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Gated Communities in the United States: From Case Studies to Systematic Evidence

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Abstract

Scholarly research about gated communities is a recently established field of study, because the significant proliferation of these communities has occurred in the last couple of decades. In this article, I argue that the seminal work of Blakely and Snyder (1997, *Fortress America: Gated communities in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.) gave the first impetus and the initial research directions in gated communities' study. The subsequent research established it as a true interdisciplinary urban field and produced important knowledge across several different academic disciplines: sociology, political science, anthropology, urban policy and planning, geography, and legal studies. The article discusses this first phase of theoretical and empirical work, based mostly on qualitative and secondary data sources. A new methodological shift is proposed, which should determine the second phase of research based on hypotheses testing and collection of systematic empirical evidence. Such evidence is essential to understand the wider impact of gated communities on larger urban areas and society as a whole.

Introduction

The body of scholarly literature about gated communities has grown together with the number and importance of these communities in the United States and abroad. This study focuses on the types of theoretical approaches and empirical evidence, which have helped to establish the field of gated communities' research, as it now exists. While the theoretical developments in this field are quite important, I contend that most theoretical arguments are somewhat decoupled from systematic empirical evidence. In addition, I argue that the scholarly community interested in gated enclaves (hereafter GE or GEs) needs to focus to a much greater degree on collecting systematic empirical evidence, which is central in understanding the full impact of these enclaves on any society. It is the main argument of this article that while many important characteristics of the GEs have been discussed, we still lack evidence about the structural outcomes related to their presence. Finally, in outlining the 'state of the field,' I focus specifically on the United States because there are a lot of different social, political, and economic contexts in the process of gating around the world. It is also quite difficult to draw conclusions across such diverse structural conditions without comparable sources of data.

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In the field of urban sociology, but also in the field of urban studies in general, The Chicago School established the first comprehensive model of urban development, the Burgess' Concentric Zones model (Park and Burgess 1967). The model not only defined the different zones like the CBD area or the Loop, the zone of transition, but perhaps most innovatively from a sociological point of view, depicted the location of many ethnic neighborhoods in the early 20th century Chicago. Henceforth, the model generated and guided numerous studies about the city and its specific ethnic neighborhoods. The model has since lost its relevance; however, the ethnographic studies of Chicago's and other cities' ethnic neighborhoods continue to this very day. Wirth's theory of urbanism, although not entirely relevant today, in its time shifted the attention from ethnographic research to using Census data in comparing cities based on population size, density, and heterogeneity. Similar to Burgess' model, the trend, which followed Wirth's conceptualization, generated a lot of important empirical evidence.

Presently, the study of gated communities is among the true interdisciplinary studies of urban America. Blakely and Snyder's (1997) can be compared to the role played by Burgess' model: the book is cited in most scholarly publications about GEs because it was the first to outline their presence of in the United States, their history, the motivations of enclave residents, the potential contributions of these enclaves to residential segregation and it established the first typology of gated communities (lifestyle communities, prestige communities, and security zones). The book is now considered a classic in the field of gated communities' studies, and it has marked the first stage in the field's development: it established the importance of the topic and many scholars followed the example by conducting their own studies. There are now many studies published in the United States (and abroad) following the topics of Blakely and Snyder's seminal work: studies about the governance of GEs (McKenzie, 2005, 2006; Judd 1995; Frantz 2006; Low 2003; Glasze et al. 2006; Lang 2007), the motivation of the residents (Blandy et al. 2003; Lang and Danielsen 1997; Low 2003; Sanchez et al. 2005; Wilson-Doenges 2000), and there are attempts at new typologies as well (Grant and Mittelstead 2004).

Nevertheless, it seems to me that now we need to enter another stage of research where we move beyond these topics and study the structural impact of gated communities on the urban society. We need to learn more about where exactly these enclaves fit within the existing place stratification order, how they change this order, how they compare to other neighborhoods on variety of important social indicators, such as race/ethnicity, income, education, political ideology, voting behavior, and how they influence the residential patterns in urban America. Therefore, in the next section, I begin by outlining the main theoretical developments in the gated communities' study; then, section three discusses what we have learned from the empirical evidence in the field; part four focuses on specific suggestions for a new research agenda; and the last part of the article concludes with the importance of the new proposed directions for research.

