**Nouvelles Pratiques Sociales.
The Conference
Democratic Renewal of Action and Social
Intervention Practices**

This conference aims to bring new input from people thinking about these issues to the editorial committee of NPS[1] on the subject of "democratic renewal" of action and social intervention practices[2]. Its objective is also to mark the journal's 20th anniversary by taking stock of the past twenty years with a network of development colleagues. The importance of thinking about the democratic renewal of intervention practices is the result of a reflection begun in 2003 by the new editing committee. While pursuing the journal's goal of contributing to the development of knowledge about intervention practices in a democratic perspective, the editorial team found that the term 'democratic' claimed by more and more practices was often not explicitly defined and that it was not enough for a practice to be called "new" to also be granted a democratic intention or existence.

What do we mean by "democratic practices" in the field of social intervention practices? What are the main factors and issues affecting the democratic potential of social intervention practices? Faced with these issues, can we identify concepts, obstacles, and opportunities? These are some of the questions with which we started the debate and would like to broaden the framework of exchange. This is why we published a guiding text in vol. 17, no 1 on the theme of democratic renewal of practices (Parazelli, 2004)[3],

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[1] Founded in the fall of 1988, Journal *Nouvelles Pratiques Sociales* (NPS) promote critical reflexions about social practices in perspective of Democratic Renewal of Social Action and Intervention Practices. This Journal is published by School of social work, Université du Québec à Montréal, Québec, Canada.
[2] For the purposes of clarity, we will use the term "social intervention practices" by including social action practices that are different to social intervention in its accepted institutional definition.
[3] See the following web page: http://www.erudit.org/revue/nps/2004/v17/n1/010570ar.pdf (in french only)

and an invitation was extended to authors from the field of research as well as well as from practice to share their ideas on this topic.

By labelling the renewal itself "democratic", we draw attention to the political orientation of the process of renewing practices. Not only do we ask ourselves about power relationships that may or may not favour a democratic renewal, but we also attempt to escape the frequent "non-definition" of the term "democratic" when faced with the realities of practice (Karsz, 2004: 12)[4]. The term "democratic" is not the only one to suffer from poor definition. Let us consider the notion of "empowerment", used in different contexts (Le Bossé, 2003) to mean different things with contradictory ends and creating a palpable discomfort in the sphere of intervention trapped in the confusion of political positions. Emphasizing the "democratic" aspect of the renewal of practices allows us to bring to light the many dynamics and processes when it comes to thinking democratically about the practicalities of social intervention. In fact, it is about identifying the conceptual and practical problems associated with it. During the colloquium, we will invite participants to critically examine the normative markers associated with the democratic aims of social intervention practices.

A Context Undermining the Appropriation of Intervention Acts

For the past twenty years, the socio-political context that practitioners in the social domain face generates changes that heavily influence the practices of public institutions and community associations that have a democratic goal. These new social configurations also tend to restructure local relationships between the principle participants, whether they are from the State, the community, or from the civic movement (or shifting). The gradual weakening of the nation-State through globalisation is not unrelated to the valorization of civil society and its mobilisation to shoulder social problems locally (Leclerc and Beauchemin, 2002). This socio-political transformation was accompanied by deep changes in the position of individuals and social relationships within community

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[4] This is a reference to the term used by the author to refer not to an absence of definition but to an absence of explicit or manifest definition.

life. This is not without consequence for the implementation of practices with democratic aims.

Among attempts made by sociologists to identify current transformations of social relationships, those associated with the study of hyper-individualistic ideology may be particularly enlightening. Hyper-individualism, a neo-liberalist ideology, introduces the idea that our society has gradually turned toward a radicalization of principles associated with modernity, based primarily on a technical rationale to structure social connections Given that since the beginning of the 1990's the neo-liberal ideology has progressively infiltrated many sectors of social life, hyper-individualism would be the incarnation of its values and projects. The development of new technologies (information technology, management, etc) facilitating an acceleration of exchanges allows neo-liberal individualism to reinforce a sales and consumption perspective where the cult of urgency and flexibility would act as a form of collective regulation (Aubert, 2004). The radicalisation of the technical rationale born from a liberal orientation would trap a considerable number of people, forced to adapt individually to the demands of change, efficiency, and performance. This transformation would lead individuals to develop competitive relationships in order to respond to the need for self-construction (Kaufmann, 1988). The meaning of a communal life would be reduced to the competitive strategies of economic exchange, itself threatened with destabilisation in the race for productivity that takes place in almost all spheres of social activity.

