

Gated Communities: Ghettos for the Rich?

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Gated communities are usually portrayed as ghettos in which the rich choose to seclude themselves out of fear of others and an exacerbated desire for security. According to Eric Charmes, this assessment ought to be more nuanced: many of the criticisms directed at gated communities are ill founded.

Everywhere in the world residential neighborhoods are being closed off to unauthorized visitors¹. Such enclosures take a variety of forms, ranging from armed security guards posted at a posh residence's entrance to a grade-crossing barrier restricting car circulation in a suburban street. Enclosed spaces also come in various sizes and shapes: from a neighborhood of several thousand inhabitants to an agglomeration of a few dozen people; from a group of suburban houses organized around a simple private street to a multi-storied tower complex equipped with many facilities and amenities. Beyond this diversity, however, there is a widespread desire on the part of city dwellers to set up obstacles between their residential space and the outside world².

This proliferation of fences, gates and other access restriction systems has drawn significant media attention since the 1990s in the United States, and since the early 2000s in France³. This attention is explained first of all by the expansion of the phenomenon. In the United States, Edward Blakely and Mary-Gail Snyder estimated in the mid-1990s that in the most affected states, notably in the west and south of the country, 40% of new residential developments were surrounded by walls or gates⁴. In 2001, in some American metropolises such as Houston, close to a quarter of all dwellings were located within enclosed estates⁵. In France, people were first struck by the success of real estate developers in Toulouse, notably Monné-

¹ I would like to thank the editorial staff of *Books and Ideas*, namely Sébastien Gandon and Bilel Benbouzid, for their comments on a first draft of this text.

² For an overview of these criticisms, see G. Glasze, C. Webster & K. Frantz (eds.), *Private Cities: Global and Local Perspectives*, London, Routledge, 2005. See also in French T. Paquot, (dir.), *Ghettos de riches. Tour du monde des enclaves résidentielles sécurisées*, Paris, Perrin, 2009.

³ Among the first articles published in France, see J.P. Besset & P. Kremer, "Le nouvel attrait pour les résidences 'sécurisées'," *Le Monde*, 15 mai 1999. For a detailed analysis of articles published in the press, see G. Billard, J. Chevalier, F. Madoré & F. Vuillat, *Quartiers sécurisés. Un nouveau défi pour la ville?* Paris, Les Carnets de l'info, 2011, p. 163sq.

⁴ E. J. Blakely & M. G. Snyder, *Fortress America. Gated Communities in the United-States*, Brookings Institution Press & Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1997.

⁵ T. Sanchez, R. Lang & D. Dhavale, *Security versus Status? A First Look at the Census's Gated Community Data*, Alexandria, Metropolitan Institute, Virginia Tech, 2003.

Decroix, who proposed apartments in enclosed and secured collective housing. Today, fences are more and more common around new property complexes.

This rising phenomenon arouses much interest because it makes disturbing social trends particularly visible. Hence gated communities are accused of all ills⁶. They have been presented alternatively as: a cause of deepening spatial segregation with the constitution of ‘ghettos for the rich’; the dual manifestation of a fear of others and feelings of insecurity; a sign of the growing privatization of cities; and evidence that social cohesion and urban public spaces are in crisis. These criticisms are often intertwined when, for instance, feelings of insecurity have an impact on the social fabric or on rich people’s desire to exist apart. They can nonetheless be distinguished analytically. This article proposes to address each one of these criticisms in turn, and to examine their relevance.

Ghettos for the Rich?

The enclosed housing estates that have drawn most media attention are evidently the wealthiest ones. In France, the *Domaine de Terre Blanche*, located near Cannes, has struck people’s imagination with its luxurious mansions and imposing entrance⁷. Such voluntary confinement⁸ is often portrayed with irony as a ‘ghetto for the rich,’ not only in the media, but among academics as well. The title of a book published in 2009 and edited by Thierry Paquot - an important reference in the francophone scientific literature on gated communities - is “Ghettos for the Rich”⁹. This figure nonetheless raises two important caveats.