Conceptualization of gated communities by academic discipline

The study of GEs is quite privileged to have become a true interdisciplinary field. Like many other urban issues, it has gained the attention of scholars working within different academic

disciplines. The wide-ranging discussions, conferences and publications span political science, anthropology, sociology, economics, geography, urban planning and policy, and legal studies. From the perspective of political science, McKenzie (1994, 2003) has become among the first and most prominent scholars, articulating GEs as part of the larger phenomenon of Common-Interest Developments (CIDs). He has since established several important features shared by all private communities: common ownership of real estate property, private land use controls, private governments, master planning and security features (McKenzie 2006). His main contributions are related to understanding the government structure of these neighborhoods and the unfortunate implications for urban areas stemming from privatization and fragmentation of government.

From urban policy and planning perspective, GEs are also seen as part of another set of communities, which Lang (2007) has termed ‘boomburbs:’ new suburban towns that have spurred since the 1970s and unlike the ‘sleepy’ suburbs have the features of towns, because they include not only residential spaces, but work places, shops, etc. In many cases, homeowner GEs operate like towns, complete with their own city halls, shopping districts, restaurants and other entertainment, places of leisure, all built within the gated walls. Lang and Nelson (2007) argue that many of these ‘accidental cities’ encompass master-planned developments, although the governing structure of the new towns is more complex compared to the planned communities. The boomburbs usually have part-time mayors and professional city manager-council system, although the municipal governments are usually smaller than those in bigger cities. Furthermore, the authors point out that ‘[g]aps in service are often filled by private governments such as homeowners associations (HOAs) and various shadow governments such as special improvement districts’ (Lang and Nelson 2007).

In the field of geography, many scholars consider GEs only as a built form or from a topological perspective and as such part of the so-called private neighborhoods (Glasze et al. 2006). The theory of the club economy has provided some valuable insights into understanding the similarity between GEs and other private social clubs. The perspective finds its place within the common theoretical ground of market economics; according to it, the public provision of collective goods and services is often inefficient. Therefore, GEs come to correct for these inefficiencies by being politically and financially sustainable institutions (Le Goix and Webster, 2006) or ‘residential clubs’ (Webster and Glasze, 2006). The sustainability is ensured, as in the case of CIDs, by the existence of the Home Owner’s Associations, which have three basic characteristics: (i) elected boards act as neighborhood decision makers, (ii) contracts govern resident’s behavior (through CC & Rs), and (iii) monthly fees finance local amenities and services (McKenzie 1994).

Low’s work has been among the most valuable in terms of collecting first-hand empirical evidence about residents’ lives within the gates. In her work she has provided the most consistent definition of a ‘gated community,’ which is considered to be a residential area that is enclosed by walls, fences, or landscaping that provides a physical barrier to entry. The most important aspect of the definition is that the access to GE’s is restricted, not only to personal residences, but also to the area’s streets, sidewalks, and neighborhood amenities (Low 2003). Low (2003) organizes her ethnographic studies of GEs around psychological and social explanations within the context of urban anthropology and has studied the

motivations of GEs' residents to choose homes in such enclaves. In later work she has advanced several theoretical ideas: spatial governmentality, where zoning is seen as imposing social order, particularly in controlling the social composition of neighborhoods; spatial residential segregation, where Low points out that the CIDs 'provide a legal framework for the consolidation of residential segregation;' and moral minimalism, where GEs are likened to suburban affluent neighborhoods.

Vesselinov et al. (2007) proposes another approach toward the study of GEs, the spatialized sociology of inequality, which lays the theoretical foundations for examining the GEs in the context of urban inequality. The logic behind this theoretical framework is related to the long-standing tradition within the discipline of sociology to study the sources and consequences of inequality, in this case particularly for urban areas. Furthermore, incorporating the analysis from the political economy of place (Logan and Molotch, 1987) Vesselinov argues that there are structural forces at work in American cities, which resemble a 'gating machine.' The combination between the vested interests in commercial profits of local governments and developers, together with the private fears of urbanites produces a permanent 'gating coalition.' Moreover, as a result of this well-oiled machine, GEs contribute to urban inequality by reproducing social stratification and introducing a new layer of neighborhood differentiation.

Empirical evidence

Despite the different disciplinary approaches and the growing literature on GEs, there is a certain level of detachment between theory and systematic empirical evidence. There are now four main strands of accumulating evidence about GEs, very little of which is based on hypotheses testing methodologies. When a topic is new, accumulating any type of evidence that contribute to the initial stages of understanding this topic is very important. And this is exactly what has happened in the first 'hunter and gatherer' phase of research on GEs: many scholars have studied the form of governance; the second strand of gathering important information is about the group interests involved in the process of building GEs; the third strand is collecting information about the residents' motivations to select and live in GEs. And within the fourth strand we have seen the first beginnings of a systematic empirical data gathering techniques and hopefully this approach will mark the next, more methodologically sophisticated phase of GEs' research.

