

**CITIZENSHIP AND YOUTH SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN CANADA:  
LEARNING CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES**

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**ABSTRACT**

With the general increase in the 'production' of citizenship and global citizenship education scholarship, one might think that we have established a clear and comprehensive understanding of these concepts and their daily implications and possibilities. That may not be the case, and while all claims, contexts and formations of citizenship are important and certainly empower individuals and groups in important ways that directly affect their lives, they do not necessarily explain or actively respond to the qualities of citizenship that people experience, desire or are able to achieve. Our analysis of youth engagement holds that by strengthening the quality of local citizenship, the connections to global citizenship are also affirmed. To discuss and analyse these active youth engagement projects in Canada's public (and to some extent private) spheres, we look into the socio-political formations of three contemporary Canadian youth movements. The first is Lead Now; the second is the Journey of the Nishiyuu and Idle No More and their members; and the third is the student movement that was organized by youth for the adequate funding of higher education in the province of Quebec.

**KEY WORDS**

Canada; Youth; Citizenship.



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# Citizenship and Youth Social Engagement in Canada: Learning Challenges and Possibilities

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## INTRODUCTION

With the recent proliferation of scholarship on citizenship and global citizenship education, one would assume that we have a clear and comprehensive understanding of the concepts and their practical implications and possibilities. As happens with any disciplinary endeavour, the assumption is usually that the more we focus on an area, the more we comprehend its conceptual and theoretical constructions and practical outcomes. While that may be a general epistemic desire, something as complicated as citizenship formations and practices require much more than probing certain zeitgeists or other time-linked examinations of a given field. Since the issue of citizenship is so complex, multi-locational and involves so many agents, it might theoretically seem to be an analytically superfluous idea that is continuously elastic in its formations, deformations and relational features. How then should we interpret emerging issues and the responses needed and enacted by people in such a myriad of socio-political, economic, and environmental locations? How do youth factor into this complex picture – youth, who are ready to take their place in the societal relationships and make sense of their citizenship?

Citizenship rights are often predicated on tenuous geographical attachments that never answer the question: to what extent can people determine

the real nature of their citizenship, and even more importantly, how do they subjectively perceive and act on their rights? When we address citizenship's general categories, we always associate them with identity, belonging, rights and claims. Indeed, employing these four terms one could portray the various contexts and relationships involved in citizenship fairly thoroughly. In addition, these terms can also convey a number of relational concerns that require much more input in order for us to draw conclusions.

Despite this complexity, we still tend to categorise citizenship rights, claims and acquisitions on the basis of three categories. As Isin (2009), among others, notes, contemporary contexts of citizenship usually derive from familial attachments (*jus sanguinis*), the so-called blood relations claims; from geographical birth connections, the land in which one is born (*jus soli*); or migration-triggered, durable location of residence that leads to naturalization (*jus domicilii*). With decades of intense globalization, and particularly with neoliberalism as its conduit, these categories seem insufficient; therefore, in this paper, we pose new questions regarding location and relations of citizenship.

## CITIZENSHIP: LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL CONSIDERATIONS

Generally speaking, all claims, contexts and formations of citizenship are important and empower individuals and groups in ways that directly affect their lives. But they do not explain or analyse the quality of citizenship that people experience, desire or are able to achieve. Indeed, the way we talk about citizenship today is overwhelmingly in terms of geography and practices, so that, more often than not, one is led to equate place/country with citizenship. While legally and in terms of rules and regulations this is still important, it is now time to question the full meaning and endowments of citizenship, which, in our estimation, should focus less on spatial realities and more on how or whether people live in such spaces as engaged claimants of their social, political, economic and educational rights and responsibilities.

With the complex and multi-locational realities of globalization, we also need to view such rights and responsibilities as globally driven, established, and operationalized. Thus, we cannot talk about local citizenship without discussing, and practicing, the global. Rethinking of relations of the local and global in contemporary arrangements that affect citizenship realities doesn't necessarily mean that one cancels out the other. As Abdi and Nas-



em (2008) previously discussed, while global citizenship power relations are certainly skewed in favour of the West and its international institutions, the force of the local is still active, and will have an influence on the trajectories of those relationships. We can see this in social movements that are connected globally / internationally but still actively engage in local sites of struggle. It shows that the global and the local should not be seen as dichotomous locations of issues or citizen responses.