We must however specify that in reaction to this dominant ideology, quite prominent within social intervention practices, other competing ideologies, such as democratic and anarchist individualism, are attempting to present other perspective on social relationships based on collective actions aimed at negotiating individual desires within the aims of the group. As with all ideologies, the confrontation with real practices is not always conclusive, which is why it is important to put the concrete investments of the democratic renewal of practices into context and not to remain trapped in the fabulous discussion of ideology, no matter how seductive.

In fact, the hyper-individualist ideology of neo-liberalism overvalues the flexible and the instantaneous by attempting to destroy the frameworks preventing mobility as well as communal rules that can be construed as rigid. Some critiques of union practices, which suggest that they slow economic development because of the rigidity of their communal rules, illustrate this context well. The importance given to the debate on the insufficient number of work hours in Quebec is not unfamiliar with this tendency either. Needless to say, these transformations reinforce a climate of normative incertitude where each individual is asked to patch together a meaning to their hyper-modern existence, especially when perspectives on the future do not seem to be as mobilizing as those in the 1960s. To live in a climate of urgency and performance pushes more and more people to push themselves to excess, thus developing a sentiment of non-existence often expressed by pathologies due to hyper-functioning (e.g. anorexia, bulimia, burn-out, exhaustion, etc.) (Ehrenber, 1998; Badal, 2003). Practitioners do not escape this context which affects the framework of intervention on many levels, particularly the feeling of disempowerment not only in work but also in the ways of thinking about their work, as well as the democratic potential of their practices (Mendel, 2003a).

For example, in the sector of social services and health in Quebec, we can notice the consequences of these transformations which threaten the appropriation of interventions. The exercise of practices based on "conclusive data", also called "best practices", devalues the autonomy and professional judgment of practitioners while also ignoring the perspectives of the populations targeted by these intervention programs. Within this framework of expertise and hierarchy of knowledge, the contribution of these actors is more often than not limited to the application of a program (Couturier & Carrier, 2003). Let us also mention the growing institutionalisation of epidemiological or sanitary readings of social problems through the 'populational' approach, of risk management and of their treatment by prevention programs specialized in public health or by those in public security (Pelchat, Gagnon and Thomassin, 2006). This reduction of social relationships to physiological behaviourism aims to close the scientific debate on the knowledge of social life by its naturalistic assumptions, whether they are biological, neurological, genetic, or ecological. "Sanitary" or secure "live-together" approaches are not unrelated with one of the effects of neo-liberal hyper-individualism, that of the

privatisation of social life and the increasing merchandising of human activities (Gaulejac, 2005). Far from being only a technical imperative, this "privatised individualism" spreads a moral of operationalism that aims to get rid of other social perspectives and favours a sort of participatory absenteeism through the exaltation of the freedom of the individual.

These contextual elements marked by technocratisation and social control render fragile the appropriation of the actions of practitioners and contribute to making conditions of collective action with democratic aims more difficult. This need to adapt, which tends to impose itself on practitioners, limits many to a consensus of obedience, of structural mimicry, or to voluntary submission. These power relationships do not go without raising critical questions in others, as well as a desire to reconsider the conditions of their practices. The recent imposition of early prevention programs for youth violence illustrates well their authoritarian orientation, and the diverse reactions of practitioners that followed (Parazelli and coll., 2003; Collectif, 2006; Lafortune, 2007).

How can we live together in a world on a path to privatisation? Is the democratic renewal of practices conceivable? Faced with the neo-liberal orientation of hyper-individualism, more and more people are engaged in the heart of identity struggles in order to reveal their difference and their resistance to the political violence of this model. That is why, many citizens and community organisations, in Quebec as elsewhere, are attempting to develop collective actions to put forward alternatives to this neo-liberal vision of contemporary individualism through multiple domains of action such as altermondialist movements, municipal democratisation projects, inclusion of marginalized populations into social life, community practices of local development, struggles against poverty and respect for the environment, other choices of political parties, etc. Far from presenting a homogeneous block of resistance, these alternatives must be placed in their own ideologies against the ever-present hyper-individualism. Indeed most intervention practices – neo-liberal practices included – claim democratic principles for themselves, but where are these principles in practice? Some intervention practices are not democratic. With what criteria (theoretical, ethical, and political), can we analyze their leaning? For example, is the use of a general assembly of members sufficient to call a

social intervention practice democratic? When one participant of an organisation chairs an administrative committee, who are they representing and how is their term of office negotiated? We know that the democratic life of a practice extends beyond the judicial constraints that organizations must submit to or avoid, but then what are the other limitations?

