

PSYCHOHISTORY OF THE 2012 QUÉBEC STUDENT REVOLT

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Abstract

This paper examines the psychohistory and consequences of the massive student demonstrations, often featuring mass erotic displays, which erupted in Montréal, Québec, in 2012. These marches, to protest an increase in university fees proposed by the education ministry as an austerity measure, provoked a political crisis that brought down the democratically-elected government of the province. The crisis reflected the historical isolation of Québec, the socioeconomic structure which has emerged there as a substitute for organized religion, and the psychological dependency fostered by a utopian political system, which have all fed a strong sense of entitlement in many citizens, enabled by a benevolent mother-state. This cultural pattern encouraged students to make 'impossible' financial demands, while resenting the state as an insufficiently-indulgent parent who was hindering their wish-fulfillment fantasies. These unprecedented events, which carry serious implications for the future of welfare-state liberal democracy, can best be understood by examining the history, culture, and family dynamics of the distinctive society of Québec.

Keywords: Political demonstrations, university fees, Québec.

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Introduction

For seven months in 2012, a series of major student demonstrations and riots suddenly erupted in the streets of Montréal in order to protest a modest proposed increase in Québec university fees, although at about \$2200 per year they are by far the lowest in Canada or North America (Statistics Canada: Undergraduate tuition fees, 2015). These massive protests often involved 150,000 - 200,000 students marching through the streets of Montreal, sometimes nearly naked, and convulsed the province so as to bring down and triumphantly replace the government (Wikipedia: Quebec Student Protests, 2015). What caused this massive and violent emotional reaction, so disproportionate to the small sums involved? (And so incongruous in

Canada, the fifth most prosperous country in the world; Macias, 2015).

Outside of Québec these events are less well-known than the Paris riots of 1968, or the US civil-rights marches and anti-Vietnam war protests of the sixties, which also involved students, but demonstrating for the rights of others rather than themselves. They have historical importance since, remarkably, they succeeded in their aims and showed for the first time how a determined, self-interested clique (representing at most about 3% of the population) may override the other 97%, paralyze the political system, and forcibly divert the resources of society to their own unearned benefit. For the mob to bring down a democratically-elected government in this way is unparalleled in North America for nearly two centuries, and in Canada only the anti-conscription riots of 1918 have come close, although in that case the government prevailed. We must examine the historical and psychological forces that led to this sudden eruption of seemingly irrational protest on the part of young people who are mostly privileged rather than downtrodden.

These events can only be understood as the *combined* effect of history, politics, economics, psychology, sociology and religion. They make no sense if viewed from the perspective of a single discipline, e.g., exchange theory and classical economics would predict that the students of Québec, being wealthier, would be more satisfied than those of other provinces, not less. Nor can the 'pure joy of rioting' (Dalrymple, 2015) explain these prolonged demonstrations, which are still occurring intermittently three years later.

The roots of French Canada

The primal trauma for French Canadians remains the British military invasion of Québec in 1759 (Wikipedia: Canada, 2015) which suddenly turned their flourishing pioneer settlement, founded in 1608, into a colony ruled by Great Britain, the detested enemy that was carrying out ethnic cleansing in French Acadia to the east. French Canadians were abandoned by France to survive alone in the new world, and the half-hearted union of English-speaking colonies with Québec to form the federal nation of Canada in 1867, a classic bad marriage, did not relieve this sense of orphanhood. Although the Québec population, mostly French-speaking and Catholic, has grown from 60,000 at the time of the conquest to eight millions today, due to church dogma making fecundity and motherhood sacred, indeed almost obligatory (Bélanger, 2000), its unique situation in North America leaves it today as an ethnic enclave, more populous than Denmark or Finland, but hemmed in by three hundred million anglophones. Quebecers turned to nationalism to survive psychologically as francophones linked in one big family, *maîtres chez nous*. The symbols of this 'nation', venerated to the bounds of reason, include the French language, poutine, ice hockey, and the

singer Céline Dion. *Nous ne sommes pas comme les autres!*

The death of religion

The authoritarian hierarchy of the Catholic church which for centuries ruled strictly over this society was composed of traditional symbols of the family: 'sister' nuns, 'brother' monks, and 'father' priests, all united in the mother church under the ultimate maternal symbol, the sacred Virgin Mary. To be a Catholic was to find a secure place within this family when there was no other national sanctuary. Québec was conquered in the religion-dominated era of Louis XV, and for long was unaffected by the Enlightenment ideas of the French and American revolutions, so that Protestants and anglophones within living memory could still be described literally as agents of the devil. Jews were regarded similarly (Gladstone, 2011).

