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Suburban fragmentation versus mobilities :
is suburbanism opposed to urbanism ?

Fragmentation périurbaine et mobilités :
la périurbanité est-elle opposée à l'urbanité ?

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Abstract:

The suburban way of life is tending towards a rejection of tangible confrontation with otherness so that other people – should they be different – become politically invisible. This is at any rate what the critical literature surmises about the growing desire of suburbanites to live amongst their own and sometimes even behind the safe and reassuring walls of gated communities. However appealing this analysis might be, it seems nonetheless rather partial. Suburban populations are increasingly mobile and their everyday horizon is less and less reduced to the immediate perimeter of the neighbourhood. Indeed, how can one interpret the social specialization of residential areas as a sign of “enclavism” when all the statistics available indicate that mobility has become a constitutive factor of people’s way of life and the neighbourhood has all but lost its existential weight?

Based on exploratory work, this paper aims to deconstruct the criticism articulated around the opposition of “suburbanism” and “urbanism” by emphasising the effects of the various forms of mobility and showing that they complement the proliferation of homogeneous neighbourhoods. In order to achieve this goal, the paper analyses the culture of people living at the periphery of two large French cities (Paris and Lyon). The arguments given are based both on the existing literature and on research the author carried out in France (Charmes, 2005).

As a result of the analysis conducted, it becomes apparent that the increase in mobilities and the social homogenisation of neighbourhoods can be linked in other ways than the one suggested by the critical literature. On the one hand, contemporary residential areas are not as neutral and sterile as they appear to be. Relationships between neighbours and interactions with people from the surroundings constitute at least an embryonic experience of otherness. Residential areas can therefore be conceived as “transition spaces” between the protected space of the home and the relatively unknown spaces of the large metropolis.

On the other hand, the paper defends the hypothesis that mobilities tend to reinforce the need for stability and control of one’s immediate space. Mobilities have lead city dwellers out of the reassuring cocoon of the neighbourhood in which almost everyone

was swathed only a few decades ago. This growing uncertainty of life enhances the need to withdraw to a home “base”. However, this need is temporary and only concerns isolated moments of everyday life. The general tendency remains one of dispersal of spatial practices and individualisation of experience.

Keywords : Urban fragmentation, gated communities, mobility, community, urbanity, urbanism, suburbanism, neighbourly relationships, psychological security

Résumé :

La vie périurbaine contemporaine semble tendre vers le rejet de toute confrontation concrète avec l’altérité et, au-delà, vers l’invisibilité politique de l’autre (du moins lorsqu’il est différent). C’est dans ces termes que la littérature critique interprète la spécialisation sociale des quartiers résidentiels et la volonté croissante des périurbains de fermer leurs rues par des barrières. Ce discours paraît quelque peu partial, ne serait-ce que parce que les périurbains sont de plus en plus mobiles et que leur horizon quotidien se réduit de moins en moins à l’environnement immédiat de leur domicile. Comment comprendre en effet la recherche de l’entre-soi dans l’espace résidentiel comme un « repli communautaire » lorsque tous les indicateurs statistiques disponibles indiquent que la mobilité est devenue un élément constitutif des modes de vie et que le lieu d’habitation a perdu une large part de son poids existentiel ?

A partir de recherches de terrain et d’une réflexion exploratoire, cet article tente de déconstruire la critique axée sur la dissolution de l’urbanité dans le périurbain en insistant sur les effets de la mobilité et en montrant leur complémentarité avec l’homogénéisation sociale des quartiers résidentiels. Pour ce faire, le propos s’appuie, d’une part sur la littérature existante, d’autre part sur des enquêtes menées par l’auteur auprès d’habitants des périphéries de deux grandes villes françaises (Charmes, 2005).

A l’issue de ces analyses, il apparaît que la recherche de l’entre-soi peut être analysée d’une autre manière que celle proposée par la littérature critique. D’une part, les espaces résidentiels ne sont pas aussi aseptisés qu’il y paraît. Les rapports entre voisins constituent au minimum un embryon d’expérience de l’altérité et il est possible de concevoir les espaces résidentiels comme les lieux d’une « transition » entre l’espace protégé du logement et les espaces publics des grandes métropoles.

D’autre part, l’article suggère que les mobilités tendent à renforcer le besoin de stabilité et de contrôle de l’espace proche. Elles ont entraîné les citoyens bien loin du cocon rassurant du quartier, dans lequel la quasi-totalité d’entre eux baignaient il y a encore quelques décennies. L’incertitude croissante de la vie sociale qui a accompagné ce mouvement a renforcé le besoin d’une « base » de repli. Ce besoin est toutefois temporaire et ne concerne que des moments limités de la vie quotidienne. La tendance générale reste à l’éclatement des pratiques spatiales et à l’individualisation des expériences.

