Local governance and social movements in Québec: The perverse effects of corporate culture

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CHAPTER 5

Local Governance and Social Movements in Québec: The Perverse Effects of Corporate Culture

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Introduction

Social responsibility has always been at the heart of Québec's social and community movements. Indeed, even at the high point of its trade-union, feminist, community and nationalist movements, which occurred in the wake of the American civil rights movement, of decolonization, and of global student movements in the 1960s. The latter spawned practices of direct democracy, self-management, and popular education based on ethics of social justice. The first Québec groups emerging from these movements, alternately referred to as "citizens' committees," "grassroots organizations," or "community organizations," embodied the ideal of participatory democracy and the ethical ideal of social responsibility. While these organizations were constituted autonomously, their political struggle brought them over the years incomplete, but relatively regular public funding. With the emergence of neo-liberalism, targeted funding and government priorities based on a more "productive" and quantifiable outputs, this ethic of social responsibility vitiated and the groups lost a large part of their initial autonomy. The running of community organizations was gradually associated with managerial practices of private corporations, and this in turn produced issues similar to those now emerging in the public sector.

This chapter will shed light on the erosion of social responsibility within Québec community organizations. It will analyse how several of these community organizations adopted a new form of management modelled on private corporations. It will also illustrate the problems this entails for the development of an ethic of social responsibility within these organizations and within social movements in Québec.

Québec Community Organizations

After the Quiet Revolution,[1] a strong and variegated popular movement emerged in Québec in all spheres of social life, on a territorial basis and on specific social problems (health, housing, household debt, sexual violence, and so on). The constitutive elements of this movement – advocacy groups – offered resources, local social services, and brought together marginalized but active citizens seeking to improve their living conditions. Other community groups organized on a territorial basis rather than strictly on social class (Lamoureux and Lamoureux, 2009), subsequently joined these initial advocacy groups. They formed national federations on a sectoral basis, and later on a territorial basis, in an effort to adapt to decentralized budgetary envelopes. They offer political representation, stimulate democratic life, and systematize innovative practices (Lamoureux and Lamoureux, 2009). An example of this would be community and alternative services in mental health or in matters of sexual violence. Fighting against poor living conditions of an important segment of Québec society (Lamoureux, 1999: 12), these organizations typically oppose bureaucratic and authoritarian policies, and favour grassroots power and democracy:

> *The project of social movements, comprised of associations, trade unions and a constellation of autonomous community organizations, is pre-eminently an emancipatory, self-managing project, based on non-traditional and non-charitable [...] collective solidarities. It also represents a view that opposes a bureaucratic and authoritarian vision of the modern polity. In short, it is a democratic project that affects individuals and collectivities in their entirety. (Lamoureux, 1999: 23)*

Bearers of specific values and principles, these groups inspired the movement that advocated social responsibility within corporations:

> *[They] search for social power and [...] combat perceived helplessness through learning that what appears personal is often political. [They] create a capacity for democracy and for sustained social change. [They] can make society more adaptable and governments more accountable. Community organizing means bringing people together to combat shared problems and to increase their say about decisions that affect their lives. (Rubin and Rubin, 1992: 1, 3)*

The organizations, struggles, and methods of popular education that later shaped Québec society were largely forged by these citizens committees, local health clinics, women's health clinics, groups for disabled workers and for the unemployed, community media, groups fighting non-regulated urban renewal, groups advocating for those on social assistance, for the right to housing, and for literacy. They led to the enactment of several laws and public institutions such as the "Office de protection du consommateur" (Public Consumer Protection Bureau), the "Conseil du statut de la femme" (Council on the Status of Women), the "Loi sur l'assurance maladie" (Public Health Insurance Act), the "Régie du logement" (Housing Authority), the "Loi sur l'équité salariale" (Wage Equity Act), to name but a few. The community health clinics inspired the creation of the CLSCs (Public

1 This refers to Québec's intensive period of modernization which took place after 1960. The Québec Welfare State emerged at this point.

Local Community Health Centres), the community daycares gave rise to the "Centres de la petite enfance" and to a world-renowned network of childcare services; feminist collectives spearheaded the struggle against sexual violence, creating the network of shelters for victims of sexual assault; they also fought for pay equity and for women's full access to the labour market.

Similar organizations emerged in many Western countries. However, Québec community groups have been recognized by the state for more than 25 years. On the other hand, the countries that formally recognize this social contribution of community organizations only initiated such a process a decade ago and the scope of their recognition is not as far-reaching as that of Québec (Guay and White, 2009). This can no doubt be explained by the specific situation of Québec, torn between the need to establish an internal social consensus to respond to conservative pressures emerging from English Canada and the American philanthropic tradition (Guay and White, 2009).

Indeed, the way Québec formally recognizes community groups is unique. It is embodied in a policy[2] that establishes:

> *the specificity of autonomous community organizations in relation to the social economy and the cooperative movement; [respect for] the autonomy of community organizations by disengaging from forced complementarity and partnership with the State; [the centrality of] supporting organizations' missions as the form of funding most likely to favour the emergence of innovative citizen participation in a milieu where problems are experienced first hand. (Guay and White, 2009: 20)*

This policy formally rejects the contractual type of funding generally applied in Europe, the United States, and English Canada, as well as in countries from the South. It recognizes and funds certain advocacy groups and this per se constitutes an "unprecedented situation in the world" (Guay and White, 2009).

Québec community organizations created and defended an organizational culture where transparency and direct democracy were guiding principles. However, certain tendencies and practices contrary to these have lately emerged within these organizations: "elite formation", professionalization (Lamoureux, 1999), devaluing of mobilization efforts and of popular education, in short, which have distanced these groups from their initial stakeholders. A number of community organizations now "represent and advocate on behalf of their members or clients" (Shragge, 2003: 31), while stinting on genuine mobilization efforts. Their legitimacy which was originally derived from the marginalized citizens they represented was gradually replaced by a state-conferred legitimacy.[3]

With the rise of neo-liberalism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the redefinition of the state, and its partial retreat social issues (Klein 1995), the survival of Québec community organizations has been uncertain.