The first caveat pertains to the usage of the figure of the ghetto. One need only enter a gated community to doubt the relevance of this image. In effect, a gated community is generally nothing more than a housing estate. Nothing ever happens in them, and in the wealthiest ones domestic workers are the main source of activity during the day. In general, gated communities constitute dormitory towns for their inhabitants: key daily activities - work, leisure, study, or purchasing activities - are conducted elsewhere. Moreover, it is precisely because city dwellers spend most of their time outside their neighborhood, and because they do not form a community together with their neighbors, that gated communities have proven so successful. In the past, in lively neighborhoods where local bonds were numerous and strong, there existed what Jane Jacobs termed “eyes on the street”¹⁰, and everyone - storekeepers, passers-by, residents - participated in collective surveillance. In this context, local inhabitants felt no need to resort to technical solutions or specialized personnel to control behaviors. Yet in residential spaces today, where the norm is to ‘mind one’s own business’ and where one’s neighbor is rarely a friend, a colleague or a family member, residents do not wish to get involved in the control of collective spaces. They prefer to delegate this task to external providers or technological devices. From this

⁶ G. Capron, “Les Ensembles résidentiels fermés dans les Amériques. Une lecture critique de la littérature,” *L’Espace géographique*, n° 2, 2004, pp. 97-113.

⁷ See the news report “Ghetto de riches” (Ghettos for the Rich) broadcast in 2001 and 2002 on M6’s TV magazine “Capital”.

⁸ S. Degoutin, *Prisonniers volontaires du rêve américain*, Paris, Editions de la Villette, 2006.

⁹ T. Paquot, (dir.), *op. cit.*, 2009. In the introduction, Thierry Paquot takes some precautions with the usage of the ‘ghetto for the rich’ figure.

¹⁰ J. Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York, Random House, 1961.

perspective, the development of gated communities must be understood not as the expression of inward-looking communities, but rather as the exact opposite: as the consequence of the weakening of local community ties – what Philippe Robert calls the “erosion of neighborly sociability”¹¹ (which results mainly from the growing importance of residential and daily mobilities). This bespeaks the extent to which the use of the figure of the ghetto can lead to misunderstandings. This usage can withstand criticism only in the case of gated retirement communities. In the latter, occupants effectively tend to live among themselves within a space enclosed by walls. But this is insufficient to characterize gated communities as ghettos, even when allowing oneself the irony of the paradox and taking liberties with common sense.

The second caveat pertains to the association between gated communities and wealth. Surely, the most visible and impermeable barricades are those surrounding the residences of the rich. Yet this connection between wealth and seclusion becomes highly debatable when the focus is enlarged to include the entire range of situations in which dwellings are surrounded by spaces that are simultaneously under a regime of private management, enclosed by gates or fences that isolate them from their environment, and under restricted access - these being the three criteria generally used in the scientific literature to define gated communities¹². Take the case of the United States, the country that sets the standard in the literature. This country is also one of the few in which a serious statistical study has been conducted on a national scale to measure the phenomenon¹³. This study has shown that the latter affects the poor slightly more than the rich. This is hardly surprising. The enclosing and securing of collective spaces is particularly frequent in social housing estates, notably those built following the principles of modern urbanism. In a number of countries, social housing estates are being restructured through rehabilitation initiatives (known in France as ‘résidentialisation’)¹⁴. These initiatives take many forms and the modalities of their implementation vary, but in most cases they entail the division of free spaces into private parcels on the one hand – each parcel being associated to a particular building – and into public spaces resembling the traditional street model on the other. And this redistribution of space is frequently accomplished through the installation of fences to delimit private parcels, and of control devices restricting access to those parcels. In a way, these initiatives entail transforming every building into a private residence. The goal is to simultaneously improve circulation control (notably by canalizing the movements of potential trouble makers), allow residents to better appropriate the spaces that surround their building, and facilitate the maintenance and management of free spaces (landlords handle privatized parcels, while municipalities oversee public spaces that have been transformed into streets).

In Africa or Latin America, working-class or impoverished neighborhoods are also significantly affected by the enclosure of streets and collective spaces¹⁵. Obviously, the fences

¹¹ P. Robert, “Les territoires du contrôle social, quels changements ?,” *Déviance et société*, vol. 24, n° 3, 2000, pp. 215-23.

