



## **What future for periurban communities: clubbisation or differentiated social dynamics?**

**Violaine Girard**

**Reviewed:** Éric Charmes. 2011. *La Ville émietlée. Essai sur la clubbisation de la vie urbaine*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France.

*In La ville émietlée, Éric Charmes describes the phenomenon of “clubbisation” in towns and villages in the outer suburbs, where there is a growing tendency to operate exclusivist policies, with the aim of effecting a social selection of inhabitants. Although Charmes’s work raises many issues, it overlooks the diverse range of social and political dynamics that can be found in periurban areas.*

The urbanisation of rural areas on the outskirts of cities – an ongoing process in France since the 1970s – following the post-war rural exodus has contributed to the transformation of the French urban landscape. The rapid growth of periurban areas, in terms of not only the number of developments but also the number of inhabitants that live in them, has for a number of decades been a source of concern for many experts, urban planners and regional planners, particularly given the growing importance of environmental policies. It is these dynamics of periurbanisation that Éric Charmes seeks to characterise as a process of uncontrolled urban sprawl and fragmentation, his starting point being the observation that the vast majority of periurban towns and villages, in addition to their heterogeneous nature, refuse to commit to urban densification policies. On the contrary, following an initial phase of growth, these communities typically implement measures intended to limit and control urbanisation, with the aim of preserving the existing residential environment, and thus perpetuating processes that result in a social selection of households.

### **Clubbisation: the expression of a consumerist relationship with residential spaces**

In this essay, the author proceeds to analyse local councils’ responses to what he calls “the demand for residential exclusivism among suburbanites” (Charmes 2011, p. 45). For this, he adopts an approach based on the opposition between political relationships and consumerist relationships with regard to the residential environment, inspired by an economic model that takes account of the way in which American suburban municipalities function. According to this model, inhabitants of residential periurban towns and villages seek to “consume services and enjoy certain amenities” rather than develop forms of political attachment to the community in which they live. Here, the term “clubbisation” designates the process by which “certain municipalities leave the political sphere in order to enter the commercial sphere” (p. 89), the municipalities in question becoming local clubs of consumers rather than a local political community.

This approach allows the author to take into account the key tensions at play in the methods employed to manage periurban communities, ranging from exclusivist policies on the one hand, linked to residents’ consumerism (e.g. social selection of new arrivals via urban planning measures,

or even controls on school admissions), to the maintenance, in certain cases, of opposing strategies (e.g. implementation of social housing programmes to accommodate young households, and maintenance or development of municipal facilities, particularly schools) on the other.

The work then discusses the institutional framework for this clubbisation trend. In addition to the administrative fragmentation that characterises periurban areas in France, one can add the fact that mayors have considerable planning powers, enabling the enactment of exclusivist policies. Furthermore, the development of intercommunal structures<sup>1</sup> has led to the creation of administrative institutions – in the form of “communities of *communes*” and “agglomeration communities”, covering swathes of periurban developments – that have been constituted via selective groupings that are often in opposition to larger nearby “urban communities”, serving in many ways to reinforce clubbisation processes. However, the author does temper his words with regard to the ungovernability of major cities, observing the growing commitment among mayors at the head of intercommunal structures to contractualisation procedures with higher tiers of local government (the *département* or region) and with regard to cooperative approaches in the field of territorial planning.

### **Beyond exclusivism, what social dynamics exist?**

This essay seeks, therefore, to provide a summary of the urban changes currently in progress in periurban towns and villages, and the links between these changes and the institutional stakes affecting local political structures. Its key interest lies in the analysis of the management tools and measures employed in periurban spaces, and of the exclusivist uses that are made of them (e.g. urban planning rules such as minimum plot size regulations – whereby a minimum surface area for plots of land for new houses is laid down, making it more expensive to build or buy property – but also school catchment areas, intercommunal structures and urban planning measures). It is, however, perhaps regrettable that this summary, based on an approach structured in terms of an ideal-typical opposition between consumerism and belonging to a political community, pays only minimal attention to the sociological characterisation of the social players, who are actually the vectors for periurbanisation dynamics.

