Beyond dreams of village life: residential clubs and clubbisation[1]

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At a time of increasing "metropolisation" and ever greater pressure on mobility, how can neighbourhood attachments be explained? These phenomena, far from being contradictory, would in fact appear to be two sides of the same coin. What's more, although city-dwellers remain attached to the neighbourhood in which they live, these attachments are changing, too. Using analyses developed in his recent work La ville émiettée *("The Fragmented City"), published by Presses Universitaires de France, Éric Charmes suggests an analogy with private clubs to describe these new neighbourhood relationships, and proposes the term "clubbisation" to qualify this process.*

The majority of day-to-day life no longer revolves around the home, but rather takes place in a fragmented space on a metropolitan scale. And yet, as any ethnographical or sociological survey will show, people in city centres, inner-city areas and the inner suburbs remain very much attached to the neighbourhoods in which they live, which they will often describe as a "village". Moreover, on the fringes of metropolitan areas, beyond the traditional suburbs, city life in the country – in formerly rural villages – is proving extremely popular. There is a paradox here, exemplified by the unsuitability of the term "village" to describe contemporary relationships within the neighbourhood and residential spaces. Neighbourhood life, even when animated, has little in common with the rural village life described by ethnographers as late as the 1960s,[2] and which generally extended no further than the parish bounds; unlike the villagers of this period, city-dwellers spend most of their day-to-day life outside their neighbourhood and do not take kindly to the sort of strong social control exerted by neighbours that would have been commonplace in rural villages 50 years ago. This is, of course, nothing new; nonetheless, we still have some difficulties in describing the exact relationship that city-dwellers maintain with the spaces surrounding their home.

These difficulties are most obvious when it comes to describing lifestyles in towns dominated by individual housing on the periurban fringe. With their deserted residential streets and overcrowded, congested highways, these settlements clearly illustrate what some have called "the end of the neighbourhood"[3] or the "deterritorialisation" of lifestyles. However, with their private, protected estates ("gated communities"), these periurban areas are also demonstrating just as clearly the phenomenon of self-segregation. What are we to make of this paradox between neighbourhood life that seems to be losing its importance and local attachments that are growing stronger? Like many paradoxes, it is the result not so much of a contradiction in reality as of an inadequacy of mobilised concepts. Its formulation is based on deeply rooted oppositions in representations of the social realm, such as the opposition between attachment and mobility, or between community and society. However, although these oppositions might have been useful for expressing the transition from rural to urban life at the turn of the 20th century, they are no longer fit for this purpose in societies that are now very much urbanised. These dichotomies currently represent an ideological smokescreen that contrasts phenomena that have long since become complementary.

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[1] The author would like to thank Bilel Benbouzid for his observations.
[2] See later for our characterisation of this village life.
[3] See in particular Ascher, François. 1998. "La fin des quartiers", in Haumont, Nicole (dir.), *L'urbain dans tous ses états : faire, vivre, dire la ville*, Paris: L'Harmattan, pp. 183–201.

Local attachments in the metropolitan era

Local territorialisation must be considered in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to, mobility.[4] For instance, it is precisely because city-dwellers spend most of their time in places other than their neighbourhood, and because they do not – or no longer – form a community together with their neighbours, that gated communities have proven so successful. Previously, in lively neighbourhoods where numerous strong local links bound the community together, there existed what Jane Jacobs called the "eyes on the street"[5] and every member of the community – shopkeepers, passers-by, residents – participated in this collective natural surveillance. In this kind of context, local inhabitants felt little need to turn to technical solutions or specialist personnel to control behaviour. By contrast, in contemporary residential spaces, where it is now standard behaviour to mind one's own business – and where one's neighbours are rarely one's friends, colleagues or family – residents do not wish to get involved in the control of communal spaces and prefer to delegate this task to outside service providers or through the use of technology. From this standpoint, the development of gated communities must be understood not as the result of a strong, inward-looking community, but rather the exact opposite, i.e. the consequence of the weakening of local community ties – what Philippe Robert calls the erosion of "neighbourly sociability",[6] which results principally from the important role that residential and daily mobility now plays.

