Are peri-urban populations anti-urban?

The effects of the fragmentation of communities

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In his seminal 1938 article, *"Urbanism as a Way of Life"*, Louis Wirth held that the two most distinctive features of urban lifestyles were the density and diversity of the populations found there. With peri-urbanisation, though, these two factors become less important: the population becomes less dense and, more importantly, residential districts become far more homogeneous. This article will not discuss the aptness of this observation (which nevertheless calls for qualification, as peri-urban areas are far more diverse than this bare statement suggests). The aim of this article is rather to qualify the reasoning whereby, because the characteristics that traditionally defined urbanity have disappeared with peri-urbanisation, the values and lifestyles that accompany peri-urbanisation are anti-urban[1]. Our focus will be on how living with one's own kind in a socially homogeneous residential area[2]. affects our relationships with other people.

Our aim is not to completely invalidate the criticisms directed at peri-urban lifestyles. It is rather to put forward a more balanced view. Because urban studies adopt a predominantly accusing standpoint, I will take that of the defence[3]. Accordingly I will present residential areas less as areas of exclusion and social selection than as bases and transitional spaces. Moreover, my emphasis on the latter aspects should be seen in the same light as that well-known example of differing viewpoints: the glass that is half-full or half-empty.

Criticism of peri-urban life

A variety of writers suggest that the growth of residential areas around large towns springs from an anti-urban attitude and the rejection of what gives public space its civilisational virtues, namely crowds, rubbing shoulders with strangers, etc. In his preface to a sociological study on peri-urban lifestyles, the geographer Jacques Lévy explains that the *à la carte* town and networked territory of peri-urban residents prevents any "real use being made of the benefits of urbanity: encounters with the unexpected, the virtuality of unforeseen events, the mutual deprogramming of places by people and of people by places" (in Pinson & Thomann, 2002). In short, for many analysts, peri-urbanisation eliminates the encounters and social mixing typical of urban life. It is the expression of a form of town planning based on the functional specialisation of spaces, which deliberately turns its back on the energy generated by encounters between flows (Mangin, 2004).

Peri-urbanisation is also commonly associated with the mass-consumption society that marked the twentieth century. The major phases of urban sprawl effectively correspond to the rise of the middle classes. And for these social categories, moving into a detached house inevitably meant buying their own home and acquiring all the modern conveniences on offer, in particular a car. Intellectuals poured criticism on neighbours' rivalry in their quest for material comfort – a competition that resulted in social fragmentation, cocooning and slavish conformity[4]. In the United States, the expression used to describe this compe-

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1 This article is a revised and updated version of the introduction and conclusion of a book published in 2005 (Charmes, 2005), drawing on recent research (Charmes, 2006a).

2 When we discuss social homogeneity in peri-urban contexts, we need to distinguish at least two scales. The first scale is that of the residential area (around a thousand residents); the second is that of the peri-urban quadrant or sector. Homogeneity can be observed on both scales, but it will not have the same content, nor the same meaning.

3 In this regard, see Jean-Pierre Garnier's review of my book (Charmes, 2005) and my reply (in *Espaces et sociétés,* n° 124-125, 2006, p. 243-253).

4 See (Gans, 1967) for the first in-depth response to such criticism.

Grand Large neighbourhood Meyzieu

tition - "keeping up with the Joneses" - has become a popular phrase.

Today criticism of mass consumption is more muted and more subtle (as consumption itself has become more diverse and more complex to comprehend). There persists a broad consensus of opinion, though, that peri-urban residents are overly stay-at-home. Engrossed in the quest for material comfort, in asserting their social status and in the welfare of their household, peri-urban residents seem to have little inclination for political involvement. Not content to reject urban public space, they seem indifferent to those who have not attained the same material comfort as themselves. This accounts for why observers are prompt to suspect them of forgetting that they belong to a social group and have certain duties to that group. With peri-urban populations, the threat of social secession is never far removed (Jaillet, 1999). In recent years, the much commented-on electoral advances of the far right in peri-urban *communes* have only accentuated the criticism (Lévy, 2003; Guilluy & Noyé, 2004).

