



ROBERT GREEN

The Conflict in Context

A Québec high school teacher's perspective on the movement for accessible education

I teach a secondary five level course called 'The Contemporary World' at a public English high school in Montreal. One of the messages I am constantly trying to pass on to my students is that in attempting to understand world events, we should always be wary of overly simplistic formulations. Events do not occur in a vacuum. The historical and political context in which an event occurs always matters.

In recent months, as the student strike in Québec has come to dominate the headlines, I have found myself repeating a very similar message in discussions with students, friends, neighbours and colleagues. The mainstream media has been very successful at framing this conflict in the narrowest of terms; as being strictly about students not wanting to pay a \$1,625 tuition increase. With such a simplistic framing of the issue it has been very easy for people to agree with commentators who characterize Québec students as irrational and entitled because they already pay the lowest tuition in Canada.

The problem with this analysis is that if indeed this movement is merely about irrational, entitled students, how does one explain the series of historic demonstrations of between two

and four-hundred-thousand people? How does one explain the fact that these demonstrations were filled not just with students, but with teachers such as myself, university and Cégep [college] professors, parents, senior citizens groups, union members, etc.? There's something missing from the simplistic picture the media is offering us.



In examining the student strike within its broader historical and political context, I hope to offer a more complete picture of the issue. In so doing I also hope to articulate why, as a public school teacher and as a citizen of Québec, I find it important to actively support the movement for accessible education.

The historical context

The history of education policy in Québec is really the tale of two competing visions: one which determines education policy based on the needs of capital and elite interests; the other seeing education as a public good that is fundamental to an equitable and democratic society.

Until quite recently Québec's education system was shaped entirely by the former of these two visions. From the time of the British conquest, Québec's merchant class saw no need for the francophone majority to be educated since nearly all francophone Québécois were destined for a life of either agriculture or low-paid industrial labour. As a result, education was seen as a private affair with no role for the state. The majority might receive some limited schooling from the Catholic Church, but otherwise education was the exclusive domain of those that could afford the high cost of private schools. In 1960 only 13% of francophones completed grade 11 (Pigeon, n.d.). The closest thing to post-secondary education most Québécois could hope to receive was some form of vocational training such as learning a trade. The study of philosophy, history, literature and other such classical academic pursuits was completely out of reach for all but a tiny elite that could afford the exorbitant cost of university tuition.

It wasn't until Québec's Quiet Revolution that any of this would change. In their election platform of 1960 the Liberal Party of Jean Lesage articulated a different vision for education in Québec.

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Lesage's overarching goal was to transform Québec into a modern, secular and democratic state. Free public education at all levels from elementary to university was featured as the key element in the Liberal platform to achieve this end.



Once elected, Lesage formed the Parent Commission whose recommendations would serve as the basis for Québec's modern public education system. While the commission stopped short of recommending free university tuition (it did recommend free ac-

cess up to the college level), its report nonetheless put great emphasis on the fact that the democratization of education could not occur unless education from primary to university was completely accessible to all regardless of sex, age, region of residence or socio-economic status (Chenard & Pageau, 1999, 179).

The reason all of this is important to understanding the current movement is that many Québec students today have parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who not only remember the Parent Commission and the many positive transformations it brought, but more importantly remember what Québec was like before the Quiet Revolution. They remember the days when being a working class francophone meant that one should not even aspire to bettering one's lot in life through higher education.

The precise amount of the tuition increase is therefore irrelevant. It could be \$1,625 or \$1,000. All that matters is that it is seen as a significant enough amount to symbolize a roll-back of the social victories of the Quiet Revolution; a reversal of the policies of accessibility advocated by the Parent Commission. Clearly, it is not \$1,625 that has mobilized the hundreds of thousands of people in the streets but rather the political direction it symbolizes.

The political context

The current mobilization also needs to be understood within the context of the ongoing bipartisan effort to restructure Québec society along neoliberal lines. This began with the deep cuts to social spending initiated by the Parti Québécois (PQ) in the late 90's. By the early 2000's government finances had significantly improved, but rather than restoring the resources that had been cut from social spending, both the PQ and Charest's Liberals (elected in 2003) dedicated any fiscal breathing room they had towards tax cuts. As Eric Martin and Simon Tremblay-Pépin of *l'Institut de recherche et d'informations socio-économiques* (IRIS) point out in their excellent document "Do we really need to raise tuition fees? Eight misleading arguments for the hikes" since 2000 both the PQ and the Liberals have each overseen two rounds of income tax cuts that individually would have provided government with enough reve-

nue to eliminate tuition altogether (2011, p17). The Liberals have also introduced significant tax cuts for corporations and the banks.

