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The Metropolis Project: ‘Bridging’ the Divide Between Research and Policy

Laurie Baker

The Metropolis Project is an alignment of academic researchers and policy makers who collaborate to address research initiatives. Research is conducted by academic researchers and is directed by Metropolis policy initiative guidelines to create public policy with a focus on migration, cultural diversity and the integration of immigrants into urban areas in Canada and abroad (Metropolis Project Homepage 2004). The main visible image that represents as a logo and a symbol, the project and its policy objectives on the Metropolis Homepage is a large bridge that links two shores over an expanse of water. The bridge is an apt metaphor for the link between two, often broadly separated groups: academics and policy-makers. The alignment of interests that enable academics to engage in the research that may lead to the creation of public policy for cultural diversity management could also be described as a bridge between potentially disparate, separate shores. The questions then become: how can we characterize the alignment of interests between academic researchers? And, what may some of the attributes, relations of power or controlling processes of this alignment, that bridge the two groups, be? I contend that the logo of the bridge then becomes an important image and metaphor to visualize the relationship between academic researchers and policy makers in the Metropolis Project.

The relationship and alignment of academics to the processes of policy creation can be seen clearly through Michel Callon and Bruno Latour's mechanisms of ‘action at a distance’ whereby, it becomes possible to link calculations at one place with action at another, not through the direct imposition of a form of conduct by force, but through a delicate affiliation of a loose assemblage of agents and agencies into a functioning network (Miller & Rose 1990: 9-10).

The Metropolis Project operates in this way by linking academics with the assertion of policy aims and goals without the use of direct force, but through subtle persuasion and coercion. Linking the various stakeholders into a network under the guidance of the government run and sponsored project, involves alliances formed not only because one agent is dependent upon another for funds, legitimacy or some other resource which can be used for persuasion or compulsion, but also because one actor comes to convince another that their problems or goals are intrinsically linked, that their interests are consonant, that each solve their difficulties or achieve ends by joining forces or working along the same lines (Miller & Rose 1990: 9-10).

The purpose of the project is to form networks and facilitate co-operation between various contributors (Richmond 2004: 2). The networks of academics, policy-makers and other stakeholders are meant to encourage a relationship of interaction, sharing, collaboration, and ‘knowledge transfer.’ The goal of networking is to create and foster a more responsible, accountable, and effective means of translating research into public policy (Metropolis Project Profile of Urban Research 2004: 2). To link goals, they must be in some way analogous to the expectations of both groups, academic researchers and policy makers. The consonant area and analogous linkages are the central span of the bridge, the space between shores. It is an image that brings to mind the ability of movement through space, transition from one point to another, and by extension, understanding and co-operation through the act of bridging diverse interests. The 'bridge' links researchers and policy-makers and brings them onto an even surface within the mandate and research objectives of the Metropolis Project as it that aligns their interests.

What is overwhelmingly evident in the Phase Two Policy Priorities for the Metropolis Project, released in 2003, is the relationship between public policy and the people it affects in the research outlines and directives. The alignment of academic researchers and policy makers may share characteristics with regards to the interest of building a distinct Canadian state, recognizable by its unique policy and innovative techniques for creating it. According to the Policy Priorities for Phase Two of the Metropolis Project,
The 'project' of imagining and constructing Canada as a diverse, multicultural society rests upon an open immigration policy, a concern for equality of opportunity, social well-being and rights and a serious attempt to maximize the potential of the country's social and capital. Equally, the construction of this multicultural society rests on immigrants acquiring, and accepting, responsibilities and developing a sense of allegiance to the country. Public policy plays a key role in promoting the social and cultural integration of newcomers and minorities and in creating the conditions that foster this process (2003: 5).

The bridge may be a path to the integration of potential immigrants and potentially to the inclusion of different ways of being, or alternatively, at second glance, it may be seen as a method of control of access, movement, and the flow of resources. Freedom is subject to the consent of those that are in control of passage across the bridge or into the country with regards to those wishing to immigrate. It links urban centres without any recognition of rural access or areas. Perhaps even access to social services could be implicated in the control and power implicit in social policy. There is not an infinite amount of monetary resources that is provided by the provincial and federal governments for the creation of diversity management policy. Thus, funds would be allocated by those with the power and position to decide who may have access to the 'bridge' or specific program that fosters immigrant integration in Canadian society or program that endorses and fosters a sense of shared cultural identity and support for people of recent immigration into urban centres (Policy Priorities for Metropolis Phase Two 2003: 1).

Laura Nader suggests that the process of integration may be affected by the dislocation or "break with structures and symbols familiar to the life cycle" (1997: 717) that makes "people vulnerable to intense persuasion" (ibid.). The image projected by the state policy directives, even if imaginary, may be seen as the "illusory general interest" (Abrams 1988: 72).