The state would no longer be the primary social provider; the market and the community were to share the responsibility. New relationships between the community and the government were in place. Community organizations were pressured into

2 The Québec Government's policy on the recognition of autonomous community organizations (PRSAC).

3 Begun during the Rochon Commission in 1988, this formal recognition of Québec community movement's contributions culminated in 2001 in the *Politique de reconnaissance et de financement de l'action communautaire autonome* which recognizes their "self management" and their "autonomy" without however recognizing these groups as "autonomous democratic spaces" (MEPACQ, 2004).

partnership with government, and innovative solutions were sought in order to confront the crisis (Shragge, 2003: 31).

Many community groups were able to survive thanks to their partnership with the Québec State (Côté and Simard 2010). Already reduced in the 1980s and centred on state-recognized service provision,[4] their missions have been tailored increasingly to the uncertainties of state grants, often in the form of project funding. The revenues from these project grants have been crucial for these groups that are without base funding. The price of such an uncertain public funding and of this formal recognition of their expertise has been very hefty: their internal dynamics and specific culture has been transformed. Indeed, now community groups tend to be recognized by the state for their purely "utilitarian" function:

> *This economicist notion of the role of social organizations, notably of community groups, contributes to the downsizing of their critical function and constrains them to the narrower mandate of service provision. In other words, activism yields to the management of social problems. This trajectory is evidenced in a more or less conscious acceptance of the inevitable character of social issues; such acceptance leads to a new dynamic of managing social problems, modeled on the market economy. To move from activism as a form of combating the causes underlying social problems to accepting a management role for handling these problems [...] marks a break with the ethics of social movements that drive civil society. (Lamoureux, 1999: 13–14)*

Recognized as deliverers of social services, community groups[5] have also been recognized by the state as legitimate representatives of the interests of the populations that they serve (Côté and Simard, 2010). They have been invited to sit at standing regional or provincial consultation bodies or social and economic forums in what are called processes of "concertation" (dialogue and collaboration). This legitimacy conferred by governmental and political bodies has led several community organizations to mimic the practices and culture of their counterparts and thus to relinquish the practices and culture of the social movement from which they arose. They have normalized their dependency on state funding and recognition,[6] and this, in turn, has exerted a major influence on their organizational practices and culture. Since their legitimacy no longer stems from their respective bases, and since the constraints imposed by the state are increasingly numerous, their practices in several instances have completely deviated and adopted those of the private sector. Thus, Québec's 4,000 community groups, gathered within 250 coalitions, often now exert a regulatory, rather than a mobilizing, influence in social movements. Gaining their legitimacy, their financial survival, and their partnership with government bodies, they have relinquished their original mission of popular education and ethics of transparency towards their stakeholders.

4 The more radical groups, which focused on methods of radical or direct action (the right to abortion, for instance) or on less socially or politically profitable issues (radical theatre, for example) quietly disappeared (Lamoureux, 1990).

5 This legitimacy led them to manage certain sectors of social intervention such as employment, social housing, community economic development, the social economy, domestic violence and sexual violence, to cite but these examples (Houle, 2006).

6 This funding is increasingly linked to sub-contracting relations within the sphere of social services.

New Public Management (NPM) and Community Organizations

New Public Management has been very influential in this transformation of community organizations' practices and culture. Against the backdrop of a crisis in public finances and of a "commodification of social relations" (Villeneuve, 2005: 7), many advanced industrial countries, OECD members in particular, have dismantled the Welfare State at different paces and with more or less virulence. This process was accompanied by a discourse peppered with ideological attacks on the redistribution of wealth: the latter, it was argued, as well as the recognition of the rights of marginalized groups, inhibited economic growth:

> *In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, liberal social government came under attack for inefficiently managing government planning, regulating, and spending, and for governing too much. Neoliberal reform came to emphasize that a "society of commitments" would interfere with the growth and movement of free market solutions, hinder entrepreneurialism, drain public resources [...], and encourage certain individuals and groups to be too dependent on government at the cost of their autonomy. (Ilcan, 2009: 211)*

The process of state downsizing was achieved in accordance with the principles of New Public Management (NPM) (Giauque, 2003), based in turn on the neo-liberal idea[7] "that the public and the private sectors did not have to be organized and managed in fundamentally different ways. Indeed, that it would be better for the public services if they could be organized and managed as much like the private sector as possible" (Dawson and Dargie, 2002: 35).

In order to "replace the traditional process-based approach, which proved very difficult to evaluate and quantify, with a results-driven approach, [and in order to institute] a system of performance enhancing incentives" (Brunelle, 2005: 36), NPM offered a set of tools, "concepts and dynamics, traditionally reserved for the private sector", which it integrated into the public sector (Villeneuve, 2005: 7). The latter was thus transformed and took on new regulatory functions:

> *the organizational regulation emerging within public organizations is based on new disciplinary mechanisms, that is, on threats and shared fears of potential sanctions, as well as on shared chances where these changes create opportunities for individuals, which results in acceptance of this regulatory model and its legitimization. We call this model "liberal bureaucracy" in order to emphasize the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the process, which combines liberty and constraints, neoliberalism and bureaucracy, decentralization and concentration of power. (Giauque, 2003: 567)*

7 "The neoliberal orthodoxy can be represented as a generalized belief that the State and its interventions are obstacles to economic and social development. This belief may be broken down into a number of more specific propositions: that public deficits are intrinsically negative; that State regulation of the labor market produces rigidities and hinders both economic growth and job creation; that the social protection guaranteed by the Welfare State and its redistributive policies hinders economic growth; and that the State should not intervene in regulating foreign trade or international financial markets" (Clark, 2002: 771).