Gated communities' governance

Perhaps the most prolific work so far has been conducted about GEs' governance: what constitutes a GE, how it is similar and different from other neighborhoods (McKenzie 1994; 2005, 2006; Judd 1995; Frantz 2006; Low 2003; Glasze et al. 2006; Lang 2007). This work has been important in learning about the internal political structure of the GEs, the consequences for the political structure of larger urban areas, and has been very successful in creating a broad base of knowledge about the governance of GEs. However, since this research is usually based on secondary sources of information, studying documents, summarizing what other scholars or journalists have found in selected case studies and discussions with developers involved in building GEs, there is now a marked need to move

beyond these data sources. The accumulated knowledge about the political structure of GEs will be greatly aided by systematically studying GEs in specific metropolitan areas along additional political characteristics, like voting behavior, political ideologies, and involvement in local politics.

Similar are the problems related to conceptualizing GEs as residential clubs. While this theory has its place in the realm of ideas about the role and functioning of GEs, there is no systematic empirical evidence to support these claims. We can propose any theory, but GEs are specific residential neighborhoods, where specific people live, they go about their everyday lives, they go to work, they shop, they entertain, they vacation, bring up children, etc. Where are the tested hypotheses and economic models, based on this economic theory, showing that GEs' residents' behavior corresponds to a theoretical framework of residential clubs? Furthermore, regarding GEs as part of any other larger category necessitates having evidence in comparing the GEs to the other neighborhoods. At present, there is simply no systematic empirical evidence comparing GEs to CIDs or to any other wider neighborhood category along race, ethnicity, income, age, health, voting patterns, life course, family, schooling, that is, along any substantive residents' characteristics.

Interests of developers, local officials, and business leaders

Within the second strand of empirical findings, extensive knowledge has been accumulated about the interests of different groups, builders, local officials, and business leaders in building GEs (McKenzie 1994; Low 2003; Le Goix 2005b; Vesselinov et al. 2007). Similar to the previous strand, it seems that we have learned as much as we can from these mostly secondary data sources and qualitative interviews. An interesting direction in this context will be to conduct survey research related to studying the attitudes toward this residential form of groups who do not live or participate in building GEs. Recent innovative work by Anderson et al. (2008) demonstrates the usefulness of this approach. The authors analyze the data about the occupational composition of both the Planning and Zoning Commission and the Board of Zoning Adjustment for 137 of the nation's largest cities. These two administrative bodies make many important decisions, which are usually upheld in legal court and, although being appointed bodies, are supposed to be representative of the general population the area. The authors find that zoning boards continue to be dominated by a few types of occupations: business owners, developers, attorneys, and politicians. Furthermore, they present to the survey respondents five specific cases, which are fictional but correspond to typical cases usually decided upon by zoning commissions. One of the cases is whether to require that a new GE allow access to a public hiking/biking path rather than restrict it. From this article we learn that while regular zoning commissions usually side with GEs and restrict public access (since they are constituted mostly of people having vested commercial interests in urban development), 74% of the survey respondents would require continued public access to the hiking/biking path.

Another uncharted territory is the awareness and involvement of non-governmental organizations in issues related to GEs. In an excellent recent study, Rosen and Razin (2009) investigate the involvement of environmental and other NGOs in the policy discussions and decisions surrounding the production of GEs in Israel. The authors study 15 major court

rulings related to Israeli GEs between 2000 and 2007 and follow the specific NGO party to the lawsuit. Several of these lawsuits concern beach projects, where developers taking advantage of lax zoning regulations have turned tourist destinations into residential GEs. Rosen and Razin also establish a typology of issues, which developers and GEs' residents are not concerned with, but which, nonetheless are of concern in the context of any democratic society: environmental rights, civil rights, and distributive justice. It seems that this line of research would be particularly significant to follow, since there are no such studies conducted in the United States.