Such an approach, viewed first of all from the standpoint of households, uses the commercialisation of the relationship with the residential space as a premise, instead of seeking to empirically reveal the manifestations of this commercialisation (collective mobilisations, political attitudes of households, etc.) or to identify the social determinants and conditions that make such commercialisation possible (residential trajectories, forms of social mobility, local mobilisations, etc.). The rare extracts from interviews that are featured in the work appear somewhat disembodied, which sometimes leads the author to oversimplify the attitudes attributed to periurban households. Similarly, the development of a residential exclusivism – which, according to Éric Charmes, is linked to approaches comparable to those that lead to the construction of gated communities (of which there are very few in France) – is presented as a statement, without enabling the reader to identify its precise extent based on empirical evidence (for example, it would be interesting to find out more about “newest arrival syndrome”, which apparently designates the unwillingness, on the part of households new to the periurban setting, to see their neighbourhood continue to develop further). Indeed, might it not be more pertinent to question the extent of such a movement, bearing in mind that periurban spaces remain, as certain studies have shown (e.g. Prêteceille 2006), socially mixed areas where a variety of social classes and categories live side by side?

---

1 **Translator’s note:** French intercommunal structures (*intercommunalités*), are optional unelected local authorities covering a group of municipalities (*communes*) that wish to pool resources in order to improve provision of certain services. Broadly speaking, there are three types of structure: communities of *communes* (largely rural), agglomeration communities (smaller urban areas), and urban communities (larger urban areas). Communities of *communes* have the fewest responsibilities; urban communities have the most.

Secondly, with regard to the role of local councillors, the approach adopted seems sometimes to overlook the contributions of political sociology, which show that relationships with the residential space and local political institutions remain socially determined and differentiated, depending on social positions and trajectories, and the inclinations and resources necessary for a commitment to the local political scene. This leads to a number of questions: for instance, what are the social profiles of periurban mayors? What exactly are the mediation processes implemented by said mayors to arbitrate between the expectations of different groups present in periurban areas, municipal management policies, and institutional integration within supramunicipal structures? Indeed, we know that if we look beyond the rhetoric concerning the “apoliticism” of rural councillors (Briquet 1997), the political stakes are all the more present in periurban and rural municipalities, where they are intrinsically linked to the relationships established between different groups of local residents. Here too, one might highlight the fact that the author’s approach, based on a theoretical definition of what would appear to constitute a political relationship *per se* with the residential space, runs the risk of making overly broad generalisations about a situation that is surely far more complex.

Ultimately, the approach adopted in this work seeks to take account – using the concept of clubbisation as a starting point – of an overall dynamic present in periurban residential communities and call into question the issues at stake in terms of territorial solidarity. By proposing a unified interpretation of periurban transformations, this approach has the effect of homogenising “the periurban”, a term which groups together territories that, in fact, are experiencing highly diversified and differentiated social dynamics. From here, the next logical step would perhaps be the pursuit of empirical research in order to shed light in a more limited, but also more precise, way on the trajectories and positions of households and local councillors in periurban areas, such as recent studies into socio-spatial segregation in the Île-de-France (Paris) region (Préteceille 2006), the residential trajectories and strategies of middle-class periurbanites (Debroux 2011) or the relationships that exist with regard to politics and voting in periurban municipalities (Rivière 2008).

### **Bibliography**

- Briquet, Jean-Louis. 1997. *La tradition en mouvement. Clientélisme et politique en Corse*, Paris: Belin.
- Debroux, Josette. 2011. « Stratégies résidentielles et position sociale : l'exemple des localisations périurbaines », *Espaces et sociétés*, vol. 1, no. 144–145, pp. 121–139.
- Préteceille, Edmond. 2006. « La ségrégation sociale a-t-elle augmenté ? La métropole parisienne entre polarisation et mixité », *Sociétés contemporaines*, no. 62, pp. 69–93.
- Rivière, Jean. 2008. « Le vote pavillonnaire existe-t-il ? Comportements électoraux et positions sociales locales dans une commune rurale en cours de périurbanisation », *Politix*, vol. 21, no. 83, pp. 23–48.

**Violaine Girard** is a lecturer in sociology at the Université de Rouen, a member of the Groupe de Recherche Innovations et Sociétés (“Innovations and Societies Research Group”), and is part of the “Enquêtes, Terrains, Théories” (“Surveys, Field Studies, Theories”) team at the Centre Maurice Halbwachs research unit. She is the author of a sociology thesis examining the residential trajectories of the working classes living on estates comprising detached houses, based on a survey conducted within a periurban and industrial territory.

### **To quote this article:**

Violaine Girard & translated by Oliver Waine, “What future for periurban communities: clubbisation or differentiated social dynamics?”, *Metropolitiques*, 16 November 2011. URL : <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/What-future-for-periurbain.html>.