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The fragmented or cosmopolitan metropolis?
A neighbourhood story of immigration in Montreal
(La métropole fragmentée ou cosmopolite? Une histoire
de quartiers de l’immigration montréalaise)

Immigration and the metropolis have long been linked, impacting upon the way we think about the contemporary city. However, quite different narratives, anchored in specific urban and social experiences, have informed traditions of this thinking, from the Chicago School to the Los Angeles School. In Montreal’s case, the narrative is a story of immigrant neighbourhoods, and illustrates both takes on the metropolis; namely that it can be cosmopolitan or fragmented in nature. This article will trace the various chapters of Montreal’s history to demonstrate that, whilst its narrative has, for the most part, identified it as a cosmopolitan city, recent developments seem to have triggered a twist in the tale towards a vision of a fragmented city; at least in sociopolitical discourses.

Keywords: metropolis, Montreal, immigration, neighbourhood, history

L’immigration et la métropole ont depuis longtemps partie liée, y compris dans la manière de réfléchir sur la ville contemporaine. Mais des récits fort différents ont traversé les traditions de pensée de l’École de Chicago à celle de Los Angeles, car ancrées dans des expériences urbaines et sociales différentes. Dans le cas de Montréal, le récit s’énonce comme une histoire de quartiers et illustre les deux versions de la métropole, l’une cosmopolite, l’autre fragmentée. On se propose donc de parcourir les différents chapitres de son histoire et de montrer que si le récit dominant est bien celui d’une ville cosmopolite, des développements récents semblent indiquer un glissement du récit vers une ville fragmentée, du moins sur le registre des discours sociopolitiques.

Mots clés: métropole, Montréal, immigration, quartier, histoire

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Introduction

Immigration and the metropolis have long been linked, and still are in our ways of thinking about the contemporary city. No-one has better explored this link – even though his work contains no statistics on immigration flows – than the Berlin sociologist Georg Simmel, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century. The urban phenomenon itself was not even really one of his preoccupations: he always contented himself with defining the metropolis simply by its contrast to the small town. But many of his essays, particularly ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ (1950 [1903]) and ‘The Stranger’ (1950 [1908]) are still essential reading in the social sciences today. A century later, La Métropole des Individus (The Metropolis of Individuals), the latest book by one of the best urban sociologists writing in French (Bourdin 2005), opens by revisiting Simmel, whose writing inspires this eminently modern reflection: ‘the metropolis is simultaneously a social organisation, an everyday individual experience and a codified set of ways of living and thinking’ (p. 22; my translation). The typical cultural form of the metropolis is cosmopolitanism; an exposure to a mix of many cultural and social frames of reference, thanks to which the individual has the simultaneous experience of both proximity and distance. It is easy to understand why, for Simmel, the figure of the Stranger perfectly embodied this tension. The Chicago School of sociology continued to investigate urban trajectories in spaces of modernity, especially immigrants’ trajectories, by means of both micro and large-scale social surveys. In the Chicago School of Robert Park and his colleagues, social disorder was never the end of the story – even in the most marginal places – but rather one step further along the construction of a new social world.

Immigration and the metropolis have also inspired another tradition of thought that is now widespread, particularly in the work of the Los Angeles School; namely, the idea of the fragmented city. The metropolises that scholars describe as paradigmatic, because they seem to represent the fate of the contemporary city better than any others are, above all, immigrant cities. For instance, Straughan and Hondagneu-Sotelo’s paper on Los Angeles is entitled ‘From Immigrants in the City to the Immigrant City’ (2002), while Nijman considers today’s paradigmatic city to be Miami which, with its majority of foreign-born inhabitants, is a major hub for transnational communities (Nijman 2000). Such papers take a global snapshot of the city in order to describe its social divisions. These are then interpreted as evidence of social rupture, betraying a strong nostalgia for
lost social cohesion that probably never existed. This vision has also crossed the Atlantic, making waves in France particularly among the so-called ‘organic intellectuals’ of urban politics like Jacques Donzelot (1999). There it has served, paradoxically, to erase any reference to ethnicity in public policy. For instance:

At the moment, the great urban question is whether the city has the political capacity to hold society together. The underclass living in the residual spaces of the industrial city scare off members of the elite into urban developments for ‘people like us’, who let themselves go far beyond functional urban planning, increasingly carving out a society of their own. (Donzelot 1999: 88; my translation)

In France as in the United States, urban segregation and its extreme expression in gated communities are seen to embody all the evils of the fragmented city.

