situated perspective, and say a little bit about what that means in this case. Which is to say: I need to say a few things about my situation.

Part of my situation is that I am a tenured professor and Canada Research Chair at McGill University. This means that, relative to many others who form the broad universe of the post-secondary education system in Quebec, I occupy a position of disproportionate privilege, comfort, remuneration, access to resources and independence. By any measure, I have it very,

very good, and I am a direct material and professional beneficiary of the exact system that the student strike brought under intense, critical scrutiny.

Another part of my situation is that I am, like many of you in this room, a particular kind of professor. I, like very many of my colleagues and very many of you, have spent the entirety of my adult life understanding myself as some kind of leftist or even Marxist intellectual. Probably the main reason I became an academic was because it was one of the few ways I could see to be a leftist (or at least to *think* and *feel* like one) and make both a living and a “difference.” Like many of us, in one way or another I have spent my whole professional life thinking, reading, writing and teaching about the injustices and indignities of power organized on capitalist lines, and encouraging various form of leftist critical and political response to that power. This has included thinking, talking and writing specifically about the demoralizing spectacle of the university’s gradual capitulation to that power in recent decades. And, in recent years, my own scholarly attention has focused on trying to understand the dynamics of politicization and de-politicization. Needless to say, the phrase “put your money where your mouth is” comes pretty close to capturing this aspect of the situation many of us found ourselves in last year.

The third and final thing I want to say about my situation has to do with my particular location at McGill University, an elite Anglo institution in the heart of a city and culture to which it relates largely as an alien, albeit an alien who has been around for a very long time. The student strike proper unfolded in the spring and, in many ways, without McGill. This was not because the Quebec student movement is primarily francophone, but because McGill is a deeply conservative institution by comparison to most other universities, a quality that extends from its administration to its professoriate to its student body, with a few exceptions. This quality was evident not only in the campus’s general abstention from the strike, but more openly in the events that took place on campus in the months preceding it. These included a fall strike by the university’s administrative support staff to which the University responded belligerently, a brief occupation of the administration building on November 10 that brought Montreal riot police to campus, complete with pepper spray, tear gas, kettling and violent baton charges against peaceful demonstrators, and a second, six-day occupation of the administration building in February by a group of students demanding that the Administration recognize the results of student referenda in support of the campus radio station and PIRG group. This ended with an eviction by police after the university cut off the occupiers’ electricity, food, and bathroom access. Students involved in these actions were heavily disciplined by the University, including fines and conduct probation.

What was most notable about these events was not that they occurred, but that the great majority of McGill students and faculty responded so passively to them. Some of us might have thought that injunctions against a union’s right to picket its workplace, police brutality against students and faculty demonstrating on campus, and the starving and refrigeration of students engaged in the time-honored campus stunt of occupying a couple of offices for a few days, would have outraged the campus community, mobilizing it to rise in defense of the university as a place where those sorts of heavy-handed tactics would simply not be tolerated. If anything, the opposite happened, as the majority of faculty and students supported the Administration’s efforts to both hold individual students personally responsible for their actions and maintain order so that business could proceed as usual. McGill had become what my colleague Tom Lamarre, in a courageous piece in our special issue, calls an “outlaw university,” where “**what passes for**

business as usual on university campuses is in fact a mode of governance that works through extralegal procedures to criminalize political action and expression in advance.”

“Business-as-usual” became the mark of the university’s greatest pride through the student strike of the ensuing spring, as only a very few of McGill’s several student associations struck their departments (including my own) and those only briefly, a very small minority of students supported the broader strike and its aims, and an even tinier minority of faculty members did what they could to protect and support these students, in a climate where open support for the strike was greeted with condescension and disgust. Ensuring that business-as-usual would not be disrupted by the alien force of a student strike took on the character of a moral crusade at McGill.

All of this combined to produce the situation in which it was decided that I would wear the red square.