The municipal selfishness typical of peri-urban areas is seen as proof of this denial of solidarity. Peri-urban *communes* are more likely than the others to refuse to build subsidised housing in their area. Local government representatives are even less abashed about it as the 20% quota

laid down by the solidarity and urban regeneration act does not apply to peri-urban *communes*. Likewise, the latter refuse to join groups of *communes* formed for common development purposes, preferring to set up "clubs" of peri-urban *communes* (Estèbe & Talandier, 2005) and promote peri-urban Territorial Coherence Schemes (Charmes, 2007a). They are also reluctant to help fund the services and facilities used by their constituents: the latter would like to be able to use park-and-ride facilities, but do not urge their elected representatives to join an urban transport authority. In this respect, peri-urban *communes* are taking advantage of a local taxation system originally devised for city dwellers who spend the best part of their day-to-day life within their home *commune*. Now that their constituents are highly mobile, peri-urban *communes* can content themselves with providing minimal services, so constituents have little choice but to take their car and use the facilities and services offered by neighbouring centres (Fouchier, 2001).

The recent development of access control systems around private housing estates, effectively turning them into what are commonly known as "gated communities", has heightened these concerns and this criticism (Charmes, 2005).

It is as if the wealthier population's rejection of urban culture and their efforts to hold other people at bay had reached new heights.

Not content to have distanced themselves from towns and their tumult, peri-urban residents now seem to want to physically demonstrate their voluntary seclusion. While gated communities are still relatively rare in France, their development, especially on the new-build property market, would appear to point to an Americanisation of French society (see Degoutin, 2006 for a recent critical review of the situation in the United States).

The fears raised by the United States are heightened by the country's traditional links between peri-urbanisation and a trend towards socio-spatial segregation in metropolitan areas, which has proved disastrous for town centres and poor sections of the population. In the United States, peri-urban areas have owed their success, at least in part, to the desire of the middle and wealthy classes to distance themselves from the poorer sections of the population, who have been abandoned in increasingly run-down town centres (Jackson, 1985; Fishman, 1987). In a country where local taxes are a vital resource for government action and there is little redistribution among local authorities, the departure of the wealthier sections of the population has resulted in a dramatic drop in resources for town centres and inner suburbs. At the same time, the latter had a growing need for funds to help their poor populations (who were also hard hit by the crisis in the automobile industry). These central and peri-central areas then went into a spiral of decline. The high percentage of black people among the poor populations and the hegemony of whites among those who settled in peri-urban areas have moreover led to the situation being compared to a form of apartheid (Massey & Denton, 1993). The term "white flight" has also been used in reference to peri-urbanisation.

Similar trends have been observed in France (Donzelot, 2004). Admittedly, France's inner-city neighbourhoods have never been abandoned by wealthy households and the poor neighbourhoods are situated not in the centre of agglomerations but in the surrounding areas, in the inner suburban belt and the suburbs. There is a growing similarity between the American and French models, with inner-city gentrification and inner-suburb pauperisation (Orfield, 2002) in the United States, and an increasingly ethnic focus in segregation issues (Lagrange, 2006). In the middle classes of both countries, we find the same trend towards avoiding "difficult" neighbourhoods by setting in peri-urban areas: because inner-city neighbourhoods have been taken over by the upper classes, the middle classes of both France and the United States are flocking to settle in the peripheries to avoid the now impoverished suburbs (Wiel, 1999).

The issue is under debate, but a number of researchers believe these mechanisms of avoidance and spatial segregation are one of the reasons why the poorest sections of the French population are being locked into a spiral of poverty[5]. In any event, they are detrimental to the social mix and this, in France, is hard to accept from a political point of view.

Living with one's own kind, and the culture of mobility: removing the communitarian focus from near space

One major criticism of peri-urban areas concerns the social homogeneity of residential space. The latter is commonly regarded as a form of withdrawal from society, and the development of gated communities has only lent weight to this view. There is a contradiction, though, between the development of mobility in all its forms and the hypothesis of a withdrawal into a sort of isolationism with one's own kind. How can it be claimed that people are seeking refuge in "residential enclaves" and that, at the same time, near space now plays only a minor role in city-dwellers' everyday life? How can it be claimed that people want to live cut off from their surroundings in zones with a completely homogeneous population, when they spend only a small portion of their time at home and move house increasingly frequently?

