

Masked Protest in the Age of Austerity: State Violence, Anonymous Bodies, and Resistance “In the Red”

Jennifer B. Spiegel

In May of 2012, at the height of the longest and largest student strike in Canadian history, the city of Montreal banned the wearing of masks at protests, enforceable at the discretion of the police with a fine of up to three thousand dollars. The bill foreshadowed a Canadian federal ban on masks that would be passed in the fall of 2012 criminalizing mask wearing at protests, with a maximum penalty of ten years in prison. The timing of these laws was no coincidence. While the situation was sparsely covered in the North American media outside of Quebec, the Quebec student movement had not only succeeded in shutting down most of the colleges and universities in the province for up to six months, it had also repeatedly mobilized hundreds of thousands of supporters in the streets. At the height of the strike, approximately 230,000 students were on strike, nearly three-quarters of Quebec’s postsecondary student population. Organizers estimated that the largest street march was attended by as many as 500,000 people.

The strike had been sparked by the government’s acceptance of what they called their “Fair and Balanced University Funding Plan,” in which tuition increases of 75 percent were proposed, alongside the privatization of research that would thereby increasingly be tied to industry.¹ This priva-

Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own.

1. Gouvernement du Québec, “2011–2012 Budget: A Fair and Balanced University Funding Plan to Give Québec the Means to Fulfil Its Ambitions,” 2011, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, www.budget.finances.gouv.qc.ca/Budget/2011-2012/en/documents/Educationen.pdf

Critical Inquiry 41 (Summer 2015)

© 2015 by The University of Chicago. 0093-1896/15/4104-0007\$10.00. All rights reserved.

tization of the cost of education came precisely at a time when young people were already squarely in debt or “squarely in the red” as it became anglicized in Quebec from the French phrase “carrément dans le rouge.”² For six months, Quebec—in particular, its largest city, Montreal—was red with hundreds of thousands of red squares pinned to lapels and school bags, draped across trees, and painted on signs. What had begun as a protest against rising tuition had become, for many, a protest against austerity measures prompting the defunding of public services, leaving individuals to fend for themselves without the economic resources to do so. As images of police brutality flooded the media, with daily pepper spraying and reports of injuries from police batons and rubber bullets causing at least one student to lose an eye,³ the protest was also, for many, a fight to maintain freedom of assembly and political expression.

Over the course of the strike, myriad tactics were used to mobilize the population and put pressure on the government. However, while hundreds of thousands of people in Quebec sported red squares for months, only a small minority of those attending protests were routinely clad in masks. So why, one might ask, would the government make it a priority to pass a law banning masks in the midst of this crisis?

This question can only be answered if we look at the role masks had been playing both locally and globally within protest movements leading up to the ban and the social logics masks embody, as well as the broader policy and disciplinary measures to which this ban belongs. In what follows, I explain how the mask ban sought to divide, order, and control would-be allies in the fight against austerity measures, undercutting attempts to build a collective front and maligning those who sought to adopt the face of the collective. I then go on to illustrate how creative strategies

2. For a history of the red square as the symbol of the Quebec student movement, see Olivia Messer, “Squarely in the Red: The History Behind That Felt on Your Lapel,” *The McGill Daily*, 31 Mar. 2012, www.mcgilldaily.com/2012/03/squarely-in-the-red/. Olivier Asselin’s “Red Square: A Colored Form’s Political Destiny,” *Theory and Event* 15, no. 3, Supplement (2012), further places the symbol within the context of art history and visual culture.

3. There are no reliable statistics on the large number of people injured by police batons, tear gas, pepper spray, stun guns, or percussion bombs, but there is a report; see Ligue des droits et libertés, Association des juristes progressistes, and the Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante, “Repression, Discrimination and the Student Strike: Testimonies and Analysis,” trans. Maureen McMahon, 29 Apr. 2013, liguedesdroits.ca/wp-content/fichiers/repression-report-2012-final-web.pdf. It revealed that by 3 September 2012 a total of 3,509 people had been arrested and that 274 people responded to their call to report experiences of police repression during the student strike.

JENNIFER BETH SPIEGEL is a research fellow at Concordia University in Montreal.

for adopting the common persona of masks, from black scarves to clown makeup, resisted such attempts to individualize and discipline particular protestors. I argue that a democratic notion of persons must not be contingent on any particular or individualizing quality and that such a notion necessarily points to the political quality of the mask that has historically underscored the development of notions of the person as a *social* actor with a political role to play. I will end with a discussion of how the use of masks resists the moral subjectivity that comes with the individualization of debt, insisting instead on collectivity.

Divide, Order, Control: Of Debt and Discipline

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault showed how disciplinary institutions have been pervasive ever since the rise of nation-states, shaping social subjectivities of the populace. However, with the rise of precarious work and the growing global wealth gap, mechanisms for maintaining social order are shifting to what Gilles Deleuze called “societies of control.”⁴ While, as David Graeber has shown, debt has been a formative construct of civilization, with the threat of violent enforcement utilized to ensure compliance and maintain social hierarchies,⁵ in the twenty-first century the force of debt in people’s lives has become acutely palpable. In the past few decades, global capitalism has increasingly functioned according to what Maurizio Lazzarato aptly calls the “debt economy”—an economy predicated on the buying and selling of debt, in which individuals and nations alike are beholden to their creditors. This system shapes not only financial transactions but the entire production of social subjectivity. As Lazzarato writes, “the debtor is ‘free,’ but his actions, his behavior, are confined to the limits defined by the debt he has entered into.”⁶

The debt relation is and has always been so powerful not only because of the financial subordination it inscribes but more pervasively because of the manner in which it has been moralized throughout history, with the poor and the indebted being shamed (for their need, for instance, of social assistance) or, prior to the development of the welfare state, even imprisoned—a phenomenon which is now seeing a resurgence in the United States.⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* is predicated in

4. See Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3–7.

5. See David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York, 2011).

6. Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles, 2012), pp. 8, 31; hereafter abbreviated *M*.

