

Ode to Disobedience and Indignation

*Laurence Guenette*¹

Rebellion is a wonderful quality. In the face of injustice, impatient, solidarity-minded, disobedient rebels are right. They are right to be angry, to feel this uplifting, uniting, liberating, incendiary emotion. Rage that refuses apathy, rejects coddling, and prefers discomfort to indifference. To paraphrase author and political scientist Gene Sharp: "the virtue of intolerance grounds the will to resist."

The social movement that rocked Québec in 2012 opened unexpected doors and surpassed the initial expectations of the students who organized against the tuition hike. The contempt and intransigence shown by the government shed light on a fundamental societal debate that, for once, broke through the usual dominant narratives. These narratives maintain that austerity is necessary, profitable, and competitive. They try to convince us that our citizenship is limited to representative democracy; that obedience is appropriate. These narratives endlessly rain down on the people the world over who see their rights melt away like snow in the sun and their vulnerability and poverty grow at alarming rates. This rightward wind sends chills down your spine.

The extent of state repression we experienced, in all its forms, shocked more than one of us: police brutality has a way of pulling back the curtain, in a brutally honest way, on the nature of the system in which we live. We are still

¹ Translated by Mona Luxion.

This is Fucking Class War

surprised at such violence. However, the stakes of power are revealed: the real fear that the powerful experience at the possibility of the status quo being overturned by a decentralised social movement, subversive and hungry for freedom. No government (especially a democratic one!) should have to massively beat its citizens to maintain power. "A democracy starts to deny itself when it refuses to recognize its own violence as a failure," writes nonviolent philosopher Jean-Marie Muller. Serve *whom*? Protect *what*? Baton blows and rubber bullets bring clear answers, administered through violence. Repression should anger and revolt us; it must be thought about deeply and radicalize activists, students, citizens.

It is in part because of repression and the government's contempt that this social movement grew so large, that it was able to reach radical issues, instead of only addressing the superficial and symptomatic tuition hike. The 2012 student strike became for me and for many of my comrades a timeless moment, a space of collective and individual transformation. A laboratory of emotions and identities, a fertile ground where beauty and solidarity grew alongside the horror of violence. This period of intense resistance changed the flavour of our citizenship forever.

It's true; we have too often had the troubling sense that we are living in a very different world from that of many of our fellow citizens. Activists at the heart of an adversarial social movement have been transformed by this struggle. The things that we often named without *feeling* them became terrifyingly concrete realities: repression, prison, court, and profiling affect us deeply and permanently.

Ode to Disobedience and Indignation

We would like for people to share this indignation which for us is felt as a mix of rage, solidarity, and despair that fills our souls. In the face of injustice, poverty, the lies of the rich and powerful, and oppression in all its forms, why are people unable to get angry, revolt, and disobey — or at least to want to? The established order — or disorder — depends on the collaboration and obedience of the population on which it rests. This is true for both democratic regimes and authoritarian ones. What does vary is the ratio of coercion to consent that ensures that obedience. If an authoritarian power uses mostly threats, fear, and violence to force the population to submit, a democratic power depends on consent or consensus that they manufacture themselves. This is the most powerful and subtle tool of power: promoting obedience and docility by relying on the idea that democratic power is unarguably legitimate.

Disinformation and media propaganda are also fully understood when we grasp their extent and power, and to see that they alienate a large part of the population. Mass media and the government teach people to associate the struggle for justice and dignity with a childish dream, and to see acceptance of antisocial austerity measures as a sign of maturity. They teach us to confuse complacency with resiliency, conformism with responsibility, resistance and violence. They also present us with a little nuanced message on obedience: obedience is good, disobedience is bad.

And when our disobedience is in the context of a struggle for social justice, in defence of our rights, we are im-

This is Fucking Class War

mediately confronted with the dominant discourses' ignorance and contempt of civil disobedience. Its detractors do not see it as a form of direct action and a tactic that is acceptable in a "democracy." In this line of thinking, we have no right to refuse to collaborate because laws and policies are put in place by our elected representatives, and too bad for those who "lost" their elections. At the heart of the struggle, in May 2012, the Québec Minister for Justice declared that, "disobedience is just a nice way of saying vandalism." Was this gross ignorance, or simply bad faith?

It is true that the idea of civil disobedience strays from the narrow confines of electoralism. Politicians rush to claim that civil disobedience is equivalent to disorder, danger, insecurity and the denial of the rule of law. All of that serves to pre-emptively demonize a phenomenon that is threatening to power: that of a population that is becoming aware of its strength when it refuses to collaborate. The population becomes one which may be thinking of no longer submitting, whose obedience is no longer guaranteed either by force or by consent.

