

CSAA Annual Meeting, Edmonton  
May 28-31 2000  
"Civil society and Ethnic politics" session

## **Civic Life, Neighbourhood Life: The Same Story?**

*Annick Germain and Julie Elizabeth Gagnon*  
*INRS-Urbanisation*

« Society is more appropriately thought of as a loosely coupled network of interactions than as a cohesive unit bound together by common beliefs »  
Charles Tilly.1984. *Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons*, New York, Russel Sage.

### **1. An injunction to participate**

In a striking text entitled "An injunction: to belong, to participate. Social cohesion and citizenship revisited"<sup>1</sup>, Denise Helly retraces the economic, political, and social evolutions at the origins of a discourse, popular both in Europe and America, concerning social cohesion and a broad-based conception of citizenship (Helly, 1999). The present ideologico-political climate raises the question of the means by which to address citizen apathy, usually considered by liberal philosophies centred solely on citizen rights as the result of over-reliance on the State, or else resulting from the increasing fragility of the structural mechanisms of social cohesion. Beyond differences in the very definition of the structures best suited to reactivate social cohesion (the State in the French version of republicanism or civil society for American communitarians), these discourses converge on one point, which concerns the duty for citizens to participate and to become responsible actors in political and civil life. Valued for its accessibility, the local scale seems especially appropriate for the reassertion of the merits of civic participation. It is first and foremost in his local community, a civic space *par excellence*, that the citizen is expected to get involved. Moreover, the local scale is assigned a new meaning

under the impulse of the decentralization process common to most governments. In this context, the local scale is invested with additional specific qualities; notable among its perceived advantages is the potential to increase efficiency in the delivery of public services, making them more accessible to the population and enhancing local democracy. What is less explicitly mentioned is that, at the same time, governments are increasingly mobilizing local community resources in order for them to take on the administration of their programs through various forms of partnership (Charbonneau, 1998); what is not said at all is that there is no guarantee that social justice is better served by decentralization (Séguin and Germain, 2000). Civic participation seems stuck at the crossroads of two distinct evolutions, unless what we are dealing with is rather one and the same process of State redeployment in advanced societies.

Among the numerous social changes inspiring this discourse on civic participation are those resulting from international migration. According to Steven Vertovec, contemporary figures of migration threaten social cohesion in two ways: "from above", because international migration embodies one of the forms taken on by globalization, and "from below", by contributing to the internal differentiation of societies (Vertovec, 1999). More specifically, the concentration of the majority of immigrants in metropolitan areas is the object of much concern in terms of social cohesion, or lack thereof: the spectre of social fragmentation, or worse, social exclusion, looms over the multiethnic metropolis. In the immigration domain, the promotion of civic participation is also one of the fundamental orientations of public policy. In Canada, the federal government has adopted civic participation as one of its three objectives for the multiculturalism program (Heritage Canada, 1996), and the Québec provincial government has made this concept one of the pillars supporting the moral contract between Québec society and immigrants in "a democratic society in which the participation and contribution of all is expected and valued" (Gagné, 2000). Here again, the local scale is the territory of reference. The *Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration*

---

<sup>1</sup> « Une injonction : appartenir, participer. Le retour de la cohésion sociale et du citoyen », title in text our translation.

(MRCI- provincial ministry responsible for immigration) is attempting to decentralize its programs and the majority of its services offered in the Montréal area (in fact, on the island of Montreal) by working with over one hundred "community partners" (including a few community-oriented public institutions such as LCSCs- Local community Services Centres). The Ministry is in the process of establishing four "integration centres" on the island of Montréal, mandated to work with local communities at the neighborhood scale; immigrant settlement and integration are to be carried out with and in the local community.