To address the crisis in public finances caused by the economic downturn of 2008 (and all of the tax-cutting) the Charest government has initiated what IRIS has dubbed “*la révolution tarifaire*” [the user-fee revolution]. Rather than roll back the cuts to income



taxes that have primarily benefited the wealthy, Charest has opted to raise the money his government needs through a series of user fee increases (in hydro electricity, health care, higher education and day care) that disproportionately hurt the poor. IRIS

estimates as a percentage of annual income these fee hikes will represent an increase of over 17% for low income households but only around 2% for the top fifth of households (Hurteau, Hébert & Fortier, 2010, p 3).

All of this is extremely important to the debate over tuition hikes as the government's position is premised on the claim that it can't afford to make a public reinvestment in post-secondary education. What IRIS's research clearly shows is that this is a false premise. It is not the ability to finance education that is lacking but rather the political will to do so. Were government to roll back even some of the tax cuts that have benefited the wealthy, the banks and the corporations, there would be more than enough for reinvesting in social spending. It is the height of hypocrisy for Charest to give away billions in tax cuts and then turn around and ask the students to pay for education financing that he claims his government can't afford.

Charest's is not the only government around the world attempting to saddle working people with the bill for economic stimulus, bank bail-outs and reduced tax revenues. Indeed such moves are part of a global austerity agenda faced by working people the world over. In June the UK's *Guardian* newspaper linked the Québec student movement to this global austerity agenda referring to it as "rapidly growing into one of the most powerful and inventive anti-austerity campaigns anywhere in the world." (Hallward, 2012)

To understand the tuition hikes within the context of a global austerity agenda is to identify the student movement not just with the defense of accessible education but indeed with the defense of the very notion of universally accessible social programs and the progressive taxation schemes that make them possible.

Neoliberal education reform

It is also important to consider the tuition hikes within the context of recent trends in Québec's education policy. Since the mid 90's both PQ and Liberal governments have moved Québec away from the democratic vision articulated by the Parent Commission. In

the longstanding debate over whether Québec's education system should be driven by the needs of markets or by the needs of the public, the pendulum has swung back towards markets.

The market-oriented neoliberal restructuring of Québec's education system has affected every level of education in Québec.

There are three central dimensions to this restructuring.

Competency-based evaluation

The first is pedagogical reform involving competency based evaluation. Through international organizations such as the OECD, multinational corporations have promoted such reforms as necessary to prepare citizens for employment in a globalized world. Apparently today's corporate leaders find 'knowledge' (the traditional basis of evaluation) too abstract, subjective and rooted in the local. 'Competency-based evaluation' looks instead at what people can do and is thus viewed as more concrete, objective and standardized. In other words, corporate leaders want education systems around the world that will allow them to more accurately and easily compare and rank prospective employees.

Not surprisingly, such competency-based pedagogical reform was first initiated in Québec at the Cégep level where there are a large number of vocational programs aimed at preparing students for the job market.

It was then gradually imposed on the entire primary and secondary public system. Since its implementation teachers have complained that it has led to a decline in the basic academic skills of their students and parents have complained about report cards they can scarcely understand. Neither of these key stakeholder groups (parents and teachers) asked for this reform in the first place. Nor did their early opposition to it seem to matter. Government charged ahead with implementation before even insuring that suitable textbooks and teaching materials were ready. Clearly, it was not the wants and needs of the public that was driving this particular reform.

Competency-based evaluation has since been introduced at the university level for various professional training programs.

School as widget factory

A second central dimension of the neoliberal restructuring of Québec's education system has been government's increased reliance on 'performance indicators' as a tool for managing Québec's schools, colleges, universities and even hospitals. The origins of this idea stem from the scientific management theories of Frederick Taylor and the behaviourist psychology of John Watson and BF Skinner, both in vogue throughout the early part of the 20th century. By taking various measures of the performance of individuals, groups or institutions, it was believed that incentives could then be put in place in order to increase productivity. An owner of a widget factory could measure the number of widgets per hour his employees produced and then offer them an incentive if they produced more.

The first attempt to manage Québec's public institutions like a widget factory came with the PQ's appointment of Francois Legault (yes, now of the CAQ) as Minister of Education. Having served as CEO of Air Transat Legault was touted as a star recruit that would bring his business-savvy to government. He did just that by tying reinvestment in Québec's universities to a number of performance related goals set by government. These included increasing graduation rates, attracting more private sponsors for research and making cuts to "non-performing" programs. Associations representing both students and faculty pointed out the backward logic of such policies in that the barriers to achieving many of the desired goals were related to the lack of funding and could not be resolved merely with motivational incentives.