1. Because it is true.

Anyone who has been to any sort of conference in the Humanities over the past several years knows that it is easier to say the words “fuck” and “shit” in an academic setting than it is to say the words “true” and “truth.” But still, there it is: first on my list, and also in title of my own essay in our special issue, “The truth of the *printemps érable*.” The epigraph to the essay is a line from Alain Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds*, where he writes **“There are only bodies and languages, except that there are also truths.”**

To be sure, much of the best critical thinking about power and politics these days revolves around bodies and languages, as sites of affective intensity, creativity and resistance, registers of heterogeneity, hybridity and difference. It is less advisable, and more dangerous, to think and talk about truth in relation to politics, but this is precisely what Badiou—and I think the student strike as well—invites us to do.

“Truths,” Badiou writes, **“exist as exceptions to what there is.”** The basic character of a truth is that it is exceptional, not normative. The truth is not simply what *is*, the truth is what *happens*. **“In order for the process of truth to begin,”** he says, **“something must happen.”** Politics, when it is really politics, is not the technical application of a received truth that is given in advance, but a procedure whereby subjects *become* subjects by making a wager on the event, a wager whose outcome cannot be guaranteed but which confirms the basic truths on which the very possibility of politics is everywhere based: that people are equal, and that things could be different than they already are.

This is what I mean when at reason #6 for why I wear the red square I say **“because it marks the difference between politics and police,”** referring specifically to the distinction made by Jacques Rancière. For Rancière, police is the name for those modes of organizing our common affairs that are aimed at controlling the situation and shutting down its possibilities. In the case of the student strike, it just so happened that police also meant actual police wielding brutal violence against student activists, night after night, for several months, with impunity, in full view of the cameras. **“Politics,”** on the other hand, **“is the way of concerning oneself with**

human affairs based on the mad presupposition that anyone is as intelligent as anyone else and that at least one more thing can always be done other than what is being done.”

These, I believe, were the truths upon which the event of the student strike was predicated, and they were also the truths to which the student strikers were faithful. These truths, even more than the breathtaking heterogeneity of bodies and languages, are what made it feel like something was really happening.

And this is why #7 on my list of reasons for wearing the red square was **“Because this is not a matter of opinion.”** Everywhere I went during those months, reasonable but nervous people would ask me: “What is your opinion of the student strike?” to which I could only answer “I have none.” Looking back, it seems to me that the question was a bit like asking a New Yorker: “What is your opinion of Hurricane Sandy?” For while one could probably muster a half-informed opinion on whether tuition fees were too low or too high, or on whether it should be called a strike or a boycott, or on whether the strikers represented the “real” students who just wanted to get on with their classes, one could certainly not have “an opinion” on the strike *as an event*. In relation to what was happening at the entrances to the colleges and in the streets of Montreal, a forcing of the claims that all people are equal and that things can be other than they already are, there could be only one response: *it’s true*. In relation to such truths one cannot have “an opinion”; one can only be decided. Hence reason #12 for why I wore the red square: because it was impossible not to.

2. Because it is red, and no other colour.

By this I meant that I wore the red square to indicate support for the substance of the strike’s *idea*, and also secondarily to express admiration for the student movement’s fidelity to that idea.

The student strike had one demand: cancel the 75% tuition increase that had been announced by the Liberal government in 2010. Unlike the Occupy movement, which had refused, or perhaps more precisely been unable, to issue a single, divisive demand and which instead opted to mobilize its supporters around an inclusive slogan – “we are the 99%.” – the striking Quebec students made clear from the outset that if you were with them, that meant there was something you were for, and something you were against.

This had several implications. It made many people very uncomfortable, and prompted a mad flurry of alternative square-making and square-wearing by people who felt the demand made upon them by the red square was too categorical – people who were concerned that there were gradations of opinion, *nuances* if you prefer, that could not be represented or “included” by the red square *as a category* if that category was defined by uncompromising opposition to the tuition increases. And also what about those tactics? A strike? Pickets? Disrupting infrastructure? What if I am in favour of a tuition freeze but opposed to those means for achieving it?

