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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Acting as Autonomous and Complementary Partners. Conflictual Cooperation in Quebec's Youth Concertation

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ABSTRACT: In Quebec, "autonomous community organizations" are involved in the public health and social services network as autonomous and complementary partners. This partnership appears paradoxical, given that the movement claims an advocacy role vis-à-vis the state. It illustrates what Lamoureux (1994) describes as a relation of "conflictual cooperation" between the state and community organizations. How do actors navigate between cooperation with public institutions and conflict when necessary? Drawing on an ethnography conducted in two youth concertation tables, this article highlights the tensions inherent in conflictual cooperation and examines the conditions under which contestation can still be voiced by community actors. While concertation is framed as a site for collaboration, it also discourages community actors from "making things political" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2018) by limiting their ability to challenge power relations with public institutions. The article argues that the absence of overt conflict in the performance of concertation often results less from alignment than from subtle control tactics – whether intentional or not – that channel and constrain dissent, although protest can still be reconfigured both backstage and outside concertation.

KEYWORDS: advocacy, autonomous community movement, channeling, depoliticization, nonprofit/state relations

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1. Introduction

In 1991, Bill 120 marked a turning point in the relationship between the Quebec government and the third sector, recast through the framework of partnership (Jetté 2011)[1]. By designating community-based organizations as "autonomous and complementary partners" of the public system, Bill 120 formally recognized their role while simultaneously institutionalizing a lasting tension. This partnership raised concerns about subcontracting by the state, potentially undermining organizational autonomy (Panet-Raymond 1989; Smith and Lipsky 1993). In response, several organizations asserted their autonomy to preserve a critical stance toward state service provision, giving rise to the autonomous community movement (White 2012).

Today, over 3,000 autonomous community organizations (ACOs) operate across the health and social services sector, including women's centers, collective kitchens, youth centers, mutual aid groups, and shelters. They emerged from grassroots citizens' committees and share a comprehensive approach to health and social care grounded in empowerment, community organizing and activism (Alinsky 1946). Through sustained pressure on the Quebec government, they were able to secure core operating funding that protects ACOs' autonomy in determining their mission and practices. This funding sustains the advocacy role they claim vis-à-vis the state (White 2012): defending the rights of those they represent, challenging government priorities, demanding more social services, and mobilizing against state interference.

The gradual withdrawal of the state from direct service provision has shifted its role toward management, notably through public health and social service establishments (CISSS) (Bourque and Jetté 2018). Since 2015, these regional bodies have coordinated service network partners to ensure local needs are met. For ACOs operating in the health and social services sector, the CISSS act as funders, overseeing the allocation of their core operating funding. They also support collaboration among partners by funding and often facilitating concertation tables – also known as roundtables – that bring together stakeholders from across the public health system. That ACOs cooperate with institutional partners who simultaneously function as funders appears paradoxical for organizations whose autonomy is partly rooted in opposition to the state.

Roundtables serve as spaces of bottom-up cooperation, co-constructing responses to community needs, but also as tools of top-down governance, mobilizing local actors to implement public policies (Kettl 2002). They reflect the paradox of partnership, as sites where power relations between institutional and community actors are constantly negotiated. This ambivalent position has been widely debated in the literature on nonprofit/state relations. Some scholars argue that government funding and collaborative governance reduce nonprofit advocacy and weaken their autonomy (Salamon 1995; Smith and Lipsky 1993). Others show that funding does not silence advocacy but rather redirects it toward defending funding streams, as organizations prioritize insider tactics and avoid "biting the hand that feeds them" (Mosley 2012; Chaves et al. 2004). These studies largely examine partnership through the institutionalization of the third sector, an approach that offers limited insight into the complex interactions between institutional and community actors.

This article instead treats the nature of links between the state and ACOs as a research object, as partnership is framed in Quebec as a "site of social struggle" (Guay 1999, 125), with organizations navigating between cooperation and conflict (Lamoureux 1994). How do actors navigate cooperation with public institutions while engaging in conflict "when necessary" (Bourque, Comeau, Favreau and Fréchette 2007, 300)? This article examines how concertation arrangements may contribute to the depoliticization of action by obscuring power relations between ACOs and institutions. It argues that roundtables, under the guise of conviviality and equality, can reinforce the institutional order that governs ACOs' partnerships with the state.

[1] The author thanks Thomas Chevallier, Joëlle Dussault, Julien Talpin and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions, which significantly improved this article.

The paper opens with a review of the literature on conflictual cooperation in partnership settings, followed by the theoretical framework, as well as an explanation on the methodology and the context in which ACOs operate. The analysis unfolds in three parts: first, an examination of the concertation's collaborative scene style, which serves to pacify interactions at the roundtable; then, an exploration of how community actors are channeled towards institutional expectations through depoliticization of their criticism; and finally, a discussion of the possibilities for resistance both within and beyond concertation scenes.

2. Conflictual Cooperation and Depoliticization: the Ambivalence of Partnership

Research shows that partnerships can undermine nonprofit autonomy (Lipsky and Smith 1989; Maddison et al. 2004). Reliance on government funding pressures organizations to align with state priorities (Smith 2010; Alexander, Nank and Stivers 1999). As organizations become more institutionalized, advocacy often shifts to insider tactics, prioritizing funding protection over challenges to systemic inequalities (Mosley 2012; Laforest 2006). These studies highlight how power asymmetries channel advocacy toward relationship-building with policymakers. The Quebec case complicates this picture. Partnership arrangements were institutionalized to safeguard organizational autonomy and maintain critical distance from the state (White 2012; Jetté 2011). Well-organized ACOs, identifying as an autonomous community movement, maintain a relation of "conflictual cooperation" with the state (Lamoureux 1994). Conflictual cooperation is defined as "a relational mode based on critical collaboration and as a flexible strategy that involves building alliances when possible and resorting to conflict when necessary" (Bourque et al. 2007, 299–300).

