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Students' futures uncertain as Québec gov't enters new era

NICK
TAYLOR-VAISEY



The Fulcrum

"The three major parties in the province—the Liberals, the PQ, and ADQ (Action Démocratique du Québec)—have come to expect that in Québec politics, there are winners and losers. And until last week, Charest and PQ leader André Boisclair each expected to win in a landslide."

OTTAWA (CUP)—The last time Quebecers elected a minority government was in 1878—and the education system in the province was vastly different than today. The government was nearly a century away from creating the *Université du Québec* network, and McGill University had barely topped an enrolment of 1000.

Times have clearly changed. During the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, the political landscape exploded, and young Quebecers benefited greatly. McGill now hosts over 33 000 students, there are over a dozen universities in Québec, and after a Parti Québécois (PQ) election win in 1994, tuition fees were frozen, making them the lowest in Canada.

Enter the 2007 provincial election, which brought forward a Liberal minority government. The reigning Griots under Jean Charest promised that, if elected, they would increase tuition fees by \$50 a year until 2012. In their platform, the party stated the 14-year-old freeze "interferes with recruiting and retaining the best professors and researchers, and

handicaps the competitive development of research infrastructure."

Charest says that Québec residents pay, on average, over \$3000 less than the rest of Canadian students, and his planned increases won't interfere with Québec's claim to the lowest tuition fees in North America. On election night, the Liberals barely won, with 48 of 125 seats.

But that doesn't mean tuition fees will increase, or even that they will stay the same. The three major parties in the province—the Liberals, the PQ, and ADQ (Action Démocratique du Québec)—have come to expect that in Québec politics, there are winners and losers. And until last week, Charest and PQ leader André Boisclair each expected to win in a landslide.

Confronted by the prospect of a minority government, they pleaded with Quebecers to elect a majority. It would be easier when dealing with the federal government, they said. More likely, the leaders simply didn't want to work with the opposition in an environment quite similar to that of the federal government. Given that

the Liberals hold such a slim lead in the National Assembly, the two opposition caucuses will no doubt mount enormous opposition to a number of Liberal plans, including increased tuition fees.

Pundits claim the results of the 26 March election affirm the importance of "the issues" to Quebecers—those social issues that have made Québec famous for its left-leaning tendencies. It was a departure from the recent trend toward a sovereignist-federalist divide in the province. Now that every issue has the power to destabilize the fragile legislature in Québec City, parties will likely scramble to gain traction on the issues Quebecers deem most important.

In such a climate, will postsecondary education remain on the politicians' radar? Will prominent student groups keep their issues on the agenda? If the recent federal minority governments provide any insight, then the fewer priorities a leader adopts, the longer their party retains power. The lineups outside the National Assembly are already forming.

Pop culture and lit-crit just don't mix

Literary theory is important—just don't beat it to death with modern texts

MONA
STRUTHERS



The Phoenix

KELOWNA, BC (CUP)—As an English student with a focus on the contemporary, I've always looked to pop culture classes as easy credits. There are a number of reasons for this: I feel like I might recognize the texts studied in pop classes; I'd rather study Toni Morrison and Timothy Findley than William Shakespeare; I can relate to modern characters and grasp thematic concepts more quickly. Perhaps most importantly, I enjoy reading about familiar places and things, and then connecting those places and things to Kevin Bacon—and eventually, to myself.

Unfortunately, pop-culture study has a dark side: it can be downright excruciating. This happens when cultural texts are hammered into frames for literary, psychological or sociological theories that they just don't fit into. Suddenly a film's *mise en scène*, a novel's mention of the colour red or a musical track's white space cease to exist as an independent act of creative expression and instead becomes an expression of cultural theory.

Don't get me wrong: interpreting text using the work of theorists like Michel Foucault or Jacques Lacan is neat-o. When a professor actually takes the time to explain Lacan's ideas about lack, I felt really excited, suddenly exposed to a new perspective that I can apply to things. But, more often than not, there isn't time for explanation—

only to summarize books of innovative thought into three or four fatally reductive bullets on an overhead or handout. It's in these cases that I feel frustrated, because I'm being taught a *Literary Theory for Dummies* version instead.

All or nothing at all—that's what I want. When a class on culture consists of little more than using bits of theory, I get the feeling that the professor is still trying to convince him- or herself that pop culture deserves to be studied in the first place.

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The problem is that many theories merit entire courses and cannot be crammed into the spaces between novels, film or poetry in an English class. Many professors only have time to present a vague, paint-by-numbers summary of one topic, one idea, out of context.

For people like me, who are actually interested in learning more about these theorists, these incomplete forays into lit-crit theory are irritating because they're too specific and reductive to be useful outside of the course. For example, I would have gladly spent a semester studying the work of

Lacan, Derrida, Butler, Sartre, Deleuze, Haraway, Levinas—I like theory, okay? But lately I feel like I'll only ever learn it with any comprehension on my own, outside of university.

As a solution to my complaint, I'd love to see more pop-culture profs with enough confidence in the texts they teach to move forward without depending on theoretical crutches that are too often contrived and little more than tenuous. I'd rather see a more basic treatment of pop culture texts—a more near-sighted approach, and one that gives creative power to the author, rather than writing off the artist's work as little more than flesh on the bones of intellectual theory.

Classes should also be described more precisely so that students can make better choices before they register. For example, I wouldn't take a class called "A Lacanian analysis of Rave," but I might sign up for "Levinas and 21st-century desire."

The near-sighted method I'm advocating is pretty much the historicist approach. I'm not sure why historical context has become so secondary in some courses: the knowledge I take from pop culture is largely composed of specific information I've learned about particular artists. Facts about production, the strange habits of writers, influences, sources of inspiration, causes of death, the budget of a film and its subsequent success/failure—and not paradigms of analysis.

What it all comes down to is: if I want to understand a theorist I will find their work and read it. But if I want to learn about 20th- or 21st-century literature and Derrida shows up more than Joyce, there had better be a damned good reason.