Philip Abrams notes that,

political institutions, the 'state-system', are the real agencies out of which the idea of the state is constructed...political institutions are turned into 'the state' so that a balance of class power...may masquerade as unaffected by class...It is first and foremost an exercise in legitimation -- and what is being legitimated is, we may assume, something which if seen directly and as itself would be illegitimate, an unacceptable domination (1988: 75-6).

Rendering the state-system legible and exposing the activities of political and institutional mandates and research agendas with regards to policy development is the exposition of the alignment of research goals, academic researchers and policy makers.

The relations of power, as governmentality, is described as the, [relations of power [that] consist of] the production of effective instruments for the formation and accumulation of knowledge- methods of observation, techniques of registration, procedures for investigation and research, apparatuses of control (Foucault quoted in Deacon 2003: 226), make subjects of surveillance visible, known, and legible to state practice. Power circulates through these seemingly 'effective' managerial processes in much the same fashion that Laura Nader draws attention to when she cites Foucault: "power was 'not a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens' but a force that permeated all realms of social life, with no real center and no one employing power tactics" (1997: 711). The power that, through the apparatus of hierarchal organization, is possessed in the mechanism that ensures the success of certain forms of knowledge and information, what Nader terms "controlling processes" (1997: 712). These controlling processes "refer to the transformative nature of central ideas such as coercive harmony that emanate from institutions operating as dynamic components of power" (1997: 712). Controlling processes, when viewed in conjunction with the projects of governmentality, produce as their result a convoluted and intertwined relationship between power, control, and the production of knowledge. The effect this relationship has on the operations of state practices and on the norms that are
naturalized, aligned, bridged and operationalized is exemplified in the Metropolis Project.

The composition of the Metropolis Project and its associated Centres of Excellence across Canada integrate academics, researchers, and policy-makers in a network of research for policy creation endeavors centered around issues of "migration, diversity and urban change" (Metropolis Project Profile of Urban Research 2004: 2) and can be seen as a new managerial collaboration for policy development. The Centres of Excellence located in major cities across Canada such as Montreal, Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver, are often integrated within university networks facilitating the access of academics to the documents and research data collected by the project and will implement the policy directives through establishing or addressing the research directions outlined for the phase of the project. The areas of inquiry as outlined in the Profile of Metropolis Urban Research are made up of three main sections that are pursued equally: research on social, cultural, education and health issues is undertaken by Metropolis Project researchers followed by housing and neighbourhood research, as well as research into economic issues (Profile of Urban Research 2004: 3-4). The inclusive nature of the project allows its implementers to be involved in the comprehensive development, control and implementation of culturally oriented social policy. Laura Nader suggests that when,

the development of human management techniques moved away from a conception of workers in their productive capacity toward the organization of labour outside the factory...The distinction between social and cultural control allows for the distinction between control over groups or relationships and control of the mind, both part of any controlling process...Control by means of culture is often implicit and not dramatic and is related to the creation of social categories and expectations and to ideological construction (1997: 719).

The Metropolis Project may in fact be an implicit and coercive project with aims to control the ideas and categories through the projects of governmentality and controlling processes that circulate power through the categorical definition of 'key ideas' and terms in the conceptual field of cultural 'diversity management' as they are reinforced and deployed in discourse. In other words, the Metropolis Project, through linking, aligning and bridging academic researchers and policy makers or state agents, controls the discourse of diversity and multiculturalism. This is accomplished in the Metropolis Project by being holistic in scope with regards to the areas of social life that are included in the areas of research and tied to the political task of ensuring a stable and productive workforce made up of people from all over the world.

When we recognize the collaboration of multiple levels of government that called for a closer working relationship between academics, government departments, and non-governmental organizations for policy research and development culminating in the Metropolis Project, the bridge logo is appropriate and telling (Richmond 2004: 6). The suspension bridge is pictured emanating from the capital 'M' that stands in front of an urban skyline. At first glance it appears to be an apt metaphor. One that displays the ability of academics to be aligned with social policy-makers for the benefit of all involved. It is worth noting that bridges are in fact engineered through human endeavor, and subject to climactic forces that render the bridge structure ultimately fragile. The structure itself lacks a permanence that perhaps a mountain may have. The tenuous position of the bridge between two shores, and spanning a waterway reminds one of the position of being betwixt and between as, for example, academic researchers may be when they align their research interests with the policy directives of the Metropolis Project. Government policy-makers and academic researchers, to my mind, make strange bedfellows, even if 'bridged' through common goals or aspirations, and for the 'imagined' management of diversity in our multicultural urban centres. The image of a bridge may be apt for the representation of the Metropolis Project. Or, it may alert us to the possibility that academic ethics and responsibilities may be called into question depending on where, how and with whom we align our interests, thus making academic 'freedom' an act of balancing or suspension, between shore and opposite shore.

Bibliography


