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## 2012 QUEBEC STUDENT PROTESTS: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON MOTIVES, STRATEGIES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES ON THE RECONFIGURATIONS OF STATE AND MEDIA DISCOURSES

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### Abstract

The first part of this article reports the main events of the 2012 student protest in Quebec leading to the government's adoption of Bill 12. It highlights the major ideological conflict generated through the liberal managerial mutation of the academic institutions as a key to understand more clearly the student's claims. Rapidly, the standard strike was transformed into a massive mobilization that produced many protests and other forms of resistance. The response given by the government to these unprecedented acts of resistance was Bill 12, to be understood as a symbolic coup d'état with voluntarily disruptive media effects whose aim was to make people forget the massive rejection of a pseudo tentative agreement in relation to Higher Education reform. The bill was also supported through the abusive and twisted use by the government of a series of buzzwords, like "bullying" and "access to education", which were relayed by the media. The authors also discuss the issues surrounding the traditional conceptions regarding the analysis of discourses, mobilizing Orwell's concept of doublethink and the notion of self-deception inherited from Sartre.

### Keywords

Quebec; strike; student; protest; debt; media; discourse; doublethinking; self-deception

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On February 13th 2012, a Quebec student protest against the increase of education fees started and within three months grew into a massive mobilization, eventually transforming into a social movement, symbolized by the red squares: “squarely in the red”. The issue of the tuition fees was only the tip of the iceberg, under which multiple other concerns were articulated, which revealed the students’ acute understanding of the transformations public higher education is undergoing in a “knowledge-based economy”. After remaining impassive in the face of these students’ calls, as well as through the rise of a more general unrest in the population, the Liberal government, led by Jean Charest, adopted Bill 12 (better known as draft Bill 78) with the aims of restricting the right to protest and hold demonstrations. This moment highlights the transition of a historical student strike in to an unprecedented social protest, which was impacted by an early and cynical election on September 4th.

The first part of this article reports the main events of the student protest leading to the government’s adoption of Bill 12. It highlights the major ideological conflict generated through the liberal managerial mutation of the academic institutions as a key to understanding more clearly the students’ claims. Rapidly, the standard strike was transformed into a massive mobilization that produced many protests and other forms of resistance that were combined with refreshing creativity, sometimes under the influence of the “rolling news” channels. The response given by the government to these unprecedented acts of resistance was Bill 12, to be understood as a symbolic coup d’état with voluntarily disruptive media effects, whose aim was to make people forget the massive rejection of a pseudo tentative agreement on Higher Education reform. The bill was also supported through the abusive and twisted use by the government of a series of buzzwords, like “bullying” and “access to education”, which were relayed by the media. We also discuss the issues surrounding the traditional conceptions regarding the analysis of discourses, mobilizing Orwell’s concept of doublethink and the notion of self-deception inherited from Sartre.

### **The lost autonomy of the Universities and their Subordination to Private Management**

The Quebec Policy on University Funding (MELS, 2000) reforms the founding structure of higher education institutions by favouring universities that enroll more 1) full-time students, 2) graduate students and 3) students admitted in faculties other than the arts or social sciences. Performance criteria are designed to increase the number of diplomas, regardless of structural effects such as the decline in quality and admission standards (FQPPU, 2000). Universities must submit themselves to these “performance contracts” if they don’t want to be deprived of their funding by the Minister of Education.

At the same time, the funding allocated to research and its management has become more important, in particular through governmental funding of targeted research and tax credits for businesses involved in the field of research and development, which encourages partnerships between universities and private corporations (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Development companies have been created through these partnerships and act as commercial relays between knowledge and its potential commodification. The promotion of research focused on innovation and practical applications, rather than on theoretical advances, is being done to the detriment of teaching tasks, mostly in undergraduate studies. Lecturers — who are facing increasingly unstable employment — are taking these masses of students under their charge, while universities abdicate responsibility for creating regular professor positions (Noble, 2002).

The consequences of this transformation in the domain of the universities’ research missions are quite important: the social space of knowledge production is no longer the discipline, but

one wherein knowledge will be considered as a tool. Problem solving in the context of targeted research often becomes the researchers' only goal. Almost none of the knowledge produced can be accumulated and take its place in the immanent logic of the discipline. It is obvious that the evaluation of the researches' advances is now based on the local partners that are involved and no longer on the monopoly of a discipline's peer committees.