¹² For further details, see notably G. Billard, J. Chevalier, F. Madoré & F. Vuailat, *op. cit.*, 2011, pp.11-12.

¹³ The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) included questions on the topic for the first time in its 2001 census. Households were asked about the presence around their homes of collective spaces enclosed by gates or walls and with restricted access. For a presentation of census results, see T. Sanchez, R. Lang & D. Dhavale, *op. cit.*, 2003.

¹⁴ See C. Lelévrier & B. Guigou: “Les Incertitudes de la résidentialisation. Transformation des espaces et régulation des usages,” in B. Haumont & A. Morel (dir.), *La Société des voisins*, Editions de la MSH, Paris, 2005, pp. 51-68.

¹⁵ See for instance C. Bénit-Gbaffou, S. Owuor & S. Fabiyi, “Le Territoire contre le réseau ? Fermetures de rue et nouvelles formes de gouvernance urbaine à Johannesburg, Ibadan et Nairobi,” *Flux*, n° 67, janvier-mars 2007, pp.

and gates erected in these areas do not look the same as in posh neighborhoods. The differences are particularly glaring in African countries. While in rich neighborhoods guards control entries and exits 24/7, in poor neighborhoods a simple barrier – which remains open most of the time - must be operated by those who enter and leave the premises. And while in posh quarters private patrols operate around-the-clock and have important means of intervention at their disposal (including the right to shoot in certain countries), in working-class areas residents must manage on their own. These differences lead to important inequalities in terms of safety of goods and people. They indicate that states have renounced the monopoly on legitimate violence (at least at the level of residential neighborhoods), and are now unable to guarantee on their own the safety of their constituents. These differences also explain, and justify in part, the attention paid to the seclusion of the rich. All the same, residential enclosure is not a privilege of the wealthy. The most exclusive gated communities reveal inequalities first and foremost, not a seclusion or looking-inward that would be specific to the rich.

The case of France further contradicts the commonplace discourse on the ‘ghettos for the rich.’ The most commonly used example in the media and in the French scientific literature is the group of properties built by Toulouse developer Monné-Decroix¹⁶. This real estate developer gained national stature by selling apartments in fully enclosed housing estates that included a swimming pool, green spaces, a security guard and an internal video surveillance system (with the possibility for residents to view the images on their television). Yet far from being golden fortresses as described by some¹⁷, the much-discussed Monné-Decroix residences were most often occupied by young, moderate-income couples drawn by what they perceived to be a low rent for the proposed living environment. In reality, the developer owed his initial success to the sale of apartments to investors as part of a tax exemption scheme. Specifically, since the respect of a rent ceiling was a condition for obtaining a tax exemption, Monné-Decroix sought to maximize the profitability of the investments he offered by locating his properties in areas that were relatively abandoned and in which real estate was inexpensive. By stressing the supposedly attractive aspect of security, the developer sought first of all to reassure investors. He made them hope that they would easily find solvent tenants, in spite of the neighborhood’s low rating.

An Escalation of Security?

I have just referred to the “supposedly” attractive aspect of security. My point in adding this adverb is not to enter the debate on the reality of insecurity or on the role fear of robberies and assaults plays in political decisions and individual behaviors. More modestly, I wish to interrogate the weight of security concerns on the development of gated communities. Numerous observers consider these concerns to be a key factor. To pick one example among many, an article published in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in 2002 commented as follows on the development of Monné-Decroix properties: “In Toulouse, fear of the other and exacerbated feelings of insecurity have created the conditions for an escalation of security reflected in the proliferation of

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¹⁶ See the work of François Madoré & Fanny Vuillat: “Les logiques sécuritaires dans le discours des promoteurs et des résidents des ensembles résidentiels fermés : l’exemple de Nantes,” *Noréis*, 212, 2009, pp. 9-22. See also N. Golovtchenko & F. Souchet, “Des gated communities à la française ? Les résidences fermées toulousaines,” in B. Haumont & A. Morel (dir.), *op. cit.*, Éditions de la MSH, 2005, pp. 145-167.

¹⁷ H. Belmessous, “Voyage à travers les forteresses de riches,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, novembre 2002.