In our analysis of youth engagement, our understanding is that by strengthening the quality of local citizenship, the connections to global citizenship are also affirmed (Abdi & Shultz, 2008; Shultz, 2011). The way we define youth, while inclusive of age categories, is more expansive. While in general terms “youth” is invariably taken to mean people between the ages of 17 and 30, our objective is to go beyond 30, assuming that there are those whose maturity into full adulthood was truncated by problematic, successive economic cycles and that these individuals are still dealing with financial and – by extension – citizenship issues that may formerly have been specific to much younger groups identified as youth. While not totally disavowing age boundaries, we are deliberately defining youth categories as fluid, circumstantial and life-experience related. Perhaps more importantly, with our focus on youth groups and not necessarily on individual youth, our categorizing becomes more social and subsumes those who are closely linked to and take part in youth activities and youth rights campaigns.

Thus, youth becomes an issue of perspective. Those who hold views or positions within social institutions and regulatory processes, who are asking for inclusive changes and hold a long-range view (and therefore, a future-oriented perspective) of the unfolding of society, may well be categorized as youth. In addition, there have been times in Canada and elsewhere when youth pressure groups have focused on issues that are not confined to youth, but straddle the interests of others, including the elderly.

As such, in discussions of citizenship especially those involving young people, the classification of “youth” may also become politically and civically positioned and operationalized. This trans-temporal, trans-interest, trans-generational and certainly trans-geographical work of activist youth can therefore be informed by and contribute to both local and global contexts of citizenship. As such, their citizenship work is both theoretically and practically linked to what Nigel Dower (2002) called the “global ethic,” that is, when one conducts one’s own life perceiving and acting in accordance with the needs of others. It



includes those who speak and advocate for inclusive and selectively liberating global citizenship in a wide variety of contexts and relationships.

With fluid concepts of global citizenship and youth, the problematic assumption may arise that those in so-called developed countries such as Canada enjoy complete citizenship with regard to their personhood and their educational, political and economic locations. This assumption is discredited by two realities. First, no citizenship context is complete, and any claim that it is masks myriad citizenship violations that are certainly taking place.

Second, even the Canadians, who are categorized as first world citizens, face many citizenship issues that are not uncommon to many developing countries. These include the problematic, exclusionist rules established by the elite; the professionalization of the political sphere; the dismantling of what Habermas and others call the “public sphere” (Habermas, 1984, 1996); and widespread public apathy towards the political process. The issue of political participation is especially complicated in an allegedly highly-developed Canada, where the level of participation is so low that more often than not, many people question the viability of the country’s democracy, since only about 40 percent of citizens vote in election cycles that, in theory, are the foundation of Canada’s systems of representative democracy and citizenship.

In addition, the neoliberal, capitalist version of citizenship that is currently so dominant throughout the world tends to blur the ideological lines of liberal democracy, which, despite its presumptive political openness, is actually based on the ideologies of classical laissez faire economics with its ‘survival of the fittest’ belief system that tends to aggravate class divisions, thus assuring the socio-economic marginalization of large segments of society. Indeed, if this marginalization happened in specific countries previously, with globalization the trend has spread throughout the world where the global plutocracy has been enriching itself at the expense of what is now termed the “global precariat” (Abdi, 2009).

So engrained are these divisions now that, in our opinion, they invalidate any notion that a global ethic – which should have induced us to live and let live – is emerging. This reality, as Wedel (2009) notes, is a demonstration of the enduring economic and political rule of the global elites, who apparently are not willing to spread citizenship rights to all.

Within these contexts of socio-economic and political marginalization, which affect different segments of society in different ways, we believe that

one of the groups that is most affected when it comes to multiple rights platforms is that of young people. For example, youth have consistently faced higher levels of unemployment, a phenomenon that is very common in all developed countries (International Labour Organization, hereafter ILO, 2013), and even more common in the developing world (Abdi, 2009). Youth are also forced to grapple with educational realities that are not conducive to the educational development of all learners. These factors are often exacerbated by youth's disengagement from the political process, which all but guarantees that politicians will not to respond to youth's needs and demands.

