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**The Potential of Civic Events to Promote City–Regional Participation :
Insights from the Montreal Citizen Agora**

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Introduction

Region–building has received renewed attention in recent years, with a focus on city–regions or metropolitan areas (a main city and the surrounding smaller municipalities or suburbs) as an important territory for economic competitiveness, social re–distribution and spatial planning. Nevertheless, they are rarely equipped with a thick institutional capacity (Amin and Thrift 2001), due to the internal socio–political tensions between the constituent areas. Even when institutions are in place, they often lead to disappointments with regard to their few achievements and a low democratic quality (Heinelt and Kübler 2005, Jouve 2005), with few citizens or civil society groups participating in regional policies (Jouve 2005).

The reasons for this have been little studied, although some suggestions have been put forward. First, it takes time, energy and resources away from community groups’ neighbourhood work to organise at a higher scale and/or network with other groups located elsewhere in the city–region (Pastor et al. 2009). Second, there is often no clear regional interlocutor, so it is unclear where to direct demands, proposals or critiques (Kleidman 2004, Swanstrom and Banks 2009). In other cases, there is a regional organ, but it is not really open to public participation and direct interaction with the public; i.e. there is no direct accountability. Finally, some authors have suggested that engaging at the metropolitan scale might require a metropolitan territorial imaginary (Boudreau 2007) or regional consciousness (Paasi 2003). Without it, groups and citizens do not imagine a city–regional political community, or a metropolitan territory where policies and projects have joint consequences.

City–regional public participation ‘is one area in which practice, both new policy experiments and innovative organizing strategies, have often run ahead of research’ (Pastor et al., 2009, p29). Pastor and his collaborators noted the catalysing effect of civic events to trigger participation or build city–regional movements. But they also face the challenge of meeting a diverse set of objectives which may turn out to be in tension.

In this paper I investigate, through one case study in Montreal, the potential of civic events to promote city–regional participation and the building of a city–regional political space. I will first present the particular context of the Montreal city–region, and second the Citizen Agora. Third, I will discuss the successes and difficulties faced within the event. The analysis of the event is based on direct observation and, discourse analysis of written documents, interactions in situ and press

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coverage.

Governance and participation in the Montreal city-region

The Montreal city-region went through complex territorial reforms from 2002-06, which included consolidation of many municipalities into one mega-city and the creation of a city-regional institution, the *Montreal Metropolitan Community* (MMC) at an even larger scale than the new mega-city. The MMC is composed of officials elected to local bodies (i.e. not directly elected to the new regional body) and is presided over by the mayor of the city of Montreal. The conflicts between municipalities continue on many regional issues, and few achievements and little leadership have come out of the new institution. This has disappointed planners and civic elites from Montreal, in terms of their expectations for regional governance, for example in regard to transport and spatial planning.

There was - and continues to be - little participation in this by civic groups or citizens, who were more focused on the contested local institutional changes of the territorial reform, and continue to be focused on community development in neighbourhoods or on contested urban projects and infrastructures (Boudreau et al. 2006, Fontan et al. 2009). On the one hand, the local living environment (or the community) may often be more crucial for residents, the city-region making more sense to 'experts'. On the other hand, the collective territorial imaginary has been for forty years rather developed at the provincial scale (the Quebec movement for independence), maybe at the cost of a city-regional territorial imaginary (Boudreau and Colin 2009).

The Citizen Agora

When a new metropolitan plan was announced in 2010, an elite group of civil society actors took the initiative to create a regional event to encourage public participation on the content of this plan, as well as to foster a feeling of belonging to the city-region and pave the way for a regional civic organization (IPAM 2010).

The event was announced in all the main civil society networks (local community groups, sectoral organizations for heritage, environment or transport; academia; planners and transport professionals involved in previous debates, from the central city and the suburbs) . Although it was open to everybody, it was relatively little announced outside of these 'networks', so that individual residents not connected to these organisations would probably not have heard about it.

