

REVIEW ESSAY

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From the Arab Spring to the Maple Spring: National Student Protests Graduate to Transnational Social Movements

A review of

Hancox, Dan, ed. 2011. *Fight Back! A Reader on the Winter of Protest*. London, U.K.: Opendemocracy.Net.

Solomon, Clare and Tania Palmieri. 2011. *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions*. Brooklyn: Verso Books.

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I write this review from inside the Quebec student-led protest movement, which has recently marked its 100th day of strike activity with a 400,000-strong march through the streets of downtown Montreal. As of this writing, the Maple Spring (*Le printemps érable*) is in full swing and will be heating up most of the summer. Mass arrests of youths and students have already surpassed the number of people jailed during the 1970 *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) crisis that saw martial law declared in Quebec. For more than a month now, students and their supporters have been gathering at 8 p.m. every night before marching through Montreal's downtown core, each one of them donning a small red-felt square on a shirt or a bag, the symbol of the student protest movement. On May 17, Quebec's Liberal government passed a special law designed to crush the strike, one that many commentators considered to be unconstitutional. Defying this law and its punitive fines, citizens throughout the province have engaged in civil disobedience and risked arrest by taking to the streets with pots and pans. They have done this in the spirit of the *cacerolazo*, a form of popular protest practiced throughout Latin America in open defiance of fascist dictatorships, market fundamentalism and neoliberal austerity measures. Quebec's students are making use of informal knowledge and

independent social media in order to protest the effects of prevailing neoliberal fiscal and social policies, including movement toward the privatization of higher education by decreasing state funding and increasing tuition fees, staggering student-loan debt, an increasingly regressive taxation structure coupled with corporate-tax avoidance, and heightened threats to academic/intellectual freedom and student government. Protests have also been directed against mass arrests and related state violence encouraged by the draconian “Law 78.”

At one of the many student union-led marches on May 22nd, the newly formed anti-racist student-of-colour, First Nations and international-student contingent (of which I was a part) made its first coordinated appearance. Our contingent was created specifically to respond to the widening racial, class and gender inequities in higher education and the job market, and to address the negative impact of zero-tolerance policies that disproportionately criminalize and increase the drop-out rate of high school-aged youth of colour throughout Canada. In unison, the racially diverse group chanted the following slogans in English: “Education is a right, not just for the rich and white!,” “Racist, classist, sexist shit. Fuck your hikes, strike, resist!,” “We are young! We are poor! We won’t pay anymore!” and, finally, “I put a 187 [police code for homicide] on your 78, we don’t need your law to demonstrate!” While fearlessly chanting in a mixture of French, English and even occasionally in Spanish, secondary and post-secondary students, along with their parents, professors and labour-union allies, were protected from potential police intimidation by Black Bloc anarchists who positioned themselves on both sides of the march. The mass protests have also produced mascots who embody resistance against the police and corporate media. These champions have taken to the streets and used both biting satire and bilingual social media to contest accounts of the protests available through dominant neoliberal media (for example, see *Translating the printemps érable* [<http://www.quebecprotest.com>], which is a volunteer collective that is attempting to balance the English media’s extremely poor coverage of the student conflict in Quebec by translating French media announcements into English). Halfway through a six-hour march, our contingent was greeted by the Quebec student movement’s non-official strike mascot, “Anarchopanda,” a man disguised as a cuddly panda bear who goes head-to-head with both corporate-media representatives and police officers virtually on Twitter and physically in the streets. “Socialist Squirrel” has also been seen fraternizing with students during the nightly protests.

Like the waves of international and transnational student protests that have exploded in response to the global economic crisis of 2008 and the unprecedented governmental defunding/privatizing of public higher education, the current Quebec-wide student unrest is transforming itself from a protest into a full-scale, inter-generational, cross-class, democratic social movement. It is a movement replete with its own social media networks, radical aesthetics, creative reappropriation of public space and alternative educational models.

