Comment: Is There Such a Thing as Montréalology?

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Introduction

The purpose of this comment is to explore further some of the questions raised in the contributions to this thematic section, particularly questions that relate to the specificity of Montréal as an object of study, and to identify areas of agreement and dissension between these contributions. The comment unfolds in three phases. It first explores possible meanings of Montréalology, that is, knowledge on Montréal: (1) the different approaches taken by studies focusing on Montréal (Montréalology as the investigation of the different aspects of Montréal as an urban, social, economic, political phenomenon); (2) the specificity of Montréal relative to other metropolitan regions— the group of reference will be its Canadian and U.S. counterparts (Montréal as a unique metropolitan region); (3) Montréal as the prototype of an existing or emerging category of cities (Montréal as an ideal type). The comment then considers the perspectives advanced by the different contributions in light of what they say about the present state of Montréalology. Following the lead of these contributions, the comment concentrates on the interface between globalization trends and the specificity of Montréal among its North American peers. It concludes that far from obliterating the particularities of Montréal, globalization is, rather, engaged in a dialectical relationship with these characteristics resulting in a Montréal-specific manifestation of global trends. The outcome is a new form of distinctiveness singularizing Montréal among North American metropolises.

The comment considers Montréal from different angles, including its built environment and linguistic makeup. But ultimately the comment, consistent with the articles from the thematic section, is about how changes in the values and lives of Montréalers transform their city. As expected, given the focus on the effects of globalization, attention is primarily on immigrants.

Meanings of Montréalology

In its most literal meaning, Montréalology refers to the study and understanding of Montréal— it is the science of Montréal. In this broad definition, the term could be adapted to all cities as each is a focus of research and thus of knowledge purporting to better understand it. There is nothing distinctive about Montréal being a topic of interest for researchers. As we talk of Montréalology, we can equally allude to New-Yorkology, Parisology, Beijingology and so on. But of course, while all cities are objects of research, the nature of the research and of its findings vary according to features specific to a city and perspectives taken by investigators. Cities are arguably the most complex of human creations (perhaps along with language), so it is to be expected that they can be apprehended from multiple angles. Consequently, knowledge generated on a city will mirror both its features and the orientation of the research carried out about it.

Montréal is the object of a substantial amount of research, probably out of proportion with its population of 3.8 million (the 16th largest metropolitan region in North America, between Detroit and Phoenix, which are larger, and Seattle and Minneapolis-St. Paul, which are smaller). The large number of researchers whose work centres on Montréal is a function of the presence of the INRS (Institut national de la recherche scientifique)—Centre Urbanisation Culture Société, by far the largest research centre specializing in urban matters in Canada, and of four universities with programs with an interest in cities—mostly in geography, sociology, political science, economics and civil engineering. There is, therefore, abundant research on Montréal, which means that seen from this perspective not only does Montréalology indeed exist, but it also refers to a rich and diversified body of knowledge. One need only type "Montréal" in geography, sociology or political science indexes to have the existence of Montréalology confirmed and be made aware of its wide scope.

The second possible meaning of Montréalology concerns the specificity of Montréal among metropolitan regions. In this understanding, Montréalology would be about what distinguishes Montréal, what is specific to this urban area. Unlike in the case of its previous meaning, there is no certainty here that Montréalology does exist, that this city is sufficiently distinct to justify the use of the term when it pertains to what particularizes this metropolitan region.

Historically, Montréal has deviated from typical North American metropolitan forms and patterns of mobility. Due in part to its low industrial wages, it has developed with a residential density above that of most other metropolitan regions. Still today, even after a sharp decline in the size of its households, Montréal stands out among North American urban regions (with the obvious exception of New York) for the density of its inner city and inner suburbs (Filion, Bunting, Pavlic and Langlois 2010). A tight triplex and duplex configuration, housing forms that singularise Montréal, delivers such density (Hanna and Dufaux 2002; Legault 1989). The effect of density, along with other factors, such as public transit availability, reverberates on the use of different modes of transportation. Montréal and Toronto compete for the second place among North American metropolitan regions (behind the New York metropolitan region) for per capita public transit patronage (Perl and Kenworthy 2010). Montréal is therefore more compact and transit reliant than most of its counterparts across the continent. But the tendency is towards more, not less, conformity with the North American metropolitan model. Over the last few decades, urban development has mostly unfolded in low-density outer suburbs, which are dependent on the automobile, and the centre of Montréal has not experienced the downtown residential development boom witnessed in cities such as Toronto, Chicago and Vancouver (Bussière 1989). One could argue that the urban form and transportation specificity of Montreal is a legacy of the past, presently challenged by contemporary development patterns.