Concertation tables, which bring together "actors with organizational interests, approaches and cultures that are often different, if not contradictory" (Bourque et al. 2007, 300), provide a relevant site to study these intertwined processes of cooperation and conflict. Research on state/nonprofit relations often examines the enrollment of community actors in policy processes through depoliticization mechanisms (Donaldson 2007; Mosley 2012; Rudrappa 2004). As the "language of empowerment" can paradoxically lead to "self-work" (Eliasoph 2011), participatory injunctions that fail to genuinely alter public policy processes hinder empowerment by avoiding conflict while legitimating cuts to public spending (Carrel 2015). Yet apparent consensus does not necessarily imply alignment: even in cooperative settings, groups may position themselves as "watchdogs" rather than fully aligned partners (Luhtakallio 2012). Thériault (2019) shows that conflictual cooperation in Quebec often takes the form of subversive practices enacted by ACOs beneath apparent cooptation, even as community workers feel disempowered by funding constraints.

Research has devoted relatively little attention to the subtle tactics that keep organizations in a state of compliance. Yet ACOs also face attempts at coercion, cooptation, and instrumentalization, which they actively resist (White 2012; Jetté 2011). A growing body of research highlights how repression shapes nonprofit action. In its more subtle and insidious forms, channeling refers to indirect forms of control that shape and prevent protest, rather than directly repress it (Earl 2011). Such control may operate through administrative constraints, redirecting organizational attention from political activity to paperwork (Chaves et al. 2004; Rudrappa 2004). For resource-dependent organizations, the threats of funding withdrawal may create a climate of fear that governs and silences dissent (Talpin 2016; Maddison et al. 2004; Jämte and Ellefsen 2020). Discursive techniques also incentivize self-imposed restrictions, as Chevallier identifies mechanisms of "partnership domination" that compel community actors to align with institutional expectations through norms of professionalism and conviviality (2023). Such insidious and often uncoordinated tactics contribute to what Earl describes as the "social control of protest" (Earl 2013). Research diverges, however, on whether it weakens dissent or, alternatively, fosters cohesion and renewed mobilization (Jämte and Ellefsen 2020; Earl

and Soule 2010). Building on these debates, this article examines how conflictual cooperation operates in practice. It argues that the absence of overt conflict in the performance of partnership often results less from alignment than from the management of dissent.

3. Analyzing Conflictual Cooperation Through Scene Styles

To analyze interactions between community and public actors, the article draws on Eliasoph and Lichterman's concept of scene style (2014), defined as a "routine way of doing things together" (Lichterman 2021, 27). Scene styles encompass three dimensions: map (the group's boundaries relative to the wider world), bonds (shared assumptions about obligations among members), and speech norms (the appropriate speech genre and tone for display). The concept builds on Erving Goffman's (1959) distinction between frontstage, where public representations unfold, and backstage, where actors can drop their roles and relax. This framework enables us to apprehend the forms of commitment that unfold in different settings, how actors define who they are, the rules of the game, and the hierarchies of power and authority that are enacted there.

The concept of scene style provides a lens for understanding the relationship between interactions within the group and their connections with actors outside the group, particularly with public authorities. This allows the dynamics of conflictual cooperation to be examined across different scenes, including frontstage interactions in concertation and backstage practices both within the concertation and in internal settings of ACOs. The analysis thus enables the articulation of politicization processes with the relationships between the state and ACOs (Patsias et al. 2019). Scene styles help to apprehend politicization as contingent upon specific interaction contexts, rather than as a set of individual qualities or values. For ACOs engaged in dissent, politicization can be understood in three ways: conflictualization (Duchesne and Haegel 2007), which involves recognizing societal cleavages; rise in generality, describing the reference to general principles (Hamidi 2006); and the identification of common problems calling for a collective response (Hamidi 2022). In contrast, depoliticization renders issues "inaccessible to deliberation or contestation" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2018, 469).

The concept of scene styles highlights how mechanisms that hinder politicization processes can be linked to social norms governing ACOs (Hamidi 2022). Building on this, this article examines mechanisms of political avoidance (Eliasoph 1998) within concertation and interprets these through an infrapolitical lens. Following Scott (1990), infrapolitics refers to the subaltern "hidden transcript", which is excluded from the public transcript by practices of domination. While ACOs make dissent visible through conflictual cooperation, this article argues that roundtables transform protest into a hidden transcript through a collaborative scene style that shapes self-policing and discourages politicization. Thus, the study connects depoliticizing effects to subtle control tactics – whether intentional or not – that channel and constrain dissent.

4. An Ethnography of Youth Concertation Tables

The analysis draws on an ethnographic study conducted in ACOs and two concertation tables between 2021 and 2023. For the purposes of this article, fieldwork included observations of roundtables meetings (plenary sessions, committees, general assemblies, breaks and informal moments) as well as internal organizational scenes in one youth center – an ACO dedicated to youth empowerment – participating in a studied roundtable (youth regular programming, general assemblies, staff meetings and coalition-led activities). Given the centrality of partnership relations in the youth center studied, fieldwork underscored the need to combine

observations across concertation settings – where ACOs engage with institutional actors – and internal organizational settings – where community actors operate beyond institutional scrutiny. This multi-sited approach made it possible to capture how partnership dynamics are interpreted, negotiated and reworked across different scenes and how these dynamics affect the organizations' ability to act as a countervailing power. The ethnographic data were supplemented by interviews conducted with actors encountered during fieldwork observations, including institutional actors and ACOs representatives involved in both roundtables studied (n=10) as well as with the youth center staff, young participants and with their coalition officers (n=12). Concertation-related documents (publications, minutes, activity reports and funding programs) were reviewed to complete the fieldwork.