The event originated with the *Institut de politiques alternatives de Montréal*. Created the year before by key Montreal figures, it presents itself as an independent organization with diverse membership aiming to promote reflection on urban development and democracy. One of the founders is a professor coordinating the Forum Urba, which holds regular debates on issues of spatial or transport planning in Montreal, in which citizens, professionals and civil servants participate. The two organizations thus have wide-ranging contacts in Montreal.

The Agora itself lasted 1½ days. On the first day, not only the organizers presented speeches, but also the mayor of Montreal, the president of the MMC, the provincial assistant deputy minister of Spatial Planning and Municipal Affairs. The major part of the event, though, was devoted to three thematic sessions - on the quality of living environments, environmentally-friendly economic growth and mobility and spatial planning - with a presentation from an expert or civic actor, followed by a reaction from an assigned discussant, and about 75 minutes of questions and comments from the public. Participants could speak by queuing for the microphone. The Agora finished with a plenary and summary of the debates.

The organizers chose the aforementioned topics 'because they represent important themes which are close to populations at the local as well as at the metropolitan level' (IPAM 2010, p4). The regional level has been considered important for planners for many years in Montreal, but has stayed mostly technocratic and far from the public. This is very often the case in metropolitan and regional governance. The organizers of the Agora wanted to stimulate participation and show that regional planning will 'affect directly the day to day life of the population' (IPAM 2010, p5).

Achievements and difficulties in regard to the challenging objectives of regional-building

The objectives stated by the organizers for the Agora were to encourage 1) regional participation in the metropolitan plan, 2) a regional sense of belonging and 3) the emergence of a city-region civic organization. These objectives of region-building are present both in the theory and practice of so-called community-based new regionalism in North America and in the promotion of political regions in Europe (Pastor et al. 2009, Keating 2003). In addition, some authors note an additional objective: the promotion of an open and heterogeneous regional identity (Amin 2004). This may, however, be in tension with the other three if they instead promote a consensual and universal sense of place for the city-region.

Many of the objectives which the organizers had for the Agora are long-term components of region-building, which can thus not be fully evaluated yet: the consultation process for the metropolitan plan is also still in process. In terms of the numbers of participants and the liveliness of exchanges, the Agora was successful, with almost 400 participants and 85 interventions from the audience, in addition to the debates between the speakers and discussants. The themes chosen effectively encouraged participation from a diversity of actors. Residents talked concretely about, for example, their vision of mobility in the city-region or on particularities of their neighbourhood. This was intertwined with reflections and suggestions from the main speakers and civic organizations on what to do, how to bring about change, or what makes change difficult. The mix of concrete experience with research and lobby expertise was thus insightful in the discussions. The openness of the forum to local issues combined with a region-building objective seemed to encourage many participants to frame their interventions in a way which was not only local and specific to their own mission, but which connected to larger regional issues.

The organizers also had as an objective to promote a sense of belonging to the city–region of Montreal, with the message ‘*The inhabitants of the city–region share a common fate*’. The Agora was the first attempt to promote this regional message across the different sectors, missions, and territories. However, it seems to have had little external diffusion and visibility. The Agora was little publicized by the media, being ignored by the main daily newspapers, and the fresh and positive perspective on the city–region did not reach the larger public.

An implicit objective which became clear during the event is that organizers, and foremost participants themselves, desired the presence of a mix of participants with different territorial affiliations, and particularly from the suburbs. This is related to the ambition of establishing a city–regional civic organization, and trying to build a city–regional legitimacy (Pastor et al. 2009) by linking Montreal–based actors with actors from the suburbs. Thus, in each workshop there was at least one suburban speaker. Several interventions came from people living in the periphery, and many others made reference to the perspective from the periphery. For many participants, though, the voice of the non–central parts of the city–region was still not present enough.

Nonetheless, the organizers did at least succeed in showing that interested parties for city–regional cooperation did not only come from Montreal. This is an important step for a city–regional movement which wants to overcome the traditional division between central city actors and suburban actors.

