The truth of *le printemps érables*

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There are only bodies and languages, except that there are also truths.

There certainly have been bodies and languages.

There have been young bodies and old bodies and bodies in between. Queer bodies and straight bodies. Bodies naked and masked. Bodies armed and armoured. Bodies moving in uncharted directions and bodies that refuse to move at all. Bodies arrested and molested. Able bodies and bodies dis-abled. Striking bodies and bodies that have been struck. The body of a panda. Bodies kettled and bodies separated from the pack (the easier to take them down). Bodies stepping lively into spaces where they have never been. Bodies poor and not-so-poor. Bodies with all kinds of skin. Ecstatic bodies and bodies in agony. Bodies bearing weight, not least the weight of their histories and futures. Bodies repeating for 115 days on the day I write this. Some bodies making their debuts.

And languages. Mostly French, but also English and every other language of Quebec, and a multiplicity of visual, sonic and haptic languages, besides. To live here (as to live anywhere) is to inhabit an endless field of linguistic translation, interpretation and contestation. *Le printemps érable* has been no exception in this regard. Among these contests is one over whether the phrase itself denotes a category mistake. Springs (the Arab, the Prague) bring relief from the dark winters of authoritarianism. They do not happen in modern liberal democracies such as Quebec, or Canada. Here, it is always already spring.

Is that true? If it is, what have all these bodies—hundreds of thousands of them—and all their languages been doing in the streets for all these days and nights? Trying to save a few hundred dollars in tuition fees? Is there no winter in this country? What is the truth of *le printemps érable*?

Let us not worry too much over the audacity of the question. In these times of beautifully heterogeneous bodies and languages, Badiou invites us to think about thinking about truth again, and about politics as one of its procedures. “Truths,” Badiou writes, “exist...
as exceptions to what there is. It is far from clear that we Quebecers are in the midst of a political event in the demanding sense Badiou attributes to this category, and it probably will not be clear for a long time. Still, we might be forgiven for wondering aloud whether what has been happening here comprises an “exception to what there is” and, if it does, to ask in what this exception consists.

As Lauren Berlant wryly observes, “However steadfast one’s commitment to truth, there is no avoiding the noise.” The nightly, clamorous manifs casseroles that arose in a flash to contest the Quebec government’s loi spéciale (Law 78 has banned spontaneous assemblies of more than fifty people and imposed punitive restrictions on the organization of political action more generally) have been genuinely remarkable. Repeated, open, mass civil disobedience by thousands of citizens is far from business as usual in contemporary Canada, even in Montreal, a city with a long history of radical political activism and collective, public noise-making. “Democracy and noise go hand in hand,” Davide Panagia writes, “there has never been a quiet democratic movement, like there has never been a peaceful democratic uprising.” Many have experienced the manifs casseroles as noisy sites in which neoliberalism’s devastating effects on political and community engagement are giving way to a resurgence of the democratic spirit. None who have marched and banged a pot in these latter-day charivaris could deny the thrill of what Berlant calls “the affect of feeling political together.” As noted historian of sound and Montrealer Jonathan Sterne has put it: “Rhythmic participation in the casseroles is a kind of political involvement.”

But what kind?

The manifs casseroles have been an unexpected occasion for political engagement and resistance by a wide range of everyday people who do not customarily find themselves in the streets objecting to their government. They materialize a similarly broad range of grievances and hopes and, crucially, they have confirmed for many that it is okay, and even enjoyable, to be political in this way. The casseroles are schools for other ways of being in the world together, and generate intensities and attachments that no amount of rational argument or persuasion could produce. They are a site where the feeling and practice of solidarity across diversity takes hold, the sort of experience that, if it settles into a reflex or habit, can translate into a powerful political force. This is exactly the sort of broad-based, popular movement that is necessary for an organized political demand such as that advanced by the student strikers to have any chance of success.

Still, for all their carnivalesque and communitarian glory, at their core the manifs casseroles are protests on behalf of liberal rights to free association and expression, carried out mostly by democratic citizens who already presume to enjoy these rights (even if they seldom exercise them), and who therefore have experienced the passage of Law 78 as an offense against a social imaginary they either believe in, or want to be able to believe in. This is the line Law 78 crossed, the line that thousands of people poured into the streets to defend. And, as nearly every first-hand account of the casseroles is at pains to point out, what marks these protests is not the demonstrators’ radicalism and marginality, but their incredible normalcy. The casseroleurs are not outsiders. Rather, they are “neighbours and people from local businesses, families with small children, elderly and retired people, working adults and many students.” These are not people without voice, they are just people who have finally decided to use their voice. While they might not
be using words, the form of their action is speech-like in that they are recognizable as subjects and as potential parties to a conversation. They are not demanding something incomprehensible; they are citizens asking for a state and society that lives up to its own widely-held ideals of liberal democratic publicity.