There is another, more obvious, dimension to the specificity of Montréal: its linguistic makeup and the impact this has on its culture. Because of the predominance of the French language, Montréal is not as tightly connected to North American cultural networks as its counterparts. It makes up for this relative seclusion by generating much of its own consumable culture. The role of Montréal as the hub of cultural production in the province of Québec places Montréal consumers of francophone media in a unique situation. For them, a large proportion of cultural references come from their own city. No other metropolitan region in North America, not even New York and Los Angeles, is in a comparable position. There is a cultural self-reflexivity in Montréal that is unequalled in North America. With so many local references in the cultural sphere, the distance between the public arena and narratives conveyed in the media is short. The resulting feedback loop between the media and life in Montréal accounts for a political scene that distinguishes Montréal (and Quebec as a whole) from other North American jurisdictions, and the spontaneous and sometimes fickle nature of its political movements. Recent events, such as the massive New Democratic Party wave in the 2011 federal election and the student protest of the spring of 2012, illustrate Montréal's singular political scene.

The third and final possible connotation of Montréalology is Montréal as representative of a category of cities. This is about whether Montréal assumes the role, along with Chicago, Los Angeles and Miami, of prototype of a certain type of urban area. Park and Burgess depicted Chicago in the 1920s as representative of the 'radio-concentric' social geography of the North American city, with a central business district surrounded by a zone of transition and racial ghettos and, further out, by rings of increasingly wealthy suburbs (Park and Burgess 1969). Until the 1980s, North American metropolises indeed conformed to varying degrees to this radio-concentric pattern. In the 1990s, it became fashionable to point to Los Angeles as the exemplar of an emerging social geography consisting in zones of sharply contrasting functions and social status, which cohabit cheek by jowl, divided as they are by suburban arterial and expressway networks within a super-block configuration. For Dear and Flusty (2002), this functional and social pattern is reflective of the loosely structured postmodern city defined by its vivid contrasts. Lately, Miami has been advanced as the model for a more fluid social form where patterns fluctuate in a region where spatial anchoring is minimal. The Miami school highlights the highly contrasting social environments found in Los Angeles, but it has considerable instability in social distributions in a metropolitan region whose identity is best defined by international demographic and cultural flows that singularizes this urban school (Nijman 2000).

Could Montréal point to a next urban model? It did to some extent in a not so distant past. In the early 1970s, in the wake of intense downtown redevelopment, the construction of the Métro subway system and Expo 67, Montréal was heralded as the prototype of the city of the future: a city where large multi-use complexes (megastructures) are connected to each other and to the Métro by a network of pedestrian corridors, thus causing the entire downtown area to become a megastructure. Known as the "underground city," Megastructure Montréal was about the avant-garde modernist architecture of Expo 67 and the form taken by downtown development over the 1960s, which weatherproofed the centre of a city known for extreme winters. In this sense, Montréal was reflective of the ambition, verging on hubris, of modernism. In a book from the mid-1970s, Banham (1976) identified Montréal as the foremost example of the megastructure movement. But the book acknowledged that this had been a brief passing phase; its subtitle "Urban Futures of the Recent Past" mirrors this view. Today, the site of Expo 67 is mostly barren, with the exception of the Biosphere (the remains of the US pavilion), and the Casino, the former French and Québec pavilions. Downtown multi-use complexes and the underground city have remained functional, but few would see them today as the main distinguishing feature of Montréal.

