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Getting organized: anti-poverty organizing and social citizenship in the 1970s

Anna K. Kruzynski and Eric Shragge

ABSTRACT Creating organizations through which the poor could have a voice was the primary goal of the anti-poverty movement in Montreal in the early 1970s. Through confrontation politics, it made claims on the state and mobilized those traditionally excluded from the wider political process. Its most significant impact was to transform those on welfare from a marginalized group into active citizens. In this article, we examine an *English speaking anti-poverty movement in Montreal* during the 1970s. We discuss its vision and strategies, as well as some of the conflicts within the organization, particularly as these shaped the possibility of the poor 'speaking for themselves'. Throughout, we show that the movement propelled a new form of *citizenship for poor people.*

> It was fun to be part of an organization or part of a movement that was basically kicking somebody's ass and making people sit-up and take notice and not letting them get away with the kind of abusive behaviours that they had (Interview 1).

Between 1960 and 1975 many social practices and relations were challenged in Quebec society. New social actors at all levels were demanding a voice in shaping a rapidly modernizing state. Social reform touched all sectors and created an atmosphere in which it seemed like new visions and hopes could be realized. It is in this context that Montreal's English-speaking poor peoples' movement was born. Its most significant impact was to transform those on welfare from a marginalized group, voiceless and subject to bureaucratic discretion, into active citizens. Citizenship, as defined in this paper, has two dimensions: social rights and the right to represent oneself and one's interest in the public arena.

In this paper we investigate the emergence of the Greater Montreal Anti-Poverty Coordinating Committee (GMAPCC) and its member groups. We argue that GMAPCC propelled a new form of citizenship for poor people that included both the assertion that there should be basic income entitlements for the poor and that they had a right to speak on their own behalf and have some control over the services that touched their lives. This movement, which transformed passive recipients into active citizens, redefined

the identity and self-perception of those receiving welfare and the way they were perceived by the wider society. It brought citizenship to those on welfare in Quebec. We situate this movement within several contexts: the reform of the state, the practices of the community movement, and finally the ideological influences. Next, we present an overview of GMAPCC by highlighting some of its structures, processes and actions. Some of the tensions that emerged within the organization are analysed, particularly as these shaped the possibility of the poor 'speaking for themselves'.

Context

The period in which GMAPCC was born and grew was turbulent. Several factors contributed to the shaping of GMAPCC. First, there were important changes in the state. In the 1960s, both the federal and provincial governments were building institutions and passing legislation that shaped the welfare state. The Canadian welfare state is built on the principle of joint federal and provincial jurisdiction. Although the administration and development of social programs has been primarily the responsibility of provinces, the federal government contributes through funding and the setting of national standards.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government put in place a system of transfer payments with minimum standards to fund a national health care system, social assistance for the poor, social services and post-secondary education. In addition, the federal government brought in major reforms that expanded income support programs targeted at seniors and the unemployed. In undertaking these reforms, successive federal Liberal governments, led by Pearson and then Trudeau, created an active social agenda. Under Pearson, the Senate Committee on Poverty 'rediscovered' the realities faced by the poor, despite the booming economic conditions and relatively low levels of unemployment. Trudeau pushed reform further, with an ideology of 'participatory democracy', encouraging citizens to have a voice in decision making. The concrete manifestations of these beliefs were the government's establishment of the Company of Young Canadians in 1965 (Brodhead *et al.*, 1997) which was designed to direct reform-minded youth into 'responsible' social change activities. This was followed by a series of make-work programs aimed at either providing summer employment for youth or creating short-term jobs as a counter-cyclical program against winter unemployment (Keck and Fulks, 1997; Loney, 1977). Thus the federal government's reformist discourse and loosely regulated grants set the stage for astute community organizers to pursue their agenda for more radical social change.

At the same time, in Quebec, a mood of social change was 'in the air'. The 'Quiet Revolution' launched by the Lesage government in 1960, moderized the state by taking over of the health and social services from the church, reforming education and becoming an active agent in the economy (Lesemann, 1984). These reforms created an environment that was open to

experimentation by people in all walks of life and in all aspects of social life. In the community sector, new popular organizations providing health, social and legal services in low-income communities began to appear. These were managed through grassroots democracy. Internationally, the movement against the war in Vietnam catalyzed a youth movement that was international and believed that a this new political generation could have a major impact on political and social processes.