Towards a Democratic Renewal of Intervention Practices

Let us remember, as the trends influencing intervention practices evolve in the sphere of societies that define themselves as democratic, they raise many questions about the very meaning of their democratic aims. That is why many practitioners in the social domain working in different countries are not only embarking upon collective reflection about the democratic methods of their practices, but they also embody these principles in action through many lenses and projects. Once this is done, the question is no longer whether margins of manoeuvre exist for practitioners to conceive of and elaborate democratic alternatives that can resist and oppose varied neo-liberal perspectives. We know that they exist. The question that will concern us in this conference is more that of the problems these practitioners encounter when they attempt to initiate a social intervention practice in a democratic manner. For example, how to overcome the obstacles preventing practitioners from taking into account the citizens' situations and their own representations of their problems? How can we design practices that aim to take them into account, rather than having the citizens led by experts (of the state or associations) or by policies that determine ahead of time the "democratic needs" of individuals? (Bourgeault, 2003). In fact, many practices called democratic see the light of day without the people concerned having been involved in their emergence or conceptualization.

How can we avoid reproducing, in the world of social intervention and research, the power relationships that place citizens in the most commonly attributed roles, those of victims to protect and objects of intervention? Even with the best of intentions, **how can we confront one of the fundamental paradoxes inherent in social intervention** which attempts to develop the autonomy of people to improve their living conditions? Does

mobilizing people in collective action in order to improve their living conditions not often amount to imposing a framework of action, if these are not initiated by them? Or, in other words, to put these people in a position to adopt their own positions? Indeed, a practitioner cannot "get along" if others do not accept to mobilize. It is also true that sometimes, it is not a case of imposition but of voluntary submission of those participating to the leadership of the main organiser. Can we resolve these paradoxes which limit the establishment of egalitarian relationships between practitioners and those targeted by the intervention? How does this paradoxical situation/conflict* between social autonomy influence efforts of democratic renewal of intervention practices? Are certain inequalities acceptable in a democratic process? If so, which ones?

Answering these questions amounts to thinking of "democratic renewal" as a process fraught with contradictions once it attempts to include those most concerned with the development of an intervention practice. In other words, the democratic renewal of practices is differentiated from "the renewal of democratic practices" by the special attention given to the difficulties of considering others before, during, and after the initiation of intervention practices. This epistemological position distinguishes itself clearly from a point of view that values the promotion of models of intervention practices to encourage adhesion and of which the democratic quality of their practices is obvious.

Indeed, for the idea of "democratic practices" to avoid drowning in the great reservoir of "buzz words", it is important to think about the practical circumstances of its political aims. Even if it is a deeply-rooted reflex, the mere idea of a democratic practice and the declaration of its principles do not succeed in making concrete reality bow to their rational demands. It is thus necessary to describe the implementation of a practice bestowed with democratic intentions in its encounter with the reality of others in order to grasp the meaning and political weight of the action put forward. The specific implementations of this idea raise issues that need to be identified, problematized, and debated not in the limited arena of ideals, let us insist, but on the historicity of a practice. The principles of equality, freedom, and solidarity (cooperation) in the exercise of communal expression, of deliberation and decision, can encounter as much success as disappointment when confronted with a social reality whose complexity still escapes us.

In fact, the implementation of these three broad ethical principles of democracy encounters many difficulties and contradictions in practice (Isin, 1992), mainly in the economic context in which citizenship tends to be reduced to freedom of trade (McAll, 1999).

For example, it would be simplistic to think that it is only in the name of freedom and equality of access to public and private spaces that groups of citizens demand the evacuation of marginalized populations such as street children, prostitutes, and travellers from their neighbourhoods. In addition to the economic issues, other factors can be considered that involve dimensions such as the psychic, cultural, etc.

Certain practices in the area of intercultural intervention regularly encounter this paradox wherein the conditions of social insertion of recently immigrated communities do not respect the principle of freedom and awareness of differences in cultural practices in the name of equality of all citizens. This often leads to a need to adapt to the cultural framework of the host environment.