All of this takes us back to original questions raised in this comment: Does Montréalology exist? And if so, what form does it take in the present context? In order to answer these questions, I now draw from the four contributions to this issue because they represent thoughtful efforts at defining some Montréal social realities of the early 21st century. I will investigate to which of the three meanings of Montréalology the different articles conform. It is to be expected that, given their common focus on Montréal, all contributions add to knowledge on Montréal and are thus consistent with the first understanding of Montréalology. The question will then be whether they also depict Montréal as different from other North American metropolises or as the prototype of an existing or emerging category of North American metropolitan regions.

Montréal as a Model of Ethnic Distribution

In her article, Annick Germain presents Montréal as an emerging North American "urban school," a possible successor to the Chicago, Los Angeles and Miami models. She convincingly highlights the specificity of ethnic group distribution in Montréal relative to the situation prevailing across North America. While North American metropolitan regions are generally segmented into rigid ethnic and racial enclaves, Montréal presents patterns that are more evenly dispersed. Several reasons explain this particularity of Montréal. There are, first, the multiple origins of its immigrants, more than in most other North American metropolises. Germain also underscores the role public policy plays in promoting a blending of ethnic and income groups in subsidized housing developments. The policy dimension suggests another specificity of Montréal in the North American context. Germain situates Montréal between well-established European welfare state systems and the vibrant civil society characterizing North American urban areas. Programs favouring the integration of immigrants and preventing the formation of ghettos can be seen as stemming from this in-between status of Montréal.

Do the features of Montréal discussed in this first article depict a metropolitan region that is distinct from its North American counterparts or do they foreshadow an emerging continent-wide pattern? With polarising incomes, growing difficulty for immigrants to join the middle class and retreating welfare state programs (especially state and municipal programs in post-2008 U.S.),

the North American urban reality appears to be moving in an opposite direction from the Montréal situation pictured in the article (Luce 2012; Wilensky 2012). Montréal comes out as faring better than its counterparts as regards the distribution of immigrants and measures encouraging their integration, despite a recent deterioration of the housing situation of immigrants (Rose, Germain and Ferreira 2006). It does not, therefore, assume the role of prototype. Montréal may, however, present an alternative ethnic geography, which could inspire public policy elsewhere. The three remaining contributions of this issue are more concerned with cultural issues, but they too address the specificity or representativeness of Montréal among its North American peers.

Navigating the Complex Linguistic Reality

If there is one widely agreed upon feature distinguishing Montréal from other large North American metropolises, it is its linguistic makeup. Montréal is indeed the only non-predominantly anglophone, large metropolitan region in North America. Moreover, divisions and frictions between the French and English linguistic realms colour all aspects of life in Montréal (Daveluy 2005; Termote and Thibault 2008). In her contribution, Patricia Lamarre detects a linguistic transformation affecting Montréal, which does not conform to the age-old tension around the respective influence of the two main linguistic groups. It is rather a new form of linguistic behaviour, which thrives in the interstice between traditional rifts. The article, which concentrates on young adults who are perfectly at ease in French and English and generally in a third language as well, monitors how they negotiate the linguistic norms of the city in their daily life. It is important to note that the subjects of the study are from immigrant families or are themselves immigrants (or in one case from another province), and are thus in a state of flux between the two linguistic camps. Perhaps the main finding of the study is that these young adults do not seek adherence to one of the two linguistic communities but appear to be at ease in a space they have created between or across these communities. Their behaviour suggests the replacement of the set linguistic patterns of Montréal by a more fluid behaviour.

In essence, the article tells the story of a group of young adults, from recently settled ethnic groups, who create their own linguistic environment and thus contribute to reshaping the language makeup of Montréal. Anything that has to do with the linguistic composition of Montréal relates to Montréalology defined as the specificity of this city among its North American counterparts. Although it represents a departure from prevailing linguistic patterns, the behaviour of the young adults investigated by Lamarre does not challenge the uniqueness of Montréal from a language perspective, since it is unusual elsewhere on the continent to find people navigating daily in a trilingual environment. It is still a case of Montréalology as specificity rather than prototype.