In Québec, community organizations had been involved in corporatist[8] relations with the Québec State before the arrival of NPM. They were gradually subjected to NPM's principles, which produced deep changes "in the labour process and in service organizations [that] are operationalized through managerial discourses [...] associated more broadly with globalization and neoliberalism" (Baines, 2004a: 6). Social responsibilities (Ilcan, 2009) were privatized and the state transferred some of these to certain community organizations that had become dependent on it.

Within NPM, governmental organizations and the non-profits they fund, are considered business units in which managers are given discretionary power to meet or exceed programme and individual goals. Accountability and efficiency, under NPM, are constructed entirely as achievement of performance targets (Baines, 2004a: 7).

The zero-deficit[9] measures introduced by the (social-democratic) government of the Parti Québecois starting in the mid-1990s, as well as the subsequent state's "re-engineering" or "modernizing" measures (Rouillard et al., 2008) brought in by the (neo-liberal) Liberal Government in 2003,[10] altered the form and the role of the Québec social state,[11] facilitating the birth of a "companion" (Klein 1995) or "neoliberal" (Bourque, Duchastel and Pineault, 1999) state. Social services were increasingly cut back, user fees were increased, and subcontracting to the private sector and to community organizations was introduced "for the good reason that it costs less; [community group] employees do not receive the salaries and social advantages that unions obtained for the workers of the public and parapublic sectors" (Piotte, 2010). This disengagement by the national state took place in the interest of the international and regional levels (Jouve 2003); this situation depends on a "ménage à trois [between] the market, the State and civil society" (Lévesque 2002). In this context, community organizations gain in recognition and position themselves in the planning process and distribution of services. They provide expertise through their involvement in governance and help legitimize the process of developing public policies (Bacqué, Rey and Sintomer, 2005), especially when

8 By corporatism, we mean "a system of representing interests in which the constitutive units are organized in a limited number of singular, obligatory, non-competitive categories, recognized or agreed upon – if not created – by the State and to which has been guaranteed a deliberate monopoly of representation within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain rules in selecting leaders and articulating demands and interests" (Bourque, 1995: 14). The tendency towards corporatism in Québec dates back to the period when the Church was responsible for the governance of civil society and controlled union organizations. It was a social corporatism that promoted "the harmonizing of interests between employers and workers within intermediary bodies" (Côté, Lévesque and Morneau, 207: 11). The neo-corporatism that we know today appeared subsequently, during the secularization of Québec institutions: unions and employers became "conflictual partners" within the state, working together to build a national economy, organizing themselves independently, and "calling upon the State to define an institutional framework that facilitates the negotiation of social demands and conflict regulation along the lines of Scandinavian countries" (Côté, Lévesque and Morneau, 2007: 11).

9 In 1996, the legislation on "zero-deficit" was adopted following "summits" that involved, for community group coalitions, working with the government's economic partners from the private sector. This legislation established "deficit ceilings" for each fiscal year (Belzile, 1999: 366). Its application principally targeted reductions in public services.

10 Re-engineering is defined as "the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of business processes to achieve dramatic improvements in critical, contemporary measures of performance, such as cost, quality, service, and speed" (Hammer and Champy, 1993: 32).

11 "Thus, governments have since then increasingly loathed to intervene as planners; rather they do so in partnership with the private sector, or with the social economy sector. In this context, governments are called upon to play the catalytic role that facilitates the proliferation of agreements between economic and non-economic partners. As a result, public intervention in the economy does not disappear, but its role is transformed. In this respect, the recognition of civil society in economic development plays a central role: it ensues both from demands formulated by the economic actors and in particular by corporations, which act increasingly as stakeholders in a host of areas and cases, and from demands stemming from other social actors" (Brunelle, 2005: 30–31).

they represent a clientele (youth, the elderly, workers, women, and so on) or a particular sector (environment, culture, recreation).

As partners and subcontractors for the state, community groups seeking to benefit from public funding must therefore satisfy certain conditions modelled on NPM principles. They are required to:

> *... be less accountable to members than to a bureaucracy that has its own requirements [...]; adhere to a social planning logic based not on the requirements of deep structural changes, but on management imperatives where the control and social peace needed for the efficient running of business, are naturally present. (Lamoureux, 1999: 32)*

In this way, the public sector is opened to the market and to competition, independent service units proliferate (agencies, community organizations) and an internal market is created where contracts awarded by tender are open to the private sector (Lebel, 2009). These autonomous units can be a self-managed group of parents or of women, organized as a cooperative or as a collective, or they can be a non-profit organization,[12] created by the managers of a public service or of a private company seeking a contract in response to a request for proposals (RFP) (Lebel, 2009). At a time when recourse to RFPs and contracts has become the rule, the borders between the public and the private begin to blur. Indeed, the public sector now seems to be ruled by a principle of efficiency intrinsic to the market, rather than by the values of civic solidarity. Services are withdrawn from the public sector and entrusted to community groups conceived as responsible citizen "corporations" (Lebel, 2009), over-regulated by the state that no longer regulates the market:

> *The community practices developed in the 1990s incorporated the formal partnership arrangements discussed above into the structures of their organizations and their wider relationships [...] [G]roups shifted from a membership or social movement base to a client focus. The redefinition is inherently depoliticizing. Clients are to be served and have a less active – or no – role in either the organizations' internal processes or on wider social issues. At best, they are represented rather than mobilized. Thus, the form of political representation became lobbying by coalitions of community organizations promoting the needs of a particular population. (Shragge, 2003: 55)*

With accelerating decentralization, the state's control over community organizations became more and more targeted. It was reinforced by the application of a Québec model of regional governance and of techno-juridical regulation (Bourque, Duchastel and Pineault, 1999). This form of governance once again fuelled the "illusion of a plurality of self-governing bodies, where room for maneuver is rigorously marked out by a range of norms, which if need be, work to eliminate the extent of that autonomy" (Lamoureux, 1991: 31); in fact, such governance introduced another type of corporatism (Côté and Simard, 2010) that established itself "by adopting a clientelistic perspective" (Lamoureux, 1999: 26). It involves:

12 In Québec, a non-profit organization is a corporation regulated by the "Loi sur les compagnies" (Corporations Act). It is non-governmental, autonomous and voluntary, and does not share out profits (Ramboarisata and De Serre, 2007:11).