Both roundtables studied aim to coordinate youth-related interventions within their regional county municipalities by bringing together community organizations (both ACOs and non-ACOs) and institutional actors (municipal staff, political representatives, school board representatives, health and social services professionals from the CISSS). They meet five times a year to facilitate resource sharing, training, joint project development, and coordinated action to address the needs of local youth. They both administer grant programs designed to support partnership-based projects addressing the needs of local youth, funded through a combination of CISSS resources and philanthropic contributions. The first roundtable (R1) operates independently from the public system and brings together about fifty members, including representatives of funding organizations who occasionally participate as observers. The youth center serving as a case study for this article participates in this roundtable. The second roundtable (R2) is coordinated by a community organizer employed by the CISSS. Approximately forty actors participate in this table. Despite their different institutional ties, both roundtables exhibit similar governance mechanisms, with institutional actors – participating at R1 but also facilitating at R2 – exerting vertical control on behalf of institutions, even though concertation is meant to be horizontal. This power dynamic largely stems from the institutions' position as funders – most notably the CISSS – within a broader context of financial precarity.

5. Navigating Cooperation and Conflict as an ACO

In Quebec, ACOs navigate both cooperation and conflict in their relationships with the state, particularly regarding access to funding. For ACOs, including the youth center studied, this dynamic is expressed primarily through coalition work and concertation.

The youth center aims to foster teenagers' sense of belonging to the group, the organization, and ultimately to society through recreational activities - such as board games, crafts, collective meals – that provide opportunities for individualized and collective interventions. Young people are encouraged to participate in organizing activities and to sit on the board, where two seats are reserved for them. The organization's primary source of funding is core operating support provided by the state through the regional public health establishment (CISSS), in recognition for their holistic, collective and preventive approach within the health and social services sector. However, this funding – exclusive to ACOs – covered only one third of its operating budget in 2021, compelling the organization, like much of the community sector, to rely increasingly on project-based funding from both government and philanthropic sources.

As ACOs are organized in dense networks at local, regional and provincial levels to represent their shared interests, the youth center can rely on its provincial and regional coalitions to advance collective claims to public authorities. Coalitions are recognized as key government interlocutors. At the provincial level, this allows them to take part in concertation processes with ministry officials to influence public policy within their areas of activity. At the regional level, they participate alongside the CISSS in the allocation of core operating

funding distributed from the Ministry of Health and Social Services. Funding managers at CISSS and regional coalition staff thus collaborate to ensure a fair distribution between ACOs. This provides coalitions with a degree of leverage, though it does not preclude them from resorting to protest when their demands are not met.

In 2023-2024, government support through core operating funding exclusively for ACOs amounts to approximately CAD 1,150,500,000 (€720,000,000)[2]. Distributed among more than 4,500 ACOs, most of which operate in the health and social services sector, this represents 58% of total funding granted by the provincial government to the community sector. Although this funding has increased slightly over the years, the shortfall between public funding and ACOs' basic operational needs continues to grow. Mobilized through their coalitions, ACOs engage in various modes of protest, ranging from advocacy to dissent, to secure increased funding. In the case of the youth center, these include meetings with elected officials, open letters in the media, street demonstrations and strikes. Its coalition actively promotes dissent: "It has the most impact when it causes disruption", a coalition leader noted during a provincial meeting, urging youth centers to take to the streets (Notes from observation, May 18, 2022).

The youth center takes part, like its coalition counterparts, in regional concertation processes with the CISSS and other local stakeholders. These meetings provide opportunities to gain insight into initiatives developed elsewhere, engage in training related to youth local issues, and, most importantly, to access funding and develop collaborative projects with other community actors involved in concertation. Either Julie[3], the youth director, or Alice, one of the youth workers, attends these meetings throughout the year. Information and opportunities identified in these discussions are then reported in staff meetings – and, when relevant, in regional coalition meetings, particularly when interactions with institutional actors allow them to anticipate the development of new CISSS or Ministry programs. Yet, it can also represent an added strain for the youth center, as Julie, the youth center director explains: "Concertation is good, but sometimes there's just too much of it! I don't mean that in a bad way […] but it's time-consuming. We go there to develop projects, but after that, there's still all the development to do." (Notes from observation, February 22, 2022). In a context of financial precarity, concertation is experienced as a condition of survival to access project-based funding while engaging with institutional actors and funders, thereby prompting a style focused more on collaboration than conflict.

6. Playing the Concertation Game: The Collaborative Scene Style

Concertation is designed to establish consensus by minimizing the contradictory demands of the actors involved. This section analyzes the frontstage work carried out to preserve a collaborative style in the everyday practice of concertation.

6.1 From Conflict to Collaboration?

As concertation is intended to bring together actors who are "different but equal" (Dhume 2001), institutional and community actors are invited to the observed roundtables to work jointly to identify and respond to local needs. To do so, they benefit from the roundtable's budget, provided by the CISSS and, in some cases – such as on both roundtables – supplemented by philanthropic funding. The financial envelopes available at the

[2] The years 2021 and 2022 are not used as reference points, as the Quebec government provided emergency funds during that period in the form of non-recurring grants to support ACOs' pandemic-related activities (Fauvel, Noiseux and Couspeyre 2024).
[3] The names of the persons and the projects investigated have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

roundtables generally require projects to be developed in collaboration with other partner organizations. Outside of the concertation, funding programs generally require letters of support from other ACOs or institutions – such as local schools – as organizations must demonstrate local support. Participation in roundtables thus helps build collaborative projects with multiple partners – making ACOs eligible for a wider range of funding opportunities.