These different narratives of the metropolis are anchored in specific urban and social experiences but are also informed by what could be called transnational conversations. Canadian cities had a relatively low profile in these conversations until the establishment of the Metropolis network, funded by the Canadian government, which has from the outset linked the question of the metropolis to that of immigration (for which Canada had already earned a sound reputation thanks to its early adoption of the multicultural model). It is not clear, however, that its approach takes the notion of the metropolis very seriously, since the paramount concern was the successful incorporation of immigrants, which set the tone of research agendas very early on. And yet immigration has substantially transformed Canada’s largest cities: it is above all an urban phenomenon and has contributed significantly to redefining urban studies. Canada is a vast country, stretching from one ocean to the other (as the national motto points out), and its metropolises have each in their own way been in the grip of the shift in the economy from east to west, such that they represent very different versions of the experience of immigration. To a large degree, the fortunes of these metropolitan centres have mirrored the fortunes and intensity of Canadian trade with their associated regions. Thus, when Europe dominated the world, Montreal topped the Canadian urban hierarchy. With the ascendancy of the United States, Toronto overtook Montreal in both demographic and economic terms. The more recent rise of the Asian economies has contributed to economic growth in Vancouver (Hiebert et al. 2006). Due to their distinct fates, the specific characteristics
of these three metropolises have not only shaped different stories of immigration, but also different traditions of integrating it into research agendas. They each constitute, therefore, a unique laboratory in which to examine the relationship between immigration and the metropolis.

I would like to show that in Montreal’s case, the narrative of this relationship is a story of immigrant neighbourhoods; in essence, the relationship has therefore crystallised at the meso scale (between micro and macro). To paraphrase David Hulchanski, it might seem odd to talk about a city of neighbourhoods when it is obvious that all cities contain neighbourhoods (Hulchanski 2007: 1). But I use ‘neighbourhood’ here in a very specific way: it is to be understood as a territory of collective urban life, as distinct from merely the immediate surroundings of a place of residence (voisinage in French). Such a relatively large territory cannot be accurately captured by statistics at the census tract level. This is one of the reasons why the literature on neighbourhood effects is often so confusing: a neighbourhood consists not only of neighbours as such but also of local services and institutions, public spaces, and so on. It is not, however, necessarily recognised as a formal district or borough. Thus, since the amalgamation or merger of all 28 municipalities of the island of Montreal in 2002 (and the subsequent de-merger of 15 of them), almost every one of the 17 boroughs that make up the new City of Montreal is larger than what we might call a sociological neighbourhood. Many boroughs’ territories cover two or three such neighbourhoods. In light of the role that neighbourhoods have played historically in the development of Montreal, I argue that this is the appropriate scale at which to analyse the urban realities of immigration. And as we shall see, even though they also frequent Montreal’s still-vibrant city centre, successive waves of immigrants have helped make the neighbourhood a solid and durable cornerstone in the construction of the cosmopolitan city.

That said, this vision of the relationship between immigration and the metropolis embodies the particular position of Montreal: informed both by French and Anglo-American research and political traditions, historically pulled between two linguistic communities, and located in the heart of a political space polarised by a project of national independence. Indeed, in Montreal, we can find evidence supporting both takes on the metropolis described in the title above – individual cosmopolitan experience versus the fragmented city – but these contrasting visions are radically reshaped by the specifics of Montreal. It should also be noted that what happens in these issues owes very little to intercultural policies as such and a great deal to the
daily experience of Montrealers. The story of immigration in Montreal has many chapters whose overarching narrative is cosmopolitan in character, but recent developments seem to have triggered a twist in the tale towards the vision of the fragmented city.

A forgotten first chapter?

Without wanting to devote too much space to the birth and early development of the metropolis of Montréal, we still need to start at the beginning. In our present troubled times, religious pluralism seems to make the immigration question much more complex than it was before Quebecers (rather recently) discovered and adhered to what the French call laïcité, that is, a dominant secular culture and the separation of church and state. But the founding narrative of the metropolis seems to have been completely forgotten. The city began with a missionary project that propelled a handful of French devotees landing on the island in 1642 to ‘convert the savages’. A few years later, the Society of the Priests of the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice sent four missionaries to create the ideal Catholic society by building a Christian city on the island. The Sulpicians’ seminary, first built in 1685 and much modified since, still houses real live Sulpicians in the shadow of the Notre-Dame Basilica, in what is now called Old Montreal.

Another of Montreal’s early distinguishing features was its cadastre, its way of dividing land, which continues to differentiate Lower from Upper Canada (the territory of Lower Canada included much of what is today the province of Quebec). In Montreal, the division of land gave an unusual contour to neighbourhood life: originally designed to give everyone equal access to the Saint Lawrence River, it created a series of côtes or portions of land divided into plots and bisected along their length by a road. These territorial units structured inhabitants’ daily lives, as one of the first historians of urban form, Jean-Claude Marsan, points out:

the côte designated the rows of farmland drawn perpendicularly, or almost so, to the river shores …. The côte, or range, is thus an alignment of farmland settled by colonists living side by side on narrow but long individual strips, facing a road or a river, or both. The côte, or range, constituted in fact the basic territorial unit responsible for social cohesion. Its spatial delineation tended to arouse the colonist’s feeling of identification with a definite territory and of belonging to a specific human community. (Marsan 1981: 34)
These territories often coincided with parishes and, later, with suburbs. They played – and still play – a major role in the history of Montreal. This urban form was perpetuated by the immigrants who developed ‘ethnic villages’ at the turn of the twentieth century, as we shall see. Throughout the French regime, Montreal remained a (very) small city, albeit one from which were launched expeditions that swept across a good part of the continent. It did not really expand until after the British Conquest of 1759. A second narrative then emerged – that of Montreal as the major metropolis of Canada.