Within this context, the practice of community organizing grew quickly in the English-speaking community. Benello wrote in 1972 that the welfare rights movement in the English-speaking community in Montreal was perhaps the most dramatic example of a grassroots movement that successfully mobilized poor people (Benello, 1972). Several sources converged to shape the practice of this anti-poverty movement. The first was the work of Saul Alinsky, who visited Montreal in the late 1960s. The tough minded, pragmatism of Alinsky emphasized the power of the poor. He argued that poor people, through strong organizations, could build power and win concrete victories (Alinsky, 1971). The second influence was the American new left that grew out of the student movement and promoted community organizing as a vehicle for social change, as opposed to more traditional forms of change such as workplace organizing. In addition, the radical democratic beliefs of the student movement encouraged new forms of organization, particularly direct democracy (Breines, 1989). The influence of the new left was evident in the visits of organizers from the USA who presented workshops to GMAPCC. Finally, by the early 1970s, there was a spill-over from the French-speaking community, particularly its Marxist analysis and use of study and action groups. This brought a revolutionary socialist vision to the movement (Panet-Raymond and Mayer, 1997). There was no single coherent view of community organizing explicitly identified within GMAPCC, but there was a common emphasis on action and victories. In practice, an emphasis on victories pushed the organizing of the poor along, and an analysis of power relations raised political awareness about power in capitalist societies.

GMAPCC – history and practice

GMAPCC[1] was a coalition of local anglophone citizens' groups (GMAPCC, 1973d) that were composed of the poor themselves, mainly welfare recipients (Shragge, 1994). Citizens from five welfare rights committees, and two-full time organizers participated in the founding of the organization in the spring of 1970 (Benello, 1972). GMAPCC's initial mandate was one of community organizing around welfare rights and advocacy:

1. The information of GMAPCC comes from several sources. Documents have been gathered through a community/popular archives project in Pointe St-Charles in Montreal, and interviews with activists were carried out during the years 1993 to present as assignments in courses in the School of Social Work at McGill University.

> [GMAPCC taught] people the power of group participation through successful actions against the welfare office. It [created] a strong body of informed welfare recipients who [were] in a position to demand changes from the government over the laws which concerned their lives (PERM, 1971).

By 1972, GMAPCC had adopted a statement of principles that covered a broad range of topics: jobs and income, housing and urban renewal, education, justice, consumer protection, mass media, democracy, women, racism, the elderly, workers and unions, language and nationalism, and big business (GMAPCC, 1972c). These positions advocated redistribution of income and wealth and strong government action to reach these objectives.

Decision-making structure

The decision-making structure of GMAPCC was a federated structure with mandated representatives of local groups. It used principles of direct democracy in decision-making. The steering committee met weekly, and was charged with carrying out the decisions made at the monthly general meetings (GMAPCC, 1972d). The chair and co-chairpersons, elected by group members at general meetings, were the official spokespeople (GMAPCC, 1973c). Along with the steering committee, GMAPCC's day-to-day business was carried out by a number of working committees: Advocates, Press, Communications, Funding, Research, and Leadership (GMAPCC, 1973a). Other issue-based committees included the Social Agency Consumers committee and the Unemployment Insurance Committee (GMAPCC, 1973a, g). Resource people (or organizers), recruited from qualified citizens and professionals who agreed with the statement of principles, were elected at general meetings (GMAPCC, 1972d, 1973c). They came from a variety of sectors, including the community, health, social services, and the university (GMAPCC, 1972e). Resource people were used in an advisory capacity, had a voice at all levels of the decision-making structure, but no vote (GMAPCC, 1972d, 1973c).

Funding

GMAPCC had two main sources of funding. From its inception, GMAPCC received grants from the federal government for make-work programs (Interview 2). These grants were used to hire welfare recipients to run the affairs of GMAPCC member groups, and of GMAPCC itself (Interview 2). As GMAPCC became an important actor in Montreal's anti-poverty crusade, it began to attract funds from the religious community and charity organizations. Some of these funds was used to support the local groups, while some was used to hire resource people to work with GMAPCC through their central office (GMAPCC, 1973a; PACC, 1975).

Tactics

GMAPCC's mandate was carried out in a number of ways. First, borrowing an Alinsky principle, GMAPCC used confrontational tactics towards winnable objectives:

> GMAPCC and the groups relating to it have focused heavily on conflict situations and on high visibility confrontations, where pressure is brought to bear on the government at various levels. It creates a clear enemy, and focuses discontent; the motive power is rage and the structural aspect of Oppression is minimized in favour of personifying the enemy – a mayor, a corporation president, a slumlord (Benello, 1972, p. 476).