7. On 28 December 2014, *NewsHour* ran “Return of the Debtors’ Prison? Many Jailed for Inability to Pay Fines,” www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/return-debtors-prison. This is one of several stories PBS has run on this theme.

part on the burning of moral and legal precepts onto the flesh of those who owe something by those with access to the means of corporal discipline, ensuring that they will not forget the debts and behavior expected of them.⁸ Credit becomes the means of social organization; it “implies the molding and control of subjectivity such that ‘labor’ becomes indistinguishable from ‘work on the self’” (M, p. 33). Students, when not working for pay, labor for course credit as a means of making themselves suitable subjects of society, eventually able to work to repay debts incurred while studying.

At the heart of the struggle against rising tuition in Quebec thus lies the question of what potential logics for the future would be put in motion: what education and for whom? But also to whom would this future be accountable? If students, and the public more generally, are “squarely in the red,” the future is always already accountable to those whom they must repay, beholden to their promises to be personally accountable for these debts. The unspoken maxim has become: behave, be careful, or you could fall from your place of relative security.

The threat of police violence and the criminalization of political expression as a preemptive measure deepened this logic, a logic which, as Brian Massumi writes, has become “the political mode of expression of neoliberalism’s colonization of all sectors of life by the economic model.”⁹ As the situation escalated, faculty and, more often, students were pepper-sprayed, beaten, and arrested for participating in strike actions on campus. The preemptive and disciplinary policing that began on campus quickly spread to the streets. This peaked with the introduction of a “special law,” Bill 78, that made it possible to arrest and fine anyone seen to be “promoting” the breaking of the law, anyone blocking classes, and anyone in a public gathering larger than fifty people that had not previously alerted the police to its route.¹⁰ The bill was introduced at the provincial level within weeks of Montreal’s municipal antimask legislation, along with other amendments to municipal protest rights (P-6), suggesting that all laws and amendments were part of the same logic of preemptive control (fig. 1).¹¹

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in “*On the Genealogy of Morals*” and “*Ecce Homo*,” trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1967).

9. Brian Massumi, “Buying Out: Of Capitulation and Contestation,” *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media* 6 (Spring 2012), wi.mobilities.ca/buying-out-of-capitulation-and-contestation/

10. Madam Michelle Courchesne, “Bill 78: An Act to Enable Students to Receive Instruction From the Postsecondary Institutions They Attend,” introduced in the Quebec National Assembly, 2nd sess., 39th legislature, 2012, www.assnat.qc.ca/fr/document/60867.html

11. City of Montreal, “By-Law Amending the By-Law Concerning the Prevention of Breaches of the Peace, Public Order and Safety, and the Use of Public Property (R.B.C.M., Chapter P-6),” By-Law 12-024, 18 May 2012, ville.montreal.qc.ca/sel/sypre-consultation/afficherpdf?idDoc=23795&typeDoc=1



FIGURE 1. Photo by Marco Simonsen-Sereda (Blogocram).

In the media and amongst police spokespeople and politicians, masks became associated with perpetrators of unregulated violence. In a bid to defend such preemptive legislation, the head of Montreal's police union appealed to the ubiquitous good protestor/bad protestor divide: "The objective for us is to catch these trouble-makers before the situation spirals out of control, so that others, including families with children, can protest in peace and security."¹² The justification offered by Montreal's Mayor Gérald Tremblay: "When your cause is just and your intentions are good, why hide your face or refuse to give your itinerary to police?"¹³

The wearing of masks became not only symbolically associated with criminal behavior but a crime in itself. Such criminalization could only be justified on preemptive grounds because other criminal acts with which the mask became associated were already enshrined in the criminal code—those accused of such crimes (for example, breaking windows) could already be arrested and prosecuted. What was criminalized, then, was not the obscuring of identity while committing a crime but simply the obscur-

12. Myles Dolphin, "Montreal Bylaw Could Offer Preview of Federal Mask Ban," *CTV News*, 16 May 2012, www.ctvnews.ca/montreal-bylaw-could-offer-preview-of-federal-mask-ban-1.823895#ixzz2MZ8OLLah

13. Quoted in QMI Agency, "Montreal Bans Masks at Protests," *Sun News*, 18 May 2012, [web.archive.org/web/20150213044149/http://www.sunnewsnetwork.ca/sunnews/politics/archives/2012/05/20120518-143325.html](http://www.sunnewsnetwork.ca/sunnews/politics/archives/2012/05/20120518-143325.html)

ing of personal identity in itself.¹⁴ “Good intentions” were conflated with collaboration with the police and the revealing of one’s individual identity. Indeed, these three elements (goodness, personal individual identification, and police-ability) became oddly synonymous. The individual had to be codeable as an atomized unit, an individual, or what Deleuze calls a “dividual” able to be processed by various legal institutions.¹⁵

This codeability of the individual, however, applied only to would-be dissidents. At the same time that legislation and policies were being put in place to criminalize the obscuring of individual identity and increase levels of surveillance,¹⁶ state functionaries, notably the police, were retreating into anonymity and actively criminalizing the documentation of their activities. Not only are riot police protected and obscured behind their masks but cases abounded in Montreal, as across Canada and the United States, of officers removing or hiding their badge numbers, making it impossible for charges to be brought against them for brutality and breaching the law and their own codes of conduct.¹⁷ During the Montreal protests, independent media—in particular the university-based community video network (CUTV), which gained notoriety for live streaming every nightly protest, amongst other feats—was frequently targeted by police and their equipment destroyed.¹⁸ In the United States, cases of individuals arrested and charged for filming police officers multiply,¹⁹ while high-profile cases such as those of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, both charged with breaching national security for exposing to the American people state doc-

14. I first elaborated this critique of police justification of the mask ban in a theatrical piece in an online multimedia forum; see J. B. Spiegel, “Masking and Unmasking: Of Masquerades and Matraques,” *Transmutations* 1 (Spring 2013), transmutations.org/site/masking-unmasking-of-masquerades-matraques

15. Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” p. 5.