A metropolis with a mosaic of neighbourhoods (but not very cosmopolitan)

This chapter of the tale, dating from the prosperous Victorian period to the turn of the twentieth century, is well known and has left traces all over the city, from the financial district in Old Montreal to the grand bourgeois villas on the city’s eponymous ‘mountain’. But I want to turn instead to the meso scale of Montreal’s urban landscape, which appeared from the outset to be very segmented along ethnic lines. It was not really a dual city, since anglophones did not constitute a homogeneous group: among them were Scots, Irish, and some Americans as well as English, and each group differed from the others in religious and cultural traditions and in socio-economic status. This explains why separate networks of cultural, charitable, and economic organisations were set up to manage each community’s reproduction. More importantly for the argument I am making here, the groups settled in their own neighbourhoods. If these districts’ borders were not always clear (particularly in the south-west of the city where the Irish working class rubbed shoulders with some of the Franco-Canadian working class), their churches – typically the most important urban institutional landmarks of the time – left no doubt as to the distinct cultural identity of each area. As a result, the metropolis began to look like a mosaic, and while linguistic clashes and religious rivalries already marked Montreal’s political life, we can assume, following many historians and geographers, that the segmentation of urban life nonetheless enabled conflicts to be contained. Urban space was thus already a useful resource for peaceful coexistence. As Claire McNicoll has ably demonstrated, when spatial segregation is in fact an aggregation responding to a logic of ‘cultural comfort’ (McNicoll 1993: 277), it can facilitate the harmonious coexistence of different groups very well.
This model of what we might term ‘integration by segmentation’ was followed by immigrants arriving from other parts of the world from the turn of the twentieth century onwards. But unlike the many North American cities that had already been radically altered by immigration, relatively few immigrants from countries other than the British Isles had made Montreal their home since the British conquest of 1759. Less than 5 per cent of Montreal’s population constituted immigrants in 1901, which led the historian Paul-André Linteau to suggest that Montreal was hardly a cosmopolitan city (Linteau 1982). However, a few pockets of immigrants were in the process of laying the foundations of a new geography of immigration that would literally and figuratively colour the culture of the city.

The founding neighbourhoods of the future

Around the turn of the century, Jews, Cantonese Chinese, and African-Americans settled in different districts in Montreal and began to stake out what are still today, to use a term from a seminal paper by the Belgian sociologist Jean Remy, their ‘founding neighbourhoods’ (Remy 1990: 180). This concept is relevant not only for describing immigrant settlement in Montreal, but also for understanding the processes and spaces that construct the cosmopolitan city. Remy discusses these with reference to cities in the Mediterranean basin between the late Middle Ages and the end of the nineteenth century, showing that the cosmopolitan city is built on a combination of homogeneous neighbourhoods and central places. City life does not thrive thanks to imposed norms of integration, but rather on social interactions between different groups. These are based on the translation of codes of behaviour from one vocabulary to another in those interstitial spaces – spaces that are neither mine nor yours – where communication and exchange can take place freely. It is also clear that for Remy, the comfort of being among people from the same cultural background – the comfort of being able to take one’s distance from city life – is as important as intercultural exchanges in public places for the overall cosmopolitan dynamic. A founding neighbourhood – the birthplace of a given immigrant community – can grow and continue to be a place of reference for the community even if their residential trajectories take them elsewhere. It operates as a compromise between home country and host country, but typically becomes a distinctive urban form in its own right and even an attractive destination for others in the contemporary city.
A good example is no doubt Montreal’s Chinatown, located at the bottom of the traditional immigrant ‘corridor’ of boulevard Saint-Laurent (which was long perceived as dividing the francophone east from the anglophone west). The Cantonese who somehow managed to settle there at the end of the nineteenth century (often unbeknownst to the Canadian government, which would have preferred to see them go back home after they had built the railways) organised their community around an ethnic niche – the laundry trade – and other services for downtown workers such as stores and restaurants (Helly 1987). What came to be known as Chinatown was thus not only a residential space (and indeed is becoming less and less so). Later and quite different East-Asian migratory flows, including the rich Hong Kong Chinese who arrived at the end of the 1970s, settled in the suburb of Brossard on the South Shore partly because of its proximity to the vibrant commercial district of Chinatown – just a bridge away, over the Saint Lawrence River. Hong Kong families readily frequented Chinatown’s businesses and community organisations. Over the past three decades, the district has undergone a turbulent but spectacular development taking the form of an excess of ‘Chinese’ symbols (gateways, temples, public squares, etc.) (Cha 2004). The city’s symbolic appreciation of Chinatown perhaps compensates for the poor reception given not only to the original Chinese community, but also to the suburban shopping mall built by Hong Kong immigrants in the 1980s. Old Chinatown is clearly a founding neighbourhood, crystallising the centrality of East and even South-East Asian immigration in Montreal. It has also become a destination for tourists as well as local consumers.