This is related to another potential objective: the liveliness of debates, the heterogeneity of actors and opinions exchanged, and even the presence of conflict. Even though consensus is often valued in practice, academics have expressed worries on the democratic quality of completely consensual participatory events, since conflictual views and external actors might have been excluded from the deliberation (Rui 2006). There is also the danger that regionalism becomes exclusionary in the definition of its territorial identity and of its public sphere (Amin 2004, Paasi 2003). In short, regional building and regional ‘consciousness’ can promote a homogeneous sense of place, which is limited democratically. Amin proposes instead to conceptualize the region as a ‘field of agonistic engagement’, where the regional agenda is debated by actors with different spatial and cultural attachments.

The Citizen Agora has proven to be particularly productive in discussing openly this tension between different regional objectives. Participants proposed different ways to integrate the vision and concerns from people living on the periphery, while also not abandoning goals important to both many central city actors and selected allies in the periphery. An illustrative example is the reduction of car use, which is strongly advocated by many groups and coalitions in Montreal. Going regional was presented by some participants as a way of reaching out on how car use is unhealthy and insecure for all residents of the city–region. On the other hand, some counter–argued that the presumed consensus within the Agora on transport issues was far from the truth, not taking account of the suburban reality. There was a gap between the desire for a broad movement fuelled by regional consensus, and the actuality of a narrower agreement between the city and selected allies in the peripheries to bring about change and debate in the emerging city–regional public sphere.

Conclusion : the potential of civic events to promote regional participation

Although many authors have noted a democratic deficit at the city–regional scale, the challenges of city–regional participation have been little investigated. The case of the Montreal city–region and the Citizen Agora points to three different but inter–related ways civic events can help in promoting regional participation and region–building.

1) Apparently the most obvious point, but the most under–developed in Montreal, is the way civic events can put the city–region on the agenda. They can show the larger public (and decision–makers) that citizens and civic actors are interested. For this to happen, the event has to be publicised in the media, which was not the case in Montreal. However, it is noteworthy that important public officials were present at the event.

2) Although the event was not widely reported, it did achieve high visibility in networks of planners and of civic organizations, thereby activating those networks to promote regional participation and consolidate allies for regional cooperation. In Montreal, the organizers had an explicit strategy of bringing together *friends of the city–region*, and managed to show that there was a set of allies to the cause of seriously developing planning practices and participatory processes at the city–regional scale.

The extent to which civic events contribute to the development of a regional consensus, for example on issues of transport, is far from certain and depends on many external factors, while the objective of a regional consensus is itself contested in the academic literature. Issues surround who and for what reasons region–building and regional participation is promoted, and which actors might be excluded in a presented consensus. From the point of view of the civic coalitions from Montreal, there are many strategic reasons to find allies in the periphery, but without letting the mass opinion from the suburbs dilute their message. At the same time, they want to promote a positive and rather neutral message of regional cooperation and regional democratic space, to offer a counter–weight to the historic division between the municipalities of the city–region. This tension is probably an important challenge for many civic regional movements.

3) Civic events have a role in increasing and widening regional participation, through attenuating the distance between the city–regional scale and the scale which actors know, use and make sense of : the concrete relation that either residents have with their lived territory, or that local community groups have with the territory of their daily work and mission. Although some actors think regularly of their work, mission or daily life at the city–regional scale, it is not the case for all. City–regional issues are often perceived as radically different from local issues. In presenting local issues as part of regional issues, the organizers of the Agora broadened the spectrum of participants and widened perspectives over the issues under debate.

In sum, the case of the Montreal Metropolitan Civic Agora shows that civic events can contribute in several ways in processes of region–building. Civic events, however, are not apolitical and not necessarily consensual. The liveness of debates and the heterogeneity of affiliations and points of views can themselves be taken as a sign of progress in terms of a diverse regional political space.

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