Given that partnership relations between ACOs and the state are characterized by conflictual cooperation, collaboration with public funders might be expected to generate tensions for ACOs. Yet funders' participation in the roundtable is generally well received, suggesting a more consensual style within the concertation setting. This is illustrated by the following exchange with Alice, a youth worker from the youth center, at Roundtable 1:

> Me – I'm surprised to see a funder at this table; I haven't seen that often elsewhere, have you?
> Alice – It's true, we don't usually see that much, it would be great if funders were more present at the tables. But yes, it's rare.
> Me – At the same time, they shouldn't be the ones deciding the projects, right?
> Alice – Yes, but this way, we can better understand how to apply for funding, you see? Sometimes the calls for proposals aren't clear. If we can talk to them, it's easier.
> (Notes from observation R1, September 26, 2022)

Alice views concertation as a space for networking, accessing funding opportunities and gaining leverage on the issues her youth center raises. Consequently, roundtables are not conceived as politicized spaces by community actors, but rather as sites for accessing information on funding and resources that would otherwise remain out of reach. For ACOs, concertation helps to promote their organization and secure resources through relationship-building with institutional actors (Mosley 2012).

Concertation allows ACOs to shift from confrontation toward collaboration with institutional actors, thought not without tensions, as shown in the following exchange at Roundtable 1 between Lauren, a CISSS program manager, and Ashley, a community worker at an ACO, about Wide Horizons, a youth program run by the CISSS:

> Lauren, the program manager, announces an open house next week: "Come visit the facility and meet the CISSS team! Community workers, youth and parents are welcome" she says. Ashley, a community worker then turns to the group, introducing herself as "a close collaborator". She laughs as she recounts her first impressions of the program. "Cover your ears, Wide Horizons!" she says, smiling at Lauren. "At first, we were like 'What even is this?' Then they invited us to get involved, and now we're working together. And if you go visit the facility, you'll see for yourselves: 'Ah, this is it! This is how they can help us' So thanks for that". Lauren, visibly moved, responds: "Thank you – without the community, this program wouldn't exist!" (Notes from observation R1, May 29, 2023).

Ashley's account is one of the "success stories" shared at the roundtable: it demonstrates that collaboration can be effective between institutional and community actors while suggesting that Ashley's initial cautious stance toward Wide Horizons reflected her limited knowledge of Lauren and her team's work at the CISSS.

As both Lauren and Ashley emphasize, working together in concertation is possible because it provides concrete benefits for both parties. Lauren, along with other institutional actors at the roundtable, is willing to "lend a hand" to community actors, recognizing that their involvement is crucial for the implementation of institutional programs. Without collaboration with ACOs, reaching the populations they serve would be

challenging, particularly for new initiatives such as Wide Horizons, hence the organization of an open house to foster engagement. ACOs and institutional actors thus collaborate based on compatible individual interests. Participants in concertation emphasize their shared goals – supporting coordinated, youth-focused action across the territory – rather than the differences in their approaches to achieving these goals. This collaborative style aligns with what Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014) define as a community of interest style, as it temporarily dissolves boundaries with institutional actors to allow polite, goal-oriented collaboration and build mutual respect in the interest of youth in the region.

6.2 Staging Collaboration through Conviviality

The diversity of approaches and actors at roundtables requires continuous work to maintain coherence and hold the group together in daily interactions. In the observed settings, the collaborative scene style is stabilized through professional positivity, as described by Chevallier (2023). Although Quebec's ACOs are better protected than their French counterparts studied by Chevallier, similar norms persist to absorb tensions without turning them into open debate. Concertation relies on shared interests rather than deep interpersonal bonds, but Nancy, the facilitator at Roundtable 1, often stages orchestrated conviviality as a norm of participation. Conviviality is conveyed through the family metaphor frequently used to describe member relationships, as expressed by Nancy regularly in the meetings:

> "As I often say, [in concertation] we're one big family! An extended family, but a big family!" (Notes from observation R1, September 26, 2022)

The image of a "big family" helps perform an inclusive and affective bond among concertation members. William, a youth center director at Roundtable 2, also advocates for maintaining the group's convivial atmosphere. He argues that the meetings should be moved from a large, neon-lit gym to a smaller, warmer space, emphasizing that not having everyone seated "so far apart" would create a "more welcoming" environment for collective discussion (Notes from observation R2, May 31, 2023). This family-oriented rhetoric conveyed by William and Nancy helps to stage deep interpersonal bonds among the group. Yet the roundtable meetings are conducted in a fairly detached atmosphere, with exchanges limited to the topics on the agenda – a characteristic feature of the community of interest style (Lichterman et Eliasoph 2014).

Staging "family" bonds among the concertation contributes to constructing a consensual "we" by erasing organizational differences and downplaying the competitive dynamics that may resurface between members. This is evident, for example, when Roundtable 1 considers the integration of a for-profit daycare into the roundtable:

> As this is the first time a for-profit organization has requested to join, several community workers question its motivations. Alexandra notes that the community daycare where she works might leave the table if the for-profit daycare is admitted. She highlights the structural inequalities ACOs and for-profit organizations, which compete for limited resources. ACOs often struggle to secure funding, as Alexandra emphasizes: "It's always a race for grants just to be able to offer anything [in the daycare]!" At this point, one member asks Nancy, the facilitator, to clarify the for-profit daycare's motivations for joining the roundtable. Nancy underlines the organization's interest in networking with community actors, adding with a smile: "We're such a charming group!" (Notes from observation R1, November 7, 2022).