The work necessary to move away from an opposition between attachment and mobility has already begun. Particular note should be made, in France, of the contributions of Yves Grafmeyer and his colleagues, whose surveys in dense city-centre and inner-city districts have shown that the development of various forms of mobility does not lead to the death of the neighbourhood, contrary to certain predictions made in the 1990s.[7] As Yves Grafmeyer himself has written, "the attachment to the neighbourhood is in no way mutually exclusive with strong investment in other spaces in the city."[8] Nonetheless, aside from the observation of possible complementarities between local attachments and a broader relationship with the city, a theoretical model to explain the way in which a strong local attachment can be compatible with intense daily mobility and a highly fragmented use of metropolitan spaces has yet to be constructed.

The club: a new model for neighbourly relationships

The concept of a club would seem a promising potential model in this regard. This and other similar concepts are not new in sociology: Georg Simmel, for example, characterised city life using the notion of a circle or group, which we might liken to an exclusive club.[9] Here, we should like to mention one particular definition, inspired by economics and the works of the British geographer Chris Webster.[10] For economists, such clubs are a way of sharing a resource or a set of resources. This form of sharing can be defined using two criteria: the possibility of excluding potential users, and the absence of "congestion" between admitted users (or, to put it another away, the sharing of resources must have a minimal impact on one's ability to enjoy these resources). The fulfilment of the second criterion is, of course, linked to the first, as it is often by limiting the number of members that congestion is avoided. A landscaped garden or a swimming pool in a condominium complex

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[4] This paragraph contains elements taken from Charmes, Éric. 2011. "Les *gated communities* : des ghettos de riches ?", *Laviedesidees.fr*, published online on 29 March 2011.

[5] Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House.

[6] Robert, Philippe. 2000. "Les territoires du contrôle social, quels changements ?", *Déviance et société*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 215–23.

[7] In particular, see Ascher, François. 1998. *Op. cit.*

[8] Grafmeyer, Yves. 2006. "Le quartier des sociologues", in Authier, Bacqué & Guerin-Pace, *Le quartier. Enjeux scientifiques, actions politiques et pratiques sociales*, Paris: La Découverte, p. 28.

[9] Simmel, Georg. 1999 [1908]. *Sociologie. Étude sur les formes de la socialisation*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

[10] See Webster, Chris J. 2003. "The Nature of the Neighbourhood", *Urban Studies*, vol. 40, no. 13, pp. 2591–2612.

indisputably meet both of these criteria, provided that there are not too many residents, and that access to these facilities is restricted to residents only (the fulfilment of this second condition may require the imposition of access restrictions – contributing in no small way to the development of gated communities).

Clubs can be managed by both public and private structures. The examples given thus far have focused on private residential complexes, but municipalities can be equally concerned by this phenomenon. After all, they possess the tools necessary to exclude certain populations: they can restrict access to their territory to specific demographic groups and implement policies promoting social population control (e.g. by limiting the amount of social housing built or prohibiting the construction of collective housing). The differences can potentially be quite considerable. Take house prices in the Paris region, for instance: if we compare the ultra-bourgeois Neuilly-sur-Seine, an inner suburb on the western edge of Paris proper (in France's richest *département*, Hauts-de-Seine), with an equally nearby suburb on the north-eastern boundary of Paris (in the disadvantaged Seine-Saint-Denis *département*), the same type of property can cost around five times as much, if not more, in Neuilly.[11]