Massive, financially burdensome religious organizations abounded, and held society in an authoritarian embrace. There was much poverty, save among the wealthy elite, with little economic development, and true democracy was unknown for centuries, as shown by the rule of the dictator Maurice Duplessis as late as 1959. Contraception, abortion and divorce were illegal only a few decades ago, while women's suffrage came in 1940 (Kalbfleisch, 2012). Strict sexual repression was the norm, combined with extreme political conservatism.

However, starting around 1960 this system rapidly collapsed under the influence of consumerism, industrialization and education, and the overthrow of religious authority figures soon followed as their roles were transferred to the political leaders of the Quiet Revolution (Canadian Encyclopedia, 2015). Within a generation, the culture changed from ultra-traditional to ultra-'progressive' and highly permissive, as families of nearly seven children on average were replaced by one of the world's lowest birth rates, while cohabitation, illegitimacy, abortion and divorce flourished. Atheism, hedonism, and promiscuity have largely become the norms, while measures of social pathology are rising, such as crime, suicide and substance abuse (Langlois et al., 1992). Most laws are lax, and are barely enforced. The great empty monasteries, convents and churches have been converted to restaurants or colleges today, with the Catholic religion almost non-existent. As is common when strict parental control is suddenly lifted, the people swung to the opposite extreme of uncontrolled, libidinal behavior - a process that also occurred, in more catastrophic form, in the liberated former African colonies of France and Great Britain. As family breakdown is common in Québec today, and above the level of the other provinces, at least one third of children have neither a real father in the home to provide a role model (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015), nor even a surrogate

Christian one that they can internalize. This is a classic post-modern dilemma, taken to extremes.

Rise of the Québec mother-state

In Freudian terms, when the adult finally confronts his father, he wishes to destroy him and to possess the mother, yet also to imitate the father in replacing him. In the politics of Québec, this meant that massive new institutions of civil society, the benevolent government agencies, hospitals, and universities eagerly replaced the all-powerful Church, authoritarian yet benevolent and forgiving. This transformation was similar to what was then occurring in France, and in some ways it has succeeded, so that Québec today qualifies as a tolerant and humane society; but without the emotional force of religion and its taboos, there is little profound motive for obedience to the restrictive rules of civil society. Consequently corruption on a heroic scale is ubiquitous in both business and politics, as is being shown today in the numerous billion-dollar scandals revealed by the Charbonneau Commission (CBC, 2015).

Another fundamental problem is that while the Church preaches unconditional love, in fact its charity is limited and carefully measured out to the faithful, with some obligations implied on the recipient. But when society relies upon on a civil society with utopian aims, run by a privileged elite whose role is to hand out as much of other people's money as possible, an infantilizing culture of mass dependency is created that is open-ended and crushingly expensive.

Despite having some of the highest tax rates in the world, so that many middle-class citizens pay over half their income in taxes (Kozhaya, 2004), Québec's public debt of over \$68,000 per taxpayer is the worst in Canada, drawing comparisons with Greece and Portugal (MEI, 2015). Individual rights and entitlements are almost unlimited, and the corresponding obligations on the all-providing state know no bounds. Thus the citizen of Québec is born in a government-run hospital, to parents who receive paid leave, and will then attend daycare, primary school, high school, junior college, and university, all provided largely by the government. He very often works for the government, directly or indirectly. He also receives lifelong medicare, and enjoys unemployment and disability protection. His tattoos can be removed for free. He is compensated if he is injured in an accident or during a crime, even one that he is committing, and when he retires he will receive a state pension. When he dies his family will receive funeral expenses. Business corporations receive billions in subsidies, often specious and nepotistic, and the government runs hundreds of money-losing state corporations. Every member of the family is served double helpings of dessert under this system.