The contradiction is all the more striking as the old opposition between village community (closed and shut off from the outside world) and urban society (open and receptive to what is different and unusual) often figures as a backdrop to these comments. It is because it beckons to the community that the concept of living with one's own kind seems so problematical and appears to be a negation of what underpins urban civilisation.

With an epistemological grounding such as this, the concomitance of the development of this peri-urban lifestyle of living with one's own kind and the advent of a culture of mobility (Rémy, 2004) can only remain unthinkable. The more or less explicit reference to the opposition between community and society is detrimental, as it results in something that simply does not make sense. If, for instance, we look at the reasons why barriers are installed to restrict access to streets in housing developments, we see that these barriers are by no means only the expression of a trend towards isolationism, but the fruit of mobility in all its forms (Charmes, 2005). They have been installed because the control of common areas and facilities is no longer inherent in local social groups, at once because their members do not know each other well (a result of residential mobility) and because they spend the best part of their time outside their neighbourhood (the result of everyday mobility). Thus, not being able to carry out the task themselves, city-dwellers can find themselves obliged to call in outside service providers (private security firms or the police and military) or use technical devices (such as barriers) to control residential common areas or clean up their neighbourhood.

The development of homogeneous settlement areas

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5. For viewpoints supporting the critical argument, see (Fitoussi, Laurent & Maurice, 2003) and (Maurin, 2004). For a more balanced view of the matter, see (Authier, Bacqué and Guérin-Pace, 2006: part three).

Arriving in Charny en Seine-et-Marne

can also be explained in part by growing mobility. Residential mobility is the main factor enabling people to choose to settle in a location inhabited by people of the same ilk. Moreover, the development of everyday mobility makes local social disparities less acceptable. The logical sequence is as follows. First, because peri-urban residents spend the best part of their lives outside the immediate surroundings of their home, they seek to curb their relations with neighbours. There are limits to this, though: even if there is less interaction with neighbours, there is still enough to require a minimum of agreement (for example on the maintenance and use of common areas). If they want to limit conflicts while maintaining minimal interaction, peri-urban residents need to ensure that their neighbours' expectations and behaviour are not too unlike their own. The best way to do this is to move into a housing estate or a *commune* whose residents are, in principle, similar to oneself.

Should this desire to live with one's own kind be likened to a form of community isolationism? On the contrary, it would seem that this desire should be interpreted as a step further in the process of shaking off the constraints of the local area. Barriers appear and settlement areas become homogeneous primarily because the local area has lost its communitarian focus. In other words, because it is chosen and no longer imposed from birth, and because it does not

limit individuals' everyday horizon as much as in the past (Bourdin, 2000).

The confusion probably stems from the fact that removing the local area's communitarian focus does not necessarily imply that the local area loses all importance for everyday life. Contrary to what some people may have said, the local area remains an essential space for everyday life and for determining self-image. Moreover, leaving the reassuring cocoon of the "village neighbourhood", in which almost all city-dwellers were nurtured just a few decades ago, makes people see the protective role of near space in a new light (Ascher & Godard, 1999).

This is not just nostalgia, though. Based on what we know of child psychology (Miljkovitch, 2001) and Anthony Giddens' work on modern identity (1991), it can reasonably be assumed that near space, like relationships with family and friends, is one of the anchor points without which it is difficult to embark serenely on the uncertain experiences that characterise contemporary urban life (Madoré, 2004; Genestier, 2001). Near space, when it is pacified, can be the place where people regain that basic trust in others they need to interact with strangers without excessive anxiety. The anchor point can therefore be not the opposite, but the other side of the culture of mobility (Rémy, 1999). It can help individuals avoid getting lost in the labyrinth of possibilities offered by contemporary urban life. Accordingly it

is quite possible to see residential spaces as bases, whose stability and reassuring nature could foster a more serene openness and receptiveness to the outside world.

In that case, the quest for the village neighbourhood would not be merely a phantasmagorical and nostalgic search for lost security: it would be profoundly in phase with the changes that have marked urban life. This is doubtless one of the most significant paradoxes of the era of mobility and social fluidity that has been forecast for us[6]. Far from disappearing, near space remains an essential base for everyday life.

Towards exclusive residential clubs?