Bills 38 and 44, which were proposed in 2009 and are currently under consideration, consolidate this new form of university governance by requiring that a majority of members sitting on boards of directors come from outside the university community. More than simply deciding the financial management of these institutions, boards of directors have the right to examine or modify all of the pedagogical, social or scientific activities by incorporating new administrative controls. The prominence given to external members in the educational field is justified by the idea that the educational community is unable to govern itself because it is involved in a conflict of interests in the management of its own institution.

These are the mechanisms by which the relationship between the institution and its management was reversed in favor of the latter: "Whereas management was traditionally a means to ensure the autonomy of the institution, it is now the institution that is the object of management" (Gagné, 2005; Readings, 1996).

### Students' Claims

The first students' demand was to halt the increase of tuition fees, from C\$2,168 to C\$3,946 (£2,762), which is a 75% increase over the next five years. These fees, which are the same in all institutions in Quebec, don't include all the costs of education. For this, we also need to take into account the administrative fees, different for each university, which averaged C\$624 by trimester in 2011 and will reach C\$919 in 2017 (CLASSE, 2012a). In 2016, the total cost for a student would have been C\$4,500.

Like other western countries, Quebec is confronted with stagnating wages and increasing household debt, a situation that is particularly true for students. 65% of undergraduate students have accumulated an average debt of C\$15,000 (FEUQ, 2012) and 38.2% think that financial issues are the primary reason for stopping or abandoning their studies (Luong, 2010). These debts are still lower than in the rest of Canada or in the US, but they remain worrisome, as economic analysts are fearful of a potential collapse of the student debt bubble (Wooldrige, 2011). Moreover, financial institutions take advantage of these debts in two different ways. Firstly, financial institutions benefit from interest by "offering" credit cards and lines of credit for students that are not eligible for the public programme of loans and scholarship. Secondly, the government, via its public program, pays, for the entire period of studies, interest on the students' loans while also covering all the risks of default. Because the government offers full guarantees over the loans, banks are taking unfair advantage of student debt by receiving millions of dollars in interest without taking any of the risks associated with these transactions (Grandbois, Lefrancois, & St-Onge, 2012).

Not only are student debts an obstacle to the accessibility of postsecondary education, they lead to an increase in the time allotted to paid work during studies. Indeed, 55% of university students work while they are studying, which represent an increase of 30% since 1978-1979 (FEUQ, 2011, p. ii). The average number of hours worked has also increased. It is now approximately 20 hours per week for undergraduate students. Students who are in this situation deplore the consequences of working, arguing that it forces longer periods of study and that it increases the risks of failing, as well as the dropout rate.

Despite these facts, students didn't primarily fight for an increase in public loans and scholarships. Indeed, during the student movement of 2005, the government transferred C\$103 million from scholarships to loans. In a context where the financialization of the economy matters for the government, it became obvious that students would have access only to a more preferential form of personal credit, which is in line with a consumer oriented offer of education curriculums, addressing itself to an individualist rationality that became stronger among what is left of the student political communities and marks their inclusion into the university community as a whole. The claim about freezing or abolishing tuition fees, against the government's firm intention to increase them, enables a repoliticization of the issues in education and the possibility for the movement to insist on the social benefits of access to education, and more specifically, to higher education. CLASSE, the most critical students' coalition, has assiduously recalled the historic mission of the public education system in Quebec, which is based on the fundamental right to education regardless of the ability to borrow. CLASSE argues that the economic cost of education should be collectively shared.

The students' associations have elaborated alternatives for the funding of universities, and more generally public services, with the objective of criticizing the arguments of "user-pays" and the commodification of services. Reintroduction of a capital tax for enterprises would generate an increase in income of around C\$800 million a year for the Quebec government, and the cost for a totally free education varies between C\$176 to C\$405 million. In addition, CLASSE suggests cutting the marketing budgets of universities, transferring C\$142 to C\$284 million from funding research to teaching, imposing a hiring freeze policy for top managers and rectors, freezing their salaries, abolishing their bonuses, and suspending any further construction of "satellite campuses", which is directly linked to the policy of 2000 and aims to attract students outside of their traditional geographical area, thereby enabling such institutions to compete with crowded universities in big cities (CBC, 2012).

### **Creative Resistance**

The strike began on February 13<sup>th</sup> 2012, led by CLASSE (coalition of striking student unions), FECQ (college students association) and FEUQ (the university students association) and quickly gained momentum with a peak of 330,000 students on strike (the total number of students in Quebec is 400,000), grouped in 138 associations, during the first historic demonstration on March 22<sup>nd</sup>. The sheer size of the student mobilization (several associations voted for a general unlimited strike until free education is achieved) is understood by some analysts as the onset of popular unrest, resembling the Arab Spring, Spanish *Indignados*, *Occupy* and other students' resistances (Chile, US, UK).