Mots clés : fragmentation urbaine, *gated communities*, mobilités, communauté, urbanité relations de voisinage, sécurité psychologique

Introduction

“The larger, the more densely populated, and the more heterogeneous a community, the more accentuated the characteristics associated with urbanism will be”. Since the publication in 1938 of Louis Wirth’s famous paper, “Urbanism as a Way of Life”, two of the key variables identified by the Chicago sociologist have lost a great part of their weight: density, and social heterogeneity. Suburbs have sprawled with low density development, and many resemble a collection of homogeneous communities, where people are sorted into various “lifestyle enclaves”. Consequently, suburbanism is frequently opposed to urbanism. This opposition has been contested long ago by Herbert Gans in a paper titled “Urbanism and Suburbanism as Ways of Life” (1962). Later in the decade, Gans’ empirical study of one the Levittowns gave more ground to his thesis (1967). Yet, the idea that suburbanism is opposed to urbanism is still very much alive. In France, this thesis is championed by Jacques Lévy, the author of one of the most influential recent geography textbooks (1999: 242sq). Only a few scholars recently tried to discuss this idea, and searched for urbanity in the suburbs (Chalas, 2000; Bordreuil, 2002)¹. In the United States, where the class prejudice against the suburbs is weaker², the question is more open to debate. Yet the mainstream academic opinion is that the suburban way of life has nothing to do with city life. The title and the subtitle of an influential book written by the leaders of the New Urbanism speak volume: *Suburban Nation. The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, Speck, 2000). Robert Putnam also pretends that sprawl is “a collective bad” at least for “social capital” as he defined it (Putnam, 2000: 214). The spread in the suburbs of the so-called “gated communities” has strengthened those critics.

In this paper, we want to reconsider the question of the social homogeneity of the suburbs³, and the effect of suburbanism on social interactions, more specifically on the daily confrontation to otherness. However appealing the analysis proposed by the critical literature might be, it seems nonetheless rather partial. For example, many critics point the growing desire of suburbanites to live amongst their own and sometimes even behind the safe and reassuring walls of gated communities, and interpret it as a refusal to be confronted to otherness, and more broadly as a rejection of the “urban” culture (Lévy, 1999; *Esprit*, 1999). But suburban populations are highly mobile and their everyday horizon is less and less reduced to the immediate perimeter of the neighbourhood⁴.

¹ A research programme launched by the French Ministry of Public Works to scrutinize suburban ways of life with a favourable bias gave rise to a lot of criticisms, to the point that the results of the programme haven’t been published as a book (Dubois-Taine, 2002)

² Herbert Gans was among the first to point this “class prejudice” (Gans, 1967).

³ For a discussion of the notion of homogenisation see (Capron, 2004) and (Boudreau, Didier and Hancock, 2004).

⁴ In France, François Ascher (1998) is considered to have promoted the strongest thesis regarding the death of the “urban village”. See (Charmes, 2005, chapter 2) for a critical appraisal of this thesis in the case of the suburbs.

Indeed, how can one interpret the social specialization of residential areas as a sign of “enclavism” (Atkinson, Blandy, 2005) when all the statistics available indicate that mobility has become a constitutive factor of people’s way of life and the neighbourhood has all but lost its existential weight (Urry, 2000)? How can one assert that people wish to live in more or less golden ghetto retreats when they in fact spend precious little time at home and change residence with increasing frequency?

This paper aims to deconstruct the criticism articulated around the dissolution of urbanism through suburbanization by emphasising the effects of the various forms of mobility and showing that they complement the proliferation of homogeneous neighbourhoods. Of course, the idea is not to give a positive image of the latter but rather place it in its proper context. In order to come nearer to this goal, the paper analyses the urban culture of middle-income people living at the periphery of large French cities, in what may be called outer suburbs or periurban areas in a more literal translation of the French⁵. Some of the arguments given are largely conjectural, and need further research to be based on hard evidences. Other arguments are more directly based on research the author carried out in France (Charmes, 2005). This research was conducted through qualitative interviews in the outer suburbs of Paris and Lyon, which is the second largest city in France. Over fifty interviews were conducted. The families interviewed were middle-income, typically composed of a middle-management woman married to an employee or, more frequently, a middle-management man married to an employee. They generally owned a house erected on a piece of land of 500 to 1000 m², worth 300 000 euros in 2005 (see figure 1).

⁵ “Espaces périurbains” are here defined as low density settlements located at the outskirts of a large city where a significant proportion of the land is devoted to rural or natural uses (this qualitative definition differs significantly from the quantitative one used by the French national statistical office, see Charmes, 2005, for more details).



Figure 1. Samples of the streets surveyed

Source : Charmes, 2005.