At first glance, Nancy's self-congratulatory remark may appear harmless. Yet it serves to temper Alexandra, who disrupted the collaborative style of the concertation.

> At the next meeting, Nancy encourages Alexandra to present her community daycare's position on the matter. Visibly uneasy, Alexandra reminds the group that the decision concerns everyone and requires collective reflection. She puts the issue in a broader perspective: "Here we're talking about a for-profit daycare, but it could involve other organizations as well. The real question is how to ensure fairness between for-profit and non-profit organizations" (Notes from observation R1, February 6, 2023).

Alexandra tried to objectify her discomfort with the integration of the for-profit daycare by framing it in terms of social justice, questioning what was fair in the situation in public terms and highlighting the power dynamics between ACOs and for-profit organizations. Her remarks thereby paved the way for the issue to be politicized through a rise in generality and conflictualization (Hamidi 2006). Yet her attempts to frame the debate in broader public terms proved fruitless.

By portraying the group as closely knit – almost like a family – Nancy works to smooth over potential inequalities between members with different statuses, whether public, non-profit or even for-profit. Being welcoming and convivial in concertation means building bridges, treating everyone as the same, rather than as a representative of a particular category (Eliasoph 1998). In this way, affective techniques function as a subtle barrier to expressing divisions that might otherwise disrupt the collaborative scene style. This pacification of interactions may even be acknowledged and valued in the roundtable, as a member of Roundtable 2 concluded a meeting by saying: "I'm happy – we managed to agree without arguing!" (Notes from observation R2, March 30, 2022). Conflict avoidance is indeed a dominant norm in civic interactions (Eliasoph 1998). In this case, the performance of conviviality may serve to prevent conflictualization and a rise in generality in the roundtables, leading community actors to self-impose restrictions.

7. Channeling Criticism towards Depoliticization

The collaborative scene style, reinforced through affective techniques, not only eases friction but also tends to align discourse and action with institutional expectations. Each sub-section illustrates the mechanisms through which criticism voiced in Roundtables 1 and 2 can be depoliticized, subtly reinforcing the power imbalance between institutions and ACOs.

7.1 Roundtable 1: In Search of Pragmatic Solutions to Concrete Problems

In Roundtable 1, professional positivity manifests as gratification for action. What matters is "doing", demonstrating that "the table is in motion", as Nancy proudly told the assembly (Notes from observation, November 7, 2022). Participants are regularly thanked for "pitching in" and contributing to the collective work (Notes from observation, May 29, 2023). At the end of my first meeting with the table, Nancy approaches me and remarks:

> "I would have liked a low-key, chill meeting but what can you do? The members of the table are really motivated". She adds, laughing and seemingly with pride: "and in the end, is that really an issue?" (Notes from observation, September 26, 2022).

Nancy, as the table's facilitator, is actively involved herself. Indeed, she facilitates the meetings, allocates speaking time, centralizes information and sends out agendas and minutes. She describes herself as "something of a conductor", making sure that "everyone plays their part at the right time, in the right place, and in the right way" (Interview, December 8, 2022). She thereby ensures that the table's members align with this action-oriented style. In fact, decision-making itself is facilitated so that the committee can focus on action, thanks to the table's coordinating committee, which helps to "pre-chew decisions for the assembly" (Notes from observation, September 26, 2022). This helps for swift decision-making during the meetings. This "self-congratulatory recognition of completed work" (Carrel and Talpin 2012, 185) leaves little room for critical reflection on how initiatives are implemented or whether they are justified, as action itself becomes the primary goal.

At Roundtable 1, action-rewarding tactics steer discussions toward practical and concrete solutions, sidelining structural causes. Problems are addressed only when they fit within the roundtable's scope for project development. As described by Nancy:

> "One of my strongest selling points for the table is our collective intelligence, in the sense that it has happened quite regularly that members came in with problematic situations and left with five or six solutions they hadn't thought of before, simply because several of us were thinking together" (Interview, December 8, 2022)

Leaving the assembly with five or six solutions implies that the problems discussed must be solvable within the table's scope. Issues that fall within this "do-able" range allow the table to embrace the "can-do spirit" described by Eliasoph (1998, 31), highlighting how groups actively suppress or sideline concerns that cannot be resolved immediately. When issues arise that exceed the table's capacity for action, a shift occurs: the issue is distanced - met with silence, nervous laughter, or treated as an anxiety-inducing topic to be deferred to future sessions. The following scene illustrates this form of avoidance:

> Evelyn, a representative from Youth Protection Services raises the existence of a sex trafficking network operating in the area: "There's so much neglect it's like the whole [city] is in neglect! […] I don't want to drop a *bomb*, but it's also the staff shortages that's at stake." She explains that some youths are no longer receiving follow-up due to resource cuts which seriously undermines the public institution's work. Another participant responds ironically: "I don't see what you're talking about!" triggering a wave of awkward laughter. Evelyn chimes in: "Even being a government organization, we just can't make it work". Someone interrupts the discussion: "That's enough *bombs* for today." Nancy steps in: "The goal is not to leave here depressed. We'll pick this up in future meetings, don't worry - we're not dropping it!" She proposes that the issue be addressed in a separate co-development session among managers, given that the topic is too distressing for the group. (Notes from observation, February 6, 2023)

This incident reveals how the norm of conviviality, which sustains the roundtable's functioning, can be disrupted by issues perceived as too complex or overwhelming to resolve within the group. In this case, the problem is delegated to a subgroup to avoid risking discouragement in the assembly. Although ACOs are often the first to confront such issues in their day-to-day work, Evelyn reduces them to "bombs" that must be handled cautiously and in limited numbers. The very fact that such problems are referred to as "bombs" by institutional actors signals how they threaten the gratification of action that dominates roundtables. In this context, the

momentary tension dissipates as Nancy redirects the discussion, restoring the concertation's usual collaborative style.