Clearly, more colours were needed.

And so we had blue squares worn by people who were opposed to the tuition increases but also opposed to the strike (and later by members of the Parti Quebecois who just thought wearing a square was cool). Yellow squares for people who thought it would be good to phase-in the increases over a longer period of time. Black squares for those who didn't really care about tuition fees but were opposed to police violence against the strikers and their supporters. Orange squares for those who were prepared to accept a tuition fee increase but just not such a big one. White squares for those who supported the students, and their right to express themselves, but thought perhaps some sort of tuition increase might be necessary but please just stop the confrontation and violence and everybody sit down and talk this through before somebody really gets hurt. And finally, green squares for those who fully supported the proposed tuition fee increases and opposed the strike.

The categorical nature of the red square's demand also accounts for the reluctance of many people in my situation to come out fully in support of the student strike (I will not rehearse what I said at the outset about the particulars of "my" situation – other than to say it was not the situation of my brave colleagues in the CEGEPs and francophone universities who courageously supported the strike from the outset). For, whatever their sentimental attachment to the students' activism, many in my situation could not see their way clear to opposing a tuition increase that, for one reason or another, they had come to believe was not only justified but also necessary. I will talk about such calculations again in a moment but, at this point, I will say only that there was no alternatively-coloured square for these people – the squares they wore were perfectly transparent.

And still, in the midst of this rainbow, which desperately tried to span the uncomfortable reality that all truly political moments are moments of divisive commitment, the red square *stayed red*. The colour held fast to its own idea, the idea that made it red.

What was its idea? The idea of the red square was partially contained in the singularity of its demand.

In the first place, that it was *a demand* implied the possibility that it could be *met*, that they could *win*, that something exceptional *could happen*. Thus was the demand the carrier of the idea that politics is possible, that there can be something other than what there already is.

Secondly, the substance of the demand embodied a much bigger idea: an idea about free access to higher education not just as an innocuous "public good" necessary for a productive economy but, rather, as a non-negotiable condition and materialization of the truth of equality. This is why, although it marked a categorical division, the red square was nevertheless also capacious, able to draw to itself all those magnificently heterogeneous bodies and languages that comprised the strike as a movement. The idea of equality includes everyone, even if political commitment to this idea divides some from others.

In sum, the demand of the student strikers for a reversal of the government's proposed tuition increase carried the idea that something could happen and that equality is true. This is what made the red square red.

In his own contribution to the slew of little red books that have come out recently to try to reclaim communism as a political ground, Badiou defines communists – you know, “Reds”—as people who *have an idea*, and hold to it even in the midst of knowledge regimes that merely repeat the impossibility of any difference. Such people, he says, need courage:

“Not only courage when we face the police—though we will certainly find that—but the courage to defend and practice our ideas and principles, to say what we think, what we want, and what we are doing. To put it in a nutshell: we have to be bold enough to have an idea. A great idea. We have to convince ourselves that there is nothing ridiculous or criminal about having a great idea.”

Now here is Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, spokesperson for CLASSE, the most militant of the striking student unions, recently convicted of contempt of court for encouraging students to act on their right to free assembly in the face of Bill 78 (he faces a possible year in jail and \$50,000 fine), in a speech last April:

“We must stop being afraid of words...The struggle against rising tuition fees, the struggle of the Occupy movement around the world, must be referred to by its name. This is a class struggle, between a possessing minority and a majority that owns nothing, a minority that sees life as nothing but a business opportunity, a tree as nothing but raw material and a child as nothing but a future employee.”