The Interface between Montréal and World Events

The article that best denotes how globalizing tendencies result in a new Montréal specificity is the description by Steven High of an annual procession commemorating the 1994 Tutsi massacre in Rwanda, and its reincarnation as an audio walk. It draws a parallel between the meaning of the procession and the connotations of the Montréal sites it crosses, themselves reflective of a prior history rife with conflicts. It is as if the procession adds a supplementary layer of meaning to the Montréal sites, while itself being sensitive to the semantics of the urban environments it traverses. The article highlights connections all along the procession between its commemoration of a tragedy on a scale never experienced in Montréal and historical events commemorated by the city's sites. It is not by accident that the procession ends with the throwing of flowers in the St. Lawrence River. The gesture takes place in the Old Port, the quintessential historical locale in Montréal, close to where the city was founded. But it relates to the river, which is a powerful representation of the city's connection to the world. The water that flows by will reach the ocean and bring to it all that it carries, including, symbolically, the flowers. The existence of layers of history connected to urban places and their reinterpretation in light of new experiences are common across all cities. In each case, however, these phenomena take a particular form, hence the specificity of Montréal (or of any other city) in this regard.

Religious Cosmopolitanism

The deepest social transformations experienced in Montréal since the early 1960s concern changing attitudes towards religion. Montréal (like all of Québec) is probably unique in how quickly and thoroughly people turned away from religious practice. The Catholic Church but also, to a lesser extent, mainstream Protestant denominations witnessed a steep decline in their worshippers after the mid-1960s (Lamonde 2010). The result has been the disconnection of a large majority of the population from religious practice and an oversupply of places of worship throughout the urban landscape (Morisset, Noppen and Coomans 2006). But the article demonstrates that the evolution of religious practice in Montréal has been anything

but linear. Modernist secularism triumphant over several decades was confronted with a search for spirituality on the part of long-term residents as well as the religious fervour of newcomers. By virtue of the provenance of immigrants, Catholicism and Islam benefited the most from their arrival. But the presence of immigrants has also given rise to a large number of other religions in Montréal. The arrival of immigrants with their different beliefs along with the search for spirituality on the part of disaffected members of the Catholic Church and mainstream Protestant denominations have given rise to a large number of religious options. In this respect, Montréal is singled out by the abruptness of its transition away from traditional denominations, but conforms to the norm of North American cities with large immigrant populations and the presence of long-term citizens seeking spiritual fulfillment, as regards a multiplication of religious options. We witness a global trend in this case— the arrival of immigrants with strong religious beliefs— injecting life and diversity into a religious scene that had been wasting away. The religious cosmopolitanism of Montréal is prototypical, but the religious practice vacuum that it fills is specific to this urban region.

The Globalization-Specificity Dialectic

A common theme runs across the different contributions to this issue: the effect of globalism, as transmitted by immigration, on the specificity of a metropolitan region. Montréal was well chosen for the exploration of this theme, for it is widely recognized as different in many respects from its North American counterparts. One can surmise from the four articles that the different manifestations of globalization do not so much challenge as redefine Montréal's specificity. The tension between globalization and the particularities of an urban area can best be apprehended as a dialectical process: manifestations of globalization are modified as they enter in contact with the specificity of a city, and this specificity is in turn altered by these manifestations. In the end, we are in the presence of both redefined particularities of an urban area and transformed globalization tendencies. All contributions point to the persistence of the uniqueness of Montréal among North American metropolises, but in a fashion that differs from its past distinctiveness. As they amalgamated with the prior characteristics of this urban area, globalizing trends acquired a distinct Montréal flavour.

If it goes without saying that all four contributions conform to the understanding of Montréalology as the generation of knowledge on Montréal, it is equally clear that the articles subscribe to Montréalology as underscoring the specificity of this urban area. This is indeed the main message to emanate from this issue.The other understanding of Montréalology, that is, Montréal as an ideal type, is not supported by the articles. There is an absence of evidence upholding the view that Montréal represents the prototype of a category of North American metropolitan regions and, given present continent-wide political and social trends, characteristics of this urban region are unlikely to foreshadow the emergence of such a category. In light of the evidence and reflections present in the contributions, Montréal stands out as a loner among North American metropolises.

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