Hired by the roundtable, Nancy occupies a relatively rare position as a facilitator independent from public institutions, since most of the roundtable's funding comes from philanthropic sources. Yet, this relative autonomy does not prevent Roundtable 1 from sidelining debate and marginalizing structural analyses, driven by the norm of conviviality. Nancy's position outside the institutions nonetheless underscores their enduring influence. In this context, political avoidance operates as a subtle mechanism that ensures institutional authority remains unchallenged in the assembly, even when criticism comes from within – as in the case of Evelyn, who represents Youth Protection Services.

7.2 Roundtable 2: Powerless Institutional Actors – Who's to Blame?

In contrast to Nancy, Jessica, the facilitator of Roundtable 2, employed by the CISSS, highlights the structural asymmetry between the CISSS and ACOs. She occasionally feels uneasy in her role on the table, due to the ambiguous nature of her work at the CISSS, positioned between institutional directives and the expectations of ACOs:

> "My position can be uncomfortable because, on the one hand, I have an employer - the CISSS - telling me to do one thing, and on the other, the ACOs – the field actors who aren't my employer but are my partners, whom I collaborate with and interact with daily - want something different. So which position should I take? [...] I want to have influence, to bring the field's perspective upward, to let citizens voice their needs directly. I want that. I don't want some bureaucrat in Quebec City deciding how our healthcare should work [here]. I want to have that influence […] but it's just not possible." (Interview, April 21, 2023)

Jessica, as a representative of the CISSS, distances herself from its position of authority by expressing her powerlessness in conveying ACOs' needs effectively to higher levels in the CISSS. Indeed, at Roundtable 2, institutional actors often speak as if they have little influence themselves, highlighting the constraints under which they operate. This helps to shift responsibility away from institutions that are implicated in the dysfunctions being raised.

In a context of strained public services, institutional actors, like Evelyn at Roundtable 1, express unease about the limits of the systems they work in. At Roundtable 2, when problems are addressed, institutional responses often appeal to the resilience and initiative of community actors:

> Nicole, a director at an ACO, describes how urgent issues that referred to state institutions are simply not taken up. In this case, she tried to find a solution for a single-parent family supported by her organization after they lost custody of their young daughter because they were living on the streets, unable to find shelter. She contacted the authorities – Youth Protection Services, the CISSS, the Ministry – in an effort to try to bring the family back together, but without success. She complains: "It's a failure – not a failure of my workers, but a failure of the system, of the public services". Paul responds: "You have to shout. Programs go where the loudest voices are, so shout loudly. That's my suggestion as a municipal official." (Notes from observation, November 16, 2022).

Furthermore, rather than taking responsibility, institutional actors often engage in blame-shifting – passing it from the CISSS to local health bodies, from local administrations to elected officials – and ultimately to ACOs, as illustrated in Nicole's example:

> In response to Paul, she suggests targeting the local social services, which have largely been absent on this issue. She exclaims: "If you tell me we need to shout, we'll get together and shout!". Spotting Michelle, who works in social services, Nicole amends herself: "I'm saying this, but I see you here". Michelle laughs: "It's fine, I work at the regional CISSS, not the local social services!" Jessica then reminds the group to move on to the next agenda item in order to stay on schedule. (Notes from observation, November 16, 2022)

This exchange illustrates the paradoxical role of ACOs, as highlighted by Fontaine (2013). While providing social services, they simultaneously help legitimize the fragmentation of state services. Paul and Michelle's disengagement reflects how institutions perceive ACOs as low-cost subcontractors, responsible for filling the gaps left by struggling social services. Delegation of governance disperses responsibility so effectively that it becomes nearly impossible to locate clear accountability (Heinkelmann-Wild et al. 2021). As a result, Nicole ends up facing the problem on her own, and her suggestion for collective action within the roundtable fails to gain traction. Although their work focuses on elected politicians, Flinders and Buller note how delegation to administrative actors or subcontractors contributes to "establish some sort of buffer zone between politicians and certain policy fields" (2006, 297). Such a tactic – the refusal to intervene – on the part of institutional actors such as Paul or Michelle reinforces the perception that no alternative choice is available or conceivable. Even the idea that the issue is a matter of political choice is therefore denied.

While concertation promotes an ideal of equality, it often operates in ways that reproduce power asymmetries and marginalize alternative viewpoints held by ACOs. At Roundtable 2, ACOs can still voice criticism, although it tends to be diluted into the flow of general contributions:

> Jessica, the CISSS facilitator, announces a revision of roundtable grant criteria. This decision has been taken by the CISSS after noting a misalignment between some funded projects and the roundtable's strategic priorities. Several ACOs – mostly youth centers – voice concerns as they stand to lose recurring funding. Jessica explains that the assembly can select new funding criteria. To proceed, she splits participants into mixed subgroups of institutional and community actors, dispersing dissenting ACOs' representatives across different groups. When some ask to be regrouped, she replies, visibly uneasy: "There are too many people in that group, and that wouldn't be fair." Aside from the contesting community actors, most participants appear unaware of the issue and mostly ask questions. In this context, a representative official steps in to explain how funding requests are evaluated in her electoral district. She refers to quantitative criteria, prompting frustration among community actors who advocate for qualitative evaluation aligned with community-based approaches. When the official suggests introducing mid-term reporting requirements, one youth center director pushes back: "Right, because we already spend our whole lives filling out forms instead of doing our mission and welcoming young people!" (Notes from observation, February 1, 2023)

In this scene, the horizontal structure of the concertation is instrumentalized to absorb and channel criticism from youth center representatives who are a minority at the table. ACOs are thus powerless to establish themselves as legitimate interlocutors, despite the appearance of equal debate at the table. Such dynamics exemplify preference-shaping depoliticization, where deliberation is mobilized not to open alternatives but to

forecloses them (Flinders and Buller 2006). Participation therefore becomes performative: ACOs are invited to speak, but not to reshape the terms of the debate, as the rules of concertation favor the already established interests of institutional actors (Carrel 2015). Paradoxically, open discussion within the roundtable can serve to neutralize dissenting voices.