The paper is divided into three sections. First, we present the main elements of a critical analysis arguing that the social homogeneity of the residential enclaves opposes suburbanism to urbanism because it reduces the daily confrontation to otherness. This critical view will be qualified – though not invalidated – in the following two sections. We shall first emphasize the fact that social “friction” is far from being totally absent from apparently lifeless and unruffled residential islets of the urban periphery. This issue will be approached from two different angles with an analysis of social frictions within housing estates (2.1) and frictions arising from interaction between estates and the outside (2.2).

In the following section, we shall focus on the way people experience mobilities, first by analysing experiences associated with the peregrinations of urban dwellers (3.1), then by calling attention to the thesis, defended by several influential scholars (Giddens, 1991; Beck, Giddens and Lasch, 1994), that for city people, everyday life is increasingly fraught with risk and uncertainty. We will connect this thesis to psychological issue in order to suggest that viewing the residential area as a refuge need not be in contradiction with it being open to the outside (3.2).

As a result of this analysis, it will become apparent that the increase in mobilities and the social homogenisation of suburban neighbourhoods can be linked in other ways than by invoking the disappearance of urbanity. Residential areas of the outer suburbs can indeed be conceived, on the one hand, as a “transition space” between the protected space of the home and the insecure space of the large metropolis (conclusion of section 2), and on the other hand, as a “base” for urban life, which is increasingly mobile and uncertain (conclusion of section 3). While they do not altogether invalidate the critical discourse presented in the first section, these observations nonetheless open a breach to offer an interpretation of the current situation that is both less radical and more likely to promote openness to others.

1. The Critical View: the Homogenisation of Neighbourhoods and the Suburban Archipelago

In classical sociology, urbanisation is considered to convey freedom from the chains of community allegiance. Contrary to the traditional village, the city is seen as the epicentre of modernity and democracy. As claimed by the Chicago School, residential and everyday mobilities initially supported this role played by cities. Moving around requires that one be open to others and indeed public spaces feed on friction between fluxes of traffic. As Louis Wirth put it: “The heightened mobility of the individual, which brings him within the range of stimulation by a great number of diverse individuals and subjects him to fluctuating status in the differentiated social groups that compose the social structure of the city, brings him toward the acceptance of instability and insecurity in the world at large as a norm. This fact helps to account too, for the sophistication and cosmopolitanism of the urbanite” (1938). Yet it would seem that, in the suburbs, mobilities have now the opposite effect in that they are becoming a source of closing-off to others.

1.1. The Effect of Residential Mobility: Towards the Establishment of Residential Clubs

In the past, residential mobility implied severing the link with the reassuring cocoon of the neighbourhood or village where one was born to interact with a new environment or different people. Today, however, residential mobility seems to promote the social homogenisation of residential spaces. Indeed the sum of residential choices gradually brings similar people to move into similar environments.

Furthermore, residential mobility results in a widening and fine-tuning of the range of local environments from which to choose. In France as in several other Western countries, city peripheries become location markets (Berger, 2006; Jaillet, 2004). People are no longer satisfied with selecting a particular house in the outer suburbs; their choice is also based on the local services and infrastructure available and, most importantly, on the social characteristics of the households living nearby (Charmes, 2005). The greater the restriction imposed by the household's financial capacity, the greater the compromise made on one or several of the environmental qualities sought. Thus, each neighbourhood – which in French outer suburbs is often a municipality, since the average population of a French “périurbaine” municipality was under 900 in 1999⁶ – becomes socially specialised according to the merchant value of the environmental cocktail it can offer. The resulting social homogenisation at the local scale is speeded up by the value of social homogeneity itself: according to a study of the effect of environmental amenities on house values by Benoît Filippi, the strongest determinant is the “absence of social mix” (2006, see also Maurin, 2004).

Hence we witness in the French periurban areas the development of a real estate market logic reminiscent of the model proposed by Charles Tiebout in the 1950s. This economist put forward the hypothesis that if local public services and infrastructure are made available by separate local governments, people will “vote with their feet” and choose their residential area according to a quality/price ratio where the offer of service and infrastructure is assessed in relation to the level of taxation. In this model, social homogeneity is functional, as it guarantees a minimum level of shared preferences, and a willingness to pay for the same services and amenities (see Estèbe, Talandier, 2005, for a recent comment on this; see also Webster, 2001).

This is why, like many other in the world, the French outer suburbs of Lyon and Paris tend to resemble their Northern American counterparts: “As suburbanization continued, however, the suburbs themselves fragmented into a sociological mosaic – collectively heterogeneous but individually homogeneous, as people fleeing the city sorted themselves into more and more finely distinguished ‘lifestyle enclaves’, segregated by race, class, education, life stage, and so on” (Putnam, 2000: 209).