So, perhaps the *manifs casserole* are not quite as noisy as they sound. To hear the exceptional noise of the *printemps erable*, we might have to listen to something else. In his account of democratic noise, Panagia characterizes political disturbances as “occasions of part-taking by those whose utterances are not yet speech.” Here, he echoes Rancière’s concern for the distinction between those who are recognized as capable of speaking, of “enunciating what is just,” and those whose utterances are unrecognizable as speech and therefore perceived as merely “the animal noise of voices expressing pleasure or pain.” The point is not to reinstall the logocentric equation of politics with reasoned speech. It is rather to identify one form of the fundamental exclusion that structures the liberal-democratic public sphere: those deemed capable of making reasonable claims are in, while those whose claims are not recognizable as reasonable speech are out. The liberal conceit is that politics take place *within* the public sphere, amongst people speaking reasonably to one another. The truth is that politics take places at the point where those who are deemed to be merely making noise are excluded from a conversation they might not want to be part of anyway.

What makes some people noisy is not that they bang pots instead of speaking, but rather that what they are saying or doing cannot be acknowledged by those who get to decide what counts as an intelligible claim. What they are saying and doing cannot be acknowledged in the strict sense: if it could be, the order of parts predicated on the present distribution of the (presumed) capacity for *logos* would have already dissolved. Thus, according to Rancière, “between the language of those who have a name and the lowing of nameless beings, no situation of linguistic exchange can possibly be set up, no rules or codes of discussion.” The only possibilities are politics, or its containment by police. Politics takes place when these nameless grunts, the part that has no part, stage a disagreement in which their claim, articulated as an exception to what there is, cannot be readily dismissed as mere noise and so calls for a police response. As Rancière describes, “politics exist because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account…it makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise.”

This is the sort of noise being made by the student strikers. What makes the strikers politically exceptional is that they are militants of a truth they understand to be non-negotiable. The strikers’ fidelity to this truth has taken the form of a demand—a tuition freeze—that can only be regarded as unintelligible by those to whom it is addressed. Their refusal to accept the government’s proposed 75 percent tuition increase is a refusal to concede post-secondary education to the logic and priorities of neoliberal capitalism, a refusal of the social logic in which it makes sense to finance public education on personal debt and corporate investment, a logic that transforms the colleges and universities into purely economic enterprises. By extension, it is also a refusal to accept an account of capitalism’s crisis that places responsibility for securing the continuity of global inequality on the shoulders of those who suffer from it most. Ultimately, it is a refusal of the sort of society that would permit and arise from such measures, borne of a commitment to the truth of equality, to which the movement has been stubbornly faithful. If they were to win, nothing would be the same. This is what moves the voice of sensible mainstream opinion in Canada to describe the Quebec student strike as “the most startlingly
incomprehensible event in Canada this year—at least to those who see the world rationally," with rationality here defined as an appreciation of the marginally higher incomes enjoyed by those who earn post-secondary degrees relative to those who do not, as if that were the issue.  

This situation corresponds perfectly to that condition of disagreement in which, as Rancière characterizes it, “one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying.” The government understands very well the radical implications of the striking students' well-articulated convictions, and it is for this reason that these must be marginalized as the sort of incomprehensible, unintelligible noise that cannot be part of discussions between reasonable people. This is why negotiations between the government and the students’ representatives had to fail. It is what makes the students’ claim (and the situation it has created) exceptionally political and it is why the only response available to the government has been radically anti-democratic legislation and a sustained campaign of police intimidation and brutality. From the seat of government, you cannot reason or negotiate with this sort of noise; the only thing you can do is try to manage it.

Anxious characterizations of the situation by the arbiters of sensible opinion are thus quite correct: “The students and their leaders have behaved outrageously. Only all-out victory will satisfy them. Thus, they are not partners for negotiations.” What else would be appropriate to a militant faith in the truth of radical equality? In order to qualify as the sort of people with whom a reasonable discussion could be had on this issue, the student strikers would have to at least be willing to accept the neo-liberal nostrums that everybody has to pay their own way, that student-loan debt is a good investment in the prosperous future that a well-funded education promises, that they should feel lucky because, even after the increase, their tuition will still be lower than in any other jurisdiction in North America, and that it is okay to think differently only so long as you don’t inconvenience anybody else. If only they would treat this as a matter of informed self-interest then maybe we could talk. If only the truth of equality was a matter of opinion then, perhaps, we could discuss it.