Through practices of blame-shifting or by narrowing discussions to pragmatic solutions within concertation processes, the collaborative style discourages community actors from "making things political" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2018) by limiting their ability to challenge power relations with public institutions. This prompts ACOs to engage in self-policing, although forms of protest can still be reconfigured both within and outside concertation.

8. Maintaining Protest despite Self-Policing

What becomes of the ACOs' culture of protest and advocacy? This section examines the ways in which resistance can be reconfigured. To do so, the analysis relies on both concertation scenes as well as internal organizational scenes within the youth center studied.

8.1 Reconfiguring Conflict Backstage

As criticism has little effect in concertation, the collaborative style functions as "an internalized constraint, a form of self-constraint" silencing many community actors (Chevallier 2022, 8). However, self-policing practices do not necessarily indicate alignment with institutional expectations. Rather, frontstage self-policing may signal a reconfiguration of protest behind the scenes and out of sight of institutional actors. Backstage interactions thus allow for the emergence of a hidden transcript (Scott 1990) through informal and exclusive exchanges among ACOs. This is the case for the criticism of the Wide Horizons program which only surfaces during breaks:

> As we step outside the meeting room, I join Alice and Jane, two youth workers, in conversation. Jane, newly appointed in an ACO, asks about Wide Horizons, the youth program implemented by the CISSS. This program had been presented earlier by a CISSS employee, Lauren, who announced an open house. As Lauren stands nearby, Alice tells her colleague that she will explain later, since "there are too many people around here", adding that the same employee had attended their previous meeting. Jane reacts ironically: "that lady's at every meeting, I see!" The group exchanges a knowing laugh. (Notes from observation R1, May 29, 2023)

In this instance, Jane and Alice critique Wide Horizons by underscoring disparities in working conditions between community and institutional actors – the latter being able to attend "every concertation meeting". By drawing attention to the employee's continuous presence, Jane also subtly signals the unpopularity of the CISSS program. When ACOs contest a program, institutional representatives often increase their visibility at roundtables to mitigate friction, a strategy that is also reflected in Lauren's organization of an open house to foster community ownership of the initiative. It reveals the top-down logic shaping program design, pushing community actors to "play a role assigned by others" (Fournier et al. 2001, 128).

At the same time, Alice and Jane's remarks highlight the power dynamics shaping the partnership between the CISSS and ACOs. While the collaboration of ACOs is crucial for Wide Horizons to reach the populations it aims to serve, it also confines them to a subordinate role in this context, operating within the boundaries set

by institutional expectations. These institutional directives – often tied to project funding – exhaust community workers and divert attention from their own mission (Maddison et al. 2004), reducing the time and energy they can devote to carrying out their work according to their own intervention approach. In non-mixed spaces such as during breaks, conflictual perspectives on CISSS/ACOs relations become audible and ACOs may criticize the structural conditions under which they operate. Alice and Jane thus redefine the group's boundaries by excluding public actors from the shared "we" (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014). In doing so, they perform conflictualization, marked by the recognition of cleavages between the CISSS and ACOs and their differing interests. Backstage remarks allow us to reinterpret the silences in roundtable meetings: they provide an alternative explanation for frontstage depoliticization, showing that attempts to name and contest power asymmetries can be reconfigured backstage.

8.2 Challenging Power Dynamics

On the frontstage, protest during roundtable meetings is often redirected toward defending the ACOs themselves, aiming to secure long-term funding and ensure survival, particularly amidst growing competition for limited resources (Mosley 2012).

> During a strategic planning session for Roundtable 2, members were invited to define the priorities for the upcoming year. At my table, youth center directors highlighted "stable funding and the continuation of projects that already work". They discussed how their existing projects were effective and expressed reluctance to "reinvent the wheel every year", thus proposing continuity. Jessica, the facilitator, upon seeing their proposed priority, remarked: "We need to be careful to distinguish between means and goals!" William, a youth center director later explained to me during a break that the roundtable was approaching the issue the wrong way: the space encourages competition among ACOs for funding, whereas ideally, there would be enough funding for everyone – and "core operating funding, because it's a problem when actions are driven by institutions". (Notes from observation R2, May 31, 2023)

Protest in concertation is often reframed as organizational self-defence, giving the impression that youth center directors are defending the ACOs' private interests. Yet these forms of resistance also serve to challenge the structural inequalities between ACOs and funders, beneath the apparent equality enacted through the collaborative scene style. William's funding claims are also framed as an appeal for solidarity among ACOs in the context of competition for resources. As the board chair of the youth center studied puts it:

> "That's always the hard part – how do you get people to say: okay, there's a pie, but let's stop fighting over the last slice. How do we make another pie on the side?" (Interview, June 1, 2022)

These considerations illustrate resistance to the neoliberal values of competition and individual self-interest.