A number of important demonstrations have been held. From rallies in the subway, backwards, naked or silent demonstrations, marathons to 'stop the hike', and mock right wing demonstrations, to demonstrations where the route is randomly determined (99percentQC, 2012), they express a new creativity and imagination. In addition, there are several surprise-actions of "economic disruptions", namely blocking bridges, highways, banks, private companies' headquarters, as well as picket lines in colleges, universities and other centres of public services. Monthly protests have been organized on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of each month since March and they are recognized as a peak event for the movement. Over 100 nightly protests have also been held: "Night Demos every night...Until Victory!" At the strongest moments of the mobilization, there were more than 11 actions in a single day in Montreal, sometimes involving several thousand people. As the importance of the movement increased daily, the stubbornness of the government, refusing

to negotiate and even meet the student representatives, provoked rising public disapproval. On April 5<sup>th</sup>, the Minister of Education submitted a first offer, which maintained the tuition hike, but attenuated its consequences by increasing the loans and scholarship program. Actually, by this offer, the government insisted on the fact that these policies are a kind of positive response to the worries of the middle class, which, according to the polls, was starting to become less enthusiastic about the government's plans. This political opportunism was understood as being in contempt of all students and strengthened the determination and popular sympathy for student demands. Moreover, the students successfully demonstrated that this new offer tried to conceal a more important tuition hike over seven years, rather than five. After trying to exclude CLASSE from any negotiations, and by doing so trying to divide the movement, the government finally accepted to meet all student representatives, but never really negotiated, offering only to add to the package a new council regarding the management of universities. The last offer was unanimously rejected by associations affiliated to CLASSE, as well as by many students that had chosen not to go on strike. The offer was in fact rejected by an overwhelming majority: by 340,000 students out of 400,000 (CLASSE, 2012b).

### **Bill 12 and the Role of Mass Media**

This strong reaffirmation by the students was met with an unprecedented governmental decision for a Western country facing a massive student movement supported by an important part of the population: the draft Bill 78 (now Bill 12) is profoundly hostile to freedom, attacking human rights, the right to association, the right to strike and strikers' right to expression. The law requires individuals and organisations to inform the police of the date, time, duration and route of any protest of more than 50 people 8 hours in advance, and imposes steep fines (from C\$7,000 to C\$35,000 for individuals, and from C\$25,000 to C\$125,000 for organisations) for any violation. This bill was preceded by several juridical demands provisionally accorded for injunctions against student associations for picket lines and occupations of colleges and universities that cause enough disturbance to cancel courses. Soon enough, these initiatives gave the impression that the governing party was actively encouraging them. Moreover, these injunctions had devastating effects, especially on the institutional climate among students themselves and between them and the employees. It is worth mentioning that judges who sided with the complainants had obvious ties to the Liberal party. This open secret is confirmed and rendered irrelevant by Bill 12 because it supersedes the individual provisional injunctions and homogenises, universalises, and radicalises their scope.

As we know, the general dynamic of mainstream media in the form of "stories" where events multiply rapidly tends to obscure or even conceal the links between facts and events. We have an exemplary case if we consider that while the media space was saturated with the scandal of Bill 12, it was also devoid of any evaluation of the massive rejection of the government's offer by striking and non-striking students. The progressive wing of the population, sympathetic to the students' cause, was enlarged by the popular indignation toward Bill 12. Of course, there was an increase of sympathy for students on the basis of the fact that the Bill targeted them specifically. But the mobilization was more against the bill itself. It took the form of spontaneous outflows of citizens in their own streets and neighbourhoods at 20:00 every night, hitting pots and pans to make noise. This movement had grown tremendously and led citizens to find solidarities that could enlarge the meaning and scope of these 'illegal' pots and pans rallies. However, the ritual was weakened over time. Should we think that the bill appeared harmless to people who were previously challenging it? Indeed, citizens participating in the daily protest were violating the bill,

but they did not see the law applied to them. In fact, the clauses of the bill on demonstrations did not seem to be enforced by the police who continued operations essentially by applying criminal and municipal laws.

This being said, there is every reason to believe that Jean Charest's freedom endangering bill was not an authoritarian action convinced of the virtues of repression. Didn't we doubt it ourselves when we thought that the law aimed to "intimidate" rather than repress? Obviously, such an idea was unwise insofar as the government left the police to its own with this law<sup>1</sup> and that the police reluctance to apply it was rapidly overcome<sup>2</sup>. However, this unacceptable irresponsibility was perhaps only the result of the fact that, by this law, the government was primarily seeking to make work in their favour the "crisis narrative" of the media in the conflict it had wilfully provoked.