The question is obviously to know whether this base should be an exclusive club. This is probably where peri-urban areas are most noticeably different to urban areas, especially in France. The difference stems from three combined factors: low-density housing; the functional specialisation of residential spaces; very low population density in peri-urban *communes*, which, notwithstanding recent laws to promote intercommunality, wield significant administrative and political power.

The effects of the low density in peri-urban areas and their functional specialisation are well known. David Mangin, for example, has shown the spatial isolation of residential areas that it generates (Mangin, 2004). On the other hand, we are less familiar with the impact of the institutional structure of peri-urban areas (this is a specifically French feature, which, to my knowledge, is also found only in the United States[7]). Few people are aware that the average population of what INSEE defines as "peri-urban" *communes* stands at 820 inhabitants[8]. Moreover, peri-urban *communes* are very common: there are 14 930 of them across France (out of a total of 36 565 *communes*, of which roughly half are "rural" and a little over 3 000 are "urban"). In qualitative terms, the peripheries of French towns can be described as mosaics, each tile of which is a *commune* made up of a village-like core or a former village centre, surrounded by more recent housing estates consisting of a few dozen houses, in turn surrounded by natural or agricultural spaces.

Many such *communes* have demographic characteristics (their low population density) and landscape features (their belt of natural or agricultural spaces) that make them natural candidates for becoming residential clubs. As it happens, this natural inclination is particularly well suited to the scope and remit of the *communes*. The latter enjoy legitimacy and political faculties that associations and neighbourhood councils, for example, do not have. Unlike urban populations, therefore, peri-urban populations can make their residential base a "kingdom". When urban residents (who are subject to the same uncertainties as peri-urban residents) seek to form a socially homogeneous base, it is difficult to extend it beyond the boundaries of a single build-

ing. They have limited control over public spaces and buildings situated in the immediate vicinity: regulations are discussed and laid down within a municipality that has tens or even hundreds of thousands of inhabitants. In many peri-urban *communes*, on the other hand, the mayor is accountable for his decisions to only a few hundred people.

A peri-urban mayor will accordingly be particularly receptive to calls to preserve the local environment. This is why we are seeing significant numbers of *communes* being turned into what are effectively residential clubs (Charmes, 2006a). The most tangible expressions of this shift to a "club" mentality are policies that put a halt to any further urban development, and a form of social exclusivism. Admittedly, this exclusivism does not necessarily imply a "rich ghetto". On the contrary, the population of many exclusivist *communes* consists of a majority of "intermediate" professionals (as defined by INSEE). Moreover, not all peri-urban *communes* implement exclusivist policies, and, of those who do, not all go about it in the same way nor to the same extent[9]. Many do so though, especially in the inner peri-urban belts.

School zoning map and municipal exclusivisms

These policies can be implemented through a number of systems. As far as town planning is concerned (Demouveaux, 2004), the main tools used are land rationing and the refusal of social housing. Some *communes*, in particular the wealthier ones, also introduce town planning regulations that prohibit the construction of houses on small plots.

Social exclusivism is also very apparent in the relationship to schools. The establishment of school zoning maps to distribute pupils among the different schools is a core issue in this respect. These zones are relatively impermeable and their boundaries difficult to cross. While this impermeability can guarantee a certain social mix[10] in town centres and the near suburbs, in the peripheries, it tends rather to accentuate segregation. Some elected representatives use it to keep "undesirables" out.

Here again, we find the distinctive trait of the institutional structuring of peri-urban areas. In town centres and the near suburbs, the *communes* generally have tens of thousands of inhabitants (and sometimes more). The mayors therefore have a large number of schools under their responsibility and have to find a compromise between more or less working class neighbourhoods and more or less wealthy neighbourhoods.

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6. And of which Bertrand Montulet and Vincent Kaufmann have clearly revealed the limitations (2004).

7. With significant differences, obviously.

8. According to the 1999 national census.

Grand-Large in Meyzieu (69)

This makes them politically aware of the idea of social mix. In peri-urban areas, on the other hand, *communes* are at once relatively homogeneous and an elementary unit in the sectors from which school populations are drawn. Many mayors therefore strive to have their municipality linked to a good school, well aware that, in parents' minds, a good school generally means good pupils (Charmes, 2007b). The 2004 decentralisation acts, which transferred zoning authority from secondary schools to General Councils (*conseils généraux*), obviously gave local elected representatives greater leeway.