It is unnecessary to mention **the presence of contradictions between the three broad ethical principles of the democratic practices, freedom, equality, and fraternity (that many call solidarity).** Let us consider intervention practices in the domain of drug addiction where the practices that aim to limit damages (social and health services) find themselves at odds with the practices associated with zero tolerance (justice). An approach to the limitation of damages that attempts to be more respectful of the freedom of drug addicts is faced with the intolerance of repression that cites the principle of equality of all before the Law.

What do we understand of these situations? How can we intervene in order to favour solidarity in this type of context? The idea of democratic renewal of practices therefore emphasizes the uncertain nature of the application of democratic aims and, consequently, invites practitioners to state what guides them when they attempt to overcome this obstacle in their practices.

How Can the Problems of Initiation, Implementation, and Investment be Confronted?

Rather than inviting participants of this conference to take the democratic quality of their practices for granted as a feature of their intervention, we invite them to a work of self-reflection about their democratic aims through the analysis of their concrete practices. How do we conceive of the position of those targeted by the action in the process and perspective of intervention? How do we support and fuel interventions within organisations? What organisational frameworks have we put in place in order to regulate exchanges and with what rules? Many types of frameworks exist in the world of social intervention; let us mention regional coordinating committees, management based on private companies, service contracts, co-management, auto-management, communal work, etc. By structuring frameworks specific to the action, the methods of management of social work guide and influence the organisational dynamic of the intervention in ways that can facilitate or impede the possibilities of the democratic renewal of social intervention. **What are the processes of appropriation of intervention that favour the democratic renewal of practices? In which organisational contexts do these processes best emerge? How do we confront inequalities of power within an organisation?** How can we encourage the desire for collective involvement in a context where privatised individualism is overvalued? How can we escape the collar of searching for a consensus group fusion? These are the types of questions that could be raised during this conference.

Not only is it important to compare democratic ideals of social intervention with the practices that embody them and to take into account contradictions associated with these discrepancies, but it is also necessary to understand its meaning and direction. In itself, helping others individually or as a group does not guarantee the democratic aims of the practices. Taking into account the representations and desires of those most affected by social intervention is an abstract principle before being put into practice. The importance of questioning the links between rationalisation and practice resides not in the desire to reduce the differences between the ideal and the real (an impossible task), but in the need

to take into account the meeting of the two, or in other words, the ordeal of their interaction (Mendel, 2003b). This position breaks away from the point of view, which suggests that the idea must one day submit social reality to its rational logic, in that theory must be correct even when reality ceases to confirm its validity. This subtlety is important because this interactivity influences both the idea and the reality, hence the need to give it a heuristic value that can favour the development of knowledge.

In brief, the question is not so much whether a discrepancy exists between intervention practices and their democratic aspirations, which is always the case; a democratic ideal is an ideal, a fiction or utopia that helps to stimulate the social imagination. The pretension that it can be attained in terms of achievement is dogmatic. Aside from the paradoxes and the contradictions, **authority figures and power relationships** create structural difficulties for the institution of the most egalitarian relationships possible. The forms vary, whether it is oppression, domination, alienation, colonisation, or paternalism (or maternalism), it is often uncomfortable to raise these questions within an organisation or a regional coordinating committee.

For example, paternalism or maternalism constitute one of the most important limits to the application of the principle of equality in democratic practices by unconsciously reproducing a familial schema in collective relationships. Protecting those vulnerable for their own good is not an act of intervention that is old-fashioned or limited to those working with children, but also exists within communal (or associative) environments that offer themselves as substitutes for the familial environment for marginalised people asking for help. If the desire for comfort is satisfied, this familial projection compromises the institution of egalitarian relationships by implicitly establishing (by tone, attitude, physical appearance, psychological profile, etc.) a hierarchical structure. Whether it is fusional or conflicting, the authority structure of the group allows by unconscious reflex the consideration of their relationships with others in a familial way. Is there any organisation that has escaped this limit, difficult to identify during the action? What do we understand of this phenomenon? How can we dampen its limiting consequences for the democratic act in collective practices? We clearly see that which remains of the democratic ideal are mainly questions and possible experiments, but no conclusion.

This conference aims to create an opportunity to share collective experience that is the result of work of reflection on the democratic renewal of diversified practices. How do practitioners confront the problems encountered in the actualisation of democratic practices? Do the problems identified extend to countries of the North and South? How do both see themselves embarking upon the work of the democratic renewal of social intervention? What is the democratic potential of these practices? What can be learnt from these experiences? These are some of the questions we hope to address in the framework of this conference.

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