Child-citizens?

The traditional church, like the state, had the roles of both a nurturant mother and a more restrictive father. But as the state took over in Québec, with seemingly unlimited resources to bestow, the former role came to predominate, as almost nothing could now be forbidden for fear of alienating voters or special interest groups. This mother-state resembles an indulgent mom rather than a strict nanny, and people speak scornfully of anyone (except themselves) who is receiving this largesse as "sucking on the government teat". The more that is given the more is demanded, and the less autonomy is shown, leading in turn to still greater demands by the child-citizens. Tough love is nowhere to be seen. To 'enable' this psychological dependency, and to generate revenue, the almighty state through its lavish advertising campaigns endlessly urges the public to gamble away even *more* money in its ubiquitous casinos, online gaming sites, and corner-store lottery outlets, and to consume *more* alcohol through its aggressive promotions in state liquor stores (Kucharsky, 2006).

The psychological result is a pervasive state of dependency in the population and a general sense of entitlement: what will the all-powerful state do for me, in its role as surrogate parent? Where is my free lunch (and breakfast, and supper)? This is a system literally of 'bread and circuses', as seen in the government-sponsored Cirque du Soleil and the many lavish street festivals that are provided by cities to entertain the masses even as potholes go unattended and bridges collapse (Peritz, 2011).

This situation is parallel to Québec's relationship with the federal government based in Ottawa, which functions as a surrogate grandfather figure in that it reproaches Québec for its profligate spending, but continues to enable this behavior by pouring large sums of money into the province: some \$8 billion annually that is taken from the wealthier provinces (Wikipedia: Equalization payments, 2015). This aid, much more than other regions of Canada receive, is met with resentment on the part of Quebecers instead of gratitude. As parents know, no good deed goes unpunished, and there is an active separatist movement which commands about 40% support currently.

The fees crisis of 2012

Québec has of course shared in the global economic woes of the great recession, and its public debt has become ever more uncontrollable. Thus in 2012, among other austerity measures aimed at controlling the debt crisis, the Liberal government of Jean Charest was forced to announce that it would raise university fees modestly. In this statist system all the fees are set by the provincial government (private universities are outlawed) and at about \$2200 per year for an undergraduate in a non-professional program are remarkably

low - often a tenth or a twentieth of the fees at comparable US universities, and less than a third of the fees in other Canadian provinces (Bishop's University, 2015). By contrast, a student from Alberta, coming from 'outside the family', must pay \$7800 in order to study in Québec, even though his wealthy province props up Québec with billions of dollars.

Fees have been frozen for twenty years, steadily shrinking in real terms with inflation, and now cover only a tenth of the actual tuition cost per student. In addition, both the government and individual universities provide an extensive program of scholarships, loans and bursaries to benefit those students who come from poorer backgrounds.

One might expect that a proposed increase of about \$1600, introduced gradually over a six-year time period, would be accepted as a reasonable contribution to the financial health of the province (Serebrin, 2011). A hike of \$325 in the first year is the price of a cell phone; or consider the student automobiles which proliferate on campus so as to cause major parking problems. But this proposal was rejected by many francophone students, perhaps a third of the total. Although students in professional programs, graduate studies, or the anglophone universities showed no interest in protests, large crowds of francophones from general education and liberal arts programs immediately started spontaneously to assemble and to march in the streets, mostly in Montréal. Many classes were subjected to a comprehensive boycott, intended to be universal across the province. Disruptive sit-ins took place in government offices, causing some injuries and damage (CTV News, 2012).