> *a process in which an occupational group, which has succeeded in establishing its members' monopoly over the definition of a particular population's needs and over the ways to satisfy them, takes charge of the production of a category of goods and services. (Paquet, 1989: 100)*

In the regions of Québec, hitherto devoid of political structures, a political level was designed in such a way as to facilitate the implementation of the neo-liberal agenda. Underpinned "by a set of representations, forming a veritable ideology, discernible in the recesses of contemporary governance discourse" (Chevalier, 2003: 206), regional governance contributed directly to the "normalization of neo-liberalism", a process which would "be realized more easily if the actors managed to use the most important elements of the local political culture" for their own purposes (Boudreau and Keil, 2006: 98).

The Transformation of Community Groups' Internal Practices

The Québec government recognizes autonomous community action and funds it as such. It recognizes its specificity in all its facets:

> *democratic action, expertise on various complex issues, well-trained personnel and inadequate working conditions compared with the professional and semi-professional personnel of public and para-public networks of the public service. (Houle, 2006)*

But chronic under funding of the community sector renders these groups overly vulnerable to measures derived from NPM and adopted by government agencies, other than the one responsible for the framework agreement secured between community groups and the Québec government. This is all the more true in that public services are increasingly amalgamated with community organizations on a sectorial basis. Regularly faced with community organizations' alternative practices (Houle, 2006) and with budgetary constraints, government agencies tend to consider the community groups as a solution for safeguarding public action in society. The social-democratic party (Parti Québecois) and the Liberal Party, each in turn, applied this vision in their own way. They did so by compelling under-funded community groups to adopt a project-defined approach; to participate (free of charge) in development planning with local and regional authorities; and by creating new local and regional intermediary organizations directly funded by government and mandated to deliver public services in youth employment, health care, and other fields. On the one hand, the territory of Québec is, indeed, currently dotted with community groups such as youth centres, women's centres, centres for street kids, housing committees, employability agencies, and groups engaged in food security (Houle, 2006). By better controlling their mandates and projects, the government's presence in these marginalized sectors has thus increased tenfold. On the other hand, rather than create new administrative structures that would facilitate its decentralization, the Québec government has created new non-profit organizations entrusted with a government mandate to decentralize its operations. It has thus been able to shape these structures by way of legislation (thanks to a reform of the legislation on non-profit organizations)

and fund them directly: these new structures included the CRÉ, CLD, CLÉ,[13] and regional health authorities, established in every region of Québec.

Here are now some examples that illustrate how NPM, corporate culture, and new forms of neo-liberal governance have influenced community organizations. These *bad practices*, to be found to varying degrees in various sectors of community action and in various Québec regions, illustrate how community groups' original civic ethic can be shunted aside.

1. A COMMUNITY GROUP RESORTS TO CONSULTANTS FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR FOR GUIDANCE ON ITS OPERATIONS

Certain community groups willingly incorporated the NPM's philosophy and practices into their internal management. The following describes the case of a board of directors, convinced that it had to reduce its human resource costs in order to enhance the community organization's performance by modelling itself on private corporations rather than on its own former democratic practices.

A tenants' rights advocacy committee from an underprivileged neighbourhood adopts the NPM model

At the end of the 1970s, citizens organized themselves in Neighbourhood X of City Y to develop housing cooperatives so as to escape the logic of rental housing and speculation. Federal and provincial funds had been made available to build cooperatives several years prior. Three community organizations, sharing the same board of directors, were created: a holding company for cooperatives, a housing committee (for information and tenants' rights advocacy) and a company to buy and renovate buildings.

When public funds for building housing cooperatives were cut in the early 1990s, the first organization was abolished and the second was merged with the company destined to buy and renovate buildings. Thus, in Neighbourhood X, only one organization remained, consisting of two sections, each with its respective coordinator: one linked to the housing committee and one to the development of cooperatives.

A decade later, the coordinator of the housing section leaves her job and the task of replacing her proves difficult. The Board of Directors thus decides to merge the two coordinating positions into one. It decides at the same time to restructure the whole organization and, to this end, hires a firm of management consultants. The firm's recommendations are modelled on the NPM: reduce employees' social benefits, reduce salaries for certain positions in order to match similar positions in the private sector, increase salaries for managers, and include on the Board of Directors (which had hitherto only been made up of citizens) "expert external" non-voting members.

These new measures were adopted by the Board of Directors without consulting the employees. The latter are thus subjected to a new job hierarchy, a deterioration of their

13 Conférence régionale des élus (CRÉ), Centre local de développement (CLD), Centre local d'emploi (CLÉ).

wages and working conditions, as well as the elimination of a seat on the Board of Directors reserved for their representative. This way of operating resembles private corporations much more than citizens associations and constitutes a practice contrary to a Board's role in advocacy, in democratic management, and in enhancing quality of life within the community organization.