⁶ Source: national census, national statistical office (INSEE).

1.2. The Effect of Everyday Mobility

The transformation of city peripheries into mosaics of specialized areas is reinforced by everyday mobility. The latter complements the effect of residential mobility in that it encourages the spread of functional specialization to urban spaces in general. Thus each part of town ends up being focused on a particular function: leisure, work, consumption, education, etc. (Mangin, 2004).

Everyday mobility has brought about a specialisation of urban spaces that is also social in nature. Indeed, extending the wealth of shopping possibilities, for instance, allows for pick-and-choose behaviour (Chalas, 2000): people can choose the shopping environment that suits their expectations in terms of goods or general atmosphere. Following an unpleasant experience, the customer is likely to stop patronizing a particular shopping centre. Thus, in the same way that residential spaces become homogeneous owing to the development of location markets, everyday spaces acquire a specific social character.

The same goes with the “supply” side: alongside the development of residential “enclaves”, everyday living spaces in general become sterile and stripped of everything that was deemed valuable in public spaces (Sorkin, 1992). Whether they be office high-rises, shopping malls, or theme parks, an increasing number of public places used by the middle and upper classes are thought out and managed by private stakeholders in opposition to urban public spaces. As underlined by the growing critical literature on video surveillance⁷, access to such places is controlled and people’s behaviour is constantly monitored. Everything is designed to eliminate the unexpected, which is responsible for the ethical value attached to spending time in public spaces. Confrontation with difference seems reduced to the strict minimum.

In addition, such privatised spaces turn their backs on the increasingly numerous and ignored inhabitants of impoverished places. Indeed, the more the environment appears to be “dangerous”, the more people tend to isolate and protect themselves from it (Brazilian and South African cities epitomize this trend, see Caldeira, 2000). For the middle and upper classes, the city seems to have become an archipelago of islets where like brushes with like, where people exhibit similar behaviour and share similar representations (Mangin, 2004; Graham, Marvin, 2001).

To the critics of the suburban life, travelling between one islet and another is unlikely to produce the confrontation with otherness that appears to be lacking in today’s cities. In some narratives of the contemporary city, travelling takes place behind the safe shield of a car that is entered or exited behind gates under the protective eye of a parking video surveillance camera; cars glide all windows closed on highway corridor rifts that cleave the deprived inner suburbs where the new “dangerous” classes are parked. Here is how Rowland Atkinson and John Flint, writing about United Kingdom, but with a broader perspective, describe the function of the car: “Shielding of the spatial patterns of movement of residents through ‘corridors’ could be observed. [...] Cars act as barriers to social interaction but also promote feelings of safety while in motion around as can be observed in the parental chauffeuring of children to school and the promotion of safety

⁷ See www.surveillance-and-society.org or, for more balanced analysis, www.urbaneye.net.

messages through advertising which has extended rural and urban survivalist subtexts for SUV's (sport's utility vehicles) and the luxury car market. In short, the remaining public realm for residents of gated communities is the space between the car and the shop or office door (itself occasionally with controlled access). Car adverts featuring disaster, urban decay and 'strange people' outside imply the interior space as one of calm and security for the driver, often emphasised by the presence of a child passenger" (2004). Less radical, but similar thesis is defended in France by Jacques Lévy (1999).

*

The consequences of such socio-spatial transformation remain to be evaluated in France, at least to our knowledge. But many authors take for granted that the rejection of tangible confrontation with otherness cause the other people – should they be different – to become politically invisible. On that matter, France is considered to follow the path of the United-States (Jaillet, 1999), where suburbanization has proven potentially ominous for social equity and democracy. In the United States, it is known that suburban residential areas tend to ignore their environment and to have secessionist aspirations (cf. the debates around the so-called "white flight"⁸). Their inhabitants show little interest in the well-being of the poorer population and do not see the point in paying taxes to finance services to which they already have access. Refusal on the part of the richer population to be actually confronted with the poorer population seems to lead the latter to political invisibility.

2. Between Neighbours: a Limited Yet Significant Experience of Otherness

"In a careful survey of community involvement in suburbs across America, political scientist Eric Oliver found that the greater the social homogeneity of a community, the lower the level of political involvement: by creating communities of homogeneous political interests, suburbanization reduces the local conflicts that engage and draw the citizenry into the public realm" (Putnam, 2000: 210). Putnam work has no equivalent in France, at least with such coverage, but there is no doubt that most academics are convinced that his analysis applies to the French suburban context. Yet, while this picture is attractively logical and carries a critical weight that is difficult to ignore, it should be qualified. The French outer suburban residential spaces we studied are not as neutral and sterile as they appear to be. Relationships between neighbours and interactions with people from the surroundings do exist, and they constitute at least an embryonic experience of otherness. We won't discuss here the possible impact of this experience on civic engagement, but one can hypothesize that it is not null. At least, suburban neighbourhood may qualify as transition space between the private space of the home and the public space (be it sociological or political).