A rather different example of a founding neighbourhood is illustrated by Little Burgundy (Petite-Bourgogne). African-Americans who, like the Chinese, arrived in Montreal in the wake of the expansion of the North American railway system, settled in Little Burgundy in the south-west of the city, not far from the city centre. They established their own churches and a community centre in this working-class neighbourhood where clashes between Franco-Canadians and the Irish were commonplace. The Negro Community Centre, founded in 1927, was for a long time a major institution for all the residents of the neighbourhood. A major urban renewal project shook the district at the end of the 1960s, replacing a great number of dwellings with new low-rent social housing – one of the biggest concentrations of social housing in Montreal, totalling 40 per cent of the local residential stock. In the 1980s, the Quebec government changed its housing allocation policy to exclude low-waged employees and
thereby attracted many very low-income members of Montreal’s Jamaican community who had been living elsewhere to Little Burgundy’s social housing units. This wiped out any semblance of social heterogeneity in public housing and resulted in a significant concentration of low-income black residents in a poor environment where drug trafficking had already begun to take root. Haitian immigrants later came to swell this contingent of black social housing tenants, but they did not share the same culture, language, or religion as the black communities already living there. Little Burgundy was soon stigmatised for its poverty, violence, and interracial tension. Some black groups then dissociated themselves from the image of the founding neighbourhood, especially leaders who by then were living elsewhere. Conflict erupted over how to deal with the neighbourhood’s most symbolic public places, and no agreement could be reached on the renovation and rehabilitation of the erstwhile Negro Community Centre. It is recognised today that this tiny neighbourhood made a huge contribution to Montreal culture; for instance, as the birthplace of several world-renowned jazz musicians who remain deeply attached to their local roots. But the story of Little Burgundy shows that founding neighbourhoods can also be contested places, inciting negotiation and sometimes conflict.

The golden age of ‘little homelands’

The mid-twentieth century brought significant waves of immigration, primarily European, to Montreal, launching its cosmopolitan turn. As in Toronto, the urban landscape was enriched by ‘ethnic villages’ that would mark Montreal’s culture and give it a cosmopolitan flavour, both figuratively and literally. First the Italians (from the beginning of the century), then the Greeks and Portuguese followed the immigrant corridor to live in districts that would be associated with them for a long time to come: the Italians settled near Jean-Talon Market in Petite-Patrie (or Little Homeland; also known as Little Italy) before going on to colonise areas such as the then-suburb of Saint-Leonard; the Greeks settled in Mile End and Parc-Extension; and the Portuguese in Saint-Louis (one of the old Jewish and working-class francophone districts near boulevard Saint-Laurent). These immigrants, often from rural backgrounds with little education, not only quickly made a place for themselves in the city but also changed the architectural and culinary landscape of Montreal. The Italians produced
their own version of the Montreal ‘duplex’ (row or terraced housing made up of two apartments one on top of the other), the Greeks made their mark in the restaurant business (as did the Italians), and the Portuguese played a decisive role in the reconquest of central neighbourhoods. Despite arriving with little and earning low wages, the Portuguese still managed to buy and renovate old housing stock that native Montrealers had regarded until then with a certain disdain as dilapidated slum housing. Painting façades in bright colours, they took over part of a district that was to become one of the hippest of the metropolis – and even North America – the Plateau Mont-Royal.2

This Montreal of ‘little homelands’ inspired author Claude Jasmin to write the novel *La petite patrie*, published in 1972, whose title was taken up in a campaign slogan for municipal elections in the 1970s: ‘Le Montréal des petites patries’. Moreover, Quebecers began to realise that immigrants were one of the keys to their cultural survival. The language question was never far away: for many immigrants, economic success was associated with English. Quebecers began to realise that in the name of a narrow-minded Catholicism, they had pushed several categories of immigrants into the arms of anglophones by refusing them access to Catholic schools, most of which were francophone. The famous Bill 101 (1977), which made it compulsory for immigrants’ children to be schooled in French, the creation of the Ministry for Immigration and Cultural Communities, and subsequent agreements made with the federal government to allow Quebec to select and integrate its immigrants would transform relations between Quebec and its immigrant communities. However, it would not be the last time that immigrants were used as a political pawn in the strategic games played out for and against Quebec’s independence.