## **2. The neighborhood as the preferred scale for civic participation**

In Montréal, probably as in other metropolitan areas, the neighborhood has become the preferred scale for the redeployment of an increasing number of public programs, both federal and provincial, aimed at better answering the needs of local communities and to involve local resources in dealing with social problems. A few examples of these programs are: *Partners in the economic development of neighborhoods* (municipal program, 1990); *Help fund for disadvantaged neighborhoods* (provincial program, 1995); *Community development at the heart of social development* (municipal program, 1994); or the most recent program for the *Revitalization of central neighborhoods* operated by the city of Montréal and financed by the *Ministère des Affaires municipales et de la Métropole* (Ministry responsible for municipal affairs). The interest of governments for intervention focused on the neighborhood scale, especially in terms of social policy, stems from a global change of perspective concerning the importance of solidarity at a scale perceived as closest to the citizen rather than pursuing "social clienteles", perceived as beneficiaries of services administered by the State (Charbonneau, 1998). Several researchers, especially in France, have pointed out the tendency for social policies to aim at rebuilding a sense of social belonging by emphasizing the importance of local territories such as the neighborhood. As Philippe Genestier puts it, the neighborhood is conceived of as "bringing people together" through proximity (Genestier, 1999). Consequently, in France, an important number of interventions aimed at ethnocultural minorities have been transformed into

programs focusing on specific neighborhoods (Simon, 1995; Donzelot et Estèbe, 1994).

At the same time, the emphasis on public action at the neighborhood scale is by the fact that various levels of government are encouraging inter-community dialogue and cooperation. In this perspective, twenty Local Community Councils<sup>2</sup> were set up in Montréal neighborhoods, financially supported by the City, the provincial government, and *Centraide* (a large-scale charity organization). These local community councils are mostly composed of community organisations expected, to a certain extent, to adopt the neighborhood scale for their actions or at least their coordination strategies (Germain, Morin, and Sénécal, 2000). Just as CDECs (*Corporations de développement économique communautaire* - Economic and Community Development Corporations) are designed to operate at the scale of the *arrondissement* (a area defined by the city of Montréal and usually comprising three neighborhoods), these neighborhood community councils are considered by public institutions as representing a concerted body of citizens and organizations. It should be noted that this perception does not necessarily concur with the perspective of community organizations, who rarely operate on the basis of representation. Most of these organizations, on the other hand, do endorse the conception of neighborhood as a meaningful territory in terms of belonging and identity. They value attachment to the neighborhood as a base for the loyalty of citizens to this territory and to their own action. To them, residential mobility is counterproductive, as they need to "retain their clients" to function effectively!

### **3. The neighborhood in question**

Of course, these findings may seem surprising considering the importance of the body of work aimed at reconsidering the pertinence of the neighborhood as a meaningful social space. Researchers such as Jean Remy, Francois Ascher, Alain Bourdin, Barry Wellman, or Yves Grafmeyer have, each in their own way, explored the limits of conceiving the local community as a

---

<sup>2</sup> *Tables de Concertation* in French.

"community-village" (in terms of a perfect correspondence between territory and community) in the context of a "metropolization" process based on the mastery and valuation of distances. The contemporary citizen is seen as organizing his daily activities and social networks at a scale completely different from those defined by proximity, the latter no longer perceived as having a structuring effect in this respect. This statement should, however, be qualified according to types of social categories (Morin and Rochefort, 1998) and type of neighborhood (Remy and Voyé, 1992). French researcher Authier and his team have recently showed that mobility and rootedness are not contradictory attitudes in some centrally located, older neighborhoods (Authier *et al.*, 1999). Other studies seem to suggest that the decline in neighborhood sociability is slower and less important than anticipated (Guest and Wierzbicki, 1999). Finally, a number of researchers are questioning differences in the meanings associated by immigrants and non-immigrants to neighborhood (Rose and Ray, 1999). Work carried out by our team in Montréal (financially supported by the FCAR) should yield some insight on this issue. In sum, if questions addressing the social pertinence of the neighborhood for its residents seem warranted, the neighborhood's reality in terms of public and community intervention seems rather obvious.

#### **4. Civic participation in seven multiethnic neighborhoods in Montréal.**

In 1992, our team conducted a study of seven multiethnic neighborhoods in the Montréal region, at the request of the *Ministère des Affaires internationales, de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles* (currently MRCI) and the City of Montréal (Germain *et al.*, 1995). The main objective was to examine interethnic cohabitation in Montréal's seven most multiethnic neighborhoods, namely in public areas (public sociability), as well as participation in community dynamics. In this paper, we will mostly be referring to this second component.

What the MRCI was interested in finding out was if ethnic groups participated in neighborhood community life. Seven neighborhoods were chosen in order to reflect the diversity of cases in the Montréal metropolitan area, in terms of

central/suburban location, poor/mixed/middle class socio-economic status, neighborhoods associated with various immigration waves, etc. Between 12 and 30 interviews were conducted in each neighborhood with key informants and a number of community activities were closely followed by team researchers. Despite important contrasts distinguishing these neighborhoods in terms of the various *modus vivendi* forged to deal with diversity, some general findings emerge from our study.

