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The politics of going regional for civil society
Citizen Agora on land-use and development in the Montreal city-region

Regional Development and Policy - Challenges, Choices and Recipients

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This presentation explores the meaning of a particular event which promoted a city-region consciousness in Montreal (in the province of Quebec, in Canada), within a context of disputed transport projects at multiple scales. My PhD research is particularly on the difficulties and opportunities of a multi-scalar context for collective action on transport and mobility issues. I concentrate my talk today on one recent Montreal event for which the organizers had regional ambitions, the Citizen Agora on land-use and development in the Montreal Metropolitan Region (referred to here as “Citizen Agora”), to which almost 400 persons participated. The region is considered here as a construction which is done in relation to other scales and territories of references, in the framework of the politics of scale (McCann 2003, Paasi 2004). I wish to explore here the tensions and difficulties, for civil society, of this process of regional-building. This interpretation of the event is based on direct observation of the event, as well as discourse analysis of the interventions of participants and of documents from organizers, particularly on issues of transport. This paper is based on a preliminary analysis which will also be presented to organizers and participants for feedback.

The region is an old category of research in geography and planning, but which has renewed itself with contemporary phenomenon of globalization and the resurgence of regions as units of economic competitiveness (Scott 2001, Paasi 2003). To draw on a distinction made by Jones and Macleod (2004), my talk will not be on regional economic spaces (existing clusters of economic activity), but rather on spaces of regionalism – that is regional territories of political mobilization and identification. Nevertheless, it is clear that the focus, both in academia and in practice, on metropolitan areas for economic competitiveness is in many instances one of the motivations for civic actors to develop a broader regional consciousness; not to leave it solely to this economic objective, but to grasp the regional scale for broader social and political objectives (Brenner 2002, Pastor et al. 2009).

In regard to this re-scaling of social and political projects, many authors noted a democratic deficit at the regional level, civic actors and social movements having difficulty to re-scale at the regional scale when this was not their historical scale of action (Swanstrom and Banks 2009, Jouve and Lefebvre 2005, Fontan et al 2009, Boudreau et al. 2006). In Montreal particularly, while the city-region means much for planners - they have had for several years many expectations for regional planning (Douay 2008, Trépanier 2003)- it means little for the public in general. The metropolitan institution created in 2002 is very little known, and the participation of civil society within this regional organ is very low. This is thought to have important implications on the ability to create a diverse political arena at the regional level (Boudreau and Collin 2009).

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The event Citizen Agora arrives at a moment where analysts were very negative about the democratic prospects of the city-region in Montreal (Douay 2008, Boudreau and Collin 2009, Kubler and Tomàs 2010). An elite group of civil society actors, led by academists, planners, and personalities from heritage conservation in the city of Montreal, took the initiative to create this event. Their promotion of the region as a symbol of progressive planning is clear – a regional consciousness means a better, more ecological and democratic, region. But the interventions of participants on issues of transport bring on the forefront dilemmas of the regional debate, particularly on issues of reducing car use. The metropolitan discourses heard in this event shows a tension between the region as a site of contention and mobilization versus the region as the new locus of consensus.

The Montreal city-region : an institution with no civic engagement – but transport as an emblematic issue

The Montreal city-region has gone through complex territorial reforms from 2002 to 2006, which included consolidation of many municipalities into one mega-city and the creation of boroughs. What is most important for my talk today is that a regional metropolitan institution was also created, at a city-regional scale – but was very little appropriated by civic groups or citizens (citizens and social movements focused much more on the contested local institutional changes (Boudreau and al. 2006, Douay 2008, Boudreau and Collin 2009, Kübler et Tomàs 2010). It is more on specific issues that the region is very recently emerging in the discourses, namely on nature preservation and transport issues.

If there has been little regional civic engagement up to the last year, it is not because citizens and civic groups are not active in the public sphere. Particularly, the issue of reducing car use has managed to be put on the spot light in the Montreal metropolitan area. A coalition against a car-driven urban mobility is getting more and more visibility (Sénécal and Harou 2005, Paulhiac and Kaufmaan 2006, Ballivy 2007, Benessaieh 2011, Gervais 2011). After several years of no highway projects in the province, the provincial government has brought back on the agenda the completion and upgrading of the metropolitan road network in the 1990s and 2000. Now subject to procedures of impact assessment and public participation, these road projects create many debates and have triggered the constitution of coalitions. These coalitions rally local resident associations and local community groups, which are affected by the road projects, with environmental groups which militate to reduce their global environmental footprint².

Important to note in those transport debates is that in most cases, the City of Montreal has positioned itself with the civic coalition and against the road projects proposed by the provincial minister of transport. There is thus at stake here an issue of power interplay between the provincial authorities (which have many powers in Canada) and the most important metropolis of the province. The contested issue between the province and the urban region is always the relative place given to the cars compared to the place given to collective transportation and walking and cycling.