The two books under review here, *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* and *Fight Back! A Reader on the Winter of Protest*, will appeal to student activists, critical educators and scholar-activists who produce knowledge and engage in pedagogical practices through active engagement with, and in the service of, progressive student movements for socioeconomic justice. Writings in the two essay collections demonstrate how action-based research can serve to model dynamic engagement between the university, autonomous or alternative media and intergenerational social movements. Such engagement is effectively redefining the fundamental role of university education in democratic societies. The interdisciplinary analysis offered in both works is directed toward an audience that includes students who are currently plotting to start their own movements against fees and cuts, precarious part-time lecturers who are struggling for respect and job security within the academy, community or union educators who help build strategic capacity in labour movements and scholar-activists—from cultural studies and communication studies scholars in the newly emerging field of social movement media studies to those exploring informal educational processes or what it means collectively to “learn in social action.”

A key feature separating *Springtime* from *Fight Back!* is the former’s transnational analysis—which starts with consideration of the United Kingdom, California, France, Italy, Puerto Rico and Greece, and ends with an assessment of the emergence of the “Arab Spring” in Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt—and the latter’s intimate analysis of the U.K.’s grassroots, youth- and student-led “winter of protest” of 2010–11. Although both frameworks offer distinct lenses through which to interrogate transnational and grassroots activism, both privilege an analysis that connects the local or national context with a larger and global one through a compendium of diverse voices from the front lines of social struggle. What unites both works is their shared commitment to provide a road map for future action as well as a chronicle of past actions, and to offer other activists the “formulation of an experience” (Solomon and Palmieri 2001: 2), replete with effective strategies and tactics that can be replicated *anywhere*. Both works also provide tentative answers to the following questions: What is new about the student-led protests that have flared up since 2008? Do the protests collectively comprise a coherent movement? If so, how can this movement generate a wholesale emancipatory transformation? As the editors of *Fight Back* pointedly ask, “Will *this* budding movement have the energy, audacity, persistence, imagination and intelligence to make the best of these [exceptional economic, social and technological] changes that are underway?” (15–16).

Both compilations directly answer this last question affirmatively. The look and feel of each book reflects how student activists have become technologically savvy users of social media networking tools, who possess a keen understanding of the workings of neoliberal capitalism. Beyond providing a framework and guide to additional actions that students can take, both works strive to rearticulate student protests as “something larger” than a single-focus fight against tuition and fee hikes. Instead,

both collections consider student protesters to constitute an emerging movement that contains the “seeds of a *politics*” (Hancox 2011: 90), one that is fundamentally anti-capitalist yet unconstrained by the kind of dogmatism, sectarianism or emphasis on ideological purity that was characteristic of the student left during the 1960s and 1970s. Both editorial teams underscore the reality that today’s activists “no longer live in a time where capitalism guarantees full employment,” and that the work prospects for degree-holders have deteriorated to such an extent that youths worldwide are condemned to unemployment or flexible, low-wage and precarious employment as well as an inability to survive on their own without incurring massive student-loan and credit-card debt (Solomon and Palmieri 2011: 162, 220). It was in the face of the political and economic crisis of 2009 that University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) students first took to the streets in defiance of the market fundamentalism and corporate-driven educational reforms preached and proposed by the UC and CSU administrations. They boldly proclaimed “We are the crisis!” and set off an intense three-day wave of occupations, marches, sit-ins, blockades, demonstrations and campus shut downs (Solomon and Palmieri 2001: 141).

The tactics and direct actions undertaken by the student activists profiled in these two works directly reflect the ongoing global financial crisis that started in 2008 and various national political crises of legitimacy confronting established neoliberal governing parties in the U.K., Greece, France, Mexico and dictatorships throughout the Arab World, and they serve to constitute “political action for the ephemerality of the postmodern era: antiform, anarchic, decentered and spontaneous” (Hancox 2011: 90). Moving beyond marches, teach-ins and occupations, many activists are experimenting with adventurous and creative new forms of protest such as flash mobs, culture jamming, political art and graffiti, YouTube videos, dubstep, dancehall, hip-hop dance-offs and even literary book blocs. A colourful example of culture jamming was provided to the world by Italian high school and university students who, in open defiance of corporate-driven/government-backed education reform, confronted Italian police and military forces while carrying handmade shields crafted of Plexiglas, foam rubber, cardboard and rope, and spray-painted with book titles by Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Guy Debord and George Orwell. Stressing the Italian state’s violence against free thought, expression and education, the Book Bloc/Arts Against Cuts declaration boldly stated that “Books are our tools—we teach with them, we learn with them, we play with them, we create with them, we make love with them, and, sometimes, we must fight with them” (Solomon and Palmieri 2001: 114). Both collections are peppered with photo essays, maps, how-to guides, communiqués, slogans and “flashback” sections that look at past student rebellions and contemporary analyses by students, course lecturers, union leaders and scholar-activists. Many of the individual testimonials and collective statements included in these texts reveal the importance of affect and subjectivity in organizing political protest