⁸ About the "white flight" see (Jackson, 1985). For a discussion of the link between social homogenisation and the quest of political independence through secession in the case of Los Angeles, see (Boudreau, Didier and Hancock, 2004).

2.1. Internal dissent

Access to a suburban residential zone is limited by the real estate filter and by people's taste regarding residence location. Both filters undoubtedly contribute to the homogenisation of residential spaces but their power remains limited. They merely lead – under revenue constraint – to the acceptance of the image and atmosphere inherent to a particular place. This cannot be enough to define the inhabitants to the last detail. Agreement on values and practices is therefore not sufficiently well tuned to avoid conflicts between neighbours.

The investigations we carried out with regard to internal dissent lead us to identify two major lines of divergence (Charmes, 2005: chapter VI). The first is linked to population inertia. In the outer suburbs we studied, habitat is far from being restricted to new or recent housing and includes many old homes sheltering a relatively old population. In France, indeed, the detached houses estates mushroomed in the 1960s and in 1970s. Many of the “pioneers” who settled at that time in the suburbs as young couples are now retired. Some left their house to settle next to a seacoast for example, but not all. Thus, retired couples might easily be living next to couples with young children. Such cohabitation is not always easy and conflicts arise, for instance, when young children are engaged in noisy games.

Other conflicts arise as young couples wish to have access to child-oriented services that are of no interest whatsoever for older couples. There age effects are compounded by generation effects. Today, for instance, most women work full time whereas many of the now retired women either never worked or stopped working to raise their children. In view of this experience, retired people find it difficult to understand young couples' demands in terms of child services and the subject of childcare centres is often a source of conflict. They are reluctant to use the municipal budget to cater for those needs. They are all the more so since they have their own needs.

Another source of tension is adolescent behaviour. This one is trans-cultural and trans-contextual. It concerns many countries and outer suburbs as well as inner suburbs and urban centre. Whether it be in council housing (Coleman, 1990), gated Sao Paolo condominiums (Caldeira, 2000) or suburban housing estates (Baumgartner, 1988; Charmes, 2005), adolescents are a major source of disturbance in residential areas. The situation is all the more delicate since a large number of the troublemakers are the inhabitants' own children. This poses two problems: adults must first of all learn to share the space with individuals whom they would rather do without but cannot possibly exclude. In addition, they must find a way to express their grievances with respect to their neighbours' children without interfering with their private life. For some, the easiest solution is to ask the police to intervene⁹. Others feel this is inappropriate and believe that differences should be settled amicably without third party intervention. Such divergence of opinion can lead to rather heated exchanges between neighbours.

⁹ See (Baumgartner, 1988) for a similar observation in the United-States.

The experience of difference that results from such conflicts is certainly limited by the relative homogeneity of the population. At the same time, the experience is enhanced ten-fold since residents of a same street cannot easily walk away from their disagreement. It is easier to move to another bench in a park should the person next to one turn out to be offensive, it is a lot more difficult to move in order to put a healthy distance between oneself and one's neighbours.

Furthermore, such friction takes on a very strong meaning as an experience because it goes against the normative ideal that regulates neighbourly relationships. Indeed, mobilities impose a certain social distance (Baumgartner, 1988, Charmes, 2005, chapter 2). Ideally, interactions should be cordial (one says hello and exchanges favours) while remaining minimal (a good neighbour does not necessarily engage in conversation every time people happen to pass by and does not meddle in other people's business). Having to deal with a disagreement puts a definite strain on this ideal of social regulation. This tension explains why apparently trivial problems can cause such annoyance, and be a real challenge to the maintenance of a *modus vivendi*. For example, dealing with cats wandering around yards put a strain on the world views neighbours are supposed to share. Such problems may seem pathetic to outsiders, but most of the time, deciding where the presence of a cat is legitimate imply a real confrontation between neighbours.

2.2. Interaction with the Outside

Confrontation with otherness does not only occur internally. It is also linked to the transit of outsiders. The resulting disturbances are such that in the suburbs we studied, this transit is – well above security concerns – the main reason for wanting to install access restriction devices at the entrance of housing estates (Charmes, 2005, chapter 3). In estates with a few dozen units, which are the most common in French outer suburbs, the erection of a gate or barrier is justified by residents mainly by two reasons. The first one is the disturbances caused by automobile traffic, which is held responsible for noise pollution and deemed dangerous for children. Street's residents are said to be careful, but non resident drivers (often called "outsiders") are considered careless. So people take measures to prevent them to use their street as a shortcut (see figure 2).