Once the battle for French had been won (or so it was thought), Montrealters jumped into the joys of cosmopolitanism, in its hedonistic variety, and not least its gastronomic one. The famous world exhibition Expo 67 had of course already given them a foretaste of what the wider world could offer. But continued immigration made a deep and lasting impression on Montrealters’ lifestyles, particularly in the central districts, where high concentrations of immigrants offered partial protection against the demographic decline caused by the exodus to the fast-developing suburbs.
From ethnic villages to multiethnic neighbourhoods

The 1980s and 1990s saw another transformation of Montreal’s landscape. Canada’s immigration policy was overhauled: it opened up to Third World countries in the wake of the Geneva conventions, adopted a ‘points system’ to attract immigrants based on their human capital, de-racialised family reunification policies, and repeatedly raised the target numbers of immigrants that Canada and Quebec aimed to attract. These changes significantly altered the characteristics of Canada’s immigrants. Henceforth, they came from more urban areas in a greater variety of countries and were better educated than their predecessors (and the Canadian born). Montreal hit record levels of diversity with respect to the countries of origin of its immigrant population, although in quantity it attracted far fewer immigrants than Toronto or even Vancouver. This diversification of countries of origin was reflected in the fabric of the city even at the very local level, and brought about a new type of immigrant neighbourhood where diversity won out over the predominance of one or two ethnic groups. Former ethnic villages became markedly multiethnic neighbourhoods: for instance, the old Greek neighbourhood of Parc-Extension welcomed large numbers of immigrants from South Asia, as well as Haitians, Latin Americans, and people from various African countries. Furthermore, immigrants settled for the first time in neighbourhoods situated farther and farther from the city centre and even in some suburbs. Thus, the figure of the multiethnic neighbourhood came to represent the city, over and above the question of location (at the periphery or the centre of the city) and socio-economic disparities (Germain, Richard, and Rose 2012).

The new face of multiethnic Montreal gave rise, however, to a number of concerns, since at the time various race-related incidents were erupting in Europe and in North America. Ministers and civil servants responsible for immigration in Quebec especially wanted to know how, in light of the concentration of immigration in certain districts, integration could be achieved and how the new arrivals could create viable community social dynamics. In the early 1990s, my colleagues and I received a mandate to conduct a large-scale survey of the most multiethnic neighbourhoods of the metropolis, to examine the ways in which residents negotiated coexistence and shared urban public spaces. The results of this extensive study of community life and modes of interethnic cohabitation in seven neighbourhoods were, on the whole, quite encouraging (Germain 2002). Public sociability was certainly detached but calm, immigrants
were very involved in community dynamics, and the most multiethnic
neighbourhoods seemed to have the least interethnic tension. In short,
Montreal was changing without really becoming fragmented. The return
of economic growth in the middle of the 1990s, a relatively affordable
housing market, and new culinary traditions brought by new immigrants
did more to bring about mutual appeasement than any official integration
policies. A sort of soft cosmopolitanism or cosmopolitanism by default was
on the rise, a bottom-up shared representation which can be tailored to
suit every resident in one way or another, probably thanks to the spread
of a particular kind of metropolitan mentality among many Montrealeans
(Germain and Radice 2006).

We found the seeds of at least a discourse of cosmopolitanism in
neighbourhoods such as Mile End, where anglophone students and
francophone and other European ‘marginal gentrifiers’ came to share the
same public spaces in this neighbourhood in the middle of the immigrant
corridor (Rose 1995: 89). While adjacent Petit-Plateau became the heartland
of a francophone cultural avant-garde inspired by the Quiet Revolution,
Mile End remained an in-between space, a little haven of peace in a city
often troubled by linguistic and political tensions; a space where a number
of extremely diverse groups found themselves embracing the cosmopolitan
by default and multiple belonging that doubles as attachment to the district.
Indeed, the City of Montreal as a whole has from time to time promoted
the idea of cosmopolitanism, especially under the leadership of former
Mayor Pierre Bourque (1994–2001). Bourque was also one of the artisans
of the monumental symbolic marking of Chinatown, thanks to the links
he forged with China as head of Montreal’s Botanical Gardens during the
1980s, where he founded the Chinese Garden.

However, on occasion, the idea of cosmopolitanism has also triggered
resistance that seems to echo criticisms made by anti-Semitic nationalists
such as Maurice Barrès in France during the Dreyfus Affair at the end of
the nineteenth century. In 1892, Barrès resuscitated the word nationalism
in an article on the opposition between enthusiasts of foreign literature
and advocates of national literature, ‘The quarrel between nationalists and
cosmopolitans’, in which he denounced the superficiality and rootlessness of
the international elite (Winock 1997). The parallel might appear surprising
or even shocking, but it nevertheless underlines the discomfort prompted by
this notion in the context of a minority society such as Quebec, embroiled
in debates about national sovereignty. Daniel Latouche’s book criticising
multiethnic Montreal’s ‘cosmopolitanism of the bazaar’ (Latouche 1990:
testifies to this discomfort. A considerable part of Franco-Québécois society appears to be hypersensitive to the perceived threat of an ode to diversity in which Québécois identity would not be defined first and foremost in terms of belonging to a common Franco-Canadian culture (Latouche 1990). Nonetheless, multiethnic Montreal at the end of the twentieth century presented few of the characteristics of fragmented societies: indeed, at the heart of its various neighbourhoods, everyday life was informed by a pragmatic soothing of differences. Downtown was also animated by a vibrant public sociability in which, it appeared, immigrants participated fully (although few studies have documented this). However, other changes were afoot, upon which the shock and aftershocks of September 2001 would cast a harsh light.