‘secured’ residences”¹⁸. Fear of robberies and assaults has no doubt contributed to the development of gated communities. In any case, this phenomenon does coincide with the rapid increase in the number of registered crimes¹⁹. And in some countries, notably in Africa or Latin America, safety risks and the crime rate are such that it would be unreasonable for anyone who can afford it not to try to protect himself or herself (obviously, the point here is not to justify the social order and especially the inequalities at the root of this violence, but only to observe that the risk of being the victim of violent assault or robbery is high).

Be that as it may, the search for physical and material security is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon. In the reference study they conducted in the 1990s in the United States, Edward Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder identified three main types of gated communities: security zone communities (of course); prestige communities (where a heavy gate at a residence’s entrance helps signify affluence to visitors and passersby); and lifestyle communities (modeled on leisure clubs, with resorts and holiday villages being prime examples). Of these three types, security zone communities in no way dominated the landscape. For instance, at the time of the study, ‘lifestyle communities’ were the most common type in the Sunbelt (southern US states)²⁰. Developers are well aware of this, since they gladly associate the fences they propose with an image of exclusivity, and not one of security (recognizing in so doing that security evokes negative emotions²¹).

Thus, in Europe or North America, gated communities are rarely fortresses surrounded by high walls. Only the homes of the very wealthy offer high security (e.g. villa Montmorency in Paris, occupied by media celebrities and powerful businessmen). In the United States, for instance, it is often possible to infiltrate a gated community by tailgating a vehicle that is entering the premises. And in many cases, barriers only restrict car circulation: pedestrians continue to enter freely. In addition, security devices are rarely enforced with a human presence such as security guards. For determined burglars, access is relatively easy, if only because security regulations often require that an entrance be left open for emergency services. Residents know this, and have few illusions about the security afforded by gates and fences. In France, studies have shown²² that tenants in Monné-Decroix apartments have mixed views on the security devices they are said to enjoy.

A similar conclusion can be reached when focusing on the enclosing of previously open collective spaces in residential neighborhoods (namely the appearance of gates and other access control devices at the entrance of suburban streets and around buildings), rather than on developers’ new products. Feelings of insecurity are merely auxiliary to the process that leads to enclosure. Residents’ primary concern is with the regulation of behaviors in their neighborhood rather than with insecurity *stricto sensu* (as in fear of burglary, car theft or assault). The two most

¹⁸ H. Belmessous, *art. cit.*, 2002.

¹⁹ Concerning the increase in crime, see D. Garland, “Adaptations politiques et culturelles des sociétés à forte criminalité,” *Déviance et Société*, vol. 31, n° 4, 2007, pp. 387-403 (Bilel Benbouzid pointed out this reference to me).

²⁰ E. J. Blakely & M. G. Snyder, *op. cit.*, 1997.

²¹ In the 2000s, Monné-Decroix changed its communication to take this into account (see G. Billard, J. Chevalier, F. Madoré & F. Vuailat, *op. cit.*, 2011).

²² G. Billard, J. Chevalier, F. Madoré & F. Vuailat, *op. cit.*, 2011.

frequently cited sources of trouble are cars on the one hand, and teenagers and young adults on the other²³.

Suburban streets are generally isolated from circulation flows, but a few reckless drivers suffice to make residents complain, notably for their children. In suburban streets with no dead end, residents sometimes mobilize to block one of the street's entry points and eliminate all 'alien' traffic. They can then install a small automatic barrier or roadblocks that prevent the passage of vehicles, but do not necessarily block the passage of pedestrians or even the entry of cars via the remaining open access - which proves that security is indeed a secondary concern. Stronger restrictions can be put in place (with a gate for instance), but even then security is not always a priority: it may be a matter of regulating parking, especially when a nearby sports center, store, or school attracts drivers in search of a space to park their car.

Teenagers are also a major concern. In residential neighborhoods, groups of young people form at night, for instance, to chat or play football. Raised voices disturb the neighbors who complain of not being able to sleep with their windows open, notably in the summer. Other residents moan over the beer cans and empty pizza boxes left lying about the next day. Feelings of insecurity reinforce the negative impression left on many people by such conducts; hence illicit behaviors like drug trafficking are easily attributed to these youths. The most common reaction is to call law enforcement agencies. Yet the latter feel they have more urgent tasks to attend to, and do not eagerly intervene in cases of behaviors that are already difficult to sanction and control. Residents can then decide to impose physical restrictions on the usage of collective spaces, which can result in the installation of barriers.