But to exactly what extent can we compare municipalities to clubs, and inhabitants to club members? The case presented below of small French periurban municipalities shows that this analogy can, in fact, be taken to considerable lengths. However, this would not have been the case just a few decades ago: the changes that have been observed in recent years are the result of what we propose to call "clubbisation" – an inelegant neologism, but one whose meaning is nonetheless clear. Clubbisation is the transition from a relationship with the local environment close to that found in the ideal-type of a community (and which could still be found in many rural villages in the 1960s) to a relationship close to that found in the ideal-type of an exclusive club (and which can be found today in condominium complexes and increasingly, as we will see, in certain periurban towns and villages). Clubbisation is therefore the transition from a local-level relationship, where the core issues were ensuring harmonious living and sharing common-pool resources within a given group, to a relationship where the core issue is the definition of a group to benefit from the sharing of given resources. In an outlook inspired by Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*, in which politics and economics constitute relatively autonomous spheres,[12] one might say that recent decades have been marked by the transition from a relationship that is primarily political at local level (where priority is given to the relationship with other people, as in a village community) to a relationship that is primarily economic at local level (where priority is given to the relationship with resources that have a market value, with one of these resources being the members themselves, as in a gentlemen's club).

These transformations, far from being incompatible with daily and residential mobility, are in fact the very expression of these types of mobility. It is possible to have a market-based relationship with the services, resources and amenities that come with residence in a particular locality, to the extent that we choose the place where we live (taking into consideration income-related constraints). Similarly, it is possible not to feel politically connected to our neighbours and, at the same time, consider that our destiny is relatively independent of that of our neighbourhood, as we can always decide to move.[13] Finally, with the expansion of the territories in which we lead our day-to-day lives, we depend less and less on our neighbourhoods as far as work, friends and family are concerned. Consequently, the local environment and the neighbourhood have lost a large part of their political value. The development of the internet, and the various forms of sociability it enables, only serves to boost this ongoing trend of disconnection between "politicised" spaces and

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[11] See Filippi, Benoît *et al*. 2007. *Marchés du logement et fractures urbaines en Île-de-France*, Paris: PUCA Ministère de l'Équipement.

[12] See Walzer, Michael. 1984. *Spheres of Justice. A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*, New York: Basic Books.

[13] Rémy, Jean. 2004. "Culture de la mobilité et nouvelles formes de territorialité", in Vodoz, Pfister-Giauque & Jemelin (dir.), *Les territoires de la mobilité. L'aire du temps*, Lausanne: Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires Romandes, pp. 13–42.

residential spaces.[14] The political space is disappearing at neighbourhood level and persists only at higher levels, such as population centres, city regions, countries and transnational spaces.[15]

Periurban municipalities: residential clubs?

One type of territory in particular demonstrates – in an almost ideal-typical way – the nature of this phenomenon, namely the periurban fringes of large French cities. Here, evidence of clubbisation can clearly be seen, with the transformation of rural villages into residential clubs. Today in France, almost 20,000 municipalities can be considered periurban municipalities, as defined by INSEE, the national statistics institute. These are generally former villages that have been absorbed into a city's sphere of influence. In nine out of ten cases, these municipalities have fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, and their built-up areas – made up for the most part of low-rise housing estates – are surrounded by natural and agricultural spaces.[16] In these towns and villages, the purchase of a detached house in many ways resembles the purchase of a ticket granting admission to a residential club: by moving into a detached house, one becomes a "member" of a municipality whose inhabitants are united by the common enjoyment of a specific living environment. Through the effects of the property market, the "clubs" that offer the most sought-after living environments become those with the most expensive "entry tickets". The least prestigious clubs – those farthest from the city centre or subject to inconveniences such as motorways, airports and industrial estates – are those that are least expensive, and which are therefore generally home to lower-middle-class households. Property in localities in which many affluent households concentrate becomes all the more sought-after, as well-off families attract other well-off families (mainly because of the "good" attendance this guarantees at the local schools). In this context, residents tend to form groups based on similar tastes and income brackets. They are linked by the sharing of resources that they have acquired (or which they rent) and are concerned above all with the management and maintenance of these resources, as part of an economic process similar to that used to manage a condominium complex. Another major concern of these residents is restricting access to (and enjoyment of) these resources to themselves; consequently, exclusivity and the definition of rules for group membership are key issues. This is reflected in local planning regulations, for instance, which seek to control the characteristics of the population through measures such as banning the building of collective housing, or even prohibiting any new construction at all.

