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SHOESTRING DEMOCRACY: PRIVATE GOVERNANCE IN CO-OPS AND GATED COMMUNITIES IN NEW YORK CITY

Abstract:

Do middle class cooperative housing residents have similar motivations for moving to co-ops as gated community residents? Do they experience the same kinds of conflicts and modes of conflict resolution with their co-op boards as gated community residents do with their Homeowner Associations? What can be learned about the impact of private governance on diversity, exclusivity, and daily social interactions of residents living in co-ops and gated communities? Based on open-ended, semi-structured interviews during 2006-2007 with New York City co-op residents, and New York and Long Island previously collected gated community interviews, this paper queries the differences between these two forms of private governance; their social, psychological, and political consequences for residents; their systems of conflict resolution; and their impact on exclusionary housing practices.

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Introduction

This research project began in response to questions by our European colleagues concerning the difference between cooperative housing and gated communities in the United States. As Chris Webster put it, why are gated communities seen as increasing social segregation and political disengagement, while co-ops are assumed to promote sociability and politically progressive values when both are forms of private governance and collective private ownership? This query is worthy of investigation, especially in the face of little existing literature and an absence of any qualitative research on the subject. Therefore, in fall 2006 we started interviewing middle class co-op residents from a variety of large and small co-op apartments buildings located in three boroughs of New York City, utilizing an opportunity sample selected for diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, length of residence, neighbourhood of residence, and size of co-op building. Our presentation is based on the first thirteen interviews (out of twenty collected to date) as a pilot for the comparison of the two private housing schemes.

We begin with a summary of the gated community/co-op projects, outlining how the research has progressed from a study of signification, that is, of the symbolic order and modes of discourse that support private governance, to an analysis of the political, economic and legal institutions that produce the normative regulation of private housing, what Giddens (1984) identifies as structures of domination and legitimation. A description of the recent study of co-ops and the history of cooperative housing in New York City follows with a brief review of the original gated community study. Excerpts drawn from interviews are then used to illustrate the various dimensions of the

comparison, including on the new areas of discourse found in the co-op interviews and the differences in the interpretation of conflict, safety, representation, and participation at each research site.

A new dimension of theory emerges from this analysis: the expansion of the idea of “moral minimalism” found among gated community residents to the concept of “shoestring democracy” that encompasses a broader range of behavior to insulate residents from local conflicts and disagreements and excuses rather than promotes political participation. By tracking how information and communication, responsibilities, and actions are promoted or hindered by the private governance structure and local practices, it is possible to evaluate its impact on psychological, social, and political life.

Theoretical & Historical Literature Review

The overall logic of this study comes from Giddens’ (1984) analysis of the duality of structure in social systems. He argues that rules and resources are reproduced as social practices through the conditions governing their reproduction. These conditions governing structural reproduction are institutionalized at three levels: signification, domination, and legitimation. Signification refers to the modes of discourse and symbolic orders of reproduction. In the example of gating, it means the way in which fear talk and advertising reinforce its reproduction. Domination includes the political and economic institutions that underpin the reproduction of social relations that Webster (2006), McKenzie (2003) have analyzed for private communities. The third institutional order, legitimation, refers to the legal institutions that reproduce social relations as described by McKenzie (1994) in Privatopia.

In the anthropological and psychological study of gated communities, we have focused on the signification and domination aspects, and have not paid as much

attention to the processes of legitimation through law, rules, and regulations. By comparing the governance structure of gated communities and co-op housing we address this oversight, and query how the similarity of the legal structure, that is, the ability to collectively own private property, underlying two different forms of housing, produces and reproduces similar psychological and social consequences.

Theoretical and Historical Background of Gated Communities

There is a theoretical debate as to why gated communities have become so popular in the United States. Arguments range from demand-side proposals that home buyers preferences and a discourse of fear are the principal motivating factors to supply-side claims that financial benefits to developers, builders, and municipalities, and residents' equal access to goods and services drive gating's success.