16. Both the websites of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have detailed concerns on recent laws and policies increasing state surveillance of individuals across various technological platforms. See Canadian Civil Liberties Association, “(Un)Lawful Access: Stop Online Spying,” ccla.org/our-work/public-safety/privacy/unlawful-access-stop-online-spying, and American Civil Liberties Union, “Rein in the Surveillance State,” www.aclu.org/rein-surveillance-state

17. Allegations of police hiding badges and identity numbers have been proliferating throughout North America, but police have rarely been reprimanded for this evasion of policy. In Toronto, following the G20 protests, ninety officers did, in fact, face disciplinary measures for hiding their identity; however, the charges were dropped due to technical issues.

18. See Grant Buckler, “Police Mistreatment of Journalists Reported in Montreal,” The Canadian Journalism Project, 15 June 2012, j-source.ca/article/police-mistreatment-journalists-reported-montreal

19. See, for instance, Radley Balko, “Despite Court Rulings, People Are Still Getting Arrested for Recording On-Duty Cops,” *The Washington Post*, 13 May 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2014/05/13/despite-court-rulings-people-are-still-getting-arrested-for-recording-on-duty-cops/

uments concerning American government activity, further anchor the asymmetrical logic of coding and surveilling individuals while *obscuring* the actions of public forces that, in principle, serve and answer to these same individuals.

This social logic is the continuation of domestic surveillance, censorship, and crowd control measures put in place during the Bush administration; it is a logic that extends the Weberian analysis of the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, where legitimacy is always already circularly defined as endorsed by the state.²⁰ After the 9/11 bombings of the Twin Towers in New York City, all those who protested state policies began to be labelled as terrorists, effectively driving social movements underground if not dissipating them completely.²¹ In 2002, following the repression of alter-globalization movements, Naomi Klein pointed out that "this is the truly insidious effect of police violence: if protestors are publicly treated like criminals regularly enough, they start to look like criminals, and we begin, albeit unconsciously, to equate activism with sinister wrongdoing, even terrorism."²² This is precisely what happened in the case of the student movement and the demonization of masked protest therein. From the outset of the student movement, talk of violent protestors filled the mainstream media, and this despite reports that, while a few clashes took place between students on the picket lines, the only serious civilian injuries that appear to have been incurred were those inflicted by the police upon student picketers and others involved in street protests.²³ The accusation that protestors were themselves intimidating and violent was, however, used as a justification for the allegedly law-preserving sanctions and violence unleashed *on* protestors.

The criminality associated with masks was extended to any physical adoption of identification with the student movement. In early June 2012, after the Minister of Culture declared the red square to be a symbol of violence and intimidation, reports of preemptive arrests began to proliferate, including people being searched, arrested, and detained simply for

20. See Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," *Essays in Sociology* (New York, 1946), pp. 77–128.

21. See Nancy Chang, *Silencing Political Dissent: How Post-September 11 Anti-Terrorism Measures Threaten our Civil Liberties* (New York, 2002).

22. Naomi Klein, *Fences and Windows: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the Globalization Debate* (Toronto, 2002), p. 122.

23. For documentation and analysis of false accusations of student violence as well as testimonials and analysis of injuries incurred by protestors, see Ligue des droits et libertés, Association des juristes progressistes, and the Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante, "Repression, Discrimination and the Student Strike."

wearing the red square.²⁴ In one particularly ironic case, a master's student from the University of Montreal reported being arrested for wearing a red square while reading George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on the Montreal metro.²⁵ This criminalization of dissent prompted some protestors to distinguish themselves from the maligned collective and to call for distinguishing between those "good protestors," willing to be identified and coded as law-abiding dissenters, and the "bad protestors" ready to overturn laws restricting protest. In some cases, the "good," law-abiding protestors turned over "bad," masked, and otherwise deviant protestors to the police as a sign of willingness to cooperate in the maintenance of order, helping to ensure that these dissidents could be processed by the authorities.²⁶

The asymmetry in surveillance—that a "good subject" is codeable by the state, but that those functioning in the name of the state may remain anonymous in carrying out their dictates, regardless of not only the constitutionality but even the basic legality of their actions, highlights an emerging social logic at work in the era of austerity. The role of the state becomes not one of serving the polis but of ensuring that people maintain their various financial commitments. Those who challenge the smooth functioning of this system through strikes or disruptive protest may thus be punished.

Within this order, not only speech and identity, but silence and anonymity themselves become highly manipulated as discourse. Wendy Brown has pointed out that in some cases the adoption of silence and anonymity can act as a form of resistance to the liberal logic of speaking the identity of the group to which one is taken to belong, an act which can be used as a performative to maintain the legitimacy of consultation practices or offer the illusion of knowledge about a group.²⁷ In the discourse of order

24. See "Montreal Police Accused of Profiling Red Square Wearers," *The Globe and Mail*, 11 June 2012, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/montreal-police-accused-of-profiling-red-square-wearers/article4246884/, and the Ligue des droits et libertés, Association des juristes progressistes, and the Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante, "Repression, Discrimination and the Student Strike."