At the roundtable, ACOs prioritize collective action to address financial precarity, advancing grassroots-oriented solutions within the immediate, pragmatic space of concertation rather than referring to conflict with public institutions:

> At Roundtable 2, as participants discuss how to use the budget allocated by the CISSS, several ACOs propose setting aside a portion of the budget to allocate it according to the emerging needs of the roundtable. Rather than providing grants to community actors for projects developed in partnership –

> as is done every year – the aim is to collectively retain control over financial priorities and respond rapidly to local needs as they arise. Essentially, the idea is that the budget should be used according to the table's collective needs, rather than having the table serve merely as an intermediary for distributing funds to organizations. The proposal is rejected by Jessica, the CISSS facilitator, who states that "in all cases, a formal application will be required, as each funded project must be approved by the CISSS" (Notes from observation R2, February 1, 2023).

This attempt to subvert funding criteria appears consistent with the roundtable's collaborative scene style, as it demonstrates a capacity for collective action and mutual support. Yet, in doing so, ACOs seek to assert independence from the CISSS's financial oversight, resisting top-down directives to maintain grassroot control over fund allocation at the roundtable. They navigate the competitive context in which they operate by creating an alternative, more supportive environment (Patsias et al. 2019) without directly targeting the CISSS. This sequence can be read as an example of a deconflictualized form of politicization, defined by Hamidi (2022) as the identification of common problems calling for a collective response. This framing nonetheless exposes the inherent contradictions embedded in the CISSS's dual role (Senecal et al. 2010): while participating in the concertation on supposed equal terms with ACOs, it also acts as the funder in a position of authority. In this sequence, ACOs introduce a redefinition of the group's boundaries centered on on-the-ground organizations – those most aware of local needs – thereby indirectly excluding the institutions and funders from the decision-making process. They thus disrupt the collaborative scene style, calling into question the institutional order that governs the roundtable. This dynamic helps explain Jessica's assertion of authority in this context. Although she previously expressed unease about representing the CISSS as the roundtable's facilitator, she now reinforces that the CISSS has the final say in allocating funding. In doing so, she effectively cuts short any attempt to subvert resource allocation and reminds members that they are expected to comply with the institutional order.

As deconflictualization (Chevallier 2023) prevails in the frontstage scenes of concertation, ACOs reconflictualize their relationship to institutions outside roundtables, in an effort to secure improved funding from public institutions. Direct confrontation is structured mostly through strikes and demonstrations, collectively organized by regional coalitions. These practices extend even to youth at the youth center studied, where young participants help create signs to post on the youth center's door during a strike. To explain why the organization is closed, they display the following message: "We're closed… to keep our doors open! On average, youth centers receive only a third of the budget they need to operate." (Notes from observation in the youth center, February 21, 2022). ACOs' multiple mobilizations help foster a culture of dissent among young people – an approach embedded in participatory decision-making, as the youth are also involved in the youth center's board. Open conflict is thus possible when ACOs step outside the concertation processes, sometimes literally, as described by a coalition officer: "As [institutional actors] say again and again, 'we're not negotiating, we're concerting'. But when you no longer have an opposing party, you're no longer really concerting!" (Notes from observation in the youth center, April 20, 2023). In other words, concertation is structured to pacify relations with ACOs, framing interactions in ways that downplay conflict and encourage self-policing, yet community actors are not oblivious to this.

In contrast to Mosley (2012), this study suggests that redirecting critique toward defending funding does not eliminate criticism of the institutional order. While ACOs conform to concertation norms, they remain aware of underlying power dynamics, as one youth director in Roundtable 2 expresses:

> "I'm a bit more concerned about these structures [of concertation]. The closer you get, the more pressure there is to conform to the environment. That's why I tend to favor working through the

> Ministry for the autonomous community movement, rather than pushing power downward. *He smiles:* People must roll their eyes! […] This kind of citizen power – it's really interesting, but at the same time, it plays out in daily practices" (Interview, November 10, 2023)

Institutional control, enacted in concertation arrangements through norms of professional positivity and conviviality, "constrains, without appearing to do so" (Chevallier 2022, 6). It paradoxically prompts community actors, like this youth center director, to defend a return to more hierarchical governance logics, against which it can sometimes be easier to advocate and protest through direct confrontation. Subtle forms of social control (Earl 2013) can still exert symbolic and material pressures strong enough to subordinate community actors, to the point where they begin to question the very ideal of horizontal concertation. Ironically, the mechanisms that were designed to shield ACOs from hierarchical domination end up being experienced as instruments that reproduce partnership asymmetry.

9. Conclusion

This study argues that partnership relations can serve to routinize domination through concertation, even in the case of ACOs – who managed to secure some protection from the government. Although structured around "a discourse of dissent" (White 1994, 45), ACOs are channeled through the collaborative scene style of concertation, where norms of professional positivity and staged conviviality serve to both obscure power relations among participants and marginalize ACOs' critical viewpoints. This research shows how concertation generates self-policing practices among ACOs, highlighting the meticulous, often invisible labor undertaken to defuse protest within frontstage interactions, only to rearticulate it backstage and outside the concertation. Political avoidance, therefore, must be understood in relation to politicization.

For community actors, conflictual cooperation means resorting to conflict when necessary. However, when the concertation's style depoliticizes forms of conflict that might otherwise challenge the power dynamics between ACOs and institutions, it raises concerns that this collaborative style may undermine the ACOs' culture of dissent. Frontstage interactions do allow frustrations over partnership domination to be expressed, provided they do not threaten the institutional order. In a context of financial precarity, the fear of losing funding ensures that ACOs themselves maintain institutional control during frontstage interactions within the concertation. Partnership arrangements, therefore, do not protect actors from repression. Instead, they make it more complex, as insidious forms are harder to detect and resist. Oscillating between protest and collaboration generates strain among community actors, who must constantly renegotiate the meaning they attach to their work. For some, this even leads them to challenge the horizontal structures of the concertation.

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