Efforts to achieve social homogeneity in the local sphere probably cause most problems when they are combined with interference from municipal elected representatives in school zoning policies. Admittedly, peri-urban residents are not the only ones to be concerned about the sort of pupils who attend the schools where their children are enrolled. However it is only in peri-urban areas that elected representatives are so easily persuaded to represent local requests. The combination is especially worrying as it is pegged to residential trends. Even if peri-urban populations are by no means confined to the stereotype of a couple with children living in a detached house, this stereotype nevertheless structures residential migrations. For households with children who move to peri-urban areas, their rejection of neighbourhoods with working-class residents is very often linked to their educational aspirations. Many middle-class households who move into a peri-urban detached house do so primarily to flee a suburb whose population does not fit in with the educational aspirations they cherish for their children (Charmes, 2005). With their detached house, they also acquire access to schools with better pupils.

When we add up all these factors (a property purchase comes with an admission ticket to a particular school zone; the value of this zone is judged on the quality of its population; the zone is managed by elected representatives whose aim is to preserve its value), we have the ingredients of a form of privatisation of schools. Here again, not all peri-urban *communes* are concerned by this process and the extent to which it is applied varies, but it cannot be overlooked.

Living with one's own kind and secession: between our experience of the world and the system

Although, as we have just seen, peri-urban residents can be criticised on certain grounds that do not apply to urban residents, some other grounds for criticism are unjustified. In particular, we need to deconstruct criticism of peri-urban-isation conducted in the name of a reference to public space and the association between town and democracy. This is a difficult discussion, made no easier by the polysemy of the notion of public space. Is there any need to remind readers that, for political philosophy, the expression "public space" is metaphorical and that spatial use of towns cannot be placed on the same footing as questions of democracy and social solidarity?

Admittedly, as the site of concrete confrontation with strangers, urban public space has probably played a historic role in challenging traditions and therefore in constructing the public discussion space that grounds contemporary democracies (Ferry, 2001). It remains to be shown, though, that the link between these two dimensions of public space

is not only genetic but also functional. Moreover, even admitting that concrete confrontation with other life forms is important for maintaining a common culture, the media now play at least as important a role as urban public spaces[11].

This probably explains why, in some cases, urban public space can become closed just as political public space is opening up. This is what Teresa Caldeira observed in Sao Paulo: Brazilian democratic life gained new force at the same time as Brazil's economic capital put up walls and systems to control its common areas. As she wrote: "Sao Paulo shows that the political system and the town's public spaces can develop in opposite directions" (2000, p322). This observation is all the more disturbing as it is made by one of the most determined critics of closed residential areas.

In other words, in contemporary societies, there does not appear to be any simple, mechanical relationship between living "in isolation" with one's own kind and the ties individuals believe they have with one another. To really grasp this, we need to distinguish between relationships that are established directly between people and those that stem from political and economic systems. My empirical observations (Charmes, 2005) show, for example, that people's refusal to have social housing near their home is not associated with a rejection of the principle of social housing. While an overwhelming majority of the households interviewed were reluctant to have less privileged households as neighbours, none of them said they objected to their taxes being used to finance social housing.

This means that efforts to keep others at a distance should be measured against the yardstick of redistribution mechanisms. In the United States, as mentioned earlier, public resources are seldom redistributed among local authorities, who are nevertheless largely responsible for financing social solidarity. As a result, settling in a peri-urban municipality is a way for people to secure the benefit of their local taxes for themselves, rather than paying for social solidarity[12]. In this case, we can rightly speak of a temptation to secede. In France, the key role played by the State in redistributing tax resources lends a very different political meaning to the exclusivism of peri-urban *communes*.

Use of the word "secession" is all the more appropriate in the US situation as many peri-urban residents knowingly aim to reduce their contribution to public aid to the poor. Their refusal to finance social solidarity policies is intentional. In France, people's intentions are by no means in a similar vein. The people I interviewed may think that their taxes could be used for some purpose other than financing the construction of social housing, but they were unable to say so to my face: if this attitude exists, it remains private and is not expressed in any political way. Admittedly, this leaves the question of the production of social housing unanswered: where can low-rent housing be built, if *communes* refuse to have them on their territory? It may, however, be easier to solve a problem such as this than change an opinion that is against financing low-rent housing.