This fact did not escape the attention of the main stakeholder — that is to say the nearly 400,000 Quebec students that the government claimed it wanted to vote on the agreement itself (Huffington Post Québec, 2012; Radio-Canada, 2012b). Indeed, the results were massively against the government offer. This episode is by far more important than its abbreviated media exposure would lead us to believe, which can be no doubt largely attributed to the circulation of rumour, maintained for over a week, that the introduction of the special law generated. This rumour obviously was confused with the speculations of journalists and experts invited by the media. The narrative structure of the media being saturated by the proliferation of events since the dramatic confrontation between police and students on Friday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, these speculations were carried on against a background understanding within the media that the special law was unavoidable, but at the same time impossible as an "effective" measure (Gagnon, 2012) — understand: as the equivalent of the War Measures Act of October 1970<sup>3</sup>. To bring to reality the unlikely law, within the limits of its legislative framework, as an emulation of the federal war measure law, made it possible to crush the political character of the whole crisis in the media. The government was better off with a widened outrage whose unanimity with the news headlines would reset the "storytellers'" counter to zero, than to continue playing the role of a government driven by a "rationally motivated" political determination. The Charest government therefore allowed itself first and foremost the enormity of a symbolic media coup: it attempted and succeeded in making us forget the massive vote against its offer to settle, the result of which it claimed it wanted to hear as a democratic government! The government knew that the new media story would only appear to *its* "silent majority" as a necessary evil: could this majority hold it against the government that the agreement was a compromise, or be worried about the massive rejection from the students of what could pass as a compromise when the government has the guts to propose such a law?

The media apparatus succeeded in transforming this event into something that could be silently interpreted by some as a necessary evil whereas for others the bewilderment that the improbable would happen left them shocked as if from a natural disaster: the advent of an

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1 The Minister of Public Safety Dutil specifically asserted that its application was at the discretion of the police (Bourgault-Côté, 2012).

2 The political profiling of those wearing the red square was particularly remarked (INCLO, 2013; LDL, AJP, & ASSE, 2013). But we must not forget the repression of political demonstrations of fall 2012 by the Montreal police, even after the repeal of Bill 12, under Montreal's bylaw P-6, an offshoot of the repealed law.

3 The War Measures Act of October 1970 is known as the federal act, which suspended the civil liberties with the official objective to find one government minister and one British diplomat kidnapped by the Front de liberation du Québec (revolutionary terrorists who hoped for the emergence of a nationalist-marxist revolution in the province of Quebec) (LaPierre, 1971).

unreasonable evil left them speechless or else made them express extensively and insistently the feeling that they could not believe their own eyes. In the media, the “new story” impresses itself by this automatic rhetorical device. The vast majority of journalists find themselves wanting to redeem the fact that they peddled the rumour of the “impatience” of the government and its “silent majority” and that they peddled the rumour of a special law by freely imagining it rather than through serious investigative journalism. Journalists simply let happen a turning point which they knew was imminent in the story because they were directly involved. The coming into force of the two-pillar law — the restrictions on fundamental freedoms that outrage a new segment of the population independently of the student cause AND the unilaterally *deferred* return to “normality” plan imposed on the institutions and students — therefore had the effect of a natural disaster, the effect of an immense power, whereby we no longer seek to understand the immanent causal structures because the closure of the never ending conflict story was interrupted by the abrupt beginning, largely recognized as such, of a new story that rapidly appeared, in contrast, quite transparent and without a plot.

### Police

Even if the police didn't enforce the vast majority of the draconian measures of the bill, it continued to improperly apply criminal law. It should be noted that for the past 10 years the Montreal police has been condemned by the United Nations Human Rights Council and Amnesty International for its mass arrests during political events. In the last few years, some police watchdog citizen groups denounced the creation of an investigative unit of the Montreal police named GAMMA, (acronym for surveillance of marginal activities and anarchist movements) in the division of organized crime (which therefore has the right to partial secrecy) and dedicated to the accumulation of information on political activists of “radical movements”. Montreal police, who brutalized many students in occupations and many other events, also held for weeks in the media that the overt criminal acts (the destruction of street furniture, the smashing of windows, etc.) during street actions were carried out not by students, but enacted by radical political factions. However, the police were not able to make any relevant arguments to defend that case. It is obvious that the protests had become an opportunity for the police to justify and even demonstrate the necessity of more GAMMA. The subtext to “more GAMMA” is more arrests of extremist “vandals”. The differentiation between students and so-called “extremists”, as it was made in police spin and repeated by senior political figures, was quickly recognized as irrelevant by much of the mobilized people. Top government officials understood this and they started to require from the student movement that it condemn violence. The answer was that all criminal acts are condemnable and there are courts to evaluate if crimes are committed and condemn their perpetrators that being the case. This was matched with the CLASSE reaffirmation of the historical importance of civil disobedience to the advancement of social justice.