25. See Marilyne Veilleux, "Ma Journée en prison pour avoir lu 1984 dans le métro," *Les Martans enragés*, 18 June 2012, cobp.resist.ca/temoignage-de-brutalite-policier/ma-journ-e-en-prison-pour-avoir-lu-1984-dans-le-m-tro?page=12

26. Amongst francophone radical activists, those who collaborate with the police to ensure activist tactics remain peaceful and turn in activists engaged in disruptive actions are known as *paciflics* (a term which roughly translates to peace police). For an example of an accusation of *paciflics* activity, see Collectif anarchiste La Nuit, "Manifestation sur fond de loi spéciale," *Voix de Faits: Blogue de combat*, 18 May 2012, voixdefaits.blogspot.ca/2012/05/manifestation-sur-fond-de-loi-speciale.html

27. See Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, N.J., 2005).

and security, however, despite the fact that dissent is punished, the silence of the majority is repeatedly utilized as discursive acquiescence to policies and thus as an indictment of those who protest. Violent policing in the maintenance of this order is continually legitimized by the need to protect the silent majority. This silent majority is thus rhetorically absorbed into the anonymity of state functionaries, who need not be heard from or identified in order to have the state function in their name. The self-declared and intentionally anonymous protestor is presented as the enemy of the tacitly anonymous and unconsulted civilian at the very moment at which the anonymous protestor seeks to activate the basic right to political expression of the anonymous civilian regardless of individual qualities—name, age, ethnicity, or economic status.

Masked Resistance and Collective Personas

The rushing through of antimask legislation at the height of the Quebec student movement was presumably intended to render protests more manageable by police. In actuality, however, the legislation increased the use of masks as a popular form of civil disobedience. On 29 March 2012, prior to the passage of the mask legislation, a protest was called, under the name and thematic *Le Grand Masquerade* (The Big Masquerade). As explained by one of the organizers, Camille Robert:

Our aim is to protest the tuition hike, but also to protest the proposal of Mayor Tremblay who wants to make wearing masks illegal. We would like to act as a reminder that people who don masks do not necessarily do so in order to be threatening. Sometimes it is to avoid racial profiling, to protect oneself from tear gas or to be creative, like today.²⁸

An array of carnivalesque disguises appeared, from clown noses, makeup, and wigs to giant multiperson Chinese dragons, to carnival, Halloween, and Christmas masks and full-blown animal costumes, depending on the season and occasion. The Anonymous (Guy Fawkes) masks made popular by the hacktivist collective as well as the Occupy movement could also frequently be seen, as well as the more standard black bandanas, goggles, and scarves often associated with black bloc tactics, though also often worn by anyone who expects to be pepper-sprayed at a protest without warning.

As W. J. T. Mitchell points out in his analysis of tactics used during the Occupy movement, a trend shared in twenty-first century protest from

28. QMI Agency, "Après de la palais de justice, la mascarade," *Canoë*, 29 Mar. 2012, fr.canoë.ca/infos/quebeccanada/education/archives/2012/03/20120329-101914.html

Tahrir Square to Occupy is the refusal to have a “representative *face* come forward as the avatar of the revolution”—a move which is both tactical and ideological.²⁹ In order to discipline and control, the police need to be able to identify individuals and personalize their crimes as the wrongdoing of delinquents. Anonymous protest, however, not only skirts disciplinary tactics but also asserts the protesting body as collective and depersonalized.

The black bloc is likely the most maligned face of masked protest, as well as the most frequently reported by mass media outlets, although the term itself, contrary to its frequent deployment, describes not a group but a set of tactics temporarily adopted. Its name, according to Graeber likely invented by the German police,³⁰ hinged on a costuming and mask that not only *conceals* identity but also *creates* a readily recognizable *group identity*. Distinguishing themselves through their attire, they confront police for a variety of reasons, including to protect other protestors from arrest (thus making themselves vulnerable).

The use of the black bloc as a tactic spread across activist communities in the 1990s. At the same time, the Zapatistas in Mexico also famously adopted masking tactics, typically ski masks and red bandanas. “We are you” spread across the world as one of the Zapatistas’ catch phrases.³¹ This use of masked identity to fulfill the double task of obscuring individuality and creating a collective identity has been further spread via the web through the hacktivist interventions of Anonymous, adopting the inspiration of the graphic novel/film character V from *V for Vendetta* (dir. James McTeigue), who was patterned after a secular reinvention of the Catholic militant Guy Fawkes.³² The power of the mask, in the case of the Zapatistas, and more recently, in the use of the Guy Fawkes mask in protests from Occupy to the Quebec student movement, lies in enabling the activist to stand in for all oppressed people (fig. 2).

This collective identity offers the sense that the rising oppressed are omnipresent—that one can brutalize and imprison single individuals, but that their spirit will remain free and embodied by others. Such an anonymous and collective notion of identity runs counter to much of contemporary liberal understandings of personhood and particularly the rights

29. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation,” *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Autumn 2012): 9; hereafter abbreviated “I.”

30. See Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland, 2009), p. 406.

31. Érik Bordeleau, *Foucault Anonymat* (Montreal, 2012), p. 10.

32. As Mitchell notes, “Fawkes is the legendary leader of a Catholic resistance movement that attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605. He was transformed into a positive secular hero by the 1980s graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, which was adapted for a film of the same title by the Wachowski brothers in 2006” (“I,” p. 9).



FIGURE 2. Photo by Simonsen-Sereda (Blogocram).

and responsibilities that the individual is presumed to hold, often over and against the collective. Ironically and significantly, however, the very legal notion of a person is grounded in the Latin concept of *persona*, derived from the masks worn by actors in ancient Greece. As Hannah Arendt points out:

In its original meaning, it signified the mask ancient actors used to wear in a play. . . . The mask as such obviously had two functions: it had to hide, or rather to replace, the actor's own face and countenance, but in a way that would make it possible for the voice to sound through. At any rate, it was in this twofold understanding of a mask through which a voice sounds that the word *persona* became a metaphor and was carried from the language of the theatre into legal terminology.³³

The *persona*, that is to say the mask worn and the role played, became the legal face of the person because it was the public face and the role through which a voice could be heard. For Arendt, this voice is a political voice to the extent that the immediate vulnerability of the individual is not what is at stake. This is why order maintained by violence shuts down politics: it

33. Quoted in Norma Claire Moruzzi, *Speaking through the Mask: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Social Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000), p. 36.