The long "strike"

This intransigence was maintained over the next seven months as large crowds, sometimes extending over 50 blocks, showed their outrage over the proposed fee increase. Although most marches were peaceful, even as the numbers swelled towards 200,000, some ugly incidents occurred, particularly when other students who did not wish to participate were forcibly prevented from entering their classrooms to attend their courses. The police on occasion responded violently to incidents of vandalism, and one student suffered a concussion and lost an eye. Others were injured, and at least 2,500 students were arrested, often paying fines of \$500 each (Wikipedia: Quebec Student Protests, 2015).

The protesters misrepresented their actions as a "strike", but in fact it was a boycott. Rather than withdrawing paid labor to obtain higher pay, they were essentially saying that the considerable financial *gift* bestowed in them by society, equivalent to about \$30,000 annually per student (Corbeil, 2012) was not large enough and they wanted more, even as the rest of society was tightening its belt. Responding to a gift by angrily demanding a larger one is

a reaction seldom found outside of the nursery.

The government soon showed that it was unwilling to confront the marchers, or even to ignore them. Rather than standing its ground as a legitimate authority, it first attempted to appease them by offering to spread out the fee hike and to increase the bursary program. The total amount would now come to \$1,778 in 2018-2019, after seven annual increases of \$254. Education minister Line Beauchamp told reporters that after including the income-tax credit on tuition fees, the proposed increase would be \$177 a year, or 50 cents a day! (Dougherty, 2012).

This reasonable offer was contemptuously rejected, and some student leaders demanded *zero* fees as their goal (as they still do). Soon the minister of education resigned in despair from her post and left politics, observing that the students neither wished to resolve the dispute nor to respect democracy. Since this minister happened to be female, and as the mother is expected to bestow gifts unstintingly on the children even as the father counts the costs, this unconscious gender association perhaps aggravated the underlying psychic tension already present in the negotiations. Panicking, the political leaders hastily brought in unworkable emergency laws intended to control street demonstrations, such as forbidding the wearing of masks (Wikipedia: Bill 78, 2015). Clearly they were no longer in control. The winter semester was suspended at over twenty campuses (Bell, 2012).

The government was thus in the position of parents whose unemployed son, living in the basement on a good allowance, replies to requests that he should contribute a little to the family budget by angrily demanding a larger allowance. Although its case in terms of economics, political legitimacy, and ethics was self-evident, the state could deny nothing to its offspring, psychologically mired as it was in enabling a mutual-dependency relationship with them. This craving of the students for more money in essence represents an unfulfillable quest for boundless love.

A children's crusade?

The most startling feature of the protests was that the marchers on some days were almost naked, both males and females wearing just underwear - or even less, such as a mere penis-sheath (Figure 1), with the women's breasts often bare save for the nipples (see Figures 2, 3 and 4). Eros ruled, and the marchers seemed to revel in flaunting their sexuality and child-like status, explicitly repudiating patriarchy (Figure 5). The marchers all wore a small red oblong of felt as their key symbol, the *carré rouge*, resembling a sacred heart or a bloodied tampon, surely in unconscious ritual tribute to the life-giving mother figure of the state, or Marianne in Gallic terms (Figure 6). The symbol also evokes 'flying the red flag', the local euphemism for menstruation. The color red here was not a communist

symbol: there was no sign of the hammer and sickle, nor of Marxist ideology, and many of the marchers were clearly petit-bourgeois. (Their figurehead leader was the multi-millionaire politician Pauline Marois, who drove a Ferrari). Other student leaders were the privileged products of private schools.

Despite occasional violence and vandalism, an atmosphere of saturnalia prevailed overall, with gaiety and colorful costumes. The marchers also carried saucepans, hammering on them with spoons to create an overwhelming din. Marois, then the leader of the official opposition in the Québec parliament, gleefully marched with the students, likewise beating on a pot like a hungry child who pounds her spoon impatiently on the dinner-table (Barron, 2015).

These events often evoke aspects of the French Revolution, and observing these joyous scenes might once have evoked Wordsworth's happy reaction (1805) to its early stages: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very Heaven." Today, however, we might echo Albin Lentz, the college president in Philip Roth's novel *Indignation*, who dismisses the students taking part in a panty-raid riot as "A mob of disobedient children. Kiddies in diapers unconstrained". "An army of hoodlums," Lentz calls the rioting students, "imagining, apparently, that they were emancipating themselves." (Roth, 2008).