Of course, these actions reveal pathologies of the social fabric²⁴, notably in the relationship between adults and young people. But it would be reductive to analyze them primarily as a consequence of feelings of insecurity - which would cause people to view the other systematically as a danger or a threat. Feelings of insecurity do exist and create tensions in social relations, but they are a catalyst more than a driving force behind the enclosing of previously open residential spaces. Defense from offenses against persons and property is not the main motivation of city dwellers. Mobilizations take place rather against troubles that irritate or unnerve them, be they caused by noisy youths, or by motorists who drive too fast or park without respecting the 'private road / parking reserved for residents' panel. In other words, and this is true in many countries, the enclosing of private streets does not aim so much for security (in the sense of limiting the possibility of assaults or robberies) as for the regulation of behaviors and usages (in the sense of applying an internal rule). This observation echoes the connection made earlier between the development of gated communities and the fact that neighborhoods no longer form communities with strong internal ties, and hence can no longer be controlled by residents themselves. Perhaps even more than a deepening fear of the other or growing feelings of insecurity, gated communities reflect the implosion of the spaces of everyday life, as well as the fact that neighborhoods now rarely constitute city dwellers' main living place.

A Privatization of the Public Domain?

²³ See E. Charmes, *La Vie Périurbaine face à la menace des gated communities*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2005.

²⁴ On this topic, see M.P. Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

The link between privatization and the development of enclosed housing estates imposes itself as self-evident²⁵. In the definition above, the private character of the spaces shared by residents is even constitutive of gated communities. Moreover, a sign reading ‘private property’ or ‘private residence’ is often posted at the entrance of enclosed housing estates. Yet the public-private relationship expressed in gated communities is more complex than a simple expansion of the private domain that would reduce the public realm to its bare bones. Uncovering this complexity is necessary for grasping the real stakes of gated communities, and for measuring the extent to which they constitute ambivalent instruments from the standpoint of the public interest²⁶.

In several cities, requests for road retrocessions – i.e. for the classification of private roads in the public domain – are frequent. I am not aware of any detailed study on the subject, but the demand for publicization may well be stronger than for privatization. This is certainly the case in a number of ancient residential suburbs. Indeed, suburban housing estates are often developed with private funds in order to limit their impact on public finances, which means that roads and networks serving individual houses are built by private developers and paid for by homeowners. Sometimes these roads are immediately retroceded to the local collectivity, but they often remain private properties. Residents are happy to go along with this until the prospect of road resurfacing or sewage system repair crops up. Such works are very costly, hence one thought goes through residents’ minds: ‘in general, it is municipalities that look after roads and networks.’ But this is true only if roads belong to the public domain. A retrocession project can thus be elaborated. Some municipalities respond favorably to such projects, but not always. They are particularly reluctant when the road is a dead end (and hence is of interest only to residents) and in poor condition (which means expenses incurred by the collectivity risk being high). Thus, several requests for the classification of roads in the public domain are rejected, which is relatively understandable considering that these roads are the functional equivalents of residential buildings’ entrance halls, staircases and car-parks, and that few would think of having such spaces enter the public domain. The problem is that when residents learn that their request was rejected, they tend to react by reaffirming the private character of their street, notably by restricting access to it in order to prevent its degradation by non-residents²⁷.

Public authorities’ contribution to the development of gated communities can go further than this. In some countries, notably in the United States, (increasingly enclosed) private housing estates are promoted as a way of reducing spending at the municipal and county levels. Private suburban estates effectively offer their residents – on the local level at least - a whole series of services usually provided by public collectivities, such as street maintenance, front door trash collection, and security. By systematizing the recourse to gated communities, some municipalities in the United States have managed to reduce their personnel to a few dozen people, even though they may comprise several hundred thousand inhabitants²⁸.

Enclosed residential estates proliferate not only in contexts where public authority is disengaging. In Cairo, for example, the largest number of gated communities can be found in the

²⁵ S. Low & N. Smith (eds.), *The Politics of Public Space*, London, Routledge, 2006.