Management by performance indicator was introduced to elementary and secondary schools by the Charest government's Bill 88. This bill requires every public school in Québec to sign what is being called a "Management and Educational Success Agreement". These agreements identify numerous objectives for the school with specific measurable targets such as "to increase graduation rates from 83% to 86%" or "the success rate for mathematics 404 will increase from 42% to 45%". Some of these performance indicators are determined by the school board while others are determined by the schools.

While thus far such performance indicators are not incentivized with promises or threats related to funding, the table is set for government to do just that. The fear of many teachers is that Québec is headed down the path of George Bush's 'No Child Left Behind' (NCLB) law that has reduced public education in the US to endless prep for the all-important standardized tests that determine both school funding and teacher pay. With a set of performance indicators already in place, all that is remaining to take Québec down the disastrous path of NCLB is to link these indicators to school funding.

The fundamental problem with this style of management and the reason it is attractive to government is that it shifts the responsibility for public institutions from governments to the institutions themselves. If public institutions are not meeting society's expectations it is not because they are under-funded by government, it is because they have failed to meet the objectives set by government. The accountability goes down, not up.

Creeping privatization

The final dimension of the neoliberal restructuring of Québec's education system is the shift toward private sources of funding. According to IRIS, since 1988 income from individuals and from private sector sources have each more than doubled as a share of total university funding. Meanwhile government contributions as a share of total funding have declined by over 20% (Martin & Tremblay-Pepin, 2011, p 8.).

Organizations representing both students and faculty members have raised serious concerns about the implications of such changes in funding. They fear that it is causing a shift in university priorities; a growing tendency to focus exclusively on programs and research that have potential for private sector sponsorship. This, they say, is happening at the expense of funding for basic research and programs with no potential for commercialization but great potential value in terms of human moral, aesthetic or intellectual development.

At the elementary and secondary level the education system is already partially privatized, largely due to the subsidies the

Québec government offers to private schools. Compared to other provinces, Québec has by far the highest percentage of students enrolled in private schools and the numbers are on the rise. From 2004 to 2010 the number of secondary students enrolled in private schools rose from 17 to 19% (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2010, p. 8). On the Island of Montreal it has been estimated to be as high as 31% (Aubin, 2011).

One consequence of the large number of private schools with specific entrance requirements (often involving entrance exams) is an over-representation of students with special needs in Québec's public schools. This adds an additional stress to an already under-funded public system. It is estimated that Québec would have to spend an additional \$700 million annually in order to catch up to the Canadian average in the financing of preschool, elementary and secondary education (Manifeste, 2009).

Considering the various dimensions of neoliberal education reform in Québec illustrates that the decision to increase tuition is not an isolated policy event. Rather it is part of a much larger bipartisan effort to restructure nearly every aspect of Québec's entire education system according to the needs of capital. Given the onslaught of neoliberal education reforms that Québec has endured since the late 90's, one might well wonder why an oppositional mass movement of this scale has not emerged sooner!

So, solidaire!

Why have Québécois been donning red squares and filling the streets in the hundreds of thousands to express our solidarity?

It's not merely because of a \$1,625 tuition increase.

We do this because we refuse to relinquish the vision of free high quality education for all that was at the heart of the Quiet Revolution. We do this because we reject a government that forces students to pay for the tax cuts of the rich. We do this because we oppose the imposition of regressive user fees to finance public services that should be accessible to all regardless of income. And we do this because we believe that education reforms should be fundamentally about the needs of human beings not markets.

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Personally, as a teacher in a school with an extremely diverse student population, I do this because I know it will not take much of an increase for tuition to become out of reach for many of my students. Outside of winning the lottery or some other equally rare



event, education is really the only means open to many of my students to improve their economic situation. This possibility of helping facilitate a brighter future for disadvantaged kids is, for me, one of the things that make teaching such a rewarding profession. Another is helping my students to develop the critical thinking skills needed to function as active citizens and change the world.

In this sense, public education has enormous transformative potential for both individuals and society. However, it is precisely this transformative vision of public education that is most threatened by policies that have the effect of discouraging students from low income families from continuing their education.

This is why I as a teacher in Québec's public system cannot remain neutral about the current debate over increasing tuition. To do so is to render all of my words of encouragement to my students hollow. To do so is to betray one of core values of public education: that advancement should be based on academic accomplishment, not things such as race, class or gender. If the notion of believing in the future of all of one's students is to be more than empty rhetoric, we as public educators need to stand with the students of Québec. After all, they are making enormous sacrifices to courageously defend the very future that we as educators have taught them to believe in!

ROBERT GREEN teaches Social Sciences, Philosophy and Ethics & Religious Culture at Westmount High School in Montreal Québec. He blogs at <http://montrealteachers4change.org>.

All photos courtesy of the author.

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