The second reason resident most commonly give for the closure of their street is adolescent and young adult traffic. Youngsters do not exclusively establish relationships within their housing estate but also socialise with other youngsters who, for example, attend the same high schools. Meeting places are few and far between and the youngsters, who might play football or simply talk, end up occupying available places according to the whim of the moment. Such gatherings can take place far into the night, when loud speaking may seriously upset local residents, who are soon likely to complain. Various measures can be adopted to remedy the problem, one of them being to install a gate to discourage youngsters from entering the estate (see figure 3). The local residents' feeling of insecurity usually reinforces their determination. Indeed such youngsters are easily accused of illicit behaviour such as drug dealing.



Figure 2. A gate in front of a French outer suburban estate designed to prevent drivers to use the street as a shortcut. The design of the barrier shows that security is not a major concern.

Source : Charmes, 2005.



Figure 3. A gate designed to repel youngsters from a neighbouring school

Source : Charmes, 2005.

On a broader scale, the issue of outsider traffic can put suburbanites in front of harsh dilemmas. They can be puzzled by an opposition between their quest for “tranquillity” and their search for “convenience”. For example, residents may feel the need for some sport facilities near their home, but they often repress this need in the fear that such facilities may attract unruly teenagers. The same goes with children’s playgrounds as they can become some kind of nightspots for teenagers.

Anyway, a full control of the residential environment is out of reach. Our observations on that matter are convergent with a study of a housing estate comprising 243 units in the periphery of Los Angeles (Kristen Maher, 2003). At one point, the residents had envisaged the possibility of installing a device to control access to the estate. The study showed that they were essentially motivated to do so by the presence of individuals of unknown status around the houses. Yet, many of those outsiders were circulating inside the estate because they were called in for household services. As Kristin Maher put it, the project of controlling access to the estate was therefore born from a will to limit and control the process of opening to the outside. This opening was itself the result of everyday mobility: indeed, for couples where both individuals work, mobility is synonymous with low presence in the home and higher income. This fosters a strong development of household services employment, and hence an influx of outsiders into housing estates. The interactions that spring from this situation are of course strictly limited to the economic realm and are stamped with the seal of domination. They nevertheless constitute an opportunity to confront differences and this, even within the intimacy of the home¹⁰!

3. Suburban fragmentation in the Face of Mobile and Uncertain Lives

Whatever the nature of the living experience around the home, it is not easy to draw from it general conclusions on the everyday experiences of suburbanites. Indeed, city dwellers' everyday perspectives have expanded considerably, and the immediately close space now only represents a small fraction of urban life space: it is therefore necessary to take into account living experiences in other social spaces (the word "space" possibly taking on here a metaphorical meaning). Yet surprisingly few researches analyses the residential environment of the suburbanites while taking into consideration the effect of their experience out of the vicinities of their home (one noteworthy exception is Philips and Smith, 2006). In this section, we try to set some directions for investigations, and to propose some hypothesis, which remain to be tested.

3.1. Individual Peregrinations

First of all, it is necessary to consider the array of everyday life spaces within the network they form for each city dweller. Indeed, places networks are increasingly constituted on a pick-and-choose basis (Chalas, 2000). It is difficult to draw any conclusive statement from this observation, but it seems that we are not so much witnessing a retreat towards closed circle allegiances – like a communitarian involution – but another step along the path of the individualisation process that typifies urban culture, as defined in the Simmelian tradition. In the course of his or her daily peregrinations, each individual

¹⁰ In Kristen Maher's case study, the opening to the outside was quite evident since the residents that were opposed to the installation of a device to restrict access to the estate ultimately had their way.

travels through sets of places that are individualized. Even in a family, each member has his own set of places he regularly goes to (to work, to study or to shop).

Yet, this individualization of daily itineraries does not necessarily mean that people are more often confronted to otherness. On the contrary, as shown in the first section, supporters of the urban fragmentation and the death of urbanism theories surmise that the places city dwellers go to in the course of their daily peregrinations are just as sterile and controlled as residential spaces. The previous section qualified this particular vision regarding residential neighbourhoods, and we will show that this view is even more inappropriate with respect to other everyday living spaces.

Suburban spaces are not always as far removed as they might appear from the status of public spaces (as defined by the classical sociologists). This is for instance the case for peripheral shopping malls (which are nonetheless the focus of much criticism). Jean-Samuel Bordreuil even sees them as the very places where public spaces might be reappearing (2002). Indeed, by studying such spaces from a quasi-ethnological standpoint, he was able to identify once more the type of exposure to different people that Walter Benjamin deemed characteristic of Parisian boulevards in the nineteenth century. Other authors have emphasized that interactions can be quite diverse in such spaces by noting that people go there not only to shop but also to take a walk or even flirt (Ascher, 1998).