2. ENCOUNTER BETWEEN A NATIONAL COALITION AND THE QUÉBEC GOVERNMENT

Other groups moved from a critical stance to supporting the ideological positions and tendencies of the Québec government. Here is an example of a national association, which was historically mandated to defend the rights of a highly vulnerable population, which endorsed a government proposal to reduce public funding in its own sector.

National Coalition Advocating for the Rights of an Underprivileged Segment of Society

The end of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s witnesses the emergence of a new coalition of associations advocating for a significant sector of the population. Gradually, it replaces an already established and more radical national organization. The government swiftly recognizes this new coalition as the agency that can speak for this sector. From the start, this new umbrella group renounces its predecessor's union-style struggle in the interest of lobbying, dialogue and cooperation with government. Its public stance reflects this choice and jars with the group's former position. In fact, rather than defend the rights of the population that it represents and suggest more beneficial alternatives, this new coalition endorses the implementation of NPM principles. It adjusts its stance and rhetoric to match these new tendencies in public management. The coalition endorses, for example, the imposition of performance indicators (comparable to the principle of competition between OECD countries) in its sector, even though the latter is of a social nature.

Moreover, this group's organizational culture is modelled henceforth on the private sector rather than on the third sector. This involves centralized decision-making at the national executive, power concentrated in Montreal and little left to the other 16 regions, an absence of debate within its committees and assemblies (that exist only on paper), and a rubber-stamping role assigned to the Board of Directors. These tactics fuelled a revolt by certain members who created a new coalition whose platform opposed the Government's proposals and whose practices were more democratic.

3. NEW REGULATING MECHANISMS IN QUÉBEC'S REGIONS

In Québec, the gradual process of decentralization, initiated by the Québec government, was referred to as "regionalization". Over time, responsibilities and powers were devolved to 17 Québec administrative regions in accordance with successive reforms. They were entrusted to intermediary associations created by the Government for that purpose; they were ruled by the same chapters of the Québec Civil Code, and structured in the same

way (Board of Directors, General Assembly, and so on) as are community groups. Their membership, however, remains vague and their operation does not resemble that of a citizens' association. Members of the Board of Directors are often appointed by authorities but remain without a mandate from the population. These members include provincial legislators, municipal councillors, as well as representatives of civil society co-opted by Government. Contrary to cities and to the muncipalities, the CRÉs (Conférence régionale des élus) have no taxation power and no electoral process. However, they are responsible for managing the social and economic development of the regions, whose territory at times exceeds that of England.

Here is an example of the way the idea to "rationalize" development in a region runs parallel to working "in partnership" with civil society. Operational procedures can easily irritate community "partners": professionals and managers, accountable only to their own Board of Directors and indirectly to the Québec State, take decisions internally and with no transparency or accountability.

Collaboration ("Concertation") in the Context of Political and Administrative Decentralization in Québec's regions

Regionalist social movements took shape in Québec *circa* 1965 in reaction to the centralization of the Québec State; in particular, it opposed a plan to modernize remote rural territories conceived in the capital without consulting targeted populations. In response, the Government created in each region a "Council A" responsible for a modest portion of this effort of decentralization. Economic development was the initial mandate of these councils. Their mandate widened somewhat in scope in 1993. In 2004 they were replaced by another council (the "Council B"), following the election of the Liberal Party. These new councils were swiftly entrusted with cultural and social mandates. However, neither the Councils A, nor the Councils B, created by way of legislation, were public institutions. Rather, they were non-profit organizations incorporated according to the "Loi des companies" (Corporations Act) Chapter 3 (of Québec's Civil Code), entities legally independent of the State, but designed to act as its representatives in their respective territories. Their mandate is broad: to develop their region and manage the budgets allocated by Government for such regional development. They also have to initiate forums designed to work with regional civil society in the context of regional development plans.

For several reasons, the establishment of Councils B produced much anxiety for democracy at a regional level. The main concern was their representativity, their legitimacy, and their accountability. Indeed, the structure of B Councils provides for limited civil society participation. While A Councils' Boards of Directors granted two thirds of their seats to representatives of civil society, elected by electoral colleges, the new legislation* granted no more than one third of the seats on the B Councils' Boards of Directors to civil society, and these were appointed by the Government upon the recommendation of the Directors of the B Councils. The presence of civil society on these Boards is thus tightly controlled. The other two thirds of the seats on the B Councils' Boards of Directors are occupied *ex officio* by local elected officials, often unfamiliar with regional issues. Indeed, they include mayors of rural municipalities or municipal councilors from larger cities, familiar with local rather than regional issues. The average citizen knows neither the B Council of his region, nor the people on its Board of Director, nor the decisions that are taken there. The media is scarcely interested in them and

the B Councils are accountable only indirectly to the central government that finances them, not at all to the population that they serve. This being said, the B Councils have the power to confer legitimacy to community organizations on their territory, as a regional representative of a sector of civil society.

The internal structure of B Councils is variable but it typically consists of a certain number of commissions or committees occupied by delegates from sectorial community organizations or companies. As non-profit organizations, the B Councils thus have the power to co-opt the community group or company that they desire on to their commissions or committees, granting (or denying them) legitimacy by that very token. They can also terminate public funding of an organization or allocate such a funding to another community organization or company.

The process of planning and implementing five-year regional plans mobilizes significant resources within the community groups of each region and henceforth strongly influences each group's orientation. In several instances, the resources, the orientation, and the development of certain groups have been subjected to the decisions and the projects of the Councils B. Contrary to the Councils A, which favoured working in concert through inter-organizational structures, the Councils B wish, it would seem, to incorporate the organizations into structures controlled by elected municipal officials and development managers.

* Québec Government (2003), "Loi sur le Ministère des Affaires municipales et des Régions" (the Ministry of Municipal and Regional Affairs Act).