This media struggle around the issue of violence took place at the same time as the government congratulated police for their “work”, even in connection with operations that have caused serious injuries and mutilations to the demonstrators. The complacency of the government towards the police has allowed it to think it had *carte blanche*: from February until July 22<sup>nd</sup>, there were 3,316 individual or group arrests, mostly without any criminal charges, but often accompanied by a fine of around C\$500. Since February, the police became more and more arrogant, menacing and brutal. Amnesty International and the UN have, on a number of occasions since the start of the strike, strongly petitioned the police to respect the rights of protesters and called upon the government to rein in the police, but to no avail. Unfortunately,

all this presages the possibility of the next outbreak in Quebec, and Montreal in particular, of a police culture quite similar to that found in police states.

### The Dialectics of Doublespeak and Babel's Tower

Certain discourse analysis techniques<sup>4</sup> consist in finding and examining lexical redundancies and their transformation as clues to the ordinary usage of language, which reveal a certain thinking habitus, implying a disjunction between speech and thought. In conformity with the postmarxist idea that thinking itself is ideological and therefore has no autonomy, even the use of ordinary language would render opaque the contents of the ideas it is nonetheless expressing. As such we have lost the capacity to step back in order to remember the original meaning or to reflect upon the nuances in meaning. Dystopic literature has for its part imagined totalitarian regimes exerting control through repression of spontaneous speech, sometimes even through the production of an official language, strategically impoverished and absolutely exclusive, accompanied by censorship of any other language, precisely in order to break the autonomy of thinking. We hence have here two conceptions of human alienability by and through language: one which affirms the irrepressible submission — which tends to be unconscious — of thinking to its encapsulation within the linguistic habitus which becomes, unbeknownst to those who express it, the marker of a social condition; the other, which relies on the strict inculcation of linguistic expression — the habitus here understood as a tendency towards the reflex — rendering speech an act divorced from thinking itself, or at the very least from thinking freely. These visions seem at first glance to converge. Indeed it is possible to imagine these two meeting at the limit, where people wilfully adopt ready-made expressions which mean nothing to the subject, used nevertheless with the understanding that it is the appropriate thing to say. This would be equivalent, for instance, to the success of George Orwell's *Newspeak* in eliminating all non-prescribed meanings by its very authority. It is precisely of this reconciliation which we should be wary, as the two perspectives begin from radically different assumptions. The ideological critique claims that it is the whole realm of thinking, insofar as it is believed to be autonomous, as well as its pretence of reflexivity mediated by its expression which is, a priori, powerless with respect to the far deeper alienation of man's praxis, being not primarily based in language. However, with Orwell's *Newspeak*, called upon in no small measure by the critics of ideology and the media, we are in front of an authoritarian institution on which is grafted a repressive force which battles the persistent use of the remains of the living language that employs proscribed meanings *because it is recognized that a rational and free mind could reinvest those remains with dangerous spontaneity*.

We believe that the heuristic hypothesis of discourse analysis as a means of identifying the self-generated "iron cages" of language, qua unconscious marker of the submission of ordinary language to a social state of affairs, is useful only insofar as its results are products which can still lend themselves to critical interpretation, which itself can be a means of bringing them to life for the good of all. It will however be sterile if it cannot be conceived, at least ideally, as a means for self-comprehension.

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4 Discourse analysis is an important branch of research with methodological and epistemological problems of its own. It is born from a project to correct the critique of Marxist-inspired ideology. At the heart of the internal controversies of this field of expertise is the question of the relevance or not of making the structures unearthed by structuralist theories of language the very locus of that which is ideological. That being said, the "discourse" is still strictly linguistic within the paradigm of discourse analysis. That analysis is pre-Foucauldian insofar as it does not go so far as to understand as discourse all sources and forms of domination or to understand as discourses a variety of non-linguistic practices which instantiate the hidden or explicit expression of domination. For more details and additional nuances, cf. among others, Dominique Maingueneau (2012).