Moreover, our interviews showed that suburbanites are far from always moving from one place to another in a car. A significant minority of suburbanites use public transportation¹¹. For example, working in Paris centre often means crossing the inner suburbs twice a day. In France, many of those suburbs are quite deprived, and crossing them in a train induces a significant experience of otherness for the middle-class people. This experience is all the more so since those trains are often crowded.

3.2. Stress and the need for “safe base”

The ethical value of the experience lived in and around the home also depends on the individual's life itinerary¹². There again, the situation appears to be far less stable and controlled than critics seem to suppose. On that matter, it is important to insist on the fact that the development of residential enclaves coincides with the growing uncertainties of daily lives (Giddens, 1991; Beck, Giddens and Lasch, 1994; Ascher and Godard, 1999).

Experiences people have in the work environment are particularly instructive. Far from enjoying the generalised social climbing that was the hallmark of the Ford era (at any rate in Western countries), individuals today are confronted with great uncertainty. It is possible their social position will improve but it may just as well deteriorate. Elements such as unemployment, divorce or an accident can set off a spiral of social downfall, particularly for the lower middle and working classes, which happen to be numerous in the outer fringes (Rougé, 2005; Guilluy and Noyé, 2004).

¹¹ Among the inhabitants of Paris “grande couronne”, 13 % of the daily trips are made by public transportation.

¹² see (Jaillet, 2004) for an defence of a similar thesis in the case of the French suburbs

The upper and upper-middle classes are obviously less concerned with such problems, yet similar reasoning can be applied to their situation. Their living experience is often tainted with psychological discomfort. They are often victims of what psycho-sociologist Alain Ehrenberg has elegantly coined “the weariness of being oneself” (1998). The constant social pressure they are subjected to in order to continue being successful and the masters of their own destiny weighs on their mental equilibrium.

Under these circumstances, executives particularly appreciate quiet moments: their main preoccupation at home is to have everything go smoothly. Such a preoccupation was regularly expressed during our interviews. Managers frequently stressed the importance of having pleasant relations with their neighbours. They also underlined the relaxing effect of simply saying “hello” to them. Yet, such cordial and reassuring relationships are more difficult to sustain among heterogeneous neighbourhood. They are all the more so since suburbanites spend most of their time far from home and don’t want to be involved in long talks, and even less in arguments with their neighbours. The more neighbours agree on without discussion, the better it is (Charmes, 2005: chapter II).

These observations are nevertheless not sufficient to establish an empirical link between the stress experienced in the daily life and the rise of homogeneous neighbourhood in the suburbs. Indeed, this stress is not peculiar to the suburbanites. Moreover, homogeneous neighbourhoods and urban fragmentation are nothing new and can be explained by many different factors other than the will to be at peace at home in a uncertain world. For example, social homogeneity can be explained by concerns about social reproduction (Brun and Rhein, 1994). Also according to the Tiebout model briefly presented above, social homogeneity may be a by-product of the consumerization of the relationship to the residential environment.

Nevertheless, the hypothesis that uncertainty in daily life is nurturing the social homogenisation of suburban neighbourhood is far from being eccentric. It fits well with an idea put forward long ago by psychologists, especially by John Bowlby¹³. The latter demonstrated that children need some “secure attachment” to be able to cope with the tension of their surrounding world. It remains to be proved that adults have the same needs, but it is certainly possible to hypothesize it (indeed some steps has been taken in this direction by psychologists, especially regarding love relationships).

One can thus suggest that the more reassuring and stabilizing the living experience around the home, the greater the capacity of an individual to trust strangers, interact with them and be sensitive to their problems. Therefore, seeking a reassuring residential environment can equally be viewed as a desire to close oneself to the outside as a need for a stable base in a changing and uncertain world. The protective character of the home’s surroundings might then allow the creation of a trustworthy base from which selective opening to others can be envisaged¹⁴.

Another, more negative, argument in favour of this thesis comes from the observation that sharing a residential space with very different people is not always and ubiquitously

¹³ Most of our knowledge regarding that matter issues from Raphaële Miljkovitch book on attachment (2001).

¹⁴ For an interesting philosophical standpoint on that matter see (Begout, 2005).

beneficial. Conflicts between neighbours can indeed be quite destructive¹⁵. It is certainly important in a democratic culture that people do not always withdraw to a protective cocoon but on the other hand, the time and place may not always be favourable for such confrontation (Genestier, Laville, 1994; *Esprit*, 2004). This is particularly true of the home and its immediate environment in as much as they traditionally play the role of a refuge. This role is all the more important now that everyday life is no longer bound by the protective limits of the neighbourhood or traditional village and that professional life is largely dominated by uncertainty.