The public culture of peri-urban residents: near space as a transitional space

It cannot be ruled out, though, that a limited experience of otherness brings about far-reaching value changes in the long term. Does solidarity mean anything if it remains an abstract, not concrete, commitment? Are we not likely to see this solidarity disintegrate in the long term, as the invisibility of the working classes in everyday life gradually leads to them becoming invisible on the political scene? This is the argument put forward by Hugues Lagrange (2006) in support of establishing a social mix in residential areas. Setha Low (2003) has observed that children who live in a gated community tend to perceive different people as threatening and outside their world. This will probably influence their political standpoints, once they reach adulthood.

Besides which, even if we recognise the value of being confronted with otherness, the critical analysis that underlies debate on urban fragmentation needs to be refined. A number of points deserve mention.

(1) First of all, not all places are always propitious for all sorts of interaction. When interaction is conflictual and it is also difficult to escape from the scene of conflict (as it is in residential areas), the social mix can become "destructive"[13]. In this case, instead of fostering the production of a common space and, going a step further, a feeling of common belonging (as in the ideal portrayal of urban public space), the interaction with others creates distance and destroys the social bond that might have been produced if the interaction had been more adaptable and flexible. The danger is particularly acute for the place of residence, insofar as moving house is a costly, difficult procedure. In reality, the idea of a social mix means nothing if it is not related to a spatial scale. On a residential scale, a certain social homogeneity is not necessarily a threat to urban public culture.

(2) Any assessment of the social mix also depends on the criteria used. Of these, the age structure is seldom taken into consideration. And yet, if the value of the social mix lies in being confronted with otherness, then the diversity of generations should enter into consideration. In this respect, peri-urban areas are far more diverse than it may seem. Researchers have as yet devoted little discussion to the question[14], but in the many *communes* whose peri-urbanisation

9. See (Charmes 2006b, Chapter V) for a presentation of the various situations

10. Albeit with difficulty (François & Poupeau, 2005; Felouzis, Liot & Perroton, 2005).

11. It should be pointed out here that neither John Rawls nor Jürgen Habermas give much attention to urban public spaces. At most, Jürgen Habermas looked at the cafés frequented by the enlightened bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, in *L'espace public*, first published in 1962 (I would like to thank Jean-François Bacot and Philippe Genestier for their remarks to me on this subject).

began in the 1960s, there are large numbers of retired households (in the Ile-de-France region, between 1990 and 1999, the number of retired households grew fastest in the *départements* of the greater urban belt). It is not always easy for newly-arrived young parents and the retired residents to live side by side, especially when it comes to defining common rules for use of the street (Until what time can children play outside?) or defining municipal policy (Should the council build day-care facilities?).

Additionally, for any given criterion, the social mix is always relative and depends on a baseline. Thus, considered on the scale of French society as a whole, peri-urban *communes* can seem very homogeneous. In fact, though, they exclude the most working-class households (if only because residents need to own a car), and there are few very wealthy households (with the exception of a handful of very isolated sectors). At the same time, most of these *communes* belong to what Edmond Préteceille (2006) calls mixed middle-class areas, in that the population spans a relatively broad sociological spectrum, from labourers to senior executives. As Martine Berger (2006) points out, each neighbourhood naturally tends to have its own specific "colour": one neighbourhood will have more private-sector executives, another will have more public-sector executives and yet another more employees, but each still has significant social diversity.

In reality, the filters applied by environmental tastes and the real estate market have limited scope, especially if we take into account the time values associated with turnover in the existing population base. Housing estates are by no means as homogeneous as one may think. What may look like homogeneity is often only a social mix "connoted" by a prevailing atmosphere. This prevailing atmosphere does not prevent either dissensions or encounters. There is always someone who does not abide by the dominant rules (someone who throws frequent parties is not always very welcome). In addition, there are always contentious situations in which the common rules no longer suffice to obtain a consensus (stray pets, for example, are a thorny issue).