The Québec Government delegates regional governance to the B Councils, which are accountable to it, rather than to the population of their region. Important differences between the regions are noticeable here; for the modes of civil society's participation are subject to the discretion of each B Council. The state establishes the norms and the B Councils (which are legally, one must recall, non-profit organizations) are destined to perform the tasks; the state supervises the execution of tasks through mechanisms of accountability based on performance, results, and transparency (Lebel, 2009). Here is an example that illustrates how the Québec Government uses administrative mechanisms to manage regional collaboration with community groups.

Managing the Social through "Specific Agreement"

For the purposes of managing the development of its regions, the Québec government now favours "specific agreements". These are formal agreements between regional offices of government departments and agencies, para-governmental organizations, and third-sector or private partners, aimed at implementing regional development priorities. This contractual system brings together, around common goals, governmental and para-governmental resources in each region. The problem is that this system depends on civil society's contribution to government objectives by assuming that it will make these objectives its own. These "specific agreements" are, of course, achieved after a process of dialogue with civil society, but this process is firmly circumscribed by government objectives, policies, and administrative guidelines (Côté and Simard, 2010). This process takes place under the aegis and leadership of regional agencies and the actors they have themselves selected from civil

society. It is a tightly controlled process, that does not rely on citizen participation, and that generates unequal relations. This being said, these "specific agreements" do acknowledge the importance of civil society, which was not the case a decade ago.

The Québec Ministry of *Culture, Communications* and of the Status of Women (MCCCF) issued an order in 2007 by which "specific agreements" on gender equality had to be achieved within each of the 17 Québec regions. While adapted to the regional realities, their objectives had to correspond to governmental priorities, that is to its 2006 Policy and 2007–2010 Action Plan (*Politique gouvernementale pour l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes* and *Plan d'action en matière d'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes*). The women's groups' regional action committees ("tables régionales de concertation") were called upon to participate in the development and implementation of these "specific agreements". Their funding originates in part from the MCCCF's national envelopes, but mainly from regional departmental offices or from governmental or para-governmental agencies. The representatives of these agencies ensure therefore that the priorities established by the "specific agreement" of their region correspond to their own priorities and mandates since they are accountable to their head offices in Québec City. Thus, for example, the Ministry of Municipal and Regional Affairs (MAMROT) will finance projects to increase the number of female candidates in local elections and the regional health authority ("Agence de la santé") will finance projects aiming at reducing domestic violence.

The connections between Bill 34 (creating B Councils that oversee the "specific agreements", these "specific agreements", regional governmental agencies, and the community groups have scarcely been analyzed. However, they appear to follow a model set out by the "Loi sur la santé et les services sociaux" (Health and Social Services Act) which addresses the matter in more detail.* In practice, a region's resources are deployed in one direction only, and the community groups are mobilized around these government priorities. In this context, do the community groups succeed in fulfilling their own objectives? To what extent does their participation in these "specific agreements" mobilize their efforts beyond their own priorities? The power structure as well as the political culture of each region introduces here significant variations in this respect. Indeed, since the system of Québec regional governance is accountable to the Québec provincial government only rather than to the population of each region, and since the regional managers possess important discretionary powers, the community group's room for manoeuvre is often contingent on the political culture of a local or regional elite. A region whose culture is business oriented will tend to develop objectives that are scarcely sensitive to the needs of the community groups and will develop subcontracting relations; a region whose culture is more open to social movements will tend to develop more egalitarian partnerships with community groups.

In the best of cases, the community groups will, to a certain extent, influence decisions, but the sponsors and donors of "specific agreements" (which are always government agencies) will always wield the final decision-making power. Community groups are thus subject to acting as the mainspring of the "specific agreement": they can suggest projects that will be accepted, modified, or refused by the sponsors or donors; they can solicit funds within the context of "specific agreements", and become, if the project is accepted, subcontractors, accountable to the Council B and to the sponsors of the specific agreement. Their legitimacy before regional governmental agencies will have been obtained at the expense of their status and at times even at the cost of their mission. In certain cases, national objectives have been devolved through such subcontracting mechanisms to community groups possessing little

financial resources. The cost of these projects is obviously less than the projects managed and borne by the civil or service or para-governmental agencies. However, the mechanisms of management and accountability to which community groups must submit seem more binding than within the civil service or within para-governmental agencies.

* Bill no. 7 or *Loi modifiant la loi sur les services de santé et les services sociaux*, 2003 and Bill no. 8 or *Loi sur les Centres de la petite enfance et autres services de garde à l'enfance*, took effect on December 18, 2003. See Masson, 2001.

4. COMMUNITY GROUPS' DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRATIC DEBATE

The NPM represents but one of many influences affecting community groups at this political juncture of ebbing social movements. The disappearance of global ideologies and meta-discourses on world affairs following the fall of the Berlin Wall also provoked among community groups a withdrawal into the delivery of services. Moreover, the government's legitimization of community groups as well as their professionalization contributed to the disappearance of the previously preferred conflictual approach to the promotion of the interests of the marginalized. This conflictual approach heralded an ethic of public debate and represented a barrier against what the French call *la pensée unique*.[14] With the disappearance of public debate and of counter-discourses, community groups are thus limited to "good management" of social issues that "cannot occur within a context of conflict", as well as to methods inspired by public relations rather than public debate or direct democracy.

A number of other factors incurred a certain institutionalization of Québec community groups: enduring community organizations (several community organizations are currently celebrating their 35th anniversary), the securing of more (albeit always inadequate) regular funding, pressures from staff seeking to improve their working conditions, and demands for the recognition of their expertise.