²⁶ R. Le Goix, “Gated communities: sprawl and social segregation in Southern California,” *Housing Studies*, vol. 20, n° 2, 2005, pp. 323-344.

²⁷ For the French case, see E. Charmes, *op. cit.*, 2005.

²⁸ R.E. Lang & J.B. Lefurgy, *Boomburbs: The Rise of America’s Accidental Cities*, Brookings Institution Press, 2007.

new city of 6th of October²⁹. Similarly, in Rio de Janeiro, the highest concentration of gated communities is in Barra da Tijuca - a neighborhood that was entirely planned by public authorities in the 1960s, and that expanded over the following decades. Around Shanghai, the planning of new neighborhoods is almost systematically accompanied by the creation of huge gated communities comprising several thousand inhabitants. This is notably the case in the residential section of Pudong district, or in new satellite cities like Songjiang. Several other examples of this kind could be offered, showing that gated communities do not necessarily express the disengagement of public powers. In the cases just mentioned, it is precisely in places where public authorities most clearly assert their power and their capacity to organize urban space that gated communities are the largest and most numerous. They are viewed indeed as tools for healthy urban management, relieving public budgets of the costs incurred by certain local facilities and collective services.

From this perspective, gated communities can be considered to be a particularly accomplished embodiment of public/private partnerships and of the neoliberal government regime that sustains them. The latter combines maximal recourse to the market and private actors with strong public intervention – a combination which, depending on one’s viewpoint, can be interpreted as a way of putting the financial and operational power of the market in the service of collective interests (the orthodox perspective), or as a way of placing public powers’ action tools at the disposal of the market and private interests (the critical viewpoint)³⁰.

What is referred to as road closures helps illustrate another aspect of the relationship between the development of gated communities and the public interest. All closed streets are not necessarily private. In various countries, notably in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, streets belonging to the public domain exist under restricted or controlled access. In reality, access remains officially free while being deterred in practice, for instance through the presence of security guards who ask passersby to disclose their identities before lifting the barrier and letting them in. This is common in a city like Johannesburg, where *de facto* privatization of the public domain is illegal yet tolerated, notably for fiscal reasons. If municipal officials publicly criticize the closing of public roads, they consider them unofficially to be a necessary evil. Without these, in effect, residents would probably move outside the bounds of the municipality. And if they did, the latter would lose part of its tax base and hence its capacity to act, especially in favor of the most destitute.

It is this line of reasoning that prompted Oscar Newman (known as one of the first exponents of the ideas guiding the above mentioned rehabilitation operations today) to champion the closing (and privatization) of roads in American city centers³¹. He felt this would help keep the wealthiest households in central neighborhoods, and hence limit the notorious ‘white flight’ to the peripheries. He had indeed observed that households living in private and closed streets had a lower propensity to move to residential suburbs. These closures were certainly regrettable, yet for Oscar Newman they were a lesser evil when compared with the spiral of degradation in

²⁹ See M. Ducola, “Vers la privatisation d'un territoire : les villes nouvelles égyptiennes face aux ensembles résidentiels fermés. L'exemple de Six-October,” mémoire sous la direction d'Eric Charmes, Institut français d'urbanisme, 2005.

³⁰ For a radical version of the critical viewpoint, see notably the works of Mike Davis, including *City of Quartz. Los Angeles capitale du futur*, translated by M. Darteville and M. Saint-Upéry, Paris, La Découverte, 1997.

³¹ O. Newman, *Community of Interest*, New York, Anchor Press, Double Day, 1980. See notably chapter 6: “The private streets of Saint-Louis.”

central municipalities' finances caused by the departure of middle class households towards suburban ones. These departures were draining central municipalities of their fiscal resources, precisely as their needs were on the rise due to the growing share of poor people in them. In these circumstances, the privatization and closing of roads could serve the collective interest (even though, as I will soon show, the benefits of this are not obvious in the long term).

In sum, the relationship between public and private interests embodied in enclosed housing estates is a complex one. This complexity stems in part from the ambiguous status of several of the spaces that surround dwelling places, insofar as these spaces are neither private like a house, nor public in the way a bustling street is. Given this ambiguity, it is difficult to take an *a priori* position on the just or unjust character of the private administration of housing estates.