We must stop being afraid of words. We must name things for what they are. What a great idea. Thus it was decided that I would wear the red square, *because it was red and no other colour* and because, as indicated in reason #4 on my list, **“it is a badge of courage (theirs, not mine).”**

3. Because it was red before the Special Law.

The Special Law was the facetious name given to Bill 78, which became law on May 18, 2012. The official title of the Bill was **“An Act to enable students to receive instruction from the postsecondary institutions they attend,”** in reference to provisions which legislated a delay in the start date of the fall 2012 semester at institutions that had been disrupted by the strike to enable completion of the disrupted winter term in September. But the law was more than just a bit of rescheduling. I’ll just read here from Cayley Sorochan’s straightforward accounting of the law’s provisions:

“In addition, the law bans any interruption of classes and any assembly of people within fifty meters of an educational institution. The law criminalizes any demonstration of fifty or more people that does not provide its itinerary to police eight hours in advance and institutes steep penalties for any individual (\$1000–5000 per offence), student leader (\$7,000–35,000), or organization (\$25,000–125,000) that breaks its provisions. Institutions are also empowered to cease the collection and payment of student fees to any student federation or association found to be in violation of the law, effectively incapacitating students’ ability to represent their interests. Most problematically, the law declares that these penalties apply not only to those who break the law, but to student representatives or organizations that do not adequately prevent their members from breaking it.”

So, as Sorochan goes on to say, Law 78 “effectively criminalized the strike.” On May 18, the night the law was passed, tens of thousands of students staged a spontaneous march in protest in Montreal. It was immediately declared illegal by police, who fired tear gas and rubber bullets into the peaceful crowd. On May 22, several hundred thousand people in Montreal, not just students, marched in an illegal demonstration to protest the law, in what has been called the largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history. On the nights that followed, Montrealers in the tens of thousands would spontaneously assemble to march in the streets of their own neighbourhoods, banging pots and pans in what came to be known as the *manifs casseroles*, openly defying the special law and inspiring solidarity “pots and pans” protests across the country and around the world. These took on the character of neighbourhood carnivals, drawing families, shop owners, and neighbours into the streets to make what Jonathan Sterne and Natalie Zemon Davis have called “rough music.” These went on nightly for two weeks and became, for many, the signature of the movement as whole. It was around this time that the call went around for Montreal academics to reflect on their experiences of these events.

What to make of this? First the obvious: the *manifs casseroles* were a tremendous, exuberant, joyful, exciting, surprising confirmation of the existence of something like the democratic public sphere, a public sphere in which people do not just talk (or link, or like, or tweet) but also act, a public sphere which has not been completely obliterated by privatization and depoliticization, in which we can still expect everyday people to gather together across their myriad differences in a great collective refusal to tolerate abuses of authority of the sort represented by the audacity of the Special Law. To walk in the *manifs casseroles* with your neighbours and their children was to feel the accumulated weight of decades of demoralization and cynicism lift off your shoulders, carried skyward by the great and righteous clamour of a spoon struck wildly against a common kitchen pot.

But to this it must be added: as obnoxious as the Special Law was, it was also a moment of tremendous relief for many people in my situation—and here I would extend “my situation” to include various middle-class professionals outside the university who were otherwise made uncomfortable by the substance of the students demand and the idea it stood for – people who could not otherwise see their way clear to come out in support of the strike itself, and who perhaps felt somewhat conflicted about this.

To use some more Badiouean language, the passage of the Special Law and the ensuing popular demonstrations against it provided the opportunity for many people in my situation to incorporate without really being incorporated. For while many academics might have reservations about the implications of a tuition freeze, and while many good middle-class progressives might be queasy about strikes and disruptions, and while both (in their secret moments) might fear the prospects of radical equality, for self-respecting liberals, standing-up against the assault on freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association represented by Bill 78 was a no-brainer. We might not all be communists, but we are all democrats. And the fact that the affective aspect of the *manifs casseroles* was more communitarian than militant also made them a more attractive, and less risky, place to park one’s political investments. With the Special Law, it became possible to say: “I am with the students. I do not support their goal, and I do not support their tactics. But I do support their right to fight for what they believe in and I think the law is an affront to democracy.”