All the neighborhoods present a network of organizations working in the field of immigrant settlement and ethnic community life. These networks were variable in extent of development and territorial scope (some were based on a local scale, others more regional-based) and played an important part in the community dynamics of these neighborhoods. Ethnic organizations were often at the root of local support networks. The various functions<sup>3</sup> assumed by ethnic associations branch out into a diversity of fields; immigrant settlement, employment training, and youth integration are becoming important issues for these organizations, often in response to available government programs. Bertheleu has highlighted the differences between self-financed voluntary organizations and those dependant on government subsidies (Bertheleu, 1995). Furthermore, organizations involved in community life are (or were) generally mono-ethnic; recent years have seen an increasing tendency for these organizations to open up to other ethnic groups. This tendency results from adaptation to the accelerated diversification process affecting several neighborhoods (in terms of ethnocultural origins), but this is also "encouraged" by government financing providers. After financing monoethnic organizations and their activities for several years, the provincial government has clearly prioritized activities promoting intercultural contact from 1989 onward (thus also addressing non-immigrant organizations); it is consequently reduced subsidies to monoethnic organizations and support to ethnic cultural activities, and intends to phase out support to these organizations in the middle term (Helly, 1996: 424). As for the federal government, it has ceased support the institutional operation of ethnic NGOs since 1995 (Helly, 2000). The

---

<sup>3</sup> Dorais (1992) finds that these mandates include social welfare, political representation, economic representation, and cultural identity.

consequences of this change of perspective on community dynamics are not yet clear. A recent study conducted by Helly and McAndrew shows that some NGO leaders support this redefinition of provincial policies in regard to the management of diversity but express concern about the trivialization of ethnic diversity (Helly *et al.*, 1999). This situation also raises questions concerning the impact of these measures on organizations based first and foremost on a sense of belonging to a given ethnic community.

In sum, the promotion of coordination at the neighborhood level allows public institutions to support "common" organizations, as opposed to specific communities as it did in the past; this also allows them to move away from the multiculturalist orientation of previous government policies, both federal and provincial.

## **5. Territorial logic, networking logic?**

Neighborhood-scale inter-community coordination is nonetheless somewhat restrictive; at the time of our study (1992), its institutionalization process was still a novel experience. In most neighborhoods, community organizations and associations had already begun working in collaboration, sometimes very intensely, as in the case of the Petite-Bourgogne Action plan, for example, developed in a neighborhood stigmatized for its racial tensions (Germain, 1995). This Action plan was put forth by the Petite-Bourgogne Coalition in 1991 and resulted from an intense collaboration effort cutting across linguistic, cultural, and racial barriers (those linked to socio-economic factors were insuperable). In *Petite-Bourgogne* (and elsewhere), several organizations feared that coordinated action would reduce direct access to government and political officials, as these would now go through the Coalition to communicate their interests and administer their programs. At the same time, several associations in the *Petite-Bourgogne* neighborhood were actually part of a larger network, often regional-based. This was specifically the case for organizations associated with ethnic groups established in several neighborhoods, such as the Black communities in *Petite-Bourgogne*. These organizations were torn between their allegiance to a regional network, on the

one hand, and coordinated action at the local level, on the other; This situation is characterized by tension between two different types of logic: a neighborhood logic, based on the pragmatic resolution of concrete cases through negotiation with other local organizations, and another logic focusing more specifically on basic issues, often related to identity, and marked by clear ideological positions.

These constraints were reinforced in the early 1990s when the *Healthy neighborhoods* program was inaugurated; this program formalized the structure of the Local Community Councils in each neighborhood and made them to include other types of actors, such as public institutions and representatives from the business sector (thus becoming "inter-sectorial"). The introduction of institutional actors (municipal services, governments, and community police - the latter also converted to the neighborhood scale shortly after) were to gradually change the dynamics of these organizations, firstly through a further formalization of the collaboration process, with which several representatives from ethnic communities didn't feel comfortable. On a deeper level, but only implicitly expressed, opposition was mounting between those lobbying in favour of the recognition of differences and those seeking to "erase" these differences altogether. Cultural minority organizations feared that they were being trapped in a form of territorial solidarity that relegated them to permanent minority status. Finally, the institutionalization of community coordination also raises the issue of representation. And, if in a neighborhood such as *Petite-Bourgogne* the Coalition had managed to gather members from all the groups active at the local level, this in no way insures the proper representation of neighborhood residents. This lack of representation especially affected the middle class (professionals having chosen the neighborhood for its proximity to downtown) living in the single-family homes or in the condominiums, who did not really identify with the neighborhood anyway.