The implications of these events are troubling, as the rioters were not just engaged in erotic adolescent fun, but sincerely believed that they were promoting a worthy social cause to improve society. Some marchers carried signs saying "Democracy", although their actions in fact destroyed the democratic process to serve their own ends. *It's all about me!* Other signs read "Free Education", meaning that other people, some of them not well off, must pay for the entire education of mostly middle class students. Education that is 93% free (the current figure) is not enough, it must be 100% "free" (Corbeil, 2012).

"Victory"

After seven months in which the demonstrations were growing rather than declining, to the dismay of the public, the Liberal government admitted defeat and stepped down prematurely, triggering a general election. Even though the public was split over the protest movement, the failure of a parent to control a misbehaving child often annoys the onlookers more than does the child itself, and so the formerly popular Premier Jean Charest was crushingly defeated at the polls, losing power and even his own seat in the legislature (National Post, 2012). Marois thereby rose overnight from leading the marchers in the streets to become the first female Premier of Québec. But only two years later she was in turn humiliatingly ejected from power in

another general election, also losing her own seat (Coorsh, 2014). The two major student protest leaders were likewise elected to the legislature in 2012, but then defeated in 2014, again showing the turbulent emotions aroused in the electorate by the protests.

The Liberal Party has thus returned to power, but, emotionally scarred, it now does not dare even to *discuss* university fees, which with inflation continue to decrease. It has been thoroughly intimidated and is in effect forbidden from governing. Student power has triumphed.

Ironically, if we ignore the budget deficit, then in terms of simple logic, the students might appear to have a case, as zero tuition fees for universities are found in Scandinavia, Germany and Scotland, for example. But such a context involves a sound economy and a mature acceptance of student responsibilities that is quite different from the cultural and historical pattern of Québec. Today, US Senator Bernie Sanders has introduced a utopian bill that would provide free tuition at all 4-year colleges in the United States (Thomason, 2015), although there is no chance of it passing. The likely costs over ten years would total \$470 billion.

It is also undeniable that ongoing looting of the public purse by various other privileged sectors of society is comparably egregious, yet unpunished. And as some student leaders remarked, all the \$400 million cost of the fee increases could have been met if Canada had bought just one less F-35 fighter jet in its current defense procurement, since these ultimately may cost approximately two billion dollars apiece to buy and maintain (Pugliese, 2014).

This argument uses the metaphor of relying upon a rich grandfather, although in fact defense is not a provincial responsibility. However, the craving to acquire such insane weapons of death and destruction, driven ultimately as it is by Thanatos, cannot compete in intensity with the unrestrained urgings of Eros; no one marches for more jet fighters. And the joyous mob could even be seen as celebrating a victory over feelings of death, according to the theory of terror management (Parry, 2015).

The future for Québec

We see that an isolated group whose identity, beyond language, was largely based on the parental symbols of organized religion, turned massively to the state as their nurturing and forgiving mother figure when the church declined and family ties fragmented. Any child's mother is the most important figure in their early life, but today the all-bestowing welfare state will rapidly supplant her. And since this mother state, while utopian in theory, is a financial disaster in practice, the offspring will demand more money at the very point where its financial resources are becoming less. The aboriginal reservations within the province illustrate the results of total

dependency on the state, with extreme levels today of substance abuse, smoking, violence, child abuse, suicide, homicide, destitution (Curtis & Ayala, 2014), and drastically shortened life expectancy (Statistics Canada: Life expectancy, 2015), although in precolonial times these tribes were well able to survive the rigors of living in tents at temperatures of thirty or forty below zero.

All universities in the province are now in debt, and trying to cope with large deficits by using underpaid part-time instructors to teach enormous classes, cancelling smaller programs, and admitting unqualified entrants. The quality of education is suffering and gloom prevails in academe (Samoisette & Zizian, 2013). As additional government funding is unlikely when the province is financially squeezed, this creates a lose-lose situation for all concerned, except perhaps the students in a narrow financial sense, although the education of many was disrupted by their boycott of seven months of classes.