This, of course, is the formula for liberalism. And that is fine. It would be the height of cynicism and moralism to gainsay the political significance of the *manifs casseroles* – both as events in themselves and in relation to the outcome of the student movement – or to question the commitment made by those who took part in them, simply because they did not necessarily express a fidelity to the substantive idea of the student strike itself. This is life after all, and it is carried out by real people doing the best they can under difficult circumstances. It is not some parlour game in which we can insist that, in order to play, everyone must ante-up by signing-up for the whole package.

I thought the Special Law was disgusting and I am very glad that my colleagues and neighbours came out in beautiful force to oppose it. However, the call for reflection on the events of the spring came just as the *manifs casseroles* were at their height, and inspiring passionate encomia by those participating in them. In that context, it's not that I felt it was important to say "I wore the red square before the Special Law." Rather, I thought it was necessary to point out that to reduce the student strike either to populist opposition to draconian legislation, or to the carnivalesque joy of being in the street at night with your neighbours and their kids, was to misrecognize and even to obscure the strike's more radical idea, and its more radical truth. It did not matter whether you wore the red square before the Special Law or not. What mattered—at least to me, in my situation—was that the *red square* was red *before* the Special Law.

4. Because it is incalculable.

This actually gathers several of the others.

Almost immediately upon its advent, the strike, and the question of whether one could or should support it or not, was assimilated into the regime of calculation that typically serves to neutralize the potential of genuinely political moments.

These calculations took many forms:

- Post-secondary education in Quebec is terribly underfunded, a tuition fee increase is necessary to maintain the quality of postsecondary education in Quebec. Where else will the money come from?
- Tuition, even financed by personal debt, is an investment that will pay off many-fold in a student's future and therefore the tuition increase is not a net loss for those who pay it but rather a prelude to greater gains.
- The impact of the increase is not so great because it will be phased-in over five-years.
- The amount of the increase is not so great compared to the many other frivolous things on which students spend their money.
- If students don't pay high tuition they will not sufficiently value their education and will not take it seriously.
- Even after the increase, Quebec tuition will be low compared to other provinces, so what are they complaining about?
- Tuition increases will be more than made up for by increased access to student aid, especially loans. Tuition increases will make postsecondary education *more* accessible, not *less* accessible

- The students on strike, and certainly the leadership of the associations, are a minority and they do not represent the majority of Quebec students
- The rights of some students to strike must be balanced against, and certainly must not trump, the rights on non-striking students to go to class
- This is a democracy, but strong disciplinary action against the strike will teach the students a lesson about personal responsibility for their actions
- The economic impact of the strike and related disruptions on commerce and tourism downtown has been terrible
- I am in favour of low tuition, but I am put off by the students' tactics.

Those who instinctively pull out their moral and financial calculators in response to any suggestion that things could be different had no trouble generating lists of reasons why the student strike was untenable and, more importantly, reasons that might justify withholding their support. Of course, the striking associations responded with calculations of their own, demonstrating the crushing levels of student debt in high-tuition jurisdictions, the social pathologies associated with financing post-secondary education on private debt and private largesse, and the social benefits of accessible post-secondary education understood as a collective responsibility.

There was, of course, a little bit right, and a little bit wrong, in all these calculations. The world is, after all, a complicated place. My point is that, for a person in my situation, such calculations were irrelevant to the question of whether one would wear the red square or not. If the truth of the red square was, as I have suggested, simply that the existing way of doing things is not necessary and that people are equal, then the question of whether to be incorporated was not a matter of objective calculation but rather a subjective matter of simply being decided. If being decided, becoming a subject, getting behind an idea, becoming political, is made conditional on all the calculations lining up in advance then, in a world that is far too complicated and contingent for that, there will never be a place for politics, because political commitment that is *actually political*, and not merely technical or managerial, will always be too risky.