Yet these issues do not affect all youth the same way in Canada. More often than not, Aboriginal youth and youth from minority communities face more problems than others. This is not difficult to understand, since these two groups come from communities that have traditionally suffered more marginalization. As early as the early 1960s, John Porter's remarkable study of political and economic power in Canada uncovered how Aboriginal peoples were at the bottom of his vertical mosaic analogy (Porter, 1965), with many groups from cultural communities also not far removed from that space.

So what has changed for these groups since the 1960s with regard to public space empowerment and the quality of their citizenship rights and achievements? As Curtis and Helmes-Hayes (1998) have found, the original character of the vertical mosaic has hardly changed at all. Therefore, Aboriginal youth are one of the more significant groups belonging to the local precariat in almost all categories of life.

We also intend to identify all marginalized and activist youth in Canada and elsewhere as members of a relatively new block of the local and global precariat. The members of this fairly new group are in a position to demand their citizenship rights via different means and tactics that help them achieve the democratic contexts of engagement and inclusion they deserve. It is through this multi-pronged, analytical, critical but still contextually fluid lens that we will examine youth engagement, not confining our observations to other issues that affect different youth groups in Canada.

While the above description discusses a number of weak spots in citizenship that are worthy of analysis and need to be remedied, we will also look beyond what is missing and examine how youth are organizing themselves in an attempt to once again become engaged citizens.

We looked at a number of cases in which youth have become organized actors for citizenship. The members of these groups claimed and exercised



their political potential, and used their formal and informal education to achieve an enlightened, critical reading of societal contexts and to design important organizational and employment opportunities that have elevated their voices in the public space. Their efforts remind us all that youth citizenship engagement in Canada is selectively present, thriving, and able to establish inclusive, forward-looking opportunities to achieve political, cultural, social, and economic well-being.

We have decided to look into the socio-political structure of three contemporary Canadian youth movements to give our readers a better idea of some of the more forward-looking youth engagement projects in Canada's public (and to some extent private) spheres. The first movement we examine is Lead Now, a youth organization that focuses on enhancing democratic processes in the Canadian public space. Next we take a closer look at the members of the Journey of the Nishiyuu and Idle No More, Aboriginal youth protest groups that are engaging in an ongoing response to the political and economic marginalization of indigenous people. The third movement involves student mobilization in response to changes in the organization and funding of higher education in the province of Quebec.

## THE CASE STUDIES

As Canadian youth face increasing exclusion from economic engagement, with youth unemployment rates persistently close to three times higher than that of Canadians over 25 (Canadian Labour Congress, 2013), concerns over the levels of political engagement have increased as well. These concerns, however, tend to centre on the diminishing participation in formal political institutions.

In this article, we present three cases where Canadian youth have organized to create spaces for political, social and economic action that we also identify as citizenship education spaces. These actions aim to shape the political agenda in Canada through citizenship engagement that goes beyond the traditional limits of typical representative democracy toward deliberative and radical democratic acts of engagement.

Youth in Canada, as in other Western nations, find themselves outside the processes and structures of democracy due to several factors including a vastly diminished public sphere where public policy processes have become



de-politicized and the bailiwick of partisan decision-making meetings. In addition, youth have had a depoliticized citizenship education in schools where obedience has replaced forms of dynamic public involvement. The cases we have cited indicate that youth-based social movements aimed at addressing very important public issues indicate that important shifts may be taking place in young people's public participation.

It is notable that mainstream media have done very little reporting on these social movements, covering only outside isolated events that were either violent, featured highly dramatic individuals, or those that might make a momentary short "story". Even those news headlines were temporary and were not able to follow the emerging interactions as social movements.

Before we describe the above-mentioned social movements, we would briefly like to discuss the issue of representative democracy. It is a label that has been attached, not only to dominant Canadian political relations, but to almost all systems in Western countries, and now, owing to the imperatives of globalization and the hegemony of Western governance, to everywhere else.