Us and them

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the territories of immigration became more fluid (Germain and Poirier 2007). Neighbourhoods that had formerly been bastions of francophones of European descent began to be settled by new immigrants: Ahuntsic-Bordeaux-Cartierville in the northern part of the island and, to a lesser extent, Hochelaga-Maisonneuve in the east end and Centre-Sud just east of downtown. Numbers of recent immigrants also rose in the West Island, traditionally home to longer-established anglophones, and in the old middle-class suburb of Saint-Laurent, as well as in typical immigrant neighbourhoods such as Côte-des-Neiges. North Africans make up an increasing proportion of recent immigrants, mainly because their knowledge of French and high levels of education facilitate their integration and mean that they are ranked highly under Quebec’s immigration policy. Immigrants from North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), for example, are remarkably dispersed in their choice of place of residence: a pattern without precedent among earlier immigrant groups; even if there is an area called Petit Maghreb (a small segment of a commercial street in Saint-Michel (Manaï 2015).

In fact, there remains no single area on the island of Montreal whose population is less than 15 per cent foreign-born (conversely, immigrants rarely count for more than 50 per cent of any given borough’s population. According to Dan Hiebert, figures from the National Household Survey show that only 1.8 per cent of visible minorities are to be found in minority-group enclaves (enclaves dominated by a single ethnic minority group) and
4.3 per cent in mixed minority enclaves (enclaves where there is a mix of minorities from different ethnic groups) (Hiebert 2015: 14). On the island of Montreal, there is therefore less and less evidence of ‘two Montreals’: one multiethnic and the other rather homogeneous. However, dispersion of immigration to the outer suburbs (that is, off the island) is still limited; at least in contrast to Toronto and Vancouver, where most new immigrants have been settling in the suburbs for some time now (Texeira, Li, and Kobayashi 2011). In Montreal, the outer suburbs represent more than one third of the metropolitan region and count for a great deal in terms of political representation. In 2015, almost 60 per cent of immigrants admitted to Quebec between 2004 and 2013 lived on the island of Montreal (MIDI 2015).

Seen from the outer suburbs or from the administrative capital, Quebec City, the island of Montreal increasingly seems like a foreign landscape. Policies for the ‘regionalisation’ of immigration (dispersion away from the metropolis) have had little success, and while the elites of the regions in decline are crying out for immigrants, discomfort with the Other and sometimes xenophobia can still be a significant problem there (and even in the capital). Seen from within, Montreal seems to be going through hard times but for several very different reasons. As mentioned earlier, the city has undergone major municipal reform, beginning with a forced merger of all the island’s municipalities and ending in the de-merger of 15 of them. The new City of Montreal has since imploded due to an extreme decentralisation of municipal functions to the boroughs (Germain and Alain 2006). These shake-ups are seen by many as the bitter failure of an attempt to build a strong megalopolis on the Toronto model (Boudreau 2000). At the very least, they have sapped municipal councillors’ and administrators’ energies. While in Toronto and Vancouver, diversity was seen, until recently, as a motor for development at the heart of municipal discourse until evidence of ‘diversity fatigue’ began to show (Siemiaticki 2010: 23), in Montreal it no longer has a structural role (Germain and Alain 2009) – and is sometimes seen as a problem (Fourrot 2009). The media have fuelled debate on the supposed crumbling of social cohesion and weakening of Québécois identity, loudly echoed in phone-ins and letters to the editor (Potvin, Tremblay, Audet, and Martin 2008). At the heart of this new urban tale, which betrays an implicit discomfort with the metropolis, there is of course the question of religion and its place in ‘public space’: a ubiquitous but ambivalent expression that sorely confuses concrete urban public place with metaphorical civic or political space (Germain et al. 2008).
The Other turning up in unexpected places

At the beginning of the millennium – before and after September 2001 – I led a research team investigating the municipal management of diversity in Montreal, concentrating in particular on controversies over the zoning of places of worship (Germain and Gagnon 2003) and on policies relating to diversity in sports and leisure facilities, especially swimming pools (Poirier et al. 2006). We found that municipal actors – leaders and employees alike – were often caught off guard by matters of religion (and of ethnocultural diversity more broadly), and that they often responded to them in a totally ad hoc fashion. It was as though no-one had anticipated that the steady increase in the volume and diversity of immigrants might lead to requests for new places of worship or changes in municipal services. Our survey on swimming pools showed that ethnoreligious groups did not, in fact, make a great many special requests, and that responses to them were made pragmatically depending on the availability of resources. Requests regarding places of worship were more often the object of resistance in municipal agencies – often for the very prosaic reason that they are exempt from municipal taxes. However, such controversies were very much contained at the local level. Our study demonstrated the capacity of citizens to engage with each other in ‘social transactions’ that led to practical ‘compromises of coexistence’ (Germain and Gagnon 2003: 300). Local residents and representatives of religious groups generally managed to situate their dialogue beyond or outside the matter of religion as such, focusing instead on the concrete conditions for cohabitation on which compromise was possible (for instance, devising new parking regulations, or reducing noise from religious ceremonies by installing air conditioning so that windows could stay closed).