Civil disobedience is a deliberate, legitimate, and principled act of non-collaboration: we disobey the law while accepting the possible consequences, made strong by the indignation we feel at the injustice enacted by the state. The act is illegal, but grounded in a sense of integrity and justice: civil disobeyers are speaking truth to power. Through civil disobedience citizens reclaim their political responsibility to think about collective wellbeing and justice, and realize the power of their consent.

Ode to Disobedience and Indignation

It is true that the notion of civil disobedience imagines democracy as a much more living and lively system than the one that is currently on offer: a democracy in which citizens use their power instead of periodically delegating it. The idea of civil disobedience recognizes people's intelligence and offers them the possibility of defying authority and being free enough to be critical of power and the law. It is not a simple thing to substitute this form of civic responsibility for the current feelings of indifference and powerlessness. However, it is necessary: the obedience of the majority maintains the status quo. In this sense, the capacity to get angry and disobey is fundamental for any democratic society.

The population's widespread collaboration and cooperation with an oppressive system is the most pernicious and powerful obstacle to struggles for social justice. In contrast, disobedience is an empowering process for both individuals and collectivities. Gandhi had reflected on the necessary steps to arrive at this point of empowerment and disobedience. He thought it necessary that, "a psychological change occur, from passive submission to courage and self-respect; that the subject realize that his assistance and cooperation make the regime possible; to build determination to withdraw one's cooperation and obedience."

We have begun this change; the most important and least quantifiable gain from this Québec spring can be found without a doubt in this revolutionary spirit that rocked the society for the first time in many years, and made people realize the potential of their indignation. This common frame of mind and this awareness of injustice will be transposed onto coming social struggles,

This is Fucking Class War

whatever the cause they espouse. As austerity measures multiply, populations come under attack, and our rights, liberties, and truly democratic values are rolled back, it is up to us to keep resisting, to think critically, and to search nonstop for ways of continuing the struggle. We can at least be proud of having been a disrupting force, of having deepened our reflection, sharpened our convictions, transcended our fears, questioned our docility, destroyed our indifference and dragged a whole mass of people into an enthusiastic and outraged awakening.

But in Fall 2012 the students returned to class, and the movement snuffed out in a bit of a confused truce awaiting the electoral results. And then the Charest government fell, the tuition hike was finally cancelled, and our lives went back to normal after more than six months of struggle. These were difficult weeks, a strange and sudden "morning after," a curious and almost worrisome calm. Many people are surprised that some of us are bittersweet, disappointed, or unsatisfied with this ending. If we are suspicious of this electoral victory against the strike, it is because a return to sleep and to business as usual is lurking after the awakening and social mobilisation of the spring. The promises of a true collective uprising have caught us: from now on we will be impatient, intolerant, demanding. We are still outraged and we are right to be.

In January 2012 we were impatiently waiting for the "strike floor" of 20,000 strikers nationwide to launch our general unlimited strike. At that moment we would never have hoped to come so far in our struggle. All of our predictions and scenarios turned out wrong. If someone had told us what was coming, we would not have been able to

Ode to Disobedience and Indignation

believe it: "In six months, you will still be on strike. There will have been a Special Law, a wave of disobedience, pots-and-pans demos, supportive professors, and the eyes of the whole world turned on Québec. Many protestors will have been injured, some severely. More than 3,000 people will be arrested. Like many of your comrades, you will go to jail and face criminal charges.

"When the struggle comes to an end, all of the streets and buildings downtown will be haunted by memories. Crossing back and forth through Montreal, you will still see the ghosts of a burning barricade, clouds of tear gas, squadrons of riot police with shining helmets, dark or colourful crowds moving in time to a common anger. You will remember at each street-corner an act of disruption, a demo, a kettle, your comrade who was hit with a rubber bullet, the feeling of baton blows to your stomach and head.

"You will be changed forever. You will cultivate that transformation to be sure that it never gutters out, that no return to 'normal' is possible. Finally if someone asks you if you would do it again, despite the horror that grew alongside the beauty of this struggle, despite the physical and judicial consequences, the exhaustion, the violence you experienced, you will say without hesitation that you would do it a hundred times over, that you aspire to be a rebel, free and full of indignation. And with the echo of the last chants and the smoke of the tear gas canisters barely faded away, you are already nostalgic for this struggle and this extraordinary movement."