But what is representative democracy in reality? From a critical perspective, the answer should not be very difficult. One of its principal claims is full and inclusive participation by all members of society and certainly participation by "all members affected" by an issue or concern. More often than not, however, the word "representational" is neither descriptive of nor practically applicable to youth, since their issues are invisible, except when they are positioned as consumers or "future" citizens. Indeed, contemporary labels for youth such as Generation X and Generation Y tentatively or even directly demonstrate that youth are neither understood nor appreciated except when it comes to the electronic and wireless technologies that have been feverishly commercialized for their supposedly non-political and non-economic – but psycho-cultural – consumption. Thus, the case studies should provide us with important details of acts of citizenship and the essential issues that have motivated Canadian youth to create significant, meaningful citizen engagement opportunities.

#### **CASE 1: LEADNOW ([WWW.LEADNOW.CA](http://www.leadnow.ca))**

Leadnow is a youth-developed and led organization formed in 2011 before the Canadian election to build a collaborative political movement across Canada to defeat the ruling conservative party. Leadnow describes itself as a "peo-



ple-powered change” organization ([www.leadnow.ca](http://www.leadnow.ca). Retrieved August 30, 2013). With a dynamic flow of thousands of participants, depending on time and location, Leadnow states its main vision and/or focus as: “an independent advocacy organization that brings generations of Canadians together to achieve progress through democracy” ([www.leadnow.ca](http://www.leadnow.ca). Retrieved August 30, 2013). Participants “[work] together to build a stronger democracy that protects our environment, that creates economic opportunity, while increasing equality and guarantee(ing that) everyone receives the care they need” ([www.leadnow.ca](http://www.leadnow.ca). Retrieved August 30, 2013).

The organization works to claim space in a political sphere that has become very restricted because of the national and provincial governments’ commitment to neoliberal public policy. Leadnow educators and advocacy experts help Canadian citizens (of all ages) work to set the political agenda within the formal, national government arenas. All of the founders and organizational leaders are young. They live in cities and regions across the country and make extensive use of social media to organize activities and carry out their mandate of shaping the political agenda in Canada. The staff mobilizes youth by organizing events, such as teach-ins, to promote a very participatory style of democracy and engagement in the public sphere.

The organization also works to shape the public’s understanding of youth (challenging the idea that youth are apathetic) and the issues that concern youth. Advocacy campaigns address issues of social inclusion, environmental justice, and economic equity. Although the organization clearly expresses the intention of being widely inclusive, it is not clear from the available online data how youth from historically marginalized groups such as the indigenous population, or immigrant and refugee groups, are involved in the planning and implementation of the activities they stage.

Leadnow actively encourages Canadians to meet in small groups to build a collaborative network where differences can be understood and a common political agenda developed. “Kitchen meetings” are encouraged in which participants gather friends, colleagues and family members together to share food and stories and prepare the political network for change.

Along with activities that deepen personal engagement in the network, Leadnow’s community teach-ins and extensive use of electronic media widen the organization’s reach. Therefore, its aim is not so much to make a social and economic difference, but a political one (as demonstrated through formal political party affiliations). Through cooperation, it attempts to find

ways of reaching the common goal of shaping (and changing) the national political agenda and building “a stronger democracy that protects our environment, creates economic opportunity while increasing equity, and guaranteeing that everyone receives the care they need” (www.leadnow.ca. Retrieved August 31, 2013).

## CASE 2: JOURNEY OF THE NISHIYUU AND IDLE NO MORE

In the winter of 2013, a group of indigenous youth from the James Bay area of northern Canada walked 1600 kilometres as a political act to express their solidarity with an increasingly popular social movement known as “Idle No More” (INM). The journey of the Nishiyuu youth started with just seven young people committed to improving the conditions in their community and “celebrat(ing) and strengthen(ing) the unity of indigenous people” (Mathias, 2013, p. 8). Throughout the journey from their small, remote village, these youth, drawing on the traditions of their ancestors, persevered despite winter temperatures of -50 to -55 degrees Celsius, to bring their community’s concerns to the Canadian Parliament. The Aboriginal People’s Television News (ATPN) reported on their arrival in Ottawa:

When the Journey of Nishiyuu walkers climbed the steps below the Peace Tower and turned, they saw a crowd of thousands gathered below them. RCMP and OPP crowd estimates ranged between 4,000 and 5,000 people. The walkers, Jordon Masty, David Kawapit Jr., Stanley George Jr., Travis George, Johnny Abraham, Raymond Kawapit and Gordie Rupert had “etched” their names “into the history of this country,” said Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn Atleo (Barrera, 2013).