Capacity of critical thought on global conjuncture is now largely reduced; this is linked to the decline of militancy, in particular among intellectuals using their analytical and writing skills to the serve the cause of the underprivileged. The over-specialization of groups as well as the employees' surfeit of work can also explain why few critical analyses of macro situations are missing; community groups are rather focused on project management and the search for project funding:

> *Most of the material actually published by community groups is wanting in political analysis. How is our sectorial cause really faring? In what global context is it situated? Can one establish connections between our cause and that of others? Sanitized texts. For a movement made up of eighty-per cent of women, the word "patriarchy" seems forgotten and the word "capitalism" abolished from the dictionary ... Apart from hackneyed uses of the term "globalization", people rarely speak in clear terms, and in a spirit of demanding change in the population's living conditions and in the methods for improving them. People appear to have forgotten that if one does not criticize the system, one reproduces it ... This lack of opposition makes us*

14 The expression "pensée unique" can be translated literally into English as "single thought". Coined in 1995 by Ignacio Ramonet, editor-in-chief of *Le Monde diplomatique*, it refers to the enforced reduction of political discussion by mainstream politics.

> *increasingly fearful of politicians. To assert our demands clearly and firmly is henceforth, it seems, categorized as radical demonstrations. (Brouillard, 2005)*

Without a counter-discourse, without an analysis of the global situation, activist leadership within community organizations is now often relegated to the background, subordinated to the immediate needs of the projects, to the delivery of services, and to the ongoing search for funding. Admittedly, groups mobilize rapidly against certain legislative or administrative changes in their specific sectors: they still act as a political shield against the deterioration of social policies and programmes. However, they henceforth also play an internal regulatory role within social movements (Côté and Simard, 2010) and at times resort to anti-democratic methods to "control" activist initiatives from within their own organizations.

Global Mobilization and Hostile Takeover within a Community Coalition

Initiated by a coalition of community groups, a global mobilization effort is scheduled to take place within three years. Events are to be held in each of Québec's 17 regions. An activist from one region is co-founder the central organizing committee and subsequently returns to her region to organize a regional event there, directly related to this global mobilization. She establishes an organizing committee and works relentlessly with 20 other activists for more than a year.

Neither the paid staff nor the president of the coalition of community organizations of the sector to be mobilized awards any importance or funding to this initiative, because both give priority to collaboration with the regional authorities in their development plans. And yet, this mobilization effort fulfils the coalition's mission, a mission tied to advocating for the sector. Noting this, the activist-leader and a female ally seek election to the coalition's Board of Directors; both are elected. They believe that this will enable them to improve communications and to tie this mobilization effort more firmly to the coalition. The coordinator and the president of the group join forces against them and seek to take control of the event's organizing committee. The activist-leader and her ally refuse to surrender the leadership of the committee voluntarily. Ten months before the scheduled date of this world mobilization, the committee falls prey to a hostile takeover. Contrary to the private sector, no rule governs this type of situation in the community sector; the very idea that this could happen is denied. Everything takes place therefore in dark secret, since the global culture of community groups dictates omerta on this matter. The president and the paid staff's methods are brutal and diverse: the meagre funds allocated to the organizing committee are cut, false information is spread, false rumours are fabricated, the reputations of the activist-leader and her ally are sullied, parallel Board of Director meetings are held in the absence of the activist-leader and her ally. Seeing that these manoeuvres do not compel the activist-leader and her ally to yield, the paid staff, the president, as well as another member of the Board of Directors resign en masse, six months before the scheduled date of the world event; they believe, no doubt, that they will deal a blow to their "opponents". The activist-leader and her ally, without any preparation, take on the duties of the paid staff as well as the presidency on a volunteer basis. The resigning president then calls an illegal general meeting of the Board of Directors, accusing the activist-leader of embezzling funds and demanding that she be dismissed and that the Board of Directors be dissolved. A stormy meeting is held, each party

being accompanied by his/her lawyer and putting forth legal rather than political arguments. The Board of Directors is not dissolved and the mobilization project takes place as planned. The activist-leader and her ally subsequently resign in order to give way to their opponents on the Board of Directors and are left with a bill of several thousands of dollars in legal fees. This mobilization effort in support of a "just" cause produced brutish power relations within the coalition that continues to claim to be working for a democratic alternative.

5. FORMS OF DEMOCRACY WITHIN COMMUNITY GROUPS

From their inception, community groups established various structures and avant-garde modes of operation, that they wanted more democratic than the institutional hierarchies they opposed, preferring participatory processes, mutual aid and sharing. These included very fruitful and diverse practices, which transcended representative democracy. In this respect, the process by which the Québec State recognized community groups, introduced when they first took shape and culminating when the Rochon Report was presented in 1998, seriously challenged the preservation of these activist, often radical, practices (Guberman et al., 2004). The introduction of methods intrinsic to the NPM and the ongoing relationship that community groups sustained with the bureaucratic systems led them to define their skills in function of a system of specialized expertise, incurring a de-politicization and an institutionalization of their movement (Couillard and Côté, 1995). Hierarchies and specializations were reintroduced; groups sometimes defined themselves around issues prioritized by the government's neoliberal policies. To such an extent that it becomes increasingly difficult to participate fully in decision-making processes within a community group short of a minimal level of expertise (Hamel, 1991). It is also increasingly difficult to operate as a collective or self-managed group.

Furthermore, the discussions on democracy within these groups are no longer a common occurrence. When they take place, they are often fuelled by the employees' perspective rather than by that of activists, members, users, or the population symbolically represented by the group (Guberman et al., 2004). This tendency to transfer power from grassroots members to the workers was already identified by Godbout (1991). As if the ideal of grassroots management had been reconfigured into an ideal of self-management (that is, management by the service producers) and then into an ideal of technocratic management (that is, management centred on the needs of the system).