This situation reflects but one of the forms taken on by the difficult relation between representative democracy and participative democracy, especially in regard to the neo-corporatist tendencies of the latter (Germain, Morin, and



Sénécal, 2000). The institutionalization of community dynamics is certainly one of the main elements of this issue.

## **6. The institutionalization of community organizations**

Several researchers in the past years have looked into the institutionalization of collective action (Hamel, 1999). A study recently carried out in Montréal on new forms of associative life reveals the partial institutionalization of community dynamics, the hybrid nature of community organizations, and the ambiguity of their relations with the State (Germain, Morin, and Sénécal, 2000). All this has certainly inspired the State to adopt new forms of social management, but has also resulted in community organizations being increasingly co-opted to deliver services. In fact, what we are witnessing is the reconstruction of community networks according to a two-tier system. On the one hand, large organizations receive public funds, act as mediators at the local scale between public institutions and the needs of residents, and are treated as competent partners by institutions; on the other hand, a plethora of small and precarious organizations have little presence in coordination instances and are dominated by the larger organizations. This framework also seems to apply to organizations in the field of immigration and ethnicity, but our research on this subject is not yet concluded (Sweeny and Germain, 2000). In this perspective, neighborhood is perceived as a privileged space for coordination on the basis of local and inter-sectorial solidarity; the upcoming State-imposed municipal fusions should further contribute to the neighborhood's specific politico-administrative mission. Cultural communities seem poorly represented in these coordination instances. They were, for example, little represented in the local forums for social development initiated by the Québec Government in 1997.

The civic participation of cultural communities seems ambivalent with respect to this scenario, in which the neighborhood becomes a reference territory. On the one hand, the increasing number of multiethnic neighborhoods (no longer ethnic neighborhoods dominated by one or two groups) and in consequence, of settlement areas for cultural communities, more than ever appeal to a

networking logic. Moreover, maps illustrating the residential location of various cultural communities reveal their relative dispersal across Montréal's neighborhoods. On the other hand, the expansion of multiethnicity has not eliminated the fact that some communities assert their presence in specific neighborhoods in which they seek to establish as their founding neighborhoods, a term defined by Jean Remy (1990). These founding neighborhoods don't necessarily coincide with the residential concentration patterns of these groups. These symbolically invested areas tend to act as identity markers but also as political spaces, as was illustrated by the last municipal elections : it yielded 15 (out of 51) municipal councillors with a minority background and their electoral districts reflect, to a certain extent, their groups' founding neighborhoods.

## **Conclusion**

Immigrants, whether recent or established, become urban citizens before becoming citizens of the State. But today, a broad-based definition of citizenship and the increasingly frequent reference to urban citizenship confers special meaning to the above statement. Cities are spaces *par excellence* for the expression of differential citizenship (Vertovec, 1998; Young, 1990). If immigrants continue to value spaces of physical proximity and namely neighborhoods as spaces for public sociability (in terms of markets, public places, places of worship, cafés, etc.), their civic participation, on the other hand, tends to deploy at other scales, namely regional, and, increasingly, ... transnational!

## Sources cited:

Authier, J.-Y. (ed.) (1999) *Rapports résidentiels et contextes urbains*. Rapport présenté au Plan Construction, Urbanisme, Architecture.

Bertheleu, H. (1995) "Les modes d'organisation collective des Loas à Montréal", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 27(2) :81-100.

Donzelot, J., and Estèbe, P. (1994) *L'État animateur. Essai sur la politique de la ville*. Paris: Éditions Esprit.

Dorais, L.-J. (1992). "Les associations vietnamiennes à Montréal", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 24 (1) 79-95

Charbonneau, J. (1998) "Lien social et communauté locale : quelques questions préalables", *Lien social et politiques*, 39 :115-126.

Gagné, M. (2000) "La politique d'accueil au Québec", in *Ville et hospitalité*, Actes du colloque, 5-6 mai 1999, Paris, Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme:27-35.