As the youth made their way to Ottawa, they stopped in communities along the way, where they spearheaded community education events and celebrated their achievements with community members who shared their food, music, stories and homes with the young leaders. Youth from these communities then joined them in the walk, becoming part of the political awakening that had emerged from their efforts.

As a side note, we must remind the reader that Canada’s Aboriginal population, who are the original owners of the land, form about 4.5 percent of Canada’s population (about 1.6 million out of a total population of 35 mil-



lion). They have suffered long and systematic schemes of oppression and deprivation that have affected all aspects of their lives. While their struggle for equality has taken many shapes, the recent emergence of well-organized and more determined youth groups has shed important light on the basic human rights that indigenous peoples in Canada are fighting for.

The Journey of the Nishiyuu coincided with the political actions of another indigenous leader, Chief Theresa Spence, who went on a six-week hunger strike to protest the Canadian government's refusal to meet and discuss the deplorable and deteriorating conditions on the First Nations reservation. At the same time, the INM movement was sweeping across Canada, mobilizing people and ideas for political, social, environmental and economic change: "The INM calls on all people to join in peaceful revolution to honour Indigenous sovereignty and to protect the land and water" ([www.idlenomore.ca](http://www.idlenomore.ca). Retrieved August 30, 2013). INM stated its purpose as "build(ing) allies in order to reframe the nation to nation relationship" ([www.idlenomore.ca](http://www.idlenomore.ca). Retrieved August 30, 2013) and "to include grassroots perspectives, issues and concerns" ([www.idlenomore.ca](http://www.idlenomore.ca). Retrieved August 30, 2013). One of the youth leaders, Natalie Mathias, is quoted in *Windspeaker* magazine on her arrival in Ottawa on March 25, 2013:

I joined the walk to support the youth across all our nations, and to show that we are still walking like our ancestors did, like they used to do back then," Mathias explained. "We want to show the government that we are fighting to protect our lands... This is the time to unite, for us all to get together. Even if you're not First Nations, you're part of the reason why we're fighting for Mother Earth, to protect the Earth. Because she's being polluted and she's sick, and we want our future generations to live and practice the traditional ways that we lived in the woods (Ball, 2013, p. 7).

### CASE 3: QUEBEC STUDENT PROTESTS 2012

In February, 2012, Quebec students went on strike to protest tuition fee increases of about 75% proposed by the provincial government. Ingar Solty (2012) estimates that 300,000 of Quebec's 400,000 students joined the strike that came to be known as "the Maple Spring", suggesting it was part of a global youth movement like those in Chile, the Middle East, the United



Kingdom and Europe, where students were demanding public education be defended against the wider political projects that have resulted in an increased dismantling of the public sphere. A May 2, 2012 article in a United Kingdom newspaper, *The Guardian*, described the student actions in Quebec as “a revolt against government tuition fee hikes that is growing into an Occupy-inspired dissent against austerity and inequality” (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/may/02/quebec-student-protest-canada>. Retrieved August 27, 2013). A red square became the symbol of the protests and could be seen on people and places around the world, as many acknowledged that “being in the red” or in debt is a serious and unacceptable problem facing youth everywhere.

This youth-led political protest action also mobilized people who were not students to come forward and criticize widespread corruption in local and national politics, neoliberalism and austerity measures that were destroying the social fabric of Canada and join demands that environmental protection be given priority over the interests of the oil energy sector. The protests were highly organized and supported by well-established democratic student organizations and large coalitions such as l'Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante de Québec (CLASSE), Federation Étudiante Collegiate de Québec (FECQ), and the Federation Étudiante Universitaire du Québec (FEUQ). These organizations did not necessarily agree on dissent tactics. For example, Martin (2012) suggested that CLASSE reject lobbying “as it perceived the interests of the state as irreconcilable with those of the students; [CLASSE] believes in creating leverage against the government through grassroots mobilization and various means of escalating pressure” (para 14).