(3) The social mix must be understood as it is actually experienced. Here again, the role of mobility should not be overlooked. Because of mobility, relationships with neighbours no longer have the same value as in the past. As mentioned earlier, what sociologists call "living with one's own kind" has nothing to do with community warmth. Thus, while we like to live among familiar faces, everything is done to ensure that the people behind these faces remain strangers (the best term to describe a neighbour is a "familiar stranger"[15]). Accordingly, even if a housing estate is very homogeneous, encounters between neighbours are nevertheless experiences of otherness, because those involved are now usually strangers for each other.

These experiences of otherness are, of course, still limited by a background consensus that enables many things to go unsaid. Be that as it may, experiences that take place in the vicinity of the home can be a first step towards contemplating a selective opening up to others, ranging up to the all-embracing openness to others to which European political philosophy (or at least such as it is embodied by Jürgen Habermas) aspires. The space near to home can be seen as a transitional space that prepares city-dwellers to open up to more radical encounters with otherness, for example during their travels further afield.

Neutralising everyday living places?

Proponents of the theory of a crisis of public spaces believe that the places frequented by peri-urban residents as they go about their everyday business are all as sanitised and controlled as residential areas (Sorkin, 1992). In their eyes, these places have nothing in common with the public spaces that forged urban culture. The counter-criticism is already widely familiar and relatively long-standing, but warrants a brief overview.

(1) We must, first of all, examine the different spaces of everyday life within the networks they form for each city-dweller. While each place may look dull and featureless, each individual, in the course of his or her daily journeys, covers particularly composite groups of places.

The fact that peri-urban areas do not have public spaces like those of the dense, historical town should not make us forget that, at the same time, the horizons of city-dwellers' everyday lives are now considerably broader. The effect of no longer being confined to the traditional neighbourhood is all the stronger as the networks of places are increasingly constituted at will (Chalas, 2000). Far from living in isolation with one's own kind, this would appear to be a step further in the autonomisation process that marks urban culture.

(2) Peri-urban spaces are not always as far removed from the status of public spaces (in the sociological sense of the term) as it may seem. Take commercial spaces as an example. Jean-Samuel Bordreuil, who has studied them with an almost ethnological approach, sees them as the site of a re-emergence of public spaces (2002). He found in them the same exposure to people that Walter Benjamin considered typical of nineteenth-century Paris boulevards. Other writers have highlighted the richness of the interactions that occur in shopping centres, pointing out that people do not simply shop there, but also go there to take a walk or meet acquaintances (Poupard, 2005).

(3) The public culture of urban residents is becoming increasingly similar to that of peri-urban residents. Living

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12. For an analysis of the questions raised by local taxation systems in the United States, see (Orfield, 2002).

13. I am borrowing this adjective, along with "connoted", used further on, from Jean Rémy.

in an urban centre does not necessarily imply frequenting the public spaces that are supposed to nurture urban culture. What can be said of the sanitised, video-surveillanced shopping centres that most historical districts have become? Is the experience of frequenting these franchise-lined streets very different to the experience we can have in peri-urban shopping centres?

Likewise, what can be said of the experience of those who live in up-market inner-city neighbourhoods and who, apart from travelling for work or holidays, only seldom stray far from home and who limit their social visits to a very narrow social circle? Is this experience really more conducive to encountering otherness than that of a middle manager who leaves home every morning to take a packed suburban train and who does the shopping on a Saturday afternoon in a shopping centre with an often highly-charged atmosphere?

Our aim here is certainly not to challenge the idea that the decision to live in a peri-urban area stems from a specific attitude to urban public spaces. The interviews I conducted (Charmes, 2005) clearly show that encounters with other people, mixtures, diversity and heterogeneity are more typical of city-dwellers' tastes than those of peri-urban residents. This is also the reason why the barriers around housing estates cannot be regarded with the same benevolence as the digital locks and entry phones that restrict access to the common areas of buildings. We should simply remain prudent in our analysis of the moral values and actual experiences that characterise peri-urban life.

Specific values or results of the context?