Moreover, one notes the emergence of a certain form of unionism that preserves the illusion that community groups inherently defend the interests of all the underprivileged. Indeed, if the democratic practices of certain community groups are still alive and well, they have markedly eroded. But since internal democracy is in constant need of refurbishing (Côté, 1975), the ideal of social change within several Québec community organizations has masked a division of labour and an unequal distribution of power under the seal of omerta. Ever since class analysis waned in popularity, the creation of community group elites has, for all intents and purposes, disappeared as a theme from the literature and from debates. But the phenomenon has not, for all that, vanished, even if the elites of community groups have changed.

Sites of advocacy and counter-power have always welcomed individuals from the middle class and of radical, revolutionary, or reformist beliefs. Some among them are also willing to devote their career to the community group milieu as full-time community activists:

> *The spokespersons of the movement are not elected, except on rare occasions. These persons are, most often, employees of Boards of Directors, themselves composed of coalition employees ... In this way, many executive directors have occupied their positions for ten or fifteen years. This is a vast movement and a very small world. (Houle, 2006)*

This structural characteristic carries within itself the seeds of a professionalization of the full-time salaried employees, and of the separation of the community group from its base. The opening of salaried positions can help reinforce a hierarchy between paid workers and volunteers. The possibility of representing a population external to the community group can favour the creation of a community group elite, endowed with a representative function rather than an executive one, just as in the case of political parties and trade unions.

The Death Throes of Activism within Community Groups

Within a number of community groups, activism has turned into voluntary work. Often "managed" by the employees, activism is no longer at the heart of group action and often even disappears from view: seldom mentioned in annual reports, it is easily seen as the equivalent of the work done by employees. Rarely recognized as expert (specialized) work or political work, activism is often converted into "help" granted to the group's salaried workers, who are chronically overburdened (but who do not do unpaid overtime). Activism remains central to the group's mission, less, however, as citizen participation than as compensation for its weak human and financial resources. Today, activist contributions within community groups are too often limited to membership in a Board of Directors, to services performed for the membership, or to carrying out the objectives of an organization's annual action plan, which, in turn, corresponds to a project financed by a government sponsor. As such, this activism increasingly resembles work performed within a voluntary association rather than an community group.

Conclusion

Within welfare systems, in Québec as elsewhere, social issues have become a phenomenon to be managed: the state has sought to do this by using its methods and techno-bureaucratic resources to its advantage. Far from reducing this tendency, neo-liberalism has reinforced it through different mechanisms such as governance and administrative decentralization. At the same time, it has incorporated a philosophy as well as methods inspired by the private sector, subsequently transmitting them to community groups to which it grants mandates and funding. Even if several community groups have been wary of these practices, they have in general had few means of resisting them and too often have fallen prey to them.

Of course, Québec community groups have helped extend democratic practices beyond the electoral process and party politics. They continue to have this impact today. Recognized in the rest of Canada, this democratic vitality of Québec civil society is indeed considered exemplary all over the world. Québec's community organizations

have helped to establish a social safety net and to institute numerous reforms enabling a better redistribution of wealth as well as greater equality of opportunities. They have allowed individuals and marginalized groups to position themselves as equal political subjects. With few means and at the cost of bitter struggles to uphold the dignity of the socially and economically excluded, they helped establish social services, policies, and legislation. Finally, they channelled the creative ebullience of social solidarity, and did not wait for experts or persons mandated by the powers-that-be to look into their situation (Ravet, 2009).

Today, many groups are still fighting this tendency to privatize and to depoliticize social issues; they are helping to create "polemical communities" where opinions that diverge from the official point of view are being asserted (Lamoureux and Lamoureux, 2009). But too often this solidarity organized and encouraged by social movements is considered by the economic elites as being detrimental. They distrust the "political involvement of groups and 'popular' organizations" (Brunelle, 2005: 28). They resort to different means to stifle it, to "discipline it, neutralize or replace it with impersonal mechanisms [which cannot achieve anything other than emptying society of its] capacity to act and begin defining spaces of humanization" (Ravet, 2009: 11).

Techno-bureaucratic management is one of these methods of imposing within community groups a greater conformity to established authorities. The result is an erosion of community action as the groups' democratic structures and practices gradually disappear. This, in turn, has a major impact on democracy within Québec society. Indeed:

> *[...] community action [is an] essential component of democratic action – democracy being above all a particular way of acting on social reality. However, the latter is characterized by conflictual social relations and by the fact that relations of power are constantly interfering. What is at stake in democracy is the mobilization of individuals as subjects and as social actors, conscious of their common responsibilities and of their power in human affairs to engage in collective and coordinated action. (Ravet, 2009)*

The transformation of community groups' culture and practices also sets up a normative standard on their work that is all the more latent because it is not the object of discussion. For example, anti-poverty work is transformed to work on the poor or, in the best of cases, work accompanying the poor:

> *The obvious example of such a slippage is the work of the Collectif pour l'élimination de la pauvreté in recent years. The Collectif's proposal projected a solution that seemed all the more interesting in that it combined legal and expert technicity to reduce poverty, without however attacking the root of the problem. In doing so, it presented an image of a society able to expunge its ills through rational and consensual action, which underpins the illusion of a society reconciled through repairing its social fractures. Such a reconciled society is a pure fantasy ... (Houle, 2006)*

We are witnessing the normalization of neo-liberalism, of which one feature is precisely to proceed through local and regional actors that "manipulate the elements of local political culture". Neoliberalism "thus no longer appears as an exogenous force ... but as the new norm" (Boudreau and Keil, 2006: 98):

> *This reappropriation by the State and the economic elite of the democratic principles so dear to the socio-political movements opposing neoliberalism would thus suggest a normalization of neoliberalism. (Boudreau and Keil, 2006: 97)*

If this normalization process is not irrevocable, it nonetheless appears to be in a phase of expansion and consolidation. Of course, there are always counter-examples to this dominant tendency, and new types of collective action, new structures and practices that are suggestive of tomorrow's democratic action.

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