4. Conclusions

The proliferation of residential “enclaves”, sometimes gated, and the formation of archipelagos of socially and functionally specialised places appear to confirm the reflux of urbanism in the suburbs. Many perceive this phenomenon as a process that reverses the civilising role of cities. Indeed, losing in effect the capacity to share with others a particular space may well have a destructive impact on the recognition of the abstract and general norms that regulate collective life. The reinforcement of the social specialisation of neighbourhoods, community selfishness and the growing reticence of city dwellers to live near council housing estates (Bussi, 2002) support this idea.

Although these criticisms are clearly relevant, they nonetheless need to be qualified. It should first of all be emphasized that supporters of this theory fail to take into account the confrontation with difference that arises via long-distance communication media. It is of course not the same to walk past a beggar and see him or her on television; nonetheless, this point should not be overlooked. As Charles Taylor (2004) among many others wrote, the contemporary public sphere is characterised by the emancipation from the constraints of co-presence.

Furthermore, one has to refrain from analysing the present urban world through the lens of the classical sociological opposition between rural villages and industrial cities. One has to take into account the changes introduced by mobilities¹⁶, which made obsolete the old dichotomy between community and society (on which Louis Wirth based his analysis of urbanism). Indeed, when examined anew through the prism of residential mobility, it appears that the homogenisation of population zones is mainly the result of a “decommunitarization” of neighbourhoods: homogenisation is only possible because the living area has been actively chosen and is no longer determined by the place of birth (Bourdin, 2000).

The so-called “gated communities” also appear above all because group of residents no longer exert pressure to maintain people’s allegiance and limit their day-to-day perspectives¹⁷. City dwellers are no longer sufficiently present on the streets of their neighbourhood to control them personally, contrary to old custom in traditional villages. There are no shops or activities to fill the lack of human presence in suburban housing

¹⁵ We owe this qualifying adjective to Jean Rémy (personal communication).

¹⁶ For a recent work mobilizing this normative framework see (Garcia Sanchez, 2004).

¹⁷ For a more detailed presentation of this view see (Charmes, 2005: chapter III and conclusion).

estates. At the same time, disorder is not absent and dealing with it may require having recourse to physical devices to control housing estate access.

Thus paradoxically, the homogenisation and protection of residential spaces are not so much the expression of communitarian withdrawal, than the products of a widely dispersed everyday life in which the environment of the home now plays a secondary role. This is certainly not the lesser of the paradoxes the era of mobility and promised social fluidity has to offer (Montulet, Kaufmann, 2004).

Yet it is possible to go even further, to the point of being provocative. Indeed, the last section of this paper suggests that mobilities may reinforce the need for stability and control of one's immediate space. Our argument remains to be firmly grounded empirically, but mobilities have lead city dwellers out of the reassuring cocoon of the neighbourhood in which almost everyone was swathed only a few decades ago. This moving away elicits a feeling of wanting that sociologists are quick to equate with nostalgia. But beyond nostalgia, the growing uncertainty of life may enhance the need to withdraw to a home base. However, this need is temporary and only concerns isolated moments of everyday life. The general tendency remains one of dispersal of spatial practices and individualisation of experience.

The second section of this paper also suggests that the residential neighbourhood can be perceived as a "transition space" in the process of opening oneself to others. Even though the streets of suburban housing estates seem more often than not devoid of human presence, they are regularly visited by residents' acquaintances, door-to-door salespeople, household services employees, network development company staff, etc. But above all, the filters imposed by environmental tastes and the real estate market still have a limited impact. The choice of a neighbourhood is made on the basis of a restricted number of criteria and housing estates are therefore far from being totally homogeneous. What appears to be a form of social homogeneity is in fact social mix with a dominant atmosphere connotation (Rémy, 1999). This social mix – though limited – could provide the substance for a critical test that might constitute the first step towards comprehensive mix such as the one Bordreuil identified in shopping malls (2002).

In today's debate, equating neighbourhood homogenisation with the construction of home bases and transition spaces almost qualifies as provocation. It is important, however, to insist on the fact that the object is not to deny the problems posed by urban fragmentation and the growing privatisation of urban spaces. The point is to raise certain questions so as to elicit a debate in the face of a body of criticism, which – in Pierre Bourdieu's words – has unfortunately been elevated to the status of *doxa*.

The object is also to formulate a narrative of the contemporary city that is less radical and thus more propitious for social change. Interpretation in terms of closure has a tendency to work as a self-fulfilling prophecy: insisting on safe withdrawal, even with a view to criticize it, tends to give support to those who have a representation of their environment as being dangerous. Conversely, insisting on social mix, even if minimal, may redirect

the logic of the debate and allows one to build another urban “imaginary” (Soja, 2000) that is more likely to promote an opening to otherness and difference.

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