Legitimacy and Symbolic Politics in a Neoliberal City

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A task of governance is to 'establish and nurture the connection with citizens' values, needs and expectations' (Pardo and Prato 2010: 1). One way this connection demonstrates itself is through direct communication. This includes the structures and means required by communication, such as staff, bureaucratic support, coherent governance, money and data analytics. Meyer (1999) rightfully addresses this dimension of legitimacy processes at the European Union level and explains how the structures and means of communication are obstructed or not fully functional. As a counter example, Bimber (2014) demonstrates how the mastering of digital media in the Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012 was innovative and partly secured his (re)elections.

Birdwhistell (Lohisse 2001) defines communication not as the content per se, but as a system, as the structure that allows the communication to take place. From a political economy perspective, communication, when in the hand of people in power, refers to the 'capacity to influence people's mind' through the mass media (Castells 2007: 240). More broadly, this is known as symbolic politics, which defines a strategic use of signs and symbols for political purposes (Donsbach 2008). Symbolic politics suppose the control of symbolic dynamics, ideological beliefs, normative values and codes which are part of the cultural realm where the communication processes occur (Lohisse 2001, Sears et al. 1980).

This short discussion explores the ramifications of legitimacy into symbolic communication in a neoliberal urban structure, by relying on selected indicators of neoliberalism, urban entrepreneurialism and communication. The matter deserves a full-length analysis, and a crossing with its relation to different moral communities (Pardo 2000) despite difficulties such as those experimented on similar urban issues (for instance, Colombo 2016).

In a forthcoming book edited by Pardo and Prato (2018), I explore the demolition of Square Viger by the City of Montreal. My discussion focuses on an informal group of public figures engaged in heritage, public art and urban redevelopment that I joined in 2013 and that lobbied in favour of saving the Square (Boucher 2018, forthcoming). Here, I attempt to describe how delicate it was to advocate for the Square without losing our legitimacy (individually and as a group), because municipal authorities and the general public have complained about the Square since its redesign in the 1970s (Doyon 2013). The admitted reason? The then-innovative design that replaced the Victorian-style park includes a predominance of concrete, great isolation from the street, walls and covered walkways which do not allow for a peripheral view (Fiset 2011). Another reason, politically incorrect, is that the new version came to life in one of the worst demographic periods in the borough; the number of residents in the vicinity declined and some groups of homeless found a home in the Square. Homelessness has a negative connotation in the urban landscape, and it creates a

great deal of discomfort amongst citizens (Boucher 2017, Classen 1993, Whyte 1988). By letting homeless people make the Square their home, the City nourished the idea that it was illegitimate; the symbolic aspects of homelessness (danger, unhealthy, instability) were transferred to the Square by the inaction of the City to support a positive image and the legitimacy of the Square.

In this dossier, the City discredited the Square by not fully implementing the plans proposed by the artist who designed it, by doing nothing to improve its state and reputation since the redesign. The disinvestment in public infrastructure and services is a well-known collateral effect of the neoliberalisation of the economy. In Canada, this is dated in the mid-1990s when the main fiscal priority became the deficit reduction rather than social safety (Stern and Hall 2015). One of the reasons why the deficit reduction has become a legitimate financial measure is the development of an analogy with household debts — an analogy that sparked (unlikely) comparisons between a responsible government and a strong father figure (the *Bonus Pater Familias* of the Roman Law and the 'Reasonable Man' in the Common Law) (Shaviro 1997, Zhou 2001). One famous illustration of this is the shoe polish brought by the finance minister of the province of Québec to the press conference announcing the 2017 budget. Building on the analogy that there is no need to buy a new pair of shoes if you can refurbish the one that is already paid for, he claimed forcefully that a responsible dad, like his government, does not spend family money before clearing the debts (Croteau 2017). With such strong images, which call to the North American values of noble sacrifice and hard work, the neoliberal strategy of deficit reduction over public services was well received by most people and thus made legitimate.