Of course, Newspeak, instituted through authoritarian means, and the repression of the use of the living language, are coordinated to ultimately extinguish free thinking itself. But it does not stop there. Central to the conception of Orwell's Newspeak is the idea that the alienation of language cannot succeed only through control and direct oppression of speech. It must break the integrity of each of those who would use speech by making them understand that false speech, from the point of view of reason or truth, also allows them to act with relative freedom in a daily life infused with terror — and consenting to this duplicitous use of language consecrates the compromise of language as a means to emancipation. The coercive character is transmuted by the implementation of *doublespeak* — which is a type of linguistic expression which consists in saying logically, perhaps even existentially, incompatible things — in the continuum of daily speech, not due to being unconscious of it but through indifference to this state of affairs. *Doublespeak* is merely the objective aspect of *doublethink*. The contradiction of *doublespeak* can be seen as an indication of structural self-censorship of the expression of thought. With the conceptualisation of *doublethink* arises the idea that a cognitive tool can disarm, for the subject himself, the problem of their inconsistency as a rational subject. Once again, it is not chiefly through self-illusion that the subject's crisis of rationality is disarmed, but through self-deception, through what we might call, as Sartre did, "mauvaise foi" (bad faith), acceptance of which is primarily a way of discharging one's blame with respect to oneself rather than with respect to anyone else, since bad faith towards another assumes in any case bad faith towards oneself, which is to say, self-deception. This bad faith is grounds for not only the capacity to maintain incompatible thoughts, but to believe them to be true just at the opportune moment (Chapman, 2009; Martin, 1984; Nelkin, 2002). That is specifically what the circumstances command when we are under the yoke of a brutal form of authority — it is a question of survival. But it is no doubt even easier to bear this bad faith in cases where it leaves the interlocutor indifferent. Some have interested themselves in the fact that the Orwellian idea of *doublethink* came to be prophetic of the form that interactions took within the high-surveillance dictatorships in the Eastern bloc. We, however, are not to be envied, living as we are in a "democratic" society where, paraphrasing Woody Allen, governments merely pretend to be concerned with the voice of their citizens. We, for our part, certainly live in a regime of bad faith structurally borne by the entirety of the communications of our political representatives and more seriously by their communications in times of crisis. Luckily for us, if there is a neoliberal double talk, it is not the fully-fledged doublespeak. As it is not the language of a totalitarian regime, it cannot claim to extinguish the open-ended meanings of other languages. In fact, it continues to draw upon those languages, insofar as it will not hesitate to borrow from the still-living common language to profit from the meaning that the daily media will dispense and eventually subvert. Here are two remarkable examples.

### **a) Bullying**

On February 15<sup>th</sup> 2012, Line Beauchamp, then Minister of Education, Leisure, and Sports (MELS), announced by press conference a plan of action to fight intimidation at school. Fresh in the minds of the public was a teenager's suicide in the fall of 2011, that of Marjorie Raymond, which had been front page news for many weeks since the media, with the help of the public, had for the most part been convinced that the single cause for the suicide had been the "intimidation" that the teenager had allegedly suffered in school and online<sup>5</sup>. Despite the tragedy, this was a

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5 This story was handled in a cavalier manner by the media, who thought to have identified the cause of Marjorie Raymond's suicide: intimidation suffered at school. An article by the journalist Joanne Bérubé in the fall of 2012 reveals that in fact it was first through rumours on social media (50,000 comments on social networks in the first 24 hours following the teenager's death) that intimidation became the sole cause of the suicide. The appearance of Marjorie's

gift to the government: what could be better than a “simple” problem in the world of education, moreover caused by its users rather than the government’s technocratic initiatives!

The government could not pass over the opportunity to fell two birds with one stone: they decided to act before the tragedy spread from the case of Marjorie Raymond to those of the striking students. Indeed not a week went by before the Minister hastened to “call for calm”, all the while *denouncing* the acts of “intimidation” allegedly committed by the striking students towards their peers, namely during the general assemblies. These accusations were repeated often throughout the months of strikes and protests (including on April 17<sup>th</sup> when a handful of students from the University of Sherbrooke sought to file an injunction against the striking students).