negates the ability to speak through a mask—to speak as a public entity guided by ideas rather than by immediate survival. When one is silenced by fear for one's life or bodily safety (or fear of incarceration or sanction that would prevent one from pursuing a livelihood), there can be no political discussion.³⁴

The mask, in its original meaning as *persona*, is thus paradoxically the *precondition* for public engagement; whereas a body, or even a face in its purely personal incarnation, may be passively molded, the face or role one *puts forward* shapes political agency. The wearing of a mask *obscures* the public *persona* of the individual in the contemporary sense, but it also *reinvents* it. It replaces the *individuality*—or the “dividuality”—of the person with the person who is at once corporeal and vulnerable on one hand, *and* collective, public, and able to carry the power of ideas that transcend the individual on the other. The mask thus recreates a *future* public *persona* through which to intervene in the social and political dynamics that circumscribe existing possibilities. If social roles are coded by what is always already deemed legitimate according to existing institutions, in adopting and subverting those roles, wearing them as masks through which to act and speak becomes a strategy for making space for another kind of politics. As Norma Claire Moruzzi writes, the masquerade, in its various manifestations, “allows us to reconsider the supposed inability of those traditionally excluded from the public realm to represent themselves within it.”³⁵ To wear the mask becomes a way of making the *choice* to engage in collective politics and to engage in a particular manner. In the case of masks donned by activists, that is to say, by those who do not have a formalized place or role through which to intervene in a manner that befits the change they seek, the mask becomes a tactic of liberation.

In the liberal democratic state, we may presume that one can only act *individually* or through an elected individual representative, and that it is on this basis that our legal and political structures function. Significantly, as Giorgio Agamben has pointed out, the advent of the legal discourse associated with the development of liberal states emphasized a notion of the person that hinged precisely on being able to present *not* a public *persona* or a social role, but rather a *body* that could be disciplined. “If it is true that law needs a body in order to be in force, and if one can speak, in this sense, of ‘law’s desire to have a body,’ democracy responds to this desire by compelling law to assume the care of this body,” writes Agam-

34. See Spiegel, “Masking and Unmasking.”

35. Moruzzi, *Speaking through the Mask*, p. 46.

ben.³⁶ What then is occurring in this schema with the dissolution of the welfare state that results from the increasing adoption of austerity measures divesting the state of the care of bodies while providing it with the increased power to discipline these same bodies?

As if in direct response to this question, masking and unmasking became twin tactics in Quebec. *MaNUfestations* (naked marches) began to take place, where protestors were invited to cover their faces with scarves while walking naked in the streets. In some cases, protestors used their bodies as a site of inscription: “Charest, tu veux notre peau?” (you want our flesh?) one protestor wrote on her body, insinuating that the province’s premier wanted to take everything from the youth—not only their money, but also control of their very bodies.³⁷ Stacy Alaimo has argued that the “fleshy vulnerability” of naked protests carves out a place for political contestation by staging an ethical appeal to *care* for the bodies presented.³⁸ Anya Bernstein has pointed out, however, that unmasking, particularly in the case of the Pussy Riot affair, can have a depoliticizing effect, placing the vulnerability of individuals, especially women, above the political intervention that they seek to enact.³⁹

In the case of Quebec, nudity became a collective performative choice allowing the unveiling of the body itself to become an anonymized gesture of the collective—particularly when the faces of the naked bodies were hidden. These naked marches became media events, in which the titillating effects of young naked bodies took precedence over their political statement; however, the political context was never fully eclipsed. If anything, it challenged the very contours of social divisions between the public and the private, as well as the role of bodily life therein, refusing to slot cleanly into the discourses of expression and silence, disclosure and obscurity (fig. 3).

This tactical play of self-exposure as a means of circumventing state violence and control in tandem with strategic (or the expected desire for) anonymity belongs to the growing repertoire of tactics that have been deployed to circumvent the fear associated with surveillance along with the discipline and control it preemptively exerts. Surveillance art, for in-

36. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif., 1998), pp. 124–25.

37. See “Nudité et humour: comment les étudiants québécois manifestent contre la hausse des frais de scolarité,” *La Tribune*, 4 May 2012, www.latribune.fr/actualites/economie/international/20120504trib000696972/nudite-et-humour-comment-les-etudiants-quebecois-manifestent-contre-la-hausse-des-frais-de-scolarité.html

38. Stacy Alaimo, “The Naked Word: The Trans-Corporeal Ethics of the Protesting Body,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20 (Mar. 2010): 24.

39. See Anya Bernstein, “An Inadvertent Sacrifice: Body Politics and Sovereign Power in the Pussy Riot Affair,” *Critical Inquiry* 40 (Autumn 2013): 220–41.



FIGURE 3. Photo by Justin Canning.

stance—during which groups perform for surveillance cameras—as well as recent video campaigns of undocumented persons in the United States that reveal their identities and vulnerable status, intentionally spreading

their stories on social media as a means of gaining public support, are also being used to interrupt fear of surveillance and thus the affective power it generates over action.⁴⁰ The play of masking and unmasking disrupts dichotomies between speech and silence, identity and obscurity, by performing both self-revelation and the refusal to be individualized as identities through which the liabilities of both public persona and bodily vulnerability are leveraged to challenge state power.

Anonymous Singularity and the Soft Faces of Militancy

Resistance to the logic of liberal individualism, however, does not mean a flattening of resistant subjects to a uniform figure (the people, the movement, the proletariat). As has been amply pointed out by new social movement theorists,⁴¹ social movements have been increasingly oriented toward a diversity of tactics, and are often heterogeneous in terms of the positions and identities as well as the material differences in the conditions of those who participate. The rise of masked protest dramatizes the pluralism of these movements; singular, multiple and creative, they enact a reinventing of public roles, without being individualized as the purview of private persons.