While the massive numbers of students who gathered each day and night to protest were united against the tuition increases, there were two very different groups reflecting different perspectives of the tuition hike problem. One group, positioning itself as anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist, viewed the long-term neoliberal agenda as the foundational problem to be addressed. Their calls for action were to resist the move toward a commercialized, marketizing education in favour of a more humanist one where education was seen to be an important part of the public good.

A second group expressed agreement with neoliberal calls for participation in a “knowledge economy” and argued that education was key to their individual success, as they had to navigate the demands of a global economy.



They argued that tuition increases would mean students left university with too much debt and could not afford to have the global mobility required to be successful in the economic environment.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### YOUTH ACTIVISM & THE PUBLIC SPHERE

While each of these three cases demonstrates many differences, together they give us a significant amount of information about the public sphere, as the youth engage and challenge what has come to be called *publicness* in Canada. We witness their contributions by more than just what they say – by what they do as engagement. Their acts of citizenship are what contribute to reshaping the public sphere. These acts are now part of the public story and of the options that are opening in Canadian society.

Growing up under neoliberalism, most youth today have spent their lives hearing about and experiencing the shrinking of the public sphere. The youth activism we see emerging challenges both the neoliberal view of the citizen as an obedient, self-sustaining, mobile individual engaged as an economic agent, and the norm of traditional partisan mobilization around a common issue. Canadian youth are demonstrating that not only are they viewing the issues in multiple ways, but they are also acting in ways that make connections to different social and political actors, spaces, and knowledges.

All three of these youth-led initiatives embraced difference and were able to see their own position as part of wider issues and concerns. This is an important contribution to a public sphere that has been shaped by discourses and practices of separation, categorization and an overall drive for homogeneity through consensus.

Canadian youth are often described by other Canadians as “non-involved” because of their low voter turnout, as if this were the sole act of citizenship on which to base one’s claims to participation. Youth citizenship is described through a litany of deficiencies that tend to make most of young people’s needs and contributions invisible. In fact, all three cases presented here make three important contributions to reshaping *publicness* through engagement. Isin (2008, 2009) describes how shifting our analysis from the citizen



to “the act” helps us see the wider impacts of engagement and particularly to see acts that might rupture “the given” (2008). In addition, the profound humanizing of *publicness* demonstrated by / in all three cases is significant not only in what these groups are demanding, but how they choose to mobilize sympathizers.

The Nishiyuu youth’s long journey on foot, where communities along the way gathered to host and be educated by the youth, is a very powerful example of engagement. The youth draw on community and ancestral knowledge to give motion to their demands for justice, linking history to new spaces and sites of contestation, belonging, identification and struggle.

The Quebec student protests, with their massive demonstrations that included thousands of people banging on pots and pans claimed the public sphere in a very dynamic, physical way. The expectation was not that all members of the movement be “on message”, as has become the depoliticizing model of Canadian policy processes, but that there are multiple experiences and issues that movements can embrace thereby contributing to reshaping *publicness as a broad inclusiveness*. However, this is not the highly individualized acts of neoliberals, but a range of loosely-coupled organizations and student groups that acted as an emerging network to focus the public’s attention on and fight for a particular political issue. As descriptions of the protests circulated on social media and in the traditional press, the network gathered strength and was able to claim public space (both political and territorial) and citizenship rights (to assemble and for public education).

In the case of Leadnow there is an ongoing, very creative, democratic call for participation in the Canadian political process based on the values of social, environmental, and economic justice rather than initiatives drawn along traditional political party lines. The commitment and clarity of their goals and actions give a renewed hope for the future of politics for those of us who have watched all things public be chipped away through the rhetoric of inefficiency and also outright neglect. This organization demonstrates considerable wisdom, claiming space in Canadian politics by changing the narrative of democratic engagement through dialogue and network mobilization.