Meanwhile, as a reaction to the 1980s crash and economic erosion, cities came out as major players to pull the population out of the financial slump. An entrepreneurialism regime, then seen as the best option, was adopted by most cities across the globe (Harvey 2014). Among other strategies, entrepreneurialism encourages the political economy of places rather than of territories; economic projects meant to improve the living and working conditions are limited to specific buildings or places (or sectors, like technologies) rather than to geographical and political (and social) territories (Harvey 2014). These actions are in line with neoliberalism, notably because they mainly benefit private sectors (Söderström et al. 2014). Sporadic but impressive and visual investments — for example, in large parks — are generally well received because they contribute to enhance the image of the city. The symbolism of a great, fun and innovative city is powerful. The expected influx of tourists and investors is seen as economic dynamism. Furthermore, investing in specific sectors, such as parks, is a classic strategy to display political and economic power and establish or secure legitimacy (Stark 2014) for the rulers and, consequently, for the city that they rule.

In 2010, major changes in the vicinity of Viger Square raised a renewed interest in the place: a mega hospital was constructed on three lots west of the Square and the abandoned Viger train station (on the south side) was revived with office spaces. Unsurprisingly, four years later, a $3 million investment specifically targeted for the Square's renewal was approved, admittedly in time for the forthcoming celebrations of the 375th anniversary of

Montreal in 2017 (Normandin 2015). Although Montrealers were sceptical of the celebrations and doubted the need to celebrate a 375th anniversary, this urban surgical intervention was welcomed by most citizens.

In light of these examples, we see how communication of symbols is essential in the establishment of legitimacy — of people, places, regimes. This has to be done at the right time, by the right people, for the right cause. In the forthcoming volume, Hurtado-Tarazona (2018b, see also 2018a) illustrates well how certain practices are deemed illegitimate because they do not contribute to enhance the image of an urban Colombian housing megaproject, while other illegal activities are tolerated because of their positive impact. Another powerful example is provided by Sarfati (2018), who explains how the South Korean president was impeached due to political corruption and misconduct, but also in the wave of massive publicdissent around the sinking of the Sewŏl Ferry in 2016. To impeach, to suspend, to fire or to expect the resignation of elected politicians or officials is a not-so-exceptional practice in politics and in business. But the South Korean tragedy is a poignant example of the symbolic aspect of rule. Even when no laws are broken, if there is social discontent, heads must fall. It gives relief to the people, stabilizes the stock exchange and can save political parties and administrations, which can be seen as active, empathetic and accountable.

At the same time, 'distrust of the system does not equate depoliticization' (Castells 2007: 245). Dissidence against policies and politics does not mean that governance is failing at communicating or that it is lacking legitimacy. The symbols used to exert influence may not be efficient as surrogates; or there may be a discrepancy among the moral community regarding the values of the symbols displayed; the symbols themselves can be seen as illegitimate. The aforementioned metaphor of the shoe polish made by the minister of finance was seen as risible in progressive circles, because of what it hid, not because they did not understand it (Anonym 2016). To argue the illegitimacy of symbols in political communication is to understand their meaning but disagree on how they are used.

The idea of the redesign of Viger Square was not well received by the group I worked with, which was formed by irreducible professionals in the fields of visual arts, heritage and urban planning. The group's argument focused on the importance of this unique modern artwork and on the view that it was hypocritical to blame the design to explain the lack of desirable users of the Square. Within the scope of our respective fields (with their very own languages, norms and codes), we used all the means available and relevant to make our claim known to municipal authorities, who had their own agenda and people who worked on building their legitimacy. The context of Montreal is far from other cities, such as Naples, where democracy is strongly put to the test (Pardo 2018b, 2018a). By lobbying within the limits of the law, we acknowledged the rules that bound us to them (and them to us); therefore, we recognized their legitimacy.

From the Viger Square experience, the governing body, the group of irreducible professionals against the redesign and Montrealers, appear as different communities in the same moral and cultural landscape who came together at a specific time. A strong hold on symbolism is important for rulers to deal with the complexity of various communities in their

society. In spite of being adopted by some and challenged by others, symbols are understood by all. This is how communication binds us all in the same mega-culture (Ipsen 2005, Park 1938) and enables legitimacy to take place or to be challenged.

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