In a speech in April, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, spokesperson for l’ASSE (one of the striking student unions) said this:

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

Does that sound like calculated self-interest? Does it sound like an opinion? Is it a matter upon which people who disagree can reach consensus through rational discussion? It is in this sense that the student strike is the truth of the printemps erable: it is a radical exception to what there is. Its claims are unintelligible under the terms and conditions of reasonable discourse in a prosperous (but always precarious, don’t forget) liberal democracy such as Quebec. Such claims are just noise but, yet, there is something about them that sounds true. Perhaps this is why the student strike has endured, day after day and night after night, at great personal cost to its militants. They simply refuse to give up. Their stamina is partly attributable to the extraordinary labour of organization that has sustained these bodies and languages against the violence they have suffered over these many months. It also might be because giving up is impossible for them: the truth that has seized them, which is nothing more or less than the truth of equality, is not something of which they can simply choose to let go and still remain the subjects they are becoming.
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Notes


3. Arguably the most popular figure of the protests, AnarchoPanda is a philosophy professor at Collège de Maisonneuve, a Montreal CEGEP (CEGEP’s are the Quebec preparatory colleges whose students have been among the most militant strikers), who has regularly attended marches and demonstrations dressed in a Panda suit, dispensing hugs to passersby. See Catherine Lalonde, “AnarchoPanda: la philosophie dans le trottoir,” Le Devoir 26 May 2012. On June 7, 2012, Julien Villeneuve (aka AnarchoPanda) filed a challenge in a Montreal superior court against the anti-mask by-law mentioned above. See Catherine Lalonde, “Anarchopanda s’attaque au règlement antimasque,” Le Devoir, 5 June 2012.

4. See, for example, Translating the printemps érable (www.quebecprotest.com), the volunteer collective that has provided free, online English translations of coverage of the protest by Francophone media outlets. The effort arose specifically to combat the hostile and misleading coverage of the protests by English-Canadian mainstream media. See Anna From Translating Printemps Érable, “Reflections from a Desk Chair Activist: On Translating the Printemps Érable,” Wi: Journal of Mobile Media, June 2012. Online at wi.mobilities.ca.

5. According to Badiou, “Philosophy is not a production of truth, but an operation carried out on the basis of truths.” Alain Badiou, Conditions, trans. Steve Corcoran (London Continuum, 2008) 11.


8. Jonathan Sterne, “Quebec’s #casseroles; on participation, percussion and protest” Sounding Out! 4 June 2012. http://soundstudiesblog.com/2012/06/04/casseroles/. Law 78, An Act to enable students to receive instruction from the postsecondary institutions they attend, was passed by the National Assembly of Quebec on 18 May 2012. It can be found online at www2.publicationsduquebec.gouv.qc.ca.


12. Sterne, “Quebec’s #casseroles; on participation, percussion and protest.”

13. The same cannot be said of similar protests elsewhere. For example, Krista Lynes argues persuasively that in the context of the feminist project of the Chilean and Argentinian cacerolazos, “The pots and pans are not simply noise-makers but powerful symbols of domestic life, survival and sustenance, and (re)productive labour. In making noise, clamouring from the inside out, Chileans and Argentinians made evident the relation between shortages, economic crisis and daily existence.” Krista Genevieve Lynes, “Clamouring Out: Against the Privative Sphere,” Wi: Journal of Mobile Media, June 2012. Online at wi.mobilities.ca.

14. Sterne, “Quebec’s #casseroles; on participation, percussion and protest.”

15. Panagia, The Political Life of Sensation 73.


19. Thus Badiou, commenting directly on the student strike in Quebec, surmises: “…au coeur de ce soulèvement une subjectivité révoltée contre l’idée que la paradigme de toute chose est l’entreprise” (“…at the heart of the uprising is a subjectivity in revolt against the idea that the paradigm for everything is business”). François Gauvin, “Lenjeu philosophique mondial du conflit étudiant,” Le Devoir, 11 June 2012. Online edition.


21. Rancière, Disagreement x.


23. The speech was made on 8 April 2012, at the Indignez-vous conference hosted by the Council of Canadians in Montreal. It can be viewed online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xz3lbU2Q6PY