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THE DILEMMAS OF THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF COLLECTIVE ACTION: THE CASE OF ASSOCIATIONS IN MONTREAL'S MULTIETHNIC NEIGHBOURHOODS

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The institutionalisation of collective action has become a central issue in understanding the fate of social movements. The increasing interpenetration of the spheres of government action and civil society is having a particularly significant effect on the logic and modes of action of groups coping with social issues, particularly in urban space. For many, it becomes necessary to be included within the partnerships that the modern State builds up within segments of civil society, to be able to incorporate any collective action in the defence of the living environment or the promotion of social change. Even more community networks often themselves act as the orchestrators of this institutionalisation process in relation to more marginal or less organised actors.

These ambiguities are particularly evident in the case of urban social movements in Montreal that, over the last thirty years, have undergone a complex process of institutionalisation. But in the present context, the emergence of a plural society has further added to the complexity of this process. In the wake of a rapid multiethnicization of the Montreal metropolitan region, new conceptions of social issues must be developed that are compatible with cultural diversity.

Over the years, the super networks of community organisations built mainly inside the host society have seemed to ignore immigration and ethnicity issues.

Very recently, however, there has been a tendency to incorporate ethnic associations within the local level community network. This movement certainly had the effect of “desenclaving” the associative networks and ethnic groups, but it has also challenged their actual basis of identity, so important in community action. Ethno-cultural minority groups have found themselves confronted with a double process of institutionalisation that has correspondingly robbed them of their autonomy and which is perceived by some of them as a threat on their community dynamic.

To explore this process, I examine collective action at the neighbourhood level, using a perspective that might seem very far removed from the problematic of social movements. I begin by very briefly outlining the work that has been undertaken over the last few years on urban social movements in Montreal [1] to demonstrate the importance of their institutionalisation. Next, I should introduce some contextual elements that can shed light on the challenges created by interethnic cohabitation for Montreal society, especially over the past fifteen years. Finally, I return to a study conducted in 1992-1993 on multiethnic neighbourhoods in the metropolitan region to illustrate the local

[1] According to P. Hamel (1995), urban social movements can be defined as "...all forms of collective action that 1) are oriented around the defense of the integrity of the neighborhood against developers and urban development; 2) intercede to improve the quality of the urban infrastructure and services and including their management; 3) promote local democracy; 4) and are organised in favor of local development and the democratization of this process".

context of collective action under conditions of multiethnicity at the neighbourhood level.

FROM CITIZEN GROUPS TO COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Montreal has a rich tradition of urban social movements. These movements have, nevertheless, been transformed since the beginning of the 1960s.

Organised around the issue of housing, the first social movements were led by social activists and were protest oriented (Hamel, 1991). By the 1970s, some of the so called “groupes populaires” got involved in the provision of services for disadvantaged populations. Some researchers have already pointed out, the ambivalence that they expressed in the face of the State-expansion in which they claimed an increasing involvement, at the same time criticising the foundations of its action (Godbout, 1990).

In the mid-1980s, the election of the Montreal Citizen's Movement (Rassemblement des citoyens de Montréal), announced a democratisation of municipal life. In practice, the new municipal elected team began by co-opting the former grassroots activists and assigning the management of social problems associated with specific clienteles to community organisations (Lustiger-Thaler, 1993). In the 1980s, the community network expanded at an unprecedented rate and a large number of these organisations were funded by the provincial government and the City of Montreal (Hamel, 1995). As P. Hamel (1995: 293) argues, "In this context, community action was located both inside and outside the state". This was especially true of Community Economic Development Corporation (CDÉC). These changes were paralleled by the transformation of the State, which relinquished some control of social management, for all intents and purposes, to the community networks by initiating partnerships.

Should we see this as a new form of democratisation or, on the contrary, as the beginnings of a neo-corporatism? It should be recalled that Corporatism was already a prevalent model in the 50’s. The question remains unanswered. But what was evident was the shift from a confrontational approach to one of partnership, at the local level.

In conjunction with this change, however, another development emerged: the territorialisation of services at the neighbourhood level. The idea of the neighbourhood made a strong comeback this period.

In the mid-1980s, the community networks were well established almost everywhere within the territory of the region and, in conjunction with municipal institutions, intersectoral consultation boards were established in most neighbourhoods. In a number of cases their leadership came out of the urban social movements of the 1970s.

A METROPOLIS UNDERGOING AN ACCELERATED MULTIETHNICIZATION

Everyone could notice the cosmopolitan character of the city. This ethno-cultural diversity spread to most neighbourhoods, rich or poor, with the exception of a few francophone working-class neighbourhoods on the east of the island. In the 1991 Census, one third of the residents of the City of Montreal reported a single ethnic origin other than French, British or Aboriginal.

For many years, this cultural diversity was ignored. But since the 80's, the immigration question has became an integral part of the political agenda and has, therefore, become inseparable from the image that Quebec is building for its future. Does it lead us toward a genuine cultural pluralism, is not so clear.

THE ASSOCIATIVE DYNAMICS IN MULTIETHNIC NEIGHBOURHOODS

In this increasingly multiethnic Montreal, the ethno-cultural groups and immigrants have developed important associative networks: more or less, 1,800 association of an ethnic or racial character [2] (Helly, 1996). The active range of these associations roughly covers 4 domains: mutual aide and social action, political representation, economic integration and cultural identity (Dorais, 1992). Many of them are partially funded by governments. We may speak of a state management of ethnic agencies in the sense that the public powers have often enabled the formation of associations that are more or less representative of given ethnic groups, in order to facilitate their relationship with these groups (Bertheleu, 1995). In the last few years, moreover, both the federal and provincial governments have restructured most of their programs related to the reception process, the integration of immigrants and multiculturalism, assigning the management of services to local associations.