Thus, GMAPCC used disruptive tactics such as occupations, sit-ins and demonstrations of welfare offices and other institutions (Interview 2; Shragge, 1994). Second, individual advocacy was used as a way of ensuring that individuals' rights were protected from the abusive ways of the welfare institution. Advocates, citizens who were trained in the rules of the law, would accompany welfare recipients to the welfare office to plead for social assistance (Interview 2).

Local leadership

One of the main roles of the resource people within GMAPCC was to seek out, politicize and train local leadership (Benello, 1972). This was accomplished in a variety of ways. First, GMAPCC organized 'kitchen meetings' where interested citizens from a particular neighbourhood would come to discuss, with the resource people, issues of concern to poor people in their area (Interview 2). The goal of these meetings was to get citizens to participate in GMAPCC actions, and to eventually form their own local citizens' group (Interview 2). Once a new group was formed, GMAPCC would provide funds for the setting up of a storefront and for the hiring of a coordinator (Interview 2). Second, GMAPCC members organized regular workshops for local organizers, for members present at General meetings, and for member groups at their request, on a variety of topics (GMAPCC, 1973e, f). Workshops were developed to give the participants the tools with which to organize and build groups; topics included dos and don'ts of organizing, negotiating, block organizing, press, tactics, and power structures (GMAPCC, 1973c).

GMAPCC groups[2]

Although many groups came and went from GMAPCC, there was a core that participated in the building and maintenance of the movement. These

2. This information is compiled from the following sources: Benello, 1972; Burman, 1971; CRABS, 1972; GMAPCC, 1971a, b, 1972f, 1973b; Hayes, 1970; Interview 1; PERM, 1971; The Montreal Gazette, 1972; The Montreal Daily Star, 1970.

groups were from many neighbourhoods in and around Montreal including: the Pointe Equal Rights Movement (PERM), the Pointe Improvement Education Committee (PIEC), the South Shore Citizens' Association (SSCA), the St-Laurent Anti-Poverty group (SLAP), the Verdun Anti-Poverty Association (VAPA), the Welfare and Low Income Citizens' group (WLIC), the Welfare Rights Anti-Poverty group (WRAP), and the Citizens Right Against Bailiff Seizures (CRABS). Groups were run by local low-income citizens, with the help of GMAPCC resource people. Mandates varied to some extent, depending on how developed the groups were, but all were signatories to the GMAPCC statement of principles. Most of these groups had a storefront to serve citizens, in which worked co-ordinator(s), welfare, housing, and/or consumer advocates, and volunteers.

Many groups also organized food depots, clothing swaps, language and other kinds of classes (e.g. sewing, adult education, cooking, budgeting), as well as social activities. Although most groups engaged in service-provision, they all organized their own local actions (e.g. local welfare office, slumlord, police, day-cares, schooling), and participated in actions organized by the other groups in GMAPCC. Some of the more organized groups published a local newspaper (e.g. Voice of VAPA). Groups were funded by GMAPCC, as mentioned above, and also received government make-work grants to hire workers for their store-fronts.

Actions

The first action that GMAPCC organized, in July 1970, centred around the right to have an advocate present when pleading for social assistance. GMAPCC:

> staged what amounted to a polite sit-in in the office of the City of Montreal's Deputy Director of Welfare, Jean-Guy Ladouceur. By the time they left, the group's spokesman had . . . obtained a ruling that welfare applicants could bring anyone they wished – not only a lawyer or social worker – to plead their case when they applied for social assistance (Radwanski, 1970).

The GMAPCC spokesman explains why the group was demonstrating: 'Many people have a hard time speaking for themselves when they apply for welfare – they're too intimidated . . . Our members have studied the rules and they can help an applicant as well or better than any lawyer' (cited in Radwanski, 1970).

A succession of successful actions followed. The 'needy-mother-sit-in' resulted in the granting of all their demands: 'decentralization of welfare operations, parity rates for all welfare recipients, and availability of immediate assistance for emergency cases' (Arnopoulos, 1970). The week-long 'Longueuil Welfare Office Sit-In' on the same issues as the needy-mother sit-in, was also successful (Palik, 1970). The 'Montreal General Hospital Occupation' resulted in the maintenance of the free and low cost drugs that

hospitals had been dispersing (Dolan, 1970). In January 1971, GMAPCC staged a successful demonstration in front of a slumlords house demanding adequate repairs and restoration of heat in apartments of citizens in Pointe St-Charles (PERM, 1971).