An Undermining of Social Cohesion and Solidarity?

Gated communities are also a cause for concern because they appear to undermine social cohesion³². Thus, there would only be a short step from gated communities to secession. In this perspective, upper and (increasingly) middle class households are said to 'de-solidarize' themselves from working class ones. By settling in gated communities, these households would express in a particularly vivid way their desire to push others aside, and especially those poorer than themselves. This exclusion is merely physical, yet it contains the seeds of political exclusion. The debates surrounding double taxation in the United States illustrate this point well³³. Some residents of private housing estates (which are not all enclosed) mobilize to demand that municipalities reduce their taxes when these are used to pay for services or facilities they already finance via their homeowners' association fees. These residents claim: "we have our own street maintenance services, and we do not want to contribute to the financing of street maintenance in public residential areas." Choosing to meet their own needs via the market therefore leads residents to vote against public interventions. This shows how, contrary to Oscar Newman's reasoning, privatization can undermine solidarity. From this perspective, if there are as many rich people living in enclosed housing estates as there are poor people, the signification of this is not the same for the first as it is for the second. The consequences of disengagement by public powers are not equivalent: poor households do not have the same means as rich households to satisfy their needs.

On top of this, certain studies suggest that children who live in gated communities develop a political culture that is less open, and more suspicious of others who are different and especially poorer than them - a perspective that was developed notably by the influential American anthropologist Setha Low³⁴. Residing in a gated community would not only cause people to live in a bubble isolated from the external world, but it would also favor an attitude of

³² See notably, in *Esprit*, the special issue edited by Jacques Donzelot and Olivier Mongin: "Quand la ville se défait," n° 258, novembre 1999, pp. 83-189. For a different viewpoint, see P. Genestier, "Gated communities versus ville européenne : la version urbaine de l'anti-américanisme," *Espaces et sociétés*, n° 107, pp. 203-208.

³³ E. McKenzie, *Privatopia. Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1994.

³⁴ S.M. Low, *Behind the Gates. Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America*, London, Routledge, 2003.

fear and discomfort towards the latter. In other words, looking at the world from behind barriers is not neutral.

These fears and concerns should not be neglected, and the incriminating evidence is indeed powerful. One must nonetheless bear in mind a few points that relativize the political significance of critical discourses concerning the impact of gated communities on the social fabric. The scale of residential enclaves, in particular, must be taken into account. In the literature, gated communities are regularly depicted as private cities. If some of these estates, notably in the United States, have an area and population comparable to those of a small city with several thousand inhabitants, such cases remain exceptional and, most importantly, are often old and do not reflect dominant trends³⁵. In Edward Blakely and Mary-Gail Snyder's reference study, gated communities in the United States included 150 homes on average³⁶. In England, two thirds of all gated communities include less than 50 residences and very few have more than 150³⁷. France seems to be in a similar situation: residential enclaves put on the market in the early 2000s contained on average 38 properties³⁸. This scale makes gated communities comparable to flat housing blocks with internal courtyards, entrance halls, staircases, elevators and eventually parking spaces. On this scale, inequalities between those who live in gated communities and those who don't are generally of limited importance except, as was mentioned earlier, in countries where protection against assaults and robberies is little or not at all guaranteed. Oftentimes, other types of barriers - albeit less visible ones - are much more important. This is true notably of the borders formed by school catchment areas or traced by the real estate market between chic and poor neighborhoods.

Furthermore, on the limited scale that characterizes most gated communities, access restrictions are nothing new. In large urban centers, access to the heart of housing blocks is almost systematically reserved for residents, while entry into buildings is further controlled by keypads, intercoms and, more and more, videophones. This is an old phenomenon that has generated few debates so far. It is true that in traditional urban centers buildings do not relate to public space the way gated communities do, be these *condominios fechados* in São Paulo or suburban estates in Los Angeles. In the first case, residents often leave their buildings on foot and insert themselves into a flow of pedestrians both numerous and diverse. In the second, inhabitants often leave their housing estate by car and insert themselves into a flow of automobiles, interacting less directly with the rest of society. Different authors, moreover, complete the critical picture of gated communities as follows³⁹: "after leaving his secured home, the [gated community] resident drives through poor neighborhoods, protected by the tinted windows of his SUV and the crash barriers on each side of the highway; he gets off his car only after placing it in the parking lot of a business park or shopping center under video surveillance." Surely, this

³⁵ With the notable exception of China.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, 1997.