The first thing to observe is that “intimidation” is a fairly weak term, certainly vague<sup>6</sup>, perhaps inappropriate, to designate what was suffered by the teenager if it led to her suicide. Even the term “bullying”, which designates precisely a type of intimidation which does not shirk from connotations of humiliation, coercion, threats and harassment, would require an additional qualification connoting terror if it were to lead to suicide. No matter: the word “intimidation” became the banner to which the media flocked when speaking of the unacceptable and fatal evil which the government, taking upon itself the role of the father figure, claimed in order to handle the situation responsibly. It voiced its opinion not only about what makes schoolyards dangerous, but also on the assemblies of student unions from the colleges and universities. The government knew full well what it was doing when it was “outraged by the unacceptable intimidation” of the students who are not in accord with the strikers<sup>7</sup>. The ostentatious expression of the unacceptable character of “intimidation” sufficed to raise the spectre of tragedies, after which it was no longer necessary to validate the testimonies of intimidation, nor even to make the distinction between the “object lessons” that some received in the context of emulation paired with the authentic democratic spirit of the student assemblies, and the terrifying and fatal “bullying”. This is why anyone who claimed to have been intimidated in an assembly needed to be listened to as a victim who was not only calling for help but also courageously denouncing the generalised terror exerted by the pro-strike students. The media, always anxious to fix their own mistakes, fell over themselves to give a public voice to these students in order to save them from the impending tragedy, and save the population from the worry that this evil which preys upon their progeny may be trivialized through silence.

There is no equivalent here to the newspeak dictated by the State. In the incessant turbulence of the contemporary media landscape, with the lightning rod of public sentiment connected directly and instantaneously to social networks, every day offers the possibility that the least

mother on TVA’s television show *Mon topo* “validated” intimidation as the cause of death for the journalists from other media, while some other journalists, after an investigation, arrived at opposite conclusions (which later were corroborated by the coroner’s inquest a few months after the event): the suicide was revealed to be the consequence of many possible factors; intimidation being only one among many causes (Bérubé, 2012).

6 The legal meaning of the term “intimidation” is itself very broad—“whoever, unjustly and without legitimate authorisation, [acts] with the motive of forcing another person to refrain from doing something that person is legally allowed to do, or to do something that person is legally allowed to refrain from doing”—and the degrees of criminal severity so varied as to allow charges to be laid from a simple summary conviction all the way to indictment in front of a judge. Let us not forget that criminal law also implies the principle of presumption of innocence, and that it is the criminal intent that must be proved beyond reasonable doubt. This is why the law describes, in article 423, typical behaviours that are more susceptible to justify an accusation (threats of violence or wrongdoing aimed at the person or members of the person’s family, threat of proprietary damage, shadowing, prevention of movement, etc.) (Canada).

7 Intimidation had already been identified as early as the fall of 2011 by the CLASSE as one of the accusations that would come from the government (Poirier St-Pierre & Éthier, 2013, p. 142). The authors add nothing more, but it is obvious that this follows from Marjorie Raymond’s suicide on November 28<sup>th</sup> 2011.

verbal expression becomes the heart of the “common sense” addicted media. “Buzzword” is now the product of a storm rather than that of the spin doctors. But the latter are still present, as we shall see with the next example.

### **b) Access to Education**

The word “intimidation” had entered into the line of platitudes created through mass communication redundancy. The government then used this lexeme for the simple reason that it was already charged with the dramatic significance of the problem of the suffering youth.

It is not only the lexemes that the media storm stir up that are invested by the government and that can eventually be subject to an opportunistic co-optation. “Access to education” for example, is a phrase borrowed from the students by the government for its own ends. The government uses these words in accordance with their own semantic history that ties them to the principle which has been the spirit of the educational policy within Quebec for the last 50 years<sup>8</sup>. This principle orients how Quebec society intends to implement the fundamental social right to education, which it recognizes and takes seriously. Students evoke this principle by claiming their right to benefit from it, on the basis of its historical depth and of its essentially positive effects over the last 50 years. This points to the fact that any transformation of such a principle of educational policy must be extensively debated before being questioned and that the specific action of the government in augmenting tuition fees is reprehensible because it is contrary to this principle and that, therefore, it is surely illegitimate despite being the action of an elected government.

We can safely say that the government, incapable of clearly defending the principles that should drive it, does everything it can to pass them off as those the students claim as their own. But imagining such a manoeuvre could betray the plan of the government to deploy the techniques involved in manufacturing newspeak. We must acknowledge the fact that the government is not at all animated by the idealism of the fictional dictatorships of great literature. The reappropriation of the phrase “access to education” to apparently say something completely different does not aim at any authoritarian institutionalization of meaning. The purpose is to successfully make a one-time use, pragmatically effective, of a phrase in order to recover its connotation as a social project and to benefit from general approval. The government is of course embarrassed when the symbolic significance of the historical-political is pointed out, but it rationalizes the situation in the following way: why couldn't the recent positive impacts of this technocratic signifier be shared? This is no doubt why nothing in the reappropriation of the phrase can be claimed to be a manipulation. Indeed, what appears as a *deliberate attempt* at hijacking the term remains an attempt because the hijacking act itself fails completely — and perhaps even deliberately — by the explicitness of the manoeuvre itself. All this allows us to put aside the idea that it constitutes strictly speaking a classic “political exploitation”. Accepted in the common sense, this notion can at first glance be understood as a discursive technique used in the political field that consists in taking one thing — an event, a person, an idea — and to partly or completely distort its content *so that it can be integrated* in a particular ideological discourse. This is not however the case here. We must therefore resign ourselves to the idea that the theory of hegemonic discourse (Gramsci, 1999) is not the most relevant to understand the “strategic rationality” of the government.