Thus, it is another significant contribution to rebuilding the Canadian public sphere. It is just as Paulo Freire noted when describing Spanish factory workers’ process of awareness (see Llewellyn & Westheimer, 2013). Learning about the structures and conditions of one’s oppression is not found in “direct questions about ideas and understandings of politics” (Llewellyn &



Westheimer, 2013, p. 232) but in the authentic relationships that emerge between people committed to creating transformational democratic spaces. Such educational praxis for democratic engagement (Llewellyn & Westheimer, 2013) provides openings for rethinking youth as participating citizens.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND YOUTH DECOLONIZING ENGAGEMENT

As several Canadian studies have demonstrated, understanding both the categorization of youth and the enactment of this category requires that we examine contexts (Archer & Wesley, 2006; Chareka & Sears, 2006; Llewlyn, Cook & Molina, 2010; Llewlyn & Westheimer, 2013; Viczko, 2012). Our case studies have highlighted youth movements linked to significant issues centred on justice: concern over anti-democratic governance; growing exclusion from policy considerations; a government that ignores the impact of environmental destruction on the lives of non-urban (and mainly aboriginal) citizens; and a government that primarily obeys external, international financial institutions rather than the citizens within national jurisdictions.

In each of the case studies, albeit to varying degrees, the youth activists were linking urgent environmental justice, economic justice, and social justice issues to everyday actions and educational citizenship activities. We have written elsewhere of the power of decolonizing approaches to relations of power, governance, and engagement (See Abdi, 2012; Shultz, 2012, 2013). As Walter Mignolo (2011) points out, decolonizing can be seen as working outside the “rules of the game (s)” of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and neoliberalism. Youth social movements such as those described here show how youth are finding their way toward the outside “game” realms in order to find spaces to work toward justice.

As we have shown, youth, in our particular definition of the term, denotes persons who harbour the expectation of full citizenship but who so far have been prevented from using their creativity, insight, energy, and vision to either contribute to or benefit from being in a given society. Instead, they bear the unequitable burdens of this very society by virtue of their exclusion.

Youth are demanding to be viewed as more than consumer citizens or temporary workers (or future workers), the positions conferred upon them by local and global elites, and politicians. They have a heavy stake in the environmental, economic and social present and future and are ready to make their views known.



## YOUTH ACTIVISTS AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

Canadian politicians can no longer expect youth to be silent or silenced regarding the important issues that face their society. While almost all provinces and universities have some form of organizational structure for youth participation where they can (occasionally) demand their educational rights, which include tuition issues, the extent to which other groups have their demands met, when seen in contrast with the Quebec initiatives, is interesting.

While tens, or occasionally, hundreds of students might come out to publicly express their needs, the numbers in Quebec are in the thousands. Indeed, Quebec is not only unique in Canada, but, with the exception of Mexico, in all of North America. While, for example, South American students are known to have well-organized student movements that demand and usually win their educational rights (the recent Chilean and Colombian student uprisings illustrate this), post-1960s North American protest movements can, at best, be described as “muted”. In fact, the Quebec movement can actually be described as being as strong as those taking place any in other part of the world. While at the moment we do not have the analytical capacity to explain this, we can perhaps mention as an underlying factor the strong culture of trade unionism in Quebec. During the last student demonstrations, for example, Quebec’s powerful trade unions lent their support to the movement. This with other traditional forms of resistance that have kept Quebec Canadians strong within the Anglophone majority, have shaped what citizens, including youth, see as possible responses to unacceptable government actions.

This current wave of student activism fits well with Giroux’s (2013) depiction of student activists as the new public intellectuals. The profile of the public intellectual or what the public intellectual should actually be is, of course, a matter of contention. Generally students have not been categorized as public intellectuals. However, with the conventional, anti-establishment public intellectuals (academics, think tank researchers, widely quoted commentators and journalists, and others) now in decline or at the service of the various branches of business and the state (Wiseman, 2013), the space may now be opening up to students and others.