The international situation was, of course, bound to have a knock-on effect on the way that Montrealers, whatever their origin, experience diversity in their day-to-day lives and perceive their relationship to the Other. This experience has become both micro-local and global for most Montrealers. On the one hand, immigration has spread over almost the whole of the island and is inscribed into the everyday landscape of proximity – on public transport, in the neighbourhood, in the city centre, or in shops and businesses. This helps create a certain kind of cosmopolitan urbany, since such proximity necessarily involves getting used to social and cultural distance. Still, each particular district in Montreal offers a different experience of diversity, since each multiethnic neighbourhood has its own
composition of people and places. There are now 1,001 scenarios in the
multiethnic urban landscape that must all be apprehended at a micro-local
scale (for which I am tempted to coin the term ‘nano-urbanology’: see
Hiebert and Vertovec, who recently built a research agenda on urban
markets (Hiebert and Vertovec 2015). The new super-diversity must be
explored at the street level. Crucially, this diversity is not experienced as
fragmentation in Montreal, since in spite of their socio-economic contrasts,
the city’s spaces are not compartmentalised and it is relatively easy to
move from one to another without feeling like an intruder. The debate
about ethnic enclaves that has been raging in Toronto, where at least 13
ethnic communities of over 100,000 people have enough critical mass
to form relatively homogenous spatial concentrations, has no equivalent
in Montreal, where ethnic groups are smaller and origins more diverse.
Several scholars have shown that Montreal has no ghettos, and although it
does have more zones of poverty, these are populated by both immigrants
and non-immigrants (Apparicio et al. 2007).

On the other hand, in complete contrast to this close contact with
ethnocultural diversity, debates about the place of religion in public
space – meant here in its abstract sense – have opened up a new distance
between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ (the precise characteristics of who is included
in the Them and the Us being both vague and variable …). Unlike in
Europe, early conflicts were not with Muslim communities but with
the long-established Hasidim (in relation to the expansion of synagogues
and construction of eruvim) and Sikhs (about whether a boy could wear
his kirpan (ceremonial knife) at school). It is as if people fear that these
minority religious practices threaten the hard-won emancipation of
Quebecers from their recent religious past. The kinds of friction over
cultural matters that for a long time were felt only at a very local level
began to resonate throughout the whole of Quebec. This malaise seemed
to come to a head in January 2007, when Hérouxville, a tiny rural
municipality that practically no immigrant had ever called home, adopted
a town charter for the benefit of potential new arrivals which spelled
out the values of the majority and listed unacceptable behaviour (such
as stoning women …). Tension regarding cultural identity had spread far
beyond the borders of the metropolis.
The Bouchard-Taylor Commission on reasonable accommodation

During 2006 and 2007, a series of controversies – including the Hérouxville town charter – hit the headlines and inflamed public opinion (not without the connivance of the opposition political parties). The controversies all related to some degree to the reasonable accommodation granted to ethnoreligious minorities in public space or, more precisely, public institutions. They touched on a variety of (what were presented as) demands: to create places of worship or to carry a kirpan in educational establishments, to frost the windows of a gym opposite a Hasidic synagogue, to abolish the Catholic prayer sessions that open some city council meetings, to provide separate services for men and women (at swimming pools, in personal home care, in prenatal classes, in driving licence exams, etc.), to offer pork-free menus in a school and a sugar shack, to wear a hijab in sports tournaments, and to vote without removing the niqab (veil). Of the twenty-odd cases that came up during this period, some were revealed to be either entirely framed or greatly distorted by the media, while others concerned friendly arrangements in private organisations rather than reasonable accommodation in the strict sense of the term. Reasonable accommodation refers in fact to a judicial process that seeks to prevent certain kinds of discrimination (specifically, the 13 kinds listed in Quebec’s Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms) that can result from the general application of a norm, rule, or law. The process therefore exists to protect minority rights from institutionalised discrimination and is oriented by specific guidelines: the discrimination in question must be recognised by the Charter, the accommodation reached must be ‘reasonable’ in that it does not place excessive constraints upon the organisation concerned, both parties must try in good faith to reach a compromise, and so on. Many of the cases that hit the headlines had not gone through this process but were simply adjustments reached by private arrangement.

The controversies and the way they were reported caused increasing confusion and misunderstanding. They were also exploited by political parties to advance their own agendas. They were perceived and presented as threatening the deepest values of Québécois society, especially equality of the sexes. Faced with this turmoil, in February 2007, the minority Parti libéral government announced that it would set up a Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, headed up by two well-known intellectuals, Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor. The Commission’s mandate as conceived by the co-chairs was very
broad: they sought to describe current practices of accommodation, to understand the reasons for the social crisis, and to evaluate Quebec’s model of integrating immigrants. To achieve these goals, they accepted written briefs from any individual or organisation who wished to submit one and toured the province, holding over 20 citizens’ forums between September and December 2007. At first, the Commission’s vast scope, combined with the lack of clear guidelines for the forums, seemed only to inflame passions further. However, thanks in part to intervention by academics, the media – in a surprising moment of reflexivity – suddenly seemed to realise that sensationalism was not helping matters. Subsequent reporting on the Commission gave airtime to the more measured and positive contributions to the debate, followed by a lull in the media until the final report was submitted in May 2008. The co-chairs’ conclusions did not please everyone, but did calm things down for a while. Broadly speaking, having made a relatively optimistic diagnosis – ‘There is no crisis’ (Bouchard and Taylor 2008: 83) – they recommended arrangements between citizens rather than political or legislative acts, the institutionalisation of the intercultural model that already prevails in practice in Quebec, and a mixed bag of other measures – none of which seem overly onerous.