³⁷ R. Atkinson, S. Blandy, J. Flint & D. Lister, "Gated cities of today? Barricaded residential development in England," *Town Planning Review*, vol. 76, n°4, 2005, pp. 417-437.

³⁸ G. Billard, J. Chevalier & F. Madoré, *Ville fermée, ville surveillée. La sécurisation des espaces résidentiels en France et en Amérique du Nord*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005.

³⁹ See notably: D. Mangin, *La Ville franchisée. Formes et structures de la ville contemporaine*, Paris, Editions de la Villette, 2004; S. Graham & S. Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition*, London, Routledge, 2001; R. Atkinson & J. Flint, "Fortress UK? Gated communities, the spatial revolt of the elites and time-space trajectories of segregation," *Housing Studies*, Vol. 19, n° 6, 2004, pp. 875-892.

picture does not correspond to the lived experience of all residents of gated communities, but its plausibility suggests that the problem is not only gated communities as such, but gated communities as part of an urban system that is evolving in troubling directions. Thus, the problem would be not only the enclosure of residential estates, but a sort of global enclosure of the spaces frequented daily by the upper and middle classes, which would systematically isolate these social categories from the poor. These observations nonetheless draw us into in a debate that goes beyond the case of gated communities, and is related to the question of the impact of city dwellers' daily experiences on the social fabric - an impact which is often presupposed but rarely proven⁴⁰.

Conclusion

In sum, when gated communities are considered in and of themselves (independently of transformations of the urban systems in which they exist), many of the criticisms directed at them often prove to be very broad, ideological, and empirically ill-founded. It all depends on the context of course, and in this sense Johannesburg is not London, nor is it Los Angeles or Shanghai. It all depends on each situation as well: an enclosed estate containing several thousand dwellings has little in common with a residence composed of a few dozen apartments. That being said, several criticisms – such as those that characterize enclosed housing estates as ‘ghettos for the rich’ - are weakly founded. Criticisms seem justified mainly when the situation is considered in symbolic terms. Gated communities attract four major criticisms that apply to contemporary cities: socio-spatial segregation, the crisis of public space, the escalation of security, and the expansion of the private sector in the production and administration of cities. Gated communities allow for the expression of concerns that are related to real problems with important political implications. For all that, these problems will not be resolved simply by bringing down walls and barriers.

It needs to be emphasized again that the symbolic and expressive power of barriers and walls tends to conceal the - less immediately visible - processes and transformations that underlie the development of gated communities⁴¹. Symbols are certainly important; and city dwellers' propensity to tolerate and even promote the display of such symbols is no doubt problematic. Yet as this study has shown, gated communities are usually only the symptoms of larger and more troubling phenomena that ought to be fully addressed and borne in mind. Take once again the question of socio-spatial segregation. In his study of the phenomenon in Los Angeles, Renaud Le Goix clearly showed that gated communities do not significantly increase segregation by themselves, and that they are only the visible surface of processes playing themselves out on a larger scale, notably at the municipal level⁴². Similarly, social segregation in France is organized primarily at the level of neighborhoods, municipalities, or school catchment areas. The latter's borders are no doubt less visible and more difficult to show in a news report, yet they are much

⁴⁰ See E. Charmes, “Pour une approche critique de la mixité sociale,” *Laviedesidees.fr*, 10 mars 2009 (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Pour-une-approche-critique-de-la.html>).

⁴¹ This point of view is consistent with that of G. Billard, J. Chevalier, F. Madoré et F. Vuailat, *op. cit.*, 2011, pp.118-119.

⁴² R. Le Goix, *art. cit.*, 2005, pp. 323-344.

more determining than the gates and walls that surround housing estates composed of a few dozen dwellings⁴³.

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⁴³ Concerning the exclusivist policies implemented by peri-urban municipalities, see E. Charmes, *La Ville émietée. Essai sur la chubbisation de la vie urbaine*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2011.