Motivations of residents

The third area of accumulated empirical evidence is related to the motivations of residents in selecting GEs. Starting with the classic work of Blakely and Snyder (1997), the trend of studying specific GEs through qualitative interviews with residents and developers has yielded important knowledge about these communities in the United States (Blandy et al. 2003; Lang and Danielsen 1997; Low 2003; Luymes 1997; Wilson-Doenges 2000). Most of the work here is based on the primary sources of data such as interviews with residence, discussions with board members, formal and informal community leaders. Three types of motivations are well established in the field: security concerns, desire to uphold property values and sense of community. It will continue to be interesting to find out more about these motivations, particularly in the still continuing housing crisis in the United States. In addition, it will be important to conduct representative surveys of residents living in these communities so that a more general conclusion could be drawn about how motivations vary across social groups: urbanites versus suburban dwellers, owners versus renters, lower and middle class versus upper class, etc.

Systematic empirical evidence

All of these studies related to the above issues have significantly contributed to the growing knowledge about GEs. At the same time, only specific type of conclusions may be drawn using qualitative methodology and using secondary sources for research analyses. Through qualitative interviews, and observations, through the discussions of urban governance, we cannot learn about the specific social, economic, and demographic composition of these neighborhoods, compare them to other neighborhoods, and place them effectively within existing neighborhood stratifications or study the overall impact of these enclaves on urban areas and larger society. This latter host of issues is a subject of research within the fourth and most recent strand of GEs' research. It is marked by three work paths: (i) analysis based on hedonic modeling of house prices for specific areas (Lacour-Little and Malpezzi 2001; Bible and Hsieh, 2001; Pompe 2008); (ii) analysis based on representative survey data for the United States and some metropolitan areas (Sanchez and Lang 2002; Sanchez et al. 2005; Vesselinov 2008); and (iii) spatial analysis of specific neighborhoods in the context of larger urban areas (Le Goix 2005a; Richter and Goetz 2007; Vesselinov and Le Goix 2009).

Many of these studies are based on specific metropolitan areas; however, all of them present systematic empirical evidence within each area, which allows for comparison across space. One example is to compare the work done by Richter and Goetz (2007), the work done by Le Goix in Southern California (2005), and the work done by Vesselinov and Le Goix in

Phoenix, Las Vegas and Seattle (2009). Even though different quantitative methodologies are applied in each case, several common trends are observed across all metropolitan areas discussed in the studies: (i) GEs, particularly owner communities, tend to be more affluent than the other communities, measured by income and house prices; (ii) GEs tend to house a higher proportion of highly educated residents; (iii) GEs tend to cluster spatially, which conclusion, in combination with the first two, means that GEs contribute to creating new clusters of affluence and privilege; (iv) GEs contribute to residential segregation.

These types of studies help us move beyond the singular qualitative case study or analysis of secondary data sources and into the understanding of the larger structural societal forces that influence and are in turn influenced by the growing impact of GEs. The next section summarizes some of the more important directions for research in accumulating systematic evidence and why it is important to follow these directions in the field of GEs' studies.

Gated communities' research agenda

Why is it important to pursue the collection of more systematic evidence? On the one hand, it is important to test the existing theoretical arguments with empirical data, because otherwise the arguments remain unsupported and in the realm of wishful thinking. On the other hand, it is important to understand the ways in which the GEs contribute to urban inequality. GEs proliferate mostly because their builders pray on people's fears about crime and depreciation of property values. The GEs proliferate also, because of vested economic group interests: on the part of developers, who turn in much greater profit compared to building any other type of housing; and on part of local politicians, who can receive credit for creating jobs (in the construction industry), for bringing more affluent people to the area (with their tax dollars) and for bringing more businesses opportunities (to service the new GEs). However, if evidence abounds about the contribution of the GEs to urban inequality, the above short-term benefits will be fast outpaced by long-term deficits.

Moreover, the negative impact of GEs can be expected to multiply with the widening effects of housing foreclosures. More and more neighborhoods across America experience the hardships brought about by mortgage defaults and need more resources to be invested in them. An increase in inequality has many negative long-term implications (declining built environment, including housing, declining schools, declining employment opportunities, out flight of middle-class residents, to name just a few) and they will become ever more costly to remedy as more GEs are being built. For many decades now, since the Urban Renewal Act of 1949, it has been proven extremely difficult to find solutions to urban poverty and disadvantaged neighborhoods. There is ultimately no need to foster the building of residential enclaves, which short-term benefits could be completely obliterated by the long-term increase in neighborhood differentiation and fragmentation.