Genestier, P. (1999) "Le sortiège du quartier : Quand le lieu est sensé faire lien", *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, 80-81 : 181-187.

Germain, A., Morin, R., and Sénécal, G. (2000) L'évolution récente du mouvement associatif montréalais : un retour au territoire programmé- un pragmatisme renouvelé, Rapport soumis au ministère l'équipement....

Germain, A., with Archambault, J., Blanc, B., Charbonneau, J, Dansereau, F. et Rose, D. (1995). *Cohabitation interethnique et vie de quartier*, Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, ministère des Affaires internationales, de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles, collection Études et recherches, No. 12.

Germain, A. (1995) "La Petite-Bourgogne: un quartier tourmenté à la reconquête de son image", p. 169-200 In *Cohabitation interethnique et vie de quartier*, Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, ministère des Affaires internationales, de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles, collection Études et recherches, No. 12.

Guest, A.M. and Wierzbicki, S.K. (1999) "Social ties at the Neighborhood level. Two decades of GSS Evidence ", *Urban Affairs Review*, 35 (1) : 92-111.

Hamel, P. (1999) "La consultation publique et les limites de la participation des citoyens aux affaires urbaines", *Recherches sociographiques*, XL: 434-466.

Helly, D. (2000) "Primauté des droits ou cohésion sociale. Les limites du multiculturalisme canadien 1971-1999", in Wieviorka, Michel (ed) *La différence*

*culturelle*, Colloque à Cerisy La Salle, Paris, 2000 (Forthcoming).

Helly, D. (1999), "Une injonction: appartenir et participer. Le retour de la cohésion sociale et du bon citoyen", *Lien social et politiques*, 41.

Helly, D. (1996). *Le Québec face à la pluralité culturelle 1977-1994*, Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, collection Documents de recherche, No. 36.

Helly, D., Lavallée, M. and McAndrew, M. (2000) "Citoyenneté et redéfinition des politiques publiques de gestion de la diversité : la position des organismes non gouvernementaux québécois", *Recherches Sociographiques*. (Forthcoming)

Heritage Canada, (1996)

<http://www.pch.gc.ca/multi/html/english.html>

Jenson, Jane (1998), *Les contours de la cohésion sociale : l'état de la recherche au Canada*, étude F 03, Ottawa, Réseaux canadiens de recherche en politiques publiques, 54 pages.

Morin, R. and Rochefort, M. (1998) "Quartier et lien social : des pratiques individuelles à l'action collective", *Lien social et politique*, 39 :103-114.

Simon, P. (1995) "La politique de la ville contre la ségrégation ou l'idéal d'une ville sans divisions", *Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*, 68-69: 27-33

Rose, D. and Ray, B. (1999) "Discovering the City? The local and the Non-local as Resources for Immigrant Women in their settlement process in Montréal", paper presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Metropolis Project conference, Vancouver, 14-15 january.

Remy, J. and Voyé, L. 1992. *La ville: vers une nouvelle définition?* Paris: L'Harmattan.

Remy, J. 1990. "La ville cosmopolite et la coexistence interethnique", In Bastenier, A. et Dassetto, F. (eds.), *Immigration et nouveaux pluralismes. Une confrontation de sociétés*. Bruxelles : Éditions universitaires/De Boeck.

Séguin, A.-M., and Germain, A. (2000) "The Social Sustainability of Montreal: A local or State Matter?", p. 39-67 In Polèse, M. and Stren, R. (eds.), *The Social Sustainability of Cities. Diversity and the Management of Change*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Sweeny, M. and Germain, A. (2000) *The Evolving Dynamic between Community Associations and Immigration in Montréal: A Reality in Mutation*. Montréal: INRS-Urbanisation.

Vertovec, Steven (1999) "Social Cohesion and tolerance", p. 94-134 In Hjarno, J. (ed.), *From Metropolis to Cosmopolis*, South Jutland University Press.

Vertovec, Steven (1998) "Politiques multiculturelles et citoyenneté dans les villes européennes", *Revue internationale de Sciences Sociales*, 156 (June) : 211-223.

Wellman, B. and Leighton, B.. (1979) "Networks, neighborhoods and communities. Approaches to the community question." *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 14 :363-390.

Young, I.M. 1990. *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton: University of Princeton press.