The situation here is very different from that which existed in the rural villages of old, where membership of the local community was more a given than a choice, and where, as a result, the issue of defining rules for group membership was secondary.[17] Furthermore, in the traditional rural village, inhabitants had highly varied social positions and interests (even small villages had their rich and poor residents), which would lead to political debate concerning the development of their community and the definition of rules for the sharing of common resources.[18] The following example illustrates this perfectly: in rural villages containing municipal forest, it was common for this woodland to be managed by the local council, using mechanisms such as *affouage* (broadly speaking, residents' right to firewood), for instance. Determining the beneficiaries was not a

[14] Montgomery, Alesia F. 2010. "Ghettos and enclaves in the cross-place realm: mapping socially bounded spaces across cities", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 659–675.

[15] For more detailed information about this scale-related effect, see Charmes, Éric. 2011. *La ville émiettée. Essai sur la clubbisation de la vie urbaine*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. 93 seq.

[16] Charmes, Éric. 2011. *Op. cit.*, chap. 1.

[17] This and the following paragraphs contain elements taken from Charmes, Éric. 2011. *Op. cit.*, pp. 240–242. The situation described here was still true of certain villages in the 1960s. In particular, see the following works: Morin, Edgar. 1967. *Commune en France. La métamorphose de Plodémet*, Paris: Fayard; Pelras, Christian. 2001. *Goulien. Commune bretonne du Cap Sizun. Entre xixᵉ siècle et iiiᵉ millénaire*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes; and Wylie, Laurence. 1979 [1968]. *Un village du Vaucluse*, Paris: Gallimard.

[18] Vivier, Nadine. 1998. *Propriété collective et identité communale. Les biens communaux en France. 1750–1914*, Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.

difficult matter: quite simply, the people that benefited were the local inhabitants, a relatively stable group based on temporal continuity. There would, of course, be some discussions – notably concerning showmen and merchants who were rarely in the village – but these problems were secondary to the issues raised by the sharing of benefits among inhabitants. Some people wanted the municipal woodland to benefit poorer families above all, by allowing them access to resources that they did not possess – thus challenging the place of the village's richer residents, for example, as the municipality would traditionally grant access in proportion to the amount of land owned. Many comments could be made on the subject of these discussions; however, for our purposes, the important point to note is that the heart of the debate lay not in determining who was to benefit from access to municipal resources, but in how these resources were to be shared.

In a periurban residential municipality, the exact opposite is the case. Let's continue with the example of woodland: in the periurban fringes, municipal woodland, where it exists, is valued for its natural beauty and used as a leisure amenity.[19] These kinds of demands – unique to periurbanites – often lead to such woodland being either turned into protected green spaces or integrated into a regional natural park. The landscape quality therefore takes precedence over the forestry management issues. There is no longer any question, for example, of heavy cutting for logging. Furthermore, the problem facing local residents is not how to share the benefits of access to woodland, as this is impossible (the enjoyment of a landscape or of a woodland walk cannot be divided up); instead, the question is how to determine the number and type of people who can take advantage of these local landscapes and walk in these green spaces, and more specifically how to limit the risks of "congestion". Consequently, one of the main worries of inhabitants of small residential municipalities is restricting the urbanisation of the municipal territory. This fear reflects a concern for the quality of the landscapes that they enjoy. For periurbanites, more houses in their area means potentially less woodland. Moreover, if the population increases, there is a risk that the paths and glades will be used by more people for their Sunday afternoon walks. In the periurban residential club, therefore, debate focuses on access rules, but touches very little on how to share the resources concerned. Similarly, little time is spent debating political issues, for two reasons: first, tastes and income levels among local residents will be relatively homogeneous; and second, these residents accepted to benefit from a living environment governed by fixed rules – that are not to be subsequently modified – the moment they signed the deeds or lease of their property. This commitment is comparable to the agreements signed when moving into a condominium.

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[19] For a detailed description of suburbanites' relationship with nature and the different registers that this relationship can take, see Vanier, Martin. 2003. "Le périurbain à l'heure du crapaud buffle : tiers espace de la nature, nature du tiers espace", *Revue de géographie alpine*, vol. 91, no. 4, pp. 79–89.