These universities are now in a desperate situation, awash with red ink while paying tenured professors salaries of up to \$150,000 and rectors up to \$400,000 per annum. They must admit more and more students, setting up a vicious cycle, so that about half the population now enters higher education programs (Statistics Canada: Postsecondary participation rates, 2008). These are of dubious value, and are taken for reasons that outside of the professional and scientific courses are often unclear, beyond providing three or four enjoyable years of beer, sex, drugs, and sport. These programs are ruled over, and mainly paid for, by the aptly titled Québec Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sport. About a third of entering students soon become bored, and drop out of their studies within a year or so (Aubin, 2012).

This make-believe scenario is paid for by a government that is trapped in credit-card debt: the parents have no more pocket money to hand out. A parallel is seen in the destructive youth riots in Paris during 2010 that successfully blocked the French government, which likewise was presiding over a financially parlous mother-state, from modestly reforming the nation's labor laws and retirement age in order to match economic reality (Wikipedia: 2010 French pension reform strikes, 2015). By contrast, the less indulgent society of England experienced only minor student demonstrations when in 2010 it abruptly raised university fees from \$5,000 to \$15,000 (Wikipedia: 2010 United Kingdom student protests, 2015). In Québec the future for universities and other institutions of civil society appears bleak, as the psychological issue of dependency versus autonomy remains unresolved, and dependency is typically a progressive condition.

Conclusion: Whither democracy?

The worst result is that the fundamental processes of liberal democracy are unravelling. We are forced to confront what we knew all along, that a spoiled child will howl when asked to behave properly, and that it is almost impossible to control a screaming infant. "To be a customer without the responsibility of paying for goods or benefits received is to be an egotist permanently resentful at not getting what you want immediately, which becomes the only criterion of satisfaction", as observed by Theodore Dalrymple (2004).

Other interest groups are now following this pattern, the students' decisive victory providing a tempting model for any interest group hoping to overthrow or suspend legitimate authority. Thus the Montréal firefighters on August 18, 2014, invaded the City Hall council chamber during a council meeting and thoroughly trashed it, aiming to block pension plan reforms. The councilors fled the chamber in alarm as the police stood by, gloating happily, since they too have lately been engaging in theatrical and disruptive public protests for more money. Some 2320 city workers left their posts during this event. These firefighters, like other public employees, enjoy rights that most taxpayers would envy, as they retire on average at 53, with a full pension.

Similarly, in spring 2015, violent demonstrations have again erupted, this time in an ugly form at Université du Québec à Montreal, in which buildings were damaged, classes disrupted, and non-striking students were forcibly prevented from attending their classes (Charnalia, 2015). Therefore de facto, if not de jure, the mob now rules, as laws may be introduced only with their consent. Anarchy spreads sporadically while the economy of Québec flounders. Smash the system! (Figure 7). Another related but distinct trend is the emergence of the FEMEN protest organization: multinational, exclusively female, and concerned with a wide range of causes undertaken for reasons of altruism rather than personal gain (Figure 8).

Although the 40% of Québec citizens who pay no income tax may not see a need for change, this developing malaise could ultimately cause working citizens to look for a strongman leader who promises to fulfil the paternal disciplinary role, as the political situation slowly comes to resemble the crises during the nineteen-thirties that led to fascist regimes in many European countries. The various thugs who then emerged as national father-figures, promising forcibly to clean up the "scum" in the streets, to echo President Sarkozy (Samuel, 2014), came to power enjoying great popularity, as a family will often prefer a ruffian father to having none at all. Disciplined, authoritarian followers convey an image of internalized paternal power and authority instead of infantile dependency, a message which might offer some members of the weary public an attractive antidote to the

tantrums of the students who took over the streets to flaunt their dependency with such devastating success.

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Eugène Delacroix, *July 28: Liberty Leading the People*, 1830, oil on canvas, approximately 11.8 x 8.2 feet.
(Louvre, Paris)

Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8