Incalculability is the condition of possibility of politics. Things are everywhere the same, even though they could be otherwise; people are equal, yet everywhere they suffer inequality. *It doesn't add up*. That is why we commit ourselves to politics. If it all added up there would be no need for politics – we could simply apply the program. This is why I wear the red square: *because it is incalculable*.

And I think this is also why so many other people “in my situation” did *not* wear the red square. Because to wear it, to really wear it, one had to be prepared to tolerate the uncertainty entailed in that commitment. As I mentioned before, most people in my situation were quite prepared to accept the argument that the universities in which they work are underfunded and that tuition increases are a defensible, and even necessary means of addressing that problem. But even most of those who did not accept that argument as given were not prepared to commit themselves to a tuition freeze (never mind the elimination of tuition all together) or to the political project for which that demand stood. For what might the outcome of such a measure or such a project be? How it would work? And how could we be sure that it wouldn't make things worse? *Things for us*.

In this, they were not wrong. For it would be delusional to somehow believe that the strike could succeed, but that thereafter everything would remain just the same as it was before. If this were to transpire, then it would mean that the strike actually had not succeeded. If the strike—whose truth is that people are equal and that something can be done other than what already is being done, and whose demand materialized an idea about what education is for and how it ought to be oriented and organized—actually succeeded there is no reason to believe that life at the university, the life of people in my situation, would simply proceed as before. As reason #14 indicates, the reason one wears the red square is because **“there will be consequences”** – and this was also the reason why many did *not* wear the red square.

The outcome of political action is always uncertain. As reason #15 says, one wears the red square **“because there is no guarantee where it will lead.”** It is the absence of a guarantee that means politics is present, and possible. A world in which the condition of taking action is that its outcome can be guaranteed in advance is a world evacuated of politics. It is the world of technics, or perhaps rather the conceit of technics (because even technics cannot guarantee its end). It is the world of Badiou’s “miserable priest,” who runs around telling everyone that unless you can be sure that what you do won’t make things worse it is better not to do anything than to do something.

To wear the red square is to bear the uncertainty of where it might lead, as a condition of the possibility of politics, a corollary of the idea that everyone is equal and that what there is, is not all there is. This is a demanding (#11) and uncomfortable (#9) position to be in. This is why most of us, most of the time, instead opt to, as Badiou puts it, **“just mind our own business and have a little fun.”** But for people in my situation or, for me anyway, that was not an option.

You can’t spend your life, and make your living, presenting an idea for the consideration of *others* only to pretend that idea does not exist the moment it presents itself to *you*. You can’t believe the university ought to be a place for equality and possibility only so long as you are certain that its being so will never affect you. You can’t complain that the game is never on and then, when it *is* finally on, decide “you know what, I think I’ll sit this one out,” because there is a possibility that you might lose. You wear the red square because, as reason #10 says, “you can’t have it both ways.”

On September 3, the Liberal government of Jean Charest was defeated by the Parti Quebecois.

On September 21, the PQ scrapped the proposed tuition fee increase and repealed Bill 78.

On September 22, the Coalition large de l’Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (CLASSE) led a demonstration at which spokesperson declared: **“The goal of this protest is to revive the debate about free tuition.”** The other two major student associations that participated in the strike, the Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ) and the Fédération étudiante collégiale du Québec (FECQ) were not present for the march.

On November 8, Quebec Premier Pauline Marois announced that a Summit on Higher Education will take place in February 2013. The summit will focus on the quality of higher education, accessibility, management and financing of universities and the contribution of universities and

research to the development of Quebec. Standing by her side as she made the announcement was 20 year old Léo Bureau-Blouin, the former President of FECQ, elected in the 2012 election as MNA for Laval des Rapides, who will co-chair the Summit.

All three student associations involved in the strike Student have endorsed the summit, though CLASSE has expressed reservations about the limited scope of its mandate.

I suppose this means there is one more reason to wear the red square, one which is not on my list: because this isn't over.