In his famous analysis of the carnivalesque in medieval folk cultures, Mikhail Bakhtin explains the longstanding role of masks in disrupting social hierarchies while celebrating multiplicity:

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life.⁴²

This characteristic of the mask was a significant element of the broader phenomena of carnivalesque festivities that allowed for polyvocal, jubilant transformation. In medieval and Renaissance folk cultures, according to Bakhtin, masks offered a play between image and reality. The myriad cases of parody destabilized the sanctity of hierarchies and figureheads—a role distinct from the invocation of the mask as creating mystery and hiding the

40. See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), p. 240.

41. See Baz Kershaw, "Fighting in the Streets: Dramaturgies of Popular Protest, 1968–1989," *New Theatre Quarterly* 13 (Aug. 1997): 255–76; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York, 2004); Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life*, Redes (Durham, N.C., 2008); and "I," amongst others.

42. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (1968; Bloomington, Ind., 1984), pp. 39–40.

true interior nature of an individual that would dominate in the Romantic era. These two versions of the mask are now echoing in the conflicting discourses of state forces seeking to identify the individual behind the mask and of protestors donning masks as a tactic of transformation. Bringing Foucault's logic to bear on the contemporary culture of anonymous resistance, Bordeleau has pointed out that in many cases anonymity becomes a resistance to the logic of individual *interiority* that is characteristic of liberal morality and economy, where the interior truth of the individual is in constant need of disclosure.⁴³

Over the past several centuries, many carnivalesque elements have carried over and been reinvented, bubbling up to the surface in the performative protests of the 1960s and 1970s and morphing in various ways through to the present day, from the interventions and satiric happenings of the Yippies, to Bread and Puppet Theater's famous popularization of giant puppets in protests, to the playful interventions of AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) and others to theatrically advocate for gay rights and the rights of all living with HIV during the rise of the AIDS epidemic. In each case, performative truths, visibility, stereotypes, classifications, and dominant powers are at play, in keeping with the concerns and social climate of the era and collective.⁴⁴ Since the late 1990s, with the rise of the alter-globalization movements and the intensification of policing that went with it, battalions of clown armies began to proliferate across Europe and the Americas.⁴⁵ According to Paul Routledge, the various clown faces act as masks, "afford[ing] a protection from everyday positionalities and conventions enabling the freeing up of personal inhibitions."⁴⁶ Over the course of the Quebec student strike and in the protests that continued in its aftermath, clowns were often seen donning bike helmets, wigs, and noses and hitting plastic shields with little sticks, writing tickets for ridiculous infractions, and yelling in their clownish ways "bouge, bouge, bouge" (move, move, move) as a mockery of the phrase frequently deployed by police as they herded protestors with their riot shields. By such gestures, the spell of fear could be broken and the code of policing could open up to

43. See Bordeleau, *Foucault Anonymat*, pp. 35–47.

44. For a study of the use of play in social movements throughout the twentieth century, see Benjamin Shepard, *Play, Creativity and Social Movements: If I Can't Dance, It's Not My Revolution* (New York, 2011).

45. For an example of a particularly sophisticated and highly trained clown battalion, see, for instance, Kolonel Klepto and Major Up Evil, "The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army Goes to Scotland via a Few Other Places," in *Shut them Down!: The G8, Gleneagles 2005 and the Movement of Movements*, ed. David Harvie et al. (New York, 2005), pp. 243–54.

46. Paul Routledge, "Sensuous Solidarities: Emotion, Politics and Performance in the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army," *Antipode* 44 (Mar. 2012): 436.



FIGURE 4. Photo by Simonsen-Sereda (Blogocram).

humor and to the free and easy breathing of laughter in the face of state repression. Like many tactics of direct action movements “calling for cultural and personal transformation as well as economic and political change” before them,⁴⁷ the diversity of clown faces within clown armies destabilizes the division between the personal and the political, creating spaces for care and compassion amongst those present within contestational movements challenging public policy and the lack of care that protestors accuse austerity policies of precipitating.⁴⁸ Moreover, the proliferation of colorful disguises through which this dissolution of public and private takes place further erodes dichotomies between the singular and the collective, providing an affective manner to express singularity within unified collective practices (fig. 4).⁴⁹

During the Quebec student strike, costumed protestors were organically adopted as mascots of the movement, becoming a salient feature wherein celebrity culture fused with a collective and anonymized ethic. Anarchopanda—a protestor clad from head to toe in a plush panda costume—rapidly became the most consistent and beloved mascot of the

47. Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley, 1991), p. 265.

48. See Klepto and Evil, “The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army Goes to Scotland via a Few Other Places,” p. 247.

49. See Routledge, “Sensuous Solidarities.”

movement, though Banane Rebelle and Bananarchy also became familiar figures. In one photo that rapidly spread across social media Anarchopanda comes face to face in a protest with Socialist Squirrel. In fact, Anarchopanda emerged as a direct response to police brutality against those on the picket lines. The panda outfit appeared to both soften police blows and the tensions that were rising as conflicts between police and protestors heightened. For a long time, few knew who the human within the panda suit really was. He only revealed his identity as Julien Villeneuve, a philosophy professor, when he went to protest the mask ban at city hall.

Even after his unmasking, however, Anarchopanda retained his “specific but non-human mode of embodiment and a rejection (or rather, playful subversion) of the politics of personality.”⁵⁰ The professor insisted on the radical distinction between the mascot persona and the man that made him, speaking of the panda always in the third person. The mascots became the soft faces of militancy. In an apparent attempt to undercut the power of the mascot, the following spring the Montreal police “beheaded” the panda at a protest. The panda was taken into police custody during a protest with the police confiscating the panda head on the grounds that it acted as a mask—and this despite the fact that the identity of the panda was already public knowledge.⁵¹ After much national outrage and ridicule, the head was eventually returned to the professor, but not before the act had spurred a multiplication of panda heads and the creation of a “panda bloc” at protests (figs. 5–6).⁵²

