Suburb

The words "suburb" in English and "banlieue" (1) in French are semantically close in several ways. The French covers three meanings that follow on one another chronologically: a legal meaning relating to rights and duties of part of the inhabitants in Medieval times, a geographical meaning which is that of the urbanised belt dependent upon a city centre, and a symbolic meaning relating to marginality and a certain discredit cast upon the inhabitants, viewed, by oversimplification, as "excluded" (from the city).

The English "suburb", via its Latin origin refers to what is "near" (or outside) the town, while the French is derived from the Germanic ban which relates to a public order (note the shared meaning with marriage bans) and also the notion of exclusion (the other meaning of ban in modern English), and from the word leuga (lieue, or league), a measure of distance used in the Gallo-Roman period. The word banlieue appears for the first time in a text from Picardy dating from the end of the 12th century, but its Latin equivalent (Banni leuga) can be noted in archives dating from 1036 on the subject of the town of Arras.

The word banlieue serves to refer to the circular belt around the town or city, normally measuring one league in width (4440 metres for the French lieue). It is distinct from what is referred to in French as the faubourg (from the Old French fors-borc, the town outside the walls) which had an exclusive economic definition at the time, in reference to hubs of commercial activity. This word has no equivalent in English (and indeed in some instances "suburb" might be used, in particular its Medieval meaning of that which is immediately outside the city walls (OED).

French usage altered at the time of the Restoration (second half of the 19th century). Banlieue was used to refer to the periphery dependent upon the city centre, and it was positioned in a system of values that contrasted the city with everything around it. With the industrial revolution, the social divisions of space began to form, and the word became loaded with pejorative undertones. The large French cities began to export towards the suburbs those populations that they could no longer house, and the rural areas sent in populations that they could no longer feed. The suburbs became dumping grounds for cumbersome or polluting activities: workshops, marshalling yards, sewage works, gas works, rubbish dumps. Numerous services also set up in the suburbs: psychiatric hospitals, hospices, prisons, cemeteries, and sports grounds for instance.

In France today the banlieue or suburb is a built-up belt that agglomerates widely diverse territories, from communes with a long history to small village units that have become extremely large with the arrival of housing estates and the tower blocks of the 1960s and 1970s.

For INSEE (French statistics department) the "banlieue" results from a subtraction: it is the agglomeration (or urban area) minus the city centre. At each population census the perimeter of the agglomeration is redefined by adding communes 2 that find themselves in the urban continuity because of the ground space taken up by new buildings, in such a way that none is more than 200 metres away from the next. Thus the banlieue of Paris comprised 279 communes in 1968, 378 in 1990, and 395 in 1999, reaching around 410 in 2009.

Since 1995, INSEE has developed a new zoning system, known as the aire urbaine (ZAU) which defines predominantly urban territory in terms of attractiveness for employment, rather than in terms of spatial and demographic growth as previously.

Inventories have shown that in general the communes in suburban areas are less well provided with services than city centres, and they often have a ratio of jobs to residents that is under 1.

Finally, as a subject of opinion and not as a scientific object, contemporary suburbs have an image that escapes their control. There is indeed a marked the gap between the virtual space with frequent media coverage, and the real territory with little media coverage – lack of communications, difficulties of daily living, poor immigrant populations, small property ownership and unobtrusive solidarities. It is no doubt in this suburban setting that we can place the two myths pervading urban history that are widely talked of today: the suburban ghetto, corresponding to marginalised tower block and housing estate areas, and the urban village, based on a social mix and a spirit of neighbourliness.

In fact, suburbs question the visibility of the real world. They lend themselves to amalgamation and confusion:

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- confusing the whole with a part, singular with plural (la banlieue, les banlieues), while the outskirts of a city are generally made up of several suburban communes each with its own particular identity;
- confusing the peripheral belt with the "sensitive" suburb, while several central city areas have problematic sectors, and numerous suburban communes experience no particular difficulties;
- confusing underprivileged quarters with ghettoes, accompanied by ethnic or religious overtones, while national origins are most often very diverse in the contemporary French "cités" (perhaps surprisingly, this term is used in French to refer to tower block ensembles or housing estates); in addition, the processes of integration and dispersion have not necessarily come to a standstill.

Finally, because of the mis-use of the word "banlieue" in French, the term does not refer to a precise spatial entity, but to a vague notion liable to apply to any enclosed sector lacking communication, and any population drawing away from the norm. The "uneasiness" attributed to French suburbs ("le malaise des banlieues") thus reflects an inexact geographical approach and a rather blurred sociological viewpoint. In a society seeking to define itself, the suburb is thus viewed as the epicentre of social problems and the choice location to implement "urban policies".

It goes without saying that this French view of the suburbs cannot be transposed to Europe overall without critique, and without addressing issues of terminology and methodology, and this is all the more true for the rest of the world. Outside France, very roughly, it tends to be the older central and peri-central quarters (the "inner cities") on the one hand and the very distant housing estates on the other that accumulate the most serious social difficulties.

In the English-speaking countries, the notion of the suburb covers very contrasted urban and social dimensions. The word most often refers to the city fringes or outskirts, rather than to the highly urbanised belt surrounding the city centre. In Britain and the USA it is associated with a rather idealised view of peaceful social relationships, and also tends to suggest wealth. In Germany, problems concentrate not so much in the peripheries as in small peri-central "hot spots".

In South America and Asia, the redistributions of population and the appearance of vast urban areas, variously controlled, exhibit very marked discontinuities that have been only partly mapped out by studies on social segregation and urban fragmentation.

Given the development of peri-urbanisation and the increase in flows, a combined approach focusing on territory and reticular spatialisation seems more suited to apprehending peripheral urban areas today: This would involve consideration of both isolated pockets and bundles of interconnections between nodal points, so that the spatial metrics vary according to the nature of the phenomena observed. It could lead to the conclusion that the stability characteristic of certain populations and certain marginalised sectors might be synonymous with "social confinement", and could suggest defining them as "relegation territories".

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-1. While the concepts are in many ways close, this article focuses more particularly on the suburbs (banlieues) of French cities with their specific features
-2.The basic "municipal" unit in France, very variable in size (from village to town or city)
-3This is the term frequently used in the French media for what in English might be called "volatile" areas.

Bibliographie

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