After several years of contesting highway projects, civic groups have also engaged in working on concrete alternatives. The promotion of walking, cycling, and measures of traffic calming form the basis of many projects within neighbourhoods. By and large, the local scale, that of the neighbourhood, has become the major space for alternatives. But the discontent with new highway projects continues. Transport and mobility projects thus constitute an emblematic issue of civic mobilization in Montreal,

² Although there are some tensions between the two types of actors in certain cases (Sénécal and Harou 2005).

in a complex multi-scalar power configuration. This will become obvious in the analysis of the Agora.

Promoting regional consciousness... from global to regional and from local to regional

The inhabitants of the city-region share a common fate, this is the message sent by organizers and participants of the Agora, and which is the general motto of the movement for new regionalism in cities of North America. In Montreal, no social movement or civil society organization had yet promoted this regional message across the different sectors, missions, and territories. The Citizen Agora was presented as the first step towards such regionalization of civil society in Montreal.

The first words of the organizers of the Agora were clear : they wish to promote a metropolitan civic participation and a feeling of belonging to the region. Participants are invited to participate to the construction of this movement of “friends of the metropolitan region”. To arrive at such goal, two prior elements are mentioned. The first one is to bring down the barriers which make difficult public participation at the regional scale. The second agenda is to educate citizens and elected representatives on the region and the joint regional destiny.

But on what exactly is based this statement of a share destiny for the region? What are the metropolitan issues which make a regional consciousness necessary? The mayor of Montreal, which is also by extension the president of the Montreal Metropolitan Community, identified in his discourse in front of the Agora three global issues which need a metropolitan response : the regionalization of economy, the fight to reduce climate change and the preservation of biodiversity. In his allocution, the city-regional scale is clearly presented as a necessity because of global trends.

The organizers of the Agora had another approach to identify the three regional issues to be discussed in the Agora. They chose three issues (quality of living environments, mobility and planning and green prosperity) which they thought would stimulate participation, exchanges, and recommendations from citizens and groups, “because they represent important themes which are close to populations at the local as well as at the metropolitan level” (Agora 2010: 4). This is to be understood in the context where the regional has been considered important for planners for many years in Montreal; but has stayed mostly technocratic, away from the public. The organizers of the Agora want to stimulate participation and show that regional planning will “affect directly the day to day life of the population” (Agora 2010: 5).

In contrast to the mayor, but following the intuition of the organizers, very rare are the participants which start from global issues to propose a regional agenda- even the issue of climate change was only mentioned once, albeit the large environmental audience. Participants start from their local experience and difficulties, or from their local or sectoral mission, which they link to a regional territorial logic.

Certain regional norms are proposed by participants : health, and preservation of landscapes, for example. These were proposed as potential gathering visions of transport and mobility for the region, which could encourage regional consciousness and regional solidarity. Health is a strong motto of groups defending a reduction of car traffic, since car traffic was denounced in a report from the Public Health agency as the first cause of death for youth in Montreal (DSP 2006). A resident of central neighbourhoods involved in issues of traffic calming proposed this health vision. Another participant proposed the preservation of the landscape of the country surrounding Montreal, as historical and cultural sites (“where montrealers have always gone for picnics”), as an alternative to the unique

representation of periphery as suburbs, which are only associated with the need for highways. These were alternative ways to frame the transport regional debate which could potentially gather adherents across the region. Other such ideas were given in the Agora. But there were also more critical stances expressed on the feasibility of regional consensus on transport issues.

Taking regional democracy seriously : how to deal with cars?

The participants did not simply propose norms and priorities for the region. Some also questioned who is participating to this construction, if there is a diversity of point of views, and demand what strategies should be done to encourage the citizens from the periphery to participate. In brief, many participants seemed worried of the legitimacy of a new regional organization to speak in name of the region; or of the real possibility of such a regional “voice” to bring change. This worry was expressed in terms of a “democratic deficit” at the regional scale. But within the event, there was two parallel but divergent interpretations of this democratic deficit.

The idea of a democratic deficit was first presented by some participants in terms of the way public authorities now responded to their demands. More precisely : citizens and groups from Montreal have shown much opposition to large car infrastructure projects promoted by the provincial government, but these projects have in some cases been nevertheless carried on. Many participants expressed a feeling of not being heard. Within this understanding of a democratic deficit, the region appears as a necessary scale step to take to be heard : implied by the participants is that a regional mobilization on the issue of reducing car traffic would be more effective than the current urban mobilization. This would be a stronger counter-weight to the provincial minister of transport, characterized as a minister of concrete.

The second way that the democratic deficit is presented regards not how much currently mobilized citizens are not taken into account by provincial authorities, but how citizens from the periphery are not considered enough by citizens of central neighbourhoods, this being perhaps the heart of the problem. The presumed consensus on transport issues in the metropolitan area is far from the reality. Some participants thus argue that the current message on reducing car infrastructure is misadapted to the suburban reality.