and struggle. By communicating something of the emotional energy and sense of urgency within these student-led protest movements, these two collections do not so much chronicle events as strive to breathe life into new social justice movements.

Despite my deep appreciation of the contribution made by both of these essay collections, I find myself taking issue with them at several junctures. For example, *Springtime* rests upon the colonialist assumption that “progressive” youth- and student-led movements are the prerogative of the global North/First World, and therefore remain alien to the global South, which in this case includes Greece, Puerto Rico, Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt. Such a starting point neglects and renders invisible widespread political unrest in India, Africa and Central and South America, and within racialized communities of colour throughout North America that have their own genealogies of student-led social movements. By focusing on Europe, the volume’s editors neglect to consider the reality that student- and youth-led social movements have always been at the vanguard of radical social change throughout Africa and South America. Students in these regions have disproportionately paid the price for such activism with their lives. Québécois and British students, especially those who possess an anti-nationalist and anti-colonialist outlook, are not remiss in accepting that they have many lessons to learn about building and sustaining large-scale movements against the remnants of colonialism and neo-imperialism from their student counterparts in the Caribbean, Latin America and elsewhere.

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My reading of *Springtime* also leads me to question the characterization of movements to topple dictatorships in the Arab and Muslim worlds as somehow akin to student agitation against tuition-fee hikes. I myself do not wish to privilege one movement over others as more or less politically legitimate or militantly radical, but I do believe that it remains a gross oversight to offer no differentiation whatsoever between movements. While the stakes are high for every youth and student collective on the front lines of political struggle, the risks of being victimized by the full force of repressive state violence are not shared equally. For example, do hyper-criminalized, low-income brown and black youths in the U.K. or U.S., who may never access higher education, share the same risks when participating in mass demonstrations against fees and cuts to public education as their white, upper-middle-class counterparts with parents who can easily afford to bail them out of jail? What of the risks faced by Arab youths and students working to overthrow First World-backed dictatorships and extralegal paramilitaries that deliberately assassinate citizens who protest against tyrannical regimes? Instead of primarily offering a class-based analysis and engaging in cultural relativism, intersections that link class with racism, colonialism and imperialism must also be accounted for when answering questions concerning who is disproportionately affected by the nation-state’s violent mechanisms of repression.

My critique of *Fight Back!* falls along the same lines as my analysis of *Springtime* insofar as it concerns the token inclusion of anti-racist analysis in Dan Hancox's collection. Beyond lacking an intersectional analysis that demonstrates how race, class and gender are interlocking forms of oppression, this collection proceeds to include articles that uncritically romanticize urban poor black and brown youth and portray them, unfairly, as vanguards of the student-initiated protests that erupted into British politics based solely on their ability to dance and create spontaneous parties with an eclectic soundtrack comprised of dancehall, hip-hop and grime. Hancox's article "This Is Our Riot: POW!" is an enjoyable article that explores the protest culture of the so-called "banlieue-style youth...from the poorer parts of London" who contributed to the protests of December 9, 2010, by bringing "their music with them" (266). This article, which focuses on the participation of the non-universitied majority of racialized youths—those who are disproportionately affected by cuts to subsidies that would help them stay in high school and continue on to university—stands alone in portraying the diverse political works that these youths actually undertake. In contrast, an article like Anthony Barnett's "Will the 'Tens' Trump the 'Sixties'?" erroneously claims that racism was not much of an issue in the 1960s and 1970s because "there weren't significant numbers of black and ethnic-minority students to make their participation an issue" (284). Barnett wonders why there were relatively more non-university black youth participating in the street protests that occurred throughout the winter of 2010–11 than there were black university students, but he offers nothing by way of an answer.