Graeber has described police hatred of festive protests and their tendency to target political art workshops for raids, violently destroying puppets and other art objects as symbolic warfare.⁵³ Larger-than-life, carnivalesque behavior extends the domain of what police would call disorderly conduct, often evading the ability of police to process and control the crowd, but does not read as threatening to television audiences, thus undermining state attempts to control the discourse on dissidence. In an effort to perpetuate the image of protestors as an unruly threat, police attempt whenever possible to eliminate these festive elements from protests, ideally before they appear. In the

50. Alanna Thain, “Anarchopanda’s Soft Subversions,” *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media* 8 (Nov. 2014), wi.mobilities.ca/anarchopandas-soft-subversions

51. See Lynn Moore, “Montreal Cops Behead Anarchopanda” *Montreal Gazette*, 6 Apr. 2013.

52. On 7 Apr. 2013, a short YouTube video called for panda blocs in all protests as a tactic to reclaim the panda head; see Charles Montmeny-Huot, “Anarchopanda: La revanche,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtKMie2c26I

53. See Graeber, “On the Phenomenology of Giant Puppets: Broken Windows, Imaginary Jars of Urine, and the Cosmological Role of the Police in American Culture,” *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire* (Oakland, Calif., 2007), pp. 375–415.



FIGURE 5. Photos by Simonsen-Sereda (Blogocram).

case of the beheading of Anarchopanda, they clearly miscalculated; the story allowed the protest movement, which had largely been abandoned by the media as old news, to once again make national headlines.

Mascots are, in themselves, politically ambiguous. They are marked by their larger-than-life, mythic status as loveable, soft incarnations of often harder forces, whether corporate, athletic, or political. The Montreal police force even has its own loveable bear mascot, Flik, although during student protests there were no reported sightings of Flik alongside the riot police for whom he acted as a soft counterpoint.⁵⁴ When protestors masquerade, however, they challenge the monopoly of the state and those who control the public debate on both the images and, more poignantly, the affective terrain that allows for the possibility, or impossibility, of politics. These more-than-human, larger-than-life figures continually act as reminders that other myths, legends, and horizons could be remade—and literally embraced—to soften and transform the fear and brutality emergent in state repression and hard-line encounters.⁵⁵

54. See “Flik, The Bear Who Wanted To Become a Police Officer,” web.archive.org/web/20091225005258/http://www.spvm.qc.ca/en/jeunesse/enfant-histoire-de-FliK.asp. In French, the term *flic* is slang for police officer.

55. See Spiegel, “Masking and Unmasking.”



FIGURE 6. Photos by Simonsen-Sereda (Blogocram).

“All in the Red”

The relevance of playful anonymity as a tactic for a population increasingly indebted and punished for its inability or unwillingness to accept the social codes imposed was made palpable by a sock puppet by the name of Docteur Chaussette (Doctor Sock) who was featured in a series of YouTube episodes. The learned sock had gone into debt to earn a PhD. She had since become the leader of the union of socks and, as such, spoke for the socks of the protestors who tirelessly marched daily and were repeatedly subject to police brutality in the streets. A sock does, of course, mask the naked identity of the hand (not to mention fingerprints). And indeed, the puppeteer is never credited for the puppet’s shows. Yet to attack a sock puppet would seem the height of absurdity. The sock objected to the treatment by police, insisting that she was not a mask but a puppet, a peaceful puppet, and that she should not be considered illegal.⁵⁶

The levels of playful critique at work in the antics of Docteur Chaussette are multiple and point to the mix of tactics and strategies that contributed to both the success and limits of the movement. Bernard Harcourt proposes the term *political disobedience* to define the social movement contestation modelled during the Occupy protests—a model that eschews forms of policy demands, movement leadership, and the general respect for law

56. Docteur Chaussette, “Docteur Chaussette se présente,” 13 June 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocusz7dWtM

and political processes suggested by civil-disobedience actions in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr.⁵⁷ Whereas, Harcourt points out, the resistance to leadership and spokespersons who can singularly speak for the movement was a defining feature in the Occupy movement, the Quebec student movement did have both leaders and spokespeople representing the decisions made by the various student associations. While the spokesperson of the movement garnering the most media attention, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, repeatedly insisted that he was not a leader and was only empowered to convey the decisions of his assemblies, he nevertheless became revered and maligned as a face of the movement.⁵⁸ Because the heart of the movement was in fact a strike—voted upon in assemblies of associations with preexisting institutional status and small budgets accrued by student fees—it is tempting to consign the movement to the old labor model of social movements. The very presence of the various masked figures as well as the playful episodes of *Docteur Chaussette*, however, resist this flattening (fig. 7).

The hierarchies—both suggested and undermined by a puppet who studies to move from foot to hand, giving her perhaps the eloquence and status attributed to a leader, only to be consigned to a life of debt, fighting for her right to be recognized as a puppet (of whom or what, we might ask), and to avoid being beaten by police as a masked figure—mirror the tensions of contemporary organizing against austerity. For students and workers fighting for the ability to organize collectively in support of access to services and living wages—in an era where most are struggling individually, saddled with debt or the threat of debt—the reinvention of tactics of political disobedience might offer situations of greater equity and collectivity using the skills, knowledge, and resources available. The use of student associations and the economic pressures on colleges and universities leveraged by the strike led to clear demands. However, the movement succeeded in garnering broad popular support precisely because it was not confined to such old structures and well-defined demands but included the masked figures and the general desire to overturn the logic of individualized morality and hierarchies entrenched by debt and austerity.

To be able to call upon faces, identities, and exceptional celebrity leaders means repeating a hierarchy of responsibility, chain of command, and chain of payment. The criminalization as well as the violent policing of

57. See Bernard E. Harcourt, "Political Disobedience," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Autumn 2012): 33–55.