The greatest urbanistic success is the 10/30 (a large and popular commercial outlet at the intersection of two large highways, in a suburb, in the spirit of an edge city). Before being able to reduce car traffic, we are going to have to have electoral debates over this – on the fact of evacuating cars progressively.

In the first interpretation, the democratic deficit concerned the relatively low power of citizens from Montreal within debates on transportation, where the primary interlocutor is the province. In the second interpretation, the democratic deficit concerned the openness of central city actors to voices from the periphery.

These two different interpretations of a democratic deficit on transport and mobility issues pose the question of what goes first : regional building to reach regional consensus or regional action for sustainable mobility? Can regional-building promote change or only status quo? Should civil society mobilize with, against or despite actors in the periphery?

Linking to regional theoretical debates : the politics of going regional

Within the debates on the constitution of city-regions resonates a debate in regional studies on the political unity and homogeneity of a region. As Amin (2004: 35) has argued, there is a conviction in much of the regionalism and new regionalism literature that “region-building and regional protection is the answer for local economic prosperity, democracy and cultural expression”. If the region can constitute itself as a collective actor, than it is more equipped to prosper in the globalized world, to reduce fragmentation, inequalities and environmental degradation and to assure itself a promising future.

The danger of such territorial regionalism is to be exclusionary in the definition of its territorial identity and public sphere, and to discount the diverse local and/or global relations through which the city-region is constituted (Amin 2004, Paasi 2003, Massey 1999). In short, regional building and regional “consciousness” can promote a homogeneous sense of place, which is limited democratically. Amin proposes in place to conceptualize the region as a “field of agonistic engagement”, where the regional agenda is debated by actors with different spatial and cultural attachments to the unbound region.

Taking regional democracy seriously thus mean that one can not proclaim regional consensus on a regional agenda. Many participants of the Citizen Agora expressed this concern in taking the example of car use. Nevertheless, if the issue is to bring about change in modes of transportation, how should civic actors think of the regional scale in relation to their mission?

Scholars who have studied and engaged themselves in movements for regional equity in the United States have discussed this dilemma (Pastor et al. 2009, Orfield 1997, 2002). Intertwined in the idea of going regional are two different paths (Pastor et al. 2009). First, « going regional » can be a political project in itself, to create a new political space at the regional scale, a positive identity for collective action, a space with a territorial imaginary which all feel some attachment or give some meaning to (Boudreau 2007, Pastor et al. 2009). Second, going regional can be pursued to search for allies, outside traditional local or sectoral allies, to advance a particular issue. For groups from central city neighbourhoods, this could mean reaching towards actors in the suburbs. For local or national groups, this could mean reaching for actors working at other scales, to have more voice and power in the promotion of a political project (Cox 1998). Pastor et al. (2009) presents this as a strategic new organizing, which consists for community groups of « leveraging regional dynamics for project development or local community revitalization » (9-10).

While the two projects can be complementary, at some point there may be tensions between the two. One academician militating against segregation and inequalities in metropolitan areas explained : “Regional reform is struggle... We must achieve the broadest possible level of good feeling, gather to our cause as many allies as we can from all walks of life and from all points of the compass. We must educate and persuade. However, [...] in the end the goal is regional reform, not regional consensus (Orfield 1997: 34, cited in Pastor et al).”

The Citizen Agora has proven to be particularly productive in discussing this honestly. Participants spoke out two different feelings of democratic deficit, which, when compared, show contrasting democratic priorities. Participants also pointed to ways out of this dilemma, in proposing to educate, to convince of the benefit of certain visions of transport for all residents of the region (sustainable,

healthy, landscape protection...). The regional is thus a way of reaching out to convince that unhealthy and insecure mobility affect all residents of the city-region. Other participants also asked questions about the possibility of establishing a regional democracy organized in sub-poles – where different parts of the region need to be represented in the debate to ensure its legitimacy (interesting debate which I had no room to expand on here). In sum, although the event started with a strong call to build a regional civic consciousness and a regional organization, the participants seemed to have taken the democratic significations of such proposal seriously.

Conclusion

The regional discourses heard in the Montreal Citizen Agora show a tension between the region as a site of contention and mobilization versus the region as the new locus of consensus. While the event was meant to promote a regional consciousness within civil society, the interventions of participants showed that this regional consciousness could not so easily be equated with regional consensus, at least on issues of transport, because of the importance of car use in the periphery. The challenges of this politics of going regional was also noted in United States in regard to the movement for regional equity (Orfield 1998, 2002, Pastor et al. 2009).

The politics of going regional is also taken place in a multi-scalar governance in which the regional can be used to increase the political weight of civic actors. In Montreal, the importance of the provincial level for transport infrastructure decisions is to be taken into account in the complex power geometry of a new regional scale of action. The future will tell us whether the civic discourses of regional mobilization for sustainable mobility will continue to go hand in hand with efforts to reach regional consensus.

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