In the current debate, presenting the homogeneisation and exclusivism of peri-urban residential spaces as the construction of bases and transitional spaces is almost tantamount to provocation. The aim is not, however, to deny the problems posed by social fragmentation and the growing exclusivism of peri-urban residential spaces (clearly highlighted in this article). Our aim is, more modestly, to raise a number of points for debate in response to criticism that, as Pierre Bourdieu might have said, has unfortunately taken on the status of popular opinion[16].

Whatever the case, associating peri-urban life to anti-urban values, as do researchers such as Jacques Lévy (1999, 2003), is a far too radical standpoint. First, it totally disregards the diversity of peri-urban life. Various studies, including that of Lionel Rougé on peri-urban "captives", suggest that the vote in favour of the far right is primarily the work of low-income households. The latter have been forced to move a long way away from the centres to cope financially, and as a result are suffering from both spatial and political exclusion (Rougé, 2005). Such households can hardly be considered representative of peri-urban residents as a whole.

Most importantly, their vote stems less from the inherent features of peri-urban life than from a thwarted social rise.

Next, how can we defend the idea of incompatible values, faced with households' constant residential circulation between the centre and the periphery? Many urban residents are in fact peri-urban residents without knowing it, and vice versa. This is all the more true as the real estate market puts strong pressure on families to "choose" a green environment over a centrally-located, lively one. The living conditions offered by peri-urban areas are less the object of an absolute preference than a relative preference: the price per square metre is a decisive factor when households weigh up the benefits and drawbacks of peri-urban areas (Kaufmann, Guidez & Jemelin, 2001). The influence of the real estate market makes it difficult to gauge just how much of the family-life value statement relates to inherently peri-urban features: peri-urban areas are considered more suitable for family life than densely-populated centres, so their inhabitants are more likely than those of any other area to espouse the values entailed in the requirements of family life (and we know that households consider the social environment even more important when they have children).

We could of course consider that, as time goes by, living in a peri-urban area alters any "urban" values individuals may have had. There appears to be few grounds for any such hypothesis though. Once they have made their choice of residence, peri-urban residents are not very different from urban residents in defending their environment. They often have motivations that many urban residents could espouse (conserve green spaces and curb property speculation, reduce traffic nuisances and preserve the "village" harmony and sociological balance of their neighbourhood).

In addition, socio-spatial segregation is far from being a peri-urban speciality. At the top of the social ladder, the most highly-segregated neighbourhoods are to be found in the centres and the up-market suburbs (Préteceille, 2006). Likewise, urban residents go to at least as much trouble as peri-urban residents to have their children admitted to what they consider the best schools. When the inhabitants of one of the few wealthy *communes* of the periphery of La Seine-Saint-Denis have a new secondary school built so they can avoid sending their children to school in Clichy-sous-Bois, and when they name the new school Henri IV, they are merely trying to copy the prevailing central-Paris model.

What sets peri-urban areas apart is definitely not any radically different values. The differences are far subtler than irreconcilable principles. Moreover, the differences apparent to observers are largely due to the specific nature

14. See the paper presented by Nicolas Luxembourg at the workshop on "Dynamiques et pratiques résidentielles de l'urbain au rural" organised by the GIS Socio-Economie de l'habitat (2006).

15. I am borrowing this expression from Hervé Paris (2005), but have given it a different meaning.

of peri-urban living conditions. We are not trying to deny the differences in the values held by urban and peri-urban residents, but rather to stress the importance of the context's influence. The effects of lower density, functional specialisation and the institutional structure of peri-urban areas should not be overlooked. In particular, the low population density of the *communes* and their substantial prerogatives have a very marked influence on peri-urban political life[17]. These factors magnify the political expression of "localist" values, which strive to preserve the living environment and the residential environment.

To conclude, it should also be pointed out that changes in the living environment are stronger and faster in peri-urban areas. Urban residents may well criticise their peri-urban counterparts: they are more often confronted with reducing vehicle traffic in their street than with building a motorway at the bottom of their garden. This is one of the main reasons why defensive reactions and the NIMBY syndrome (it is not by chance that this acronym, "Not In My Back Yard", developed in reference to individual housing) are more frequently to be seen in peri-urban areas.

16. In practice, it is usually the woman of the household who lets the man use the family car.

17 For a similar approach to that developed in this article, see (Capron, 2006: Chapter 9). For an approach that, though similar, is more polemical and relates to France, see (Genestier, 2001).

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