58. See Les Perreux, "Charismatic Quebec Student Spokesman 'in a Tough Position,'" *Globe and Mail*, 11 May 2012, www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/charismatic-quebec-student-spokesman-in-a-tough-position/article4184539/



FIGURE 7. Docteur Chaussette in front of a poster by L'École de la Montagne Rouge (2012).

those who dare to enter into acts of collective resistance to the individuation and hierarchy of rights, roles, and responsibilities is an attempt to burn into the social body and memory an imperative to accept the social terms of the debt economy and the individualization it relies on; to “inscribe the promise of debt repayment on the body itself” (*M*, p. 41).

At the height of the movement, the city of Montreal, particularly the downtown area, was thoroughly occupied; every street became a potential site of intervention. However, as Mitchell points out, the public space claimed for political dissent—whether Tahrir Square, Wall Street, or the entire downtown area of Montreal—is not a priori a political space for political convergence or discussion but is rather, in contemporary societies, always already “*pre-occupied* by the state and the police. . . . Its *pacified* and democratic character, apparently open to all, is sustained by the ever-present possibility of violent eviction” (“I,” p. 10).

The cyclic and omnipresent readiness of the police to intervene has been palpable in Montreal. While throughout the student strike carnivalesque tactics of collective protests permitted viral contagion of resistant affects, their festive spread also heralded its containment as a historic event and festival to be referred to nostalgically almost immediately following the strike, harkening back to the official cooption of the medieval carnivals

of which Bakhtin wrote. In the medieval period, the liberatory dissolution of hierarchy conferred by the carnival, during which the lower classes had an opportunity to dress up as the ruling classes and mock their power, often amounted to little more than a cathartic manner of releasing tensions and frustrations, thereby allowing the order to continue more or less undisturbed and even in some cases return with greater repression.⁵⁹ In the festive crescendo of the student movement protests, when the tradition of casserole protests, in which supporters bang on pots and pans to indicate their support for protestors, was borrowed from Latin America and swept the city of Montreal, the leader of the official opposition party in Quebec was videotaped taking part and was soon afterwards elected as Premier of the province.⁶⁰ However, while the most controversial of the laws, Bill 78, was swiftly repealed by the new government, other antiprotest legislation (specifically the aforementioned amendments to the municipal law P6), measures that the police had in fact opted not to utilize during the student strike, began to be used against those who continued to oppose antiausterity measures and the dissolution of civil liberties. On May Day 2013, in keeping with recent trends, over four-hundred people were arrested and held in custody for more than six hours without access to food, water, or toilets before being released with their \$637 fines for protesting in the streets without an itinerary.⁶¹

Festive collective action and anonymous protest are no more a panacea in the fight against austerity measures than the ability to utilize silence or speech dictates the content of what will be said and how and by whom such utterances can be manipulated. Anonymity and collective symbols can and have been used by police to infiltrate movements and by politicians to coopt transformative demands into election promises, reconcentrating power amongst elite leaders. Moreover, as Lauren Berlant points out, the “politically affective immediacy” of much carnivalesque protest may itself become one more case of utilizing a sense of belonging and solidarity to distract from the hard tasks of redistributing risks, resources, and vulnerabilities. This is particularly so in the midst of a neoliberal present that casts itself as a “space of transition, not only between modes of production and modes of life, but between different animating, sustaining fantasies,

59. See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

60. The reigning Liberal Party of Quebec utilized this video in their own publicity in a failed attempt to undermine the opposition leader. See “Une Publicité libérale montre Pauline Marois frappant des casseroles,” *Radio Canada*, 26 June 2012, ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelles/politique/2012/06/25/003-plq-publicite-marois-casseroles.shtml

61. See Simon Van Vliet, “Une autre Souricière . . . et après?” *Mais*, 3 May 2013, mais.simonvanvliet.info/une-autre-souriciere-et-apres/

adept at absorbing revolutionary utopias in the heterotopia of the marketplace.”⁶² Nevertheless, the rise of masked protest and criminalization of those protesting the concentration of wealth and the dissolution of public services, occurring at the same time that the state is claiming its right to speak for the silent while it obscures its own policies, points to the right to collective identity, not only as a tactic, but as a battleground in social logic itself. This raises the very question of who the polyvocal “we” of the polis really is and how it is protected by the sanctioned force of the officials designated to protect the collective, namely the police.

Though many masks were donned during the 2012 Quebec student strike, the most pervasive collective mark of belonging was, from beginning to end, the symbol of the red square. The symbol has since spread well beyond the Quebec student movement. For several months during the student strike it was adopted by Occupy Wall Street as their Facebook avatar. Shortly thereafter, an American student-movement page was started called “All in the Red” in solidarity with the Quebec student movement, calling for “a nationwide network to spread awareness and organize around the issue of student debt and the wider education crisis through direct action and popular education.”⁶³ The infinitely repeatable symbol of the red square allowed for a viral spread of the occupation of space and public institutions in a manner that clearly targeted austerity measures and the widening wealth gap whereby increasing numbers of people, of all levels of education, find themselves in debt. That the situation is unfolding within the broader contexts of national debts owed to banks has been all but occluded by the pitting of masked protestors against the “silent majority.”⁶⁴

Nearly two years after the first Quebec student protest march against the tuition increases of the “Fair and Balanced University Funding Plan,” the day before the 2013 municipal Montreal elections, a small masked protest was held to oppose the continuing antiprotest legislation. It found itself followed by a helicopter, two buses for shuttling arrestees, and several hundred police officers. If masked protest itself summons a battlefield, it may well be because when the many who are “all in the red” enact this identity as a collective, rather than as individuals, the very moral structure that underpins legal and economic relations within liberal democratic societies is challenged. Creative experimentation with masked protest in this context means experimentation with the very nature of public identity and

62. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, pp. 262, 261.

63. “All in the Red,” www.facebook.com/allinthered/info?ref=page_internal

64. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see *M*, pp. 13–35.

the legitimacy of collective action itself. In the asymmetrical face-offs between anonymous state functionaries and anonymous protestors, free expression under contemporary state capitalism is being increasingly unmasked as fantasy.