The increased residential segregation and fragmentation would add to the already existing political fragmentation, brought about by GEs. As McKenzie has argued for a long time, such private enclaves increase the privatization and fragmentation of urban government. If more systematic studies are conducted, specifically representative studies of voting behavior, level of involvement in local and regional politics, political ideology, these studies will

complement the already accumulated knowledge about the political structure of GEs in very important ways. We will learn more about gated residents' attitudes toward political and social citizenship, and whether what looks like a political secession is something that they are indeed fostering on purpose.

In addition, it will be very important to learn in a systematic fashion, more about the GEs residents' motivations, particularly in the still continuing housing crisis in the United States. Have residents reconsidered their desire to live in GEs or have they solidified their residential choices further? How has the foreclosure crisis affected the residents? It will be important to conduct representative surveys of residents living in these enclaves so that more general conclusions could be drawn about how motivations vary across social groups: urbanites versus suburban dwellers, owners versus renters, lower and middle class versus upper class, etc. We know that there is quite a bit of variation between GEs, there are smaller and larger GEs, there are owner GEs and renter GEs, but there is little we know about the differentiation among residents.

Such representative studies should be expanded to include residents living in close-by non-gated neighborhoods. Comparisons should be made along elements of political behaviors, ideologies, social values, so that we can learn more about how the residents outside GEs feel about the enclaves. No one has ever conducted a representative survey about how any non-gated residents feel about GEs being built in the vicinity of their already existing neighborhoods. The theory of the club economy maintains that GEs have the right to exist just like any other social club. There is, however, one quite significant substantive difference between social clubs and residential clubs: while most social clubs have a temporary spatial structure (the individuals get together at a certain place only from time to time), the GEs have a permanent spatial structure. The building of these enclaves permanently alters the physical environment of entire areas. The place collective efficacy characteristics, thus, are pertinent not only to the GE itself, but to the larger area where the GE is built. After all, in a democratic society, decisions affecting a wider and wider proportion of the population should be made based on the participation of all residents in the affected areas.

The significance of systematically expanding the research on GEs cannot be overstated. While an increasing number of scholars are at least aware of the complexity surrounding GEs, not too many urban policy makers know about the complicated history of the enclaves, which have been built under the radar in many areas and are still not subject of discussions in public discourse. The more we learn, the more empowered we will be as scholars and as a community to bring this subject matter to the fore not only of academic discussions but to the fore of public opinion as well.

Conclusion

The brief state of the field of gated communities' study shows that a lot has been learned during the first, hunter/gatherer phase of research. I term it hunter/gatherer phase because it encompasses the collection of different types of knowledge and information, necessary in the development of any scientific field. Blakely and Snyder's (1997) seminal work established the field of study and gave the first significant directions for further research: the

history of GEs, the role played by developers, local political and business leaders, the media, the motivations of residents, and the typology of GEs. All of these directions have been closely followed by a growing number of scholars. Several new theoretical perspectives have been proposed; McKenzie's privatization of government thesis, where GEs are considered as part of CIDs or any other larger category of private neighborhoods; Lang's articulation of GEs as part of the new boomburbs; Webster and Glazse theory of the club economy; and Vesselinov's spatialized sociology of inequality, which examines the GEs in the context of urban inequality.

Despite this growing interest in the field, however, the theoretical arguments remain somewhat detached from supporting empirical evidence. Some exceptions notwithstanding (see Systematic empirical evidence) the field is lacking methodological strength in testing even the existing theoretical models and hypotheses, which testing is at the core of any scientific inquiry. Therefore, it is the focus of this article to suggest a major shift toward producing scientific methodologies, which would allow hypotheses testing and, in turn, will yield systematic empirical evidence. There are already studies that have set a good example, which could certainly be followed and improved upon: studying the attitudes of non-GEs residents about the gating process (Anderson et al. (2008); studying the role of non-governmental organizations (Rosen and Razin 2009) and Community Development Corporations in the United States related to GEs; further looking into the motivations of residents, but structured by social group; studying more closely the spatial regimes in the production of GEs and the corresponding outcomes (Le Goix 2005a; Richter and Goetz 2007; Vesselinov and Le Goix 2009). It is very exciting to think about all the possible innovative ways, in which new knowledge about GEs can be produced. Hopefully, the further realization of these new ideas and directions of research will be as exciting as the promise of it.

Short Biography

Elena Vesselinov is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Queens College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York. She is an urban sociologist with research interests in social and spatial inequality, gated communities, residential segregation, immigration, and comparative urbanization. Her work has appeared in *Urban Studies*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Demography*, *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* and others and has been supported by the National Institute of Child and Human Development, the National Science Foundation, the Soros Foundation and others.

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