The impact of this interpenetration of state and civil society on the role, social effectiveness, even the very nature of these organisations has hardly been researched (Bertheleu, 1995).

I will focus on a very particular process of institutionalisation that weighs upon the collective action of immigrants and ethnic groups, drawing upon the results of a study of seven multiethnic neighbourhoods in the Montreal Region. All of these neighbourhoods have a more or less extensive network of associations created to receive immigrants, contest racism, defend the interests of particular cultural communities as well as those particular social categories (immigrant women, "racialized" youth, etc.). These organisations often occupy a prominent place in the local associative dynamic. In many cases, ethnic associations have played an historic

2 Helly, however, has demonstrated that some of these associations, despite their legal existence, have no real function.

role in the establishment of community networks at the neighbourhood level and in struggles to defend the integrity of their environments. Many of them have experienced a remarkable longevity, and women often play a dominant role.

Three significant developments should be highlighted. First, as many other Canadian researchers have observed (Herberg, 1989), the areas in which these organisations intervene have a tendency to change with time: the defence of their cultures of origin seems to have become secondary to questions of employment and employability. Secondly, it is worth noting that there is a new tendency among many ethnic associations to present themselves more and more under the banner of multiethnicity. These changes are sometimes necessary, due to the evolution of the ethno-cultural origins of the residents of the neighbourhoods in which the associations open, but sometimes they are responding to pressure from funding governmental agencies.

A third important change warrants discussion. In the past few years, “intercommunity consultation” has become very important in the organisation of associative life. Today, in most neighbourhoods we find a consultation board around which diverse associative organisations come together, with varied levels of success, but also include the public and para-public institutions that have been assigned to the neighbourhood, like health and educational institutions, the community police and local representatives of municipal services.

This context of intercommunity consultation is generally very efficient for both the organisation of activities, the provision of services and the mobilisation of local forces. For instance, a former working-class neighbourhood, carved up by a massive renovation project, and grappling with serious problems of poverty, delinquency and racism, successfully overcame a number of crises, partly thanks to the vigour of its associative network, under the banner of a Coalition. For thirty years, a series of continual mobilisations have occurred.

Over the years, many institutions contributed to the expanding ranks of this community coalition: municipal services, the municipal office of housing in charge of low-income housing, schools, etc. In the 1990s, francophone institutions took over the leadership of the Coalition and introduced more formal and rational management system. The work was organised into committees, action programs, with established procedures. While institutions were rapidly modifying their approach in order to work in consultation with the neighbourhood (the first experiences of the neighbourhood police date back to this period), many groups started to object to the strength of their presence and to fear that the weight of the task of consultation was progressively pulling the members of the Coalition away from their roots. There as elsewhere was also raised some objection to these formalised structures because they were built on the idea that the neighbourhood should speak in a single voice, which prevented the

adoption of specific positions and hindered agreement on demands. A large number of ethnic associations were further reluctant to give up their marginal negotiating position and wanted to be able to continue to advance their objectives outside of the Coalition. The construction of a common vision quickly became a yoke around the necks of minority groups, making it more difficult for these groups to come together as soon as any impasse was created by their differences. More broadly, the consolidation of the formal procedures and organisational structure, and the weight of the institutions (and/or of their discourse) created an ideology of universalism. Very rapidly, the groups that wanted to express and defend their particular identities felt no longer welcome. This was very different of the traditional model of integration in Montreal where in fact the social fabric has always been strongly organised along ethnic and linguistic segmented lines, even well before immigration flows became important.

We should add to that portrait that both the provincial and municipal public services employ civil servants that are almost exclusively of French origin. In spite of access and equality programs. It is, therefore, not surprising that in this situation, institutions are perceived by immigrants and ethnic groups as much less accessible than they are for French-Canadian associations.

The identification of intercommunity consultation with a defined territory also created problems. Even the ethnic groups that are the most concentrated in urban space are rarely limited to only one neighbourhood and are rarely numerous enough dominate an area as large as a neighbourhood. If public institutions are increasingly discovering the benefits of initiatives that target specific districts rather than given communities, thus avoiding the reinforcement of an unwelcome multiculturalism, ethnic associations no longer see things in the same way. Certain groups refuse to be enclosed within territorial boundaries, and view this effort to territorialize social intervention as a means of denying diversity and cultural pluralism at the local level.

But the participation of ethnic associations in neighbourhood consultation boards also allows them to acquire a certain legitimacy and, especially, to move beyond the enclaves to which some of these groups are confined. Ethnic associations are particularly aware of these advantages, especially when the integration of young minority people is at stake. This desire for participation is, however, tempered by a concern with retaining an identifiable space where the ethno-cultural origins of these youths does not have a minority status.

Throughout the numerous interviews conducted in these multiethnic neighbourhoods, the suspension of a minority status in the spaces of everyday life of a neighbourhood was an argument that was often made. This concept does not stand in opposition to the desire to integrate within the "host" society. It undoubtedly refers, rather, to a strategy of accommodation that privileges the space of the neighbourhood as a place that alleviates the identity fragmentation that accompanies all migratory

experiences. Maybe we could find here some relevance for the idea of the dissociation of the three dimensions of citizenship that was discussed by Joan Cohen. But, it is another story.

I just wanted to show here that the activities of ethnic groups already often organised, or even controlled, by different levels of government, also come up against an additional institutionalisation process in which their activities are taken over by community networks from the "host" society.

Despite these dilemmas, it is at the local scale that the new pluralism of Montreal society must be constructed, and it depends upon an opening of public space to collective action that could make room for some form of multiculturalism.

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