Two striking points must be underlined. Firstly, the pragmatism of the people who actually have to deal with requests for accommodation in public institutions (especially in the education and health sectors) is impressive. Most of the public workers who spoke before the Commission were and are learning to manage diversity and did not want a heavy framework imposed upon the process. In light of this, the co-chairs were right to say that there is no crisis of reasonable accommodation. Secondly, there is a great gap between, on the one hand, the multiple real-life practices of accommodation and adjustment that enable relatively harmonious coexistence between cultural groups and, on the other, public discourse on that coexistence and its impact on issues of identity. The co-chairs clearly showed that the emotions stirred up by the so-called crisis were out of all proportion to the daily realities of living together. It is also a pity that apart from saying that Montreal has no ghettos, the report makes no mention of the urban, spatialised dimensions of everyday intercultural coexistence (Leloup and Radice 2008). In fact, this gap evokes the old dilemmas of a metropolis always searching for itself, torn between openness to the world and loyalty to Quebec (Germain and Rose 2000).

In contrast, the faith the co-chairs put in the intercultural model seems somewhat naïve. If this model – a cross between Canadian multiculturalism
and French-style republican integration – is as efficient and successful as they claimed, how did the reasonable accommodation debate manage to throw Quebec society into chaos for so many months? In fact, the story does not end there! In September 2013, the Parti québécois minority government, in power for barely a year, unleashed a veritable tsunami by making laïcité the cornerstone of its election platform, hoping to convince voters to give it a majority mandate. Its proposed Quebec Charter of Values, which aimed to ensure state religious neutrality, included a measure prohibiting the wearing of visible religious symbols in public services, which targeted hijab- or niqab-wearing Muslim women especially. This electoral campaign tore the electorate in two, and was the subject of acrimonious debates even within families. It also provoked the anger of all mayors on the island of Montreal who, in contrast to their colleagues in Quebec’s regions, stated they would refuse to apply the Charter in their jurisdictions were the Parti québécois to win. To general surprise, the proposal resulted in a resounding victory for the opposition party (the Parti libéral) in the 2014 provincial elections.

At around the same time, my research team and I were completing a study of interethnic cohabitation in four middle-class neighbourhoods—that is, of the very class which had been targeted by certain political parties as particularly sensitive to debates around identity. Consequently, according to polls, Laval – a middle-class suburb to the north of the island of Montreal – is home to the highest proportion of those who consider immigration a potential threat to Québécois culture (Bilodeau and Turgeon 2014). Our surveys revealed a peaceful cohabiting in public spaces, residents rarely citing cultural diversity to describe the major demographic changes which were nevertheless a feature of where they lived (Germain, Jean, and Richard 2015).

By way of conclusion …

The cosmopolitan city and the fragmented city represent two different visions of the metropolis. Evidence for both can be seen simultaneously in today’s Montreal, but at two very different registers: the former in urban life and the latter in social and political debate. At these registers, diversity has a different meaning and provokes a different effect. To explain this mismatch, we might propose the following hypothesis: the principal protagonists at each register are perhaps not the same actors. Thus, young people and immigrants are as omnipresent in the various public places of
Montreal’s everyday life (indeed, complaints are often made to municipal services about the supposed over-use of public parks by recent immigrant families) as they are absent from forums of social and political debate. Moreover, several social and political leaders seem to seek to exploit these first few cracks of fragmentation in the urban fabric for their own ends (with the help of the media). Although the potential for socio-economic fragmentation is hardly anodyne, it is not yet clearly inscribed on the urban landscape: many neighbourhoods still maintain considerable social and ethnic heterogeneity. The barriers that recent immigrants face in accessing the job market, in spite of their high qualifications, constitute a real problem which, although contributing to inequality, has not (yet?) created an urban fracture. Fragmentation instead seems to be incited by cultural and, especially, religious factors that are resonating specifically in spaces of representation and sociopolitical discourse in a society that, at least within the baby-boom generation, continues to see itself as a minority.

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Notes

2 The Plateau featured in a list of the 15 hippest neighbourhoods in North America in an article in the US magazine UTNE Reader (November–December 1997 issue).
3 A sugar shack, or sap house, is a cabin in a maple grove where maple syrup is made. During ‘sugaring off’ season, some of the bigger sugar shacks also operate as restaurants. Like many traditional Québecois meals, the typical sugar shack menu is rather heavy on the pork (in the form of bacon, crackling, pork pâté, etc.).

References


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