Table 1: Clubbisation – or from shared resources to club resources[20]

	Users to be determined according to the resource (economic sphere)	A given community (political sphere)
Shared use is problematic (high congestion)	Private resources (e.g. a dwelling)	Shared resources (e.g. municipal woodland in a rural village)
Shared use poses few problems (low congestion)	Club resources (e.g. a landscaped garden in a gated condominium complex)	Public resources (e.g. the air quality of a metropolitan area)

"Clubbisation" and metropolitan areas

As the examples above show, the concepts of clubs and clubbisation can be used to consider relationships with a local area in a way that goes beyond the dichotomy between community and society. These concepts enable us to imagine a strong relationship with one's place of residence that works with, and not against, mobility. They allow us to explain why and how the nature of the relationship with one's place of residence has changed. The local community is no longer a given, as its social perimeter fluctuates significantly with residential and daily mobility. The neighbourhood is increasingly less the location of a common destiny shared by a relatively stable community, and more a location where specific common-pool resources are shared by individuals brought together on a temporary basis (if not in real terms, then at least in terms of the way they portray their situation). Or, to put it more succinctly, it is no longer the group that makes the neighbourhood, but the neighbourhood that makes the group. The facilities, amenities and services offered by a neighbourhood are no longer produced by a group, but instead produce a group. This means that the core issue is no longer the rules defined for sharing the resources offered by a given locality, but rather the rules defined for becoming a resident of this locality in the first place. And the key aim of this control is undoubtedly – and increasingly[21] – the preservation of the social environment, in a context where the neighbourhood stands for less as a political space than as an economic resource. Indeed, to borrow the terms of the pluralist philosopher Michael Walzer,[22] city-dwellers' relationships with their neighbourhood are becoming less associated with the political sphere and increasingly attached to the economic sphere.

What are we to think of this clubbisation of French municipalities in political and moral terms and, more importantly, what should be done? To answer these questions, the full extent of this clubbisation must be assessed. In particular, we need to determine whether the residential clubs described above have counterparts in city centres, inner-city areas and traditional suburbs. Even if we consider only the periurban fringe, this is nonetheless a massive phenomenon, which potentially concerns hundreds of towns and villages around every large city. Must we oppose this clubbisation of the periurban fringe, and, more specifically, fight against the commodification of the social environment and its consequences, namely the social division of space and the resultant

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[20] Table drawn up on the basis of a critical reading of Ostrom, Elinor, Gardner, Roy & Walker, James. 1993. *Rules, games, and common-pool resources*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. See also Charmes, Éric, 2011. *Op. cit.*, chap. 5.

[21] The work that has done the most to popularise this proposition, even if the methodology used is questionable, is Maurin, Éric. 2004. *Le ghetto français*, Paris: Le Seuil.

[22] Walzer, Michael. 1984. *Op. cit.*

segregation? Expressing the question in these terms seems inappropriate. Clubbisation is a large-scale process and efforts to directly oppose it would be in vain (at least from a reformist perspective). The margins for manoeuvre and the true political stakes lie in the fact that the new relationship with the local environment that results from clubbisation is also a new relationship with metropolitan areas in general. Residential clubs can only develop where there is a strong relationship of dependence on a metropolitan environment: in order to live in a residential town or village, it must be possible to work in a different town, do one's shopping in another and send one's children to school in yet another. In sum, clubbisation does not exclude the political sphere from urban issues: it simply redefines the scales and spaces for which this sphere is relevant. Although we are increasingly able to choose our neighbours, the metropolitan area, for its part, is increasingly becoming a common territory to be shared. The issue at stake is therefore the political regulation of this shared territory and of the relationships that must be developed between its various components. A first step towards achieving this kind of regulation is making city-dwellers aware of the organic dependencies that exist between the different components of the metropolitan areas in which they live, work and play. To do this, we must accurately and realistically assess the situation and stop presenting self-segregation and the metropolis as two opposing forces; the concepts of clubs and clubbisation can help achieve this goal.

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Further reading:

Charmes, Éric. 2011. *La ville émiettée. Essai sur la clubbisation de la vie urbaine*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

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