Indeed, not only the students from Quebec, but the other two groups we have discussed, might also lay claim to this particular public space. With





the media that focuses on such debates now favouring young people (as so-called digital natives, they are more savvy in conveying their messages via social media), we may also need to redefine who qualifies to be a public intellectual.

In the case of Aboriginal youth especially, the issue is also linked to the fact that their ideas, knowledge systems and overall life perspectives are more marginalized than those of other modern-day youth. Indeed, in Canada at least, those formally or informally dubbed as public intellectuals have hardly ever advanced the interests of Aboriginal peoples. On the contrary, it is common knowledge that some of the most influential intellectuals to wield a powerful influence with the current conservative government (e.g., Tom Flanagan who also contributes to Wiseman's new book, *The Public Intellectual in Canada*) are not necessarily known for their pro-Aboriginal stances. The same can be said of other interest groups that impact youth citizenship. Even in the Quebec students' protests, while the trade unions did lend their support, some of the most important media outlets were not as supportive. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the biggest television and radio system in the country, was actually accused of being biased against the students:

CBC coverage of the Quebec student protests in downtown Montreal today is driven by a painfully obvious bias against the student strike. (...) News reports via CBC have consistently failed to scrutinize violent police actions against striking students, and the station's coverage bends toward the austerity-driven logic of the Quebec government's policy to hike tuition fees ([montreal.mediacoop.com](http://montreal.mediacoop.com)).

It shouldn't be surprising that established media usually represent established powers that tend to support the conventional order. Indeed, with the proliferation of epistemologically marginalizing labels such as Generation X, Generation Y and Generation Me that have been heaped upon today's youth, it is no wonder that powerful institutions will, by and large, present youth rights demands as problematic, disturbing, and even dangerous.

Clearly, though, the youth are no longer at the mercy of conventional media. With savvy familiarity and use of new social media, they may be able, for the first time, to beat such media at their own game and use their own expertise to create news and counter-conventional perspectives about their lives and education and needs.

Yet more importantly, as we discuss and analyse these issues, it is important is to view youth citizenship from the perspective of opportunities, not as a source of problems. The persistent view of youth citizenship as one that is incomplete should be put into the context of those original, formal citizenship constructs, such as those of classical Greece, for example, in which only adult men with property were citizens. The reality in which youth, women and indigent men were not citizens is still a current socio-political pathology we haven't fully overcome. The best way to achieve a more comprehensive view of this is to look at current global power distribution. By far the most endowed group citizenship-wise in the world continues to be the group that was so endowed millennia ago. It is therefore, important to recognize today's issues of youth citizenship and social engagement as part of the ongoing struggle to promote the social, political and economic profile of those wishing to enjoy the full rights and privileges of citizenship.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have offered broad, analytical and critical perspectives of the realities and opportunities of citizenship contexts and youth engagement programs. Viewing citizenship and youth engagement from a local and global perspective, we have broached the proliferation of global citizenship scholarship and one-directional discussions that most often do not represent the rights of youth or those who live outside the political boundaries of the West.

We have also highlighted cases in which youth organizations have become more politically engaged, staking their claims to citizenship rights that may allow them to become valid agents for claiming and reclaiming their citizenship.

To shed more light on the issue, we have described the work of the three engaged youth movements: Leadnow; Journey of the Nishisyuu and Idle No More; and the Quebec Student Protest groups, all of which have eschewed the inactivity characteristic of much of the youth scene in contemporary Western democracies including Canada. In our analysis we have also looked into new ways of construing youth activism, and how the work of so-called public intellectuals should respond to the important issues of citizenship engagement and relationships. Certainly, such interactive realities will enhance public debate and invigorate the reconstruction of Canadian citizen-



ship and democratic life. These movements also tend to establish more inclusive public policy opportunities that cater to the immediate and long-term well-being of communities. This is important because these communities do not usually benefit from the usual structures present in “representative” democracies which are, as we said above, basically the organized rule of the elite acting on behalf of the elite.

The actions of the movements described here are creating better prospects for Canadian citizenship. They may serve as examples for youth elsewhere in the world who are also exposed to the global rhetoric of democracy without enjoying many foreseeable or palpable benefits.

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