In the following excerpt of the speech given by Jean Charest on the eve of the adoption of

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8 The idea of access to education is tied to the principle of “equal opportunities”. The fixity of university tuition was the way that we had chosen to progressively attain free education as a measure claimed to guarantee equal opportunities in the field of education. We need to recall however that this does not abolish the meritocratic principle and that it would therefore be illusory to think that all are equal once free access to education is achieved.

Bill 78, on the evening of May 16<sup>th</sup> 2012, there is all we need to be convinced:

For our people, access to education is one of the essential conditions to our development and to our economic prosperity. Our government, by its decisions and its actions, recognizes the right to education. We believe that nothing and no one should hinder the right of a Quebec citizen to have access to his education. [...] As all Quebecois, we wish for the pressure to be reduced on the establishments that are subject to a boycott. It is time to allow calm to return. [...] I am addressing myself in particular to all my fellow citizens to remind you that in Quebec access to education is a right. Nobody can pretend to be defending access to education and at the same time block the door to a Cegep or to a university faculty. You cannot do both at the same time. Education is a prerequisite to freedom and fulfillment, to democracy, and will never be a pretext to intimidation and violence. As a result, I announce that the bill will guarantee access to education and will be based on the sacred principle of the freedom of each citizen (Radio-Canada, 2012a).

If the second sentence expresses the importance that the government attributes to the assertion of its respect for the right to education — “Our government, by its decisions and its actions, recognizes the right to education” — access to education, this universal right, this principle guiding the institutionalization of justice for all in the field of education, is presented as something that can be confused with the individual right for the consumer to circulate in and around a building where a service they paid for is provided. “The right to education”, that is the equivalent of the right to justice, surreptitiously becomes the right to “my (your, his/her) education” [that of each of the customers of the education system], when, in fact, they should not be amalgamated. The right to education is established politically just as the right to justice. One can imagine how nonsensical it would be to confuse the “right to justice” and the “right to my (your, his/her) justice”.

But such awkwardness can exist only because the “ideological-political reappropriation” of the phrase is not the main issue. It has only become a locutionary capsule, closed in on itself. That is in fact why the difference between “access to my education” and “access to education” are unimportant in terms of mass communication where “access to education” has become a sign connoting the constructive spirit that brings hope to those who use it. Why then bother distinguishing them? It cannot be fit for the purpose of manipulation when it betrays to that extent the perceived intent. As for the merits of the pretension that it amounts to the same thing, this distinction can only appear as far-fetched because it lacks the essential and what is for it inaccessible: coinciding with the long-standing meaning of the phrase.

One hypothesis then could be that this is evidence of what the members of the government preparing the announcement of Bill 78, with the help of their wise and foxlike advisers, “sincerely” thought: in love with the right to free enterprise, they thought that by presenting the demands for a right to education as a demand for a right to free enterprise they displayed as much “constructive spirit” as the Parent Commission (the government study of early 1960’ that paved the way to the construction of a modern education in Quebec aiming at free and universal access), while the students would be left complaining. If this was the case, we can consider as extremely troubling the state of bad faith these people are in. It is so self-imbued that, intoxicated with itself, it no longer recognizes its desire for conspiracy and as a result does not even think of concealing it.

## Early Elections

The Bill 12 included a forced return to school, which wasn't respected by all students, but led to a phasing out of the struggle. For the Liberal party, the early election on September 4th 2012 consisted of a bet that supporters of "law and order" would increase in the face of the potential chaos on campuses. This means that this political strategy is based on the suspension of the engagement of the state to preserve social peace. The Liberal party was now thinking that it could take advantage of these social tensions and explosive climate.

These elections obviously show a new shift in the strategy of wedge politics: Liberals created polarisation by implicitly inciting and nourishing a relatively controlled disturbance of social peace using as a means a law which violates fundamental rights. We must notice that the relative control of this disturbance of social peace implies even planning the timing of the peak risk for the most dramatic events to happen. Should we not consider that all those features of the government's action are resulting in a soft form of a coup d'état?

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