Also problematic is Hancox's labeling of the actions of youth of colour as "riots" instead of "protests," a terminological slippage that remains dangerous insofar as it reinforces popular perceptions of racialized youth riots as parties and entertainment. It takes skill to liven up protesters who have been kettled by police in freezing weather, just as it does to engage in high-level student-government negotiations. I have no doubt that working-class youths of colour in the U.K. make use of a diverse array of strategies and tactics to achieve their goals, as do their more middle-class white counterparts, but I would have liked to have seen evidence of this diversity presented in *Fight Back!*. As it stands, the collection does a disservice to poor and non-white youths and students by tokenizing their participation in and limiting their potential contribution to creating a sustainable culture of protest, one strong enough to resist the pressures of corporate cooptation and state repression.

Like the student activists profiled in *Fight Back!* who are aware of the need to engage marginalized youth of colour into the wider discourse (316), the Quebec student movement needs to pay serious attention to the disparity between the student strike movement and Aboriginal, black, Latino and Filipino youths who have disproportionately suffered at the hands of a racist and colonialist educational system, who have been hindered from accessing higher public education, and who are dropping out (or being "pushed out" by the popularity of zero-tolerance

policies) of secondary school in record numbers. What difficulties do racialized poor and working-class youths face when positioning themselves within the wider protest movement? Do these young people need to assimilate themselves into the dominant student movement and adapt its discourse to fit their own needs, or can university students do more to “flip the script” on adult-youth power relations and facilitate critical engagements with youths that allow them to build their own strategic capacity and enter the movement when and where they collectively choose? Although I have criticized *Fight Back!* for failing to incorporate a sustained analysis of racist class oppression, I applaud the volume’s editors for selecting articles that speak directly to how government cutbacks affect poor racialized youth and cut them off from access to education and training beyond the secondary level.

While my main critique of these two collections centres on their lack of genuine racial critique, an article like the one provided by Kanja Sessay in *Springtime* serves as a model for just such an analysis. Sessay’s “Education Cuts, Class and Racism” charts the history of the National Union of Students (NUS)’s Black Students Campaign, a militantly anti-capitalist and anti-racist student-labour-grassroots community coalition built by one million African, Asian, Arab and Caribbean students, workers and community activists (23). Sessay underscores how students of colour not only danced their way through the movement but actively engaged in *all* facets of building the foundation necessary for a general public-sector strike against neoliberal austerity measures and corporate tax avoidance in collaboration with progressive labour unions, student coalitions and youth. Sessay is one of the few contributors to underscore how the burden of current austerity measures adopted in the U.K. will be much heavier for the black urban poor and working class, especially youths and women who are already suffering from high levels of unemployment and underemployment (25). Sessay’s intersectional analysis of the differential effects of unfair economic policies is much appreciated and should be further developed in future compilations documenting student activism.

The overall strength of these two collections lies in their focus on social media and informal education within student-led social movements. Both *Fight Back!* and *Springtime* raise important questions that can animate other action-based research projects focusing on transnational social movements, such as: How are youth and student activists using social media and informal educational tools against the privatization of public universities from within their movements and coalitions? How does their use of these strategies and tools enable them to enhance their strategic capacity and collective knowledge in defence of public and liberal education?

Future action-based research should build on the scholarship that has been collaboratively produced by these two editorial teams looking at the role of media production and the networking capacities of social media to link the efforts of student activism transnationally. Both of these collections serve to inspire hope and provide a compendium of new strategies and tactics robust enough to inspire future

direct actions. Even if youths and students ultimately fail to achieve their immediate goal of freezing tuition fees, they have already succeeded in inspiring millions of others worldwide to usher in a new student-led global justice movement driven by an alternative “globalization from below.”