In one action, 22 people were arrested at a sit-in at the Atwater welfare office. Activists were demonstrating against the poor treatment of women, racism, and late cheques (Benello, 1972). GMAPCC was quick to follow this with one of its largest actions – the 'St-Denis sit-in', which initiated a series of meetings with Minister of Social Affairs, Claude Castonguay (Benello, 1972). A series of publications entitled 'Welfare means hunger and slavery' was produced for this action, providing rationale and evidence of feasibility, for the demands (GMAPCC 1971, 1972a, b). Demands were increases to welfare rates, removal of policy which limited the benefits of single 'employable' young adults, and installation of hospitality booths in all welfare offices (GMAPCC, 1971, 1972b). Once again, GMAPCC managed to win its demands:

> Claude Castonguay told a group of anti-poverty workers that ... a general increase in the (welfare) payments is expected ... starting in the fall, a few offices will begin issuing welfare cheques every 14 days to make budgeting easier for the recipients ... He also agreed with the groups' demands for hospitality booths in Montreal welfare offices because they had proven to be useful in provincial offices (Ferrante, 1972).

Finally, in 1973, GMAPCC launched a successful campaign to stop Bell Canada's proposal to increase pay-phone rates from 10 to 25 cents (GMAPCC, 1973d).

Tensions

Despite GMAPCC's many successes, and the legacy of citizenship for those receiving social assistance, several tensions emerged. We explore several of these as they relate to the process of the poor taking on the role of full citizens. We point out how some of the factors that supported the emergence of GMAPCC, created barriers to a stronger, more politicized social movement.

First, as highlighted by every interview with GMAPCC members, a tension existed between professionals and welfare recipients. The 'resource people' had informal power and initiated the directions and strategic choices for the group. There was an ambivalence in this relationship. Organizers were recognized as necessary allies and as playing crucial roles in both the lives of leaders and the organization, but the power they held was not always appreciated. Thus, on paper, the organization was controlled by welfare recipients and poor people from member organizations. In practice, the processes were far more complex, and limited the real control of members.

> If it had not been for the leadership of the professionals, it is unlikely that GMAPCC would ever have materialized ... Good organizers should organize themselves out of a job, but this did not happen ... Indigenous leaders were involved at all levels, but they were not able to act autonomously and depended on the professionals for guidance (Interview 1).

> There was a sort of 'love–hate relationship' that developed between organizers, who were being paid to do the work, and welfare recipients, who were volunteering their time and who felt that they were doing more work (Interview 4).

Second, related to the first, was the issue of gender. Most of the organizers were university educated men, and most of the leaders and members were women (Interviews 1, 4). This issue did not go unchallenged. For example,

> There are men who are members of tenant unions, and other kinds of poor people's organizations. These men as a rule feel that their wives' place is in the home, and since he makes all the decisions regarding the home, he is the *one* to participate. We had a strange experience in one group where the women took all the real leadership of organizing the group and were very strong in their commitment to see the struggle through to the end. But when the time came to elect representatives to negotiate with the landlord, two of the three representatives chosen were men. We are not sure whether the women in that group were even conscious of what had happened. When the time came to declare who were the real leaders of the group, the positions were relegated to men, even though they weren't necessarily the real leaders (...) in order for women to participate equally, we must first stand up and demand respect. We must regain our identity, begin our real self-development, take the initiative in the struggle and most importantly, recognize our intelligence and ability to make decisions (Poor Peoples' Paper, 1972).

For many of the women, becoming involved in a community organization was the beginning of a process of personal redefinition. Many GMAPCC documents and publications saw gender and the oppression of women as central in the struggle against poverty. For example, one of the GMAPCC's statement of principles (1972) argued

> For the right of women to organize, as women, in movements to make sure that radical social change includes radical change in the status of women as well as to give each other the strength and support to overcome the particular problems of women.

For many women in the group, learning to stand up for themselves as welfare recipients was a lesson that spilled over into their personal lives (Interview 3) and included redefining domestic relations and their perceptions of the role of women in the society.

Third, GMAPCC, like many other organizations in that period, had a complex relation with the state, which was both funder and target: 'It is ironic that the funding of GMAPCC-related projects came from the government, the very agent that was to be challenged' (Interview 1). GMAPCC

campaigned for changes, was confrontational, and engaged in direct action against the state. At the same time, funds for its member groups came from several different government programs, particularly make work grants mentioned earlier. There was always a dual role of the anti-poverty groups at the local level – providing service, and working politically for social change. The moneys received from government, however, pushed the service side, and did not fund political action. The overall impact of this type of funding was a de-politicization and demobilization of the movement. As one former activist put it, the government 'gave us money . . . to shut us up, to keep us quiet' (Interview 1). The import of this issue is evident in the following excerpt from *The Poor Peoples' Paper*:

> Where is the fight? Are we all too comfortable with [the make-work program] and its salaries that we have forgotten what it is like to be on welfare and hungry? Are we now afraid to speak out against the rotten system because the grants might be cut? The government knew exactly what they were doing. 'Throw them a bone – that will quiet them' (GMAPCC, 1972).

Further, many of the member groups were small, and when some of the welfare recipients were hired on make-work grants, this created conflicts and divisions between what became seen as a 'professional poor person' and volunteers. As the member organizations succeeded in protecting their funds, the managing of the grants took an organizational toll in terms of their activities, membership, and outlook.

These conflicts led to questioning among the organizers, and some leaders, and a shift in orientation resulted. This change was the impetus to the death of GMAPCC in 1975 and its rebirth as with a new name 'Neighbourhood Action Committee' and a shift in practice to broad based multi-issued neighbourhood organizing in order to reach a broader constituency.

GMAPCC's legacy

Notwithstanding the difficulties that arose within the organization, GMAPCC enjoyed many victories around welfare rights and had a significant impact on the people who participated in its development:

> [GMAPCC's] significance within the larger Québec scene is that it . . . initiated a style of militancy which heretofore did not exist to any significant degree . . . GMAPCC certainly had an important influence in giving the English poor of Montreal a sense of dignity and power and relevance . . . It had a significant influence in changing welfare practices (Benello, 1972, p. 471).

These points are illustrated in many comments made by activists interviewed. For instance, one activist went from being 'scared of (her) own shadow' without confidence or skills as an advocate, to being an activist and spokesperson for the movement (Interview 5). Another said that she had become 'more aggressive' (Interview 3). Yet another activist (Interview 2) recalled that: 'the one thing it did give people was that they shouldn't feel

guilty because they had to go on welfare'. She went on to say that participation in the movement nutured self-esteem, self-confidence, and pride in the citizens in the face of opposite messages coming from society and welfare officers: 'Welfare was our right, we had done nothing wrong'. Thus, through their involvement in GMAPCC, not only did they have a direct impact on government policy and practice, but welfare recipients had become citizens.

The lessons for citizenship are important. The poor were not 'given' rights but they claimed them. Organizations like GMAPCC argued that reform from above was not acceptable unless the poor and others who are affected by change were to have a voice in these processes. This period marks the beginning of the principle of participation of many groups in social policy development and implementation. But it is important to remember that this voice was won through organizing and struggle. If the struggle is forgotten, and there is not an active participation, then the voices become weakened. Tokenism then becomes the result of representation without organization. Thus, effective representation implies active engagement of the poor people themselves.

GMAPCC is an example of the recasting of protest movements. It was based on a common characteristic of people-welfare recipients and were able to find support from those who shared that identity. It was an example of a social movement based on status, and identity. Like the movements that followed it based on culture, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, GMAPCC was not only a vehicle for specific social demands. It was a place where those who faced oppression from the wider society could redefine themselves and could become actors rather than victims. In the process, they demonstrated to society that they had legitimate claims and brought forward a new perspective on the problems of poverty. The lessons of their struggles have been taken up by other groups marginalized by the wider society such as the disabled, and psychiatric survivors. These groups through their struggles have made gains but also redefined themselves.

GMAPCC played a role in the struggle for improved conditions for welfare recipients. It was not solely responsible for the gains made in that period, but it was part of a wider social movement that was pushing for social change in a period of economic expansion and social reform. All the ingredients were there for the reform within a framework of capitalism. In recent years, many of these social gains have been eroded in the name of greater market flexibility and the curbing of state spending. With the exception of broad-based mobilization in Ontario, the shifts in social policy have taken place with a relatively weak opposition. Could a strong, active organization of poor people been able to defend previous gains? The lesson from GMAPCC is that gains must be defended as well as won, and the people most likely to defend those gains are those who struggled to win them. But movements of poor people are hard to sustain. It is clear that there is a necessity for these movements to defend gains and promote their

own interests, but perhaps new forms of organization and mobilization will emerge but in different ways reflecting the changes in the state and the composition of those who find themselves on social assistance – the young, immigrants and refugees, displaced workers, as well as poor women.

Eric Shragge teaches at the School of Social Work, McGill University.
Anna Kruzynski is a doctoral student in the joint PhD program in Social Work, Université de Montréal and McGill University. She is a part-time community organizer at the Pointe St. Charles Community Clinic.
Address for correspondence: Eric Shragge, e-mail: cxer@musica.Mcgill.ca; Anna Kruzynski, e-mail: akruzy@po-box.mcgill.ca

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