Racism is certainly a major contributor to patterns of residential separation and exclusion in the United States. Cities continue to experience high levels of segregation based on discriminatory real estate practices and mortgage structures, and studies show that residential proximity to Blacks intensifies Whites' fear of crime. A preference for defended space becomes even more enticing with increased media coverage and national hysteria about urban crime. An ever-growing proportion of people fear that they will be victimized, such that fear of crime has increased since the mid-1960s, even though there has been a decline in all-violent crime since 1990 (Brennan and Zelinka 1997).

The creation of common interest development provided a legal framework for the consolidation of residential segregation. "Common interest development" describes "a community in which the residents own or control common areas or shared amenities," and that carries with it reciprocal rights and obligations enforced by a private governing

body. (Judd 1995: 155) Specialized covenants, contracts, and deed restrictions (CC&Rs) that extend forms of collective private land tenure and the notion of private government were adapted by the lawyer and planner Charles Stern Ascher to create the modern institution of the homeowner association in 1928 (McKenzie 1994).

From the supply-side, gated communities are seen as a new spatially defined markets in which innovative neighbourhood products are supplied by a new style of service producer.” (Webster 2001). Rather than being “taxpayers” who pay for public goods and services that are not always available, residents become “club members” who pay fees for private services shared only by members of community. Developers also maximize their profits by building more houses on less land, and incentive zoning packages allow them to cluster units and achieve this higher density. States that have experienced a property tax revolt find CID housing particularly attractive because it transfers the debt liability, building of infrastructure, and provision of services to private corporations, while at the same time collecting property taxes from residents (McKenzie 1998).

Theoretical and Historical Background of Housing Cooperatives

The difference in cooperative housing and condominiums within gated communities is not only in the structure of ownership, but also in the degree of control residents have in selecting prospective tenants. In cooperatives, residents become members of a corporation or limited partnership that collectively owns a building or group of houses. You become a shareholder and purchase shares that entitle you to a long-term “proprietary lease.” Individual shareholders do not actually “own” their units, but own a percentage of shares within the cooperative. Condominiums on the other hand, are real property, usually with individual ownership of the house or apartment, and

common ownership of facilities, land or buildings. Fees covering maintenance, taxes and improvements are distributed to all residents in both organizations, but in the condominium arrangement an individual can sell or rent his or her apartment without the approval of the other residents or the condominium board. In cooperatives, however, the co-op board must approve every buyer or renter and has the power to grant or withhold approval.

According to the American Housing Survey (2005), 0.6% of all owner-occupied homes in the U.S. are co-ops, and 5.6% are secured (or gated) communities. Only 7.3% of these co-ops include residents below the poverty rate, so that the majority of co-ops include middle and upper income owners. Relevant to this study, over 80% of U.S. co-ops are within New York City (Schill, Voicu, and Miller 2004). The first co-op was built in New York City in 1876 as a "home club," and the Finnish Home Building Association built the first housing co-op organized under the Rochdale Cooperative Principles in Brooklyn in 1918 (Sazama 1996). Established in 1844 by the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in Rochdale, England, the Rochdale Principles are meant as a set of standards for the governance of cooperatives (Conover 1959). The basic principles of "open, voluntary membership," "democratic governance," "limited return on equity," "surplus belongs to members," "education of members and public in cooperative principles," and "cooperation between cooperatives" were adopted by the International Co-operative Alliance (I.C.A.) in 1966 and included as part of their "Statement on the Co-operative Identity" as recently as 1995 (I.C.A. 2006).

During the Great Depression of the 1930s many member-sponsored co-ops folded, and were not revitalized until 1950 when the National Housing Act provided mortgage insurance (Sazama 1996; Goodman 2000). Co-ops did not become popular again until the 1980s when an inability to profit from price-regulated rental units motivated landlords to convert their buildings to cooperatives (Goodman 2000). By the

1990s, homeowners became more interested in purchasing condominiums because of fewer restrictions in applying and subletting these units (Goodman 2000).

Methodology

Ethnography of Gated Communities in New York and Texas

The research began with gaining entry into upper middle and middle income gated subdivisions in 1994 and 1995: one in Nassau County on Long Island, and three in the northern suburbs of San Antonio, Texas. A middle income and middle to lower middle income community in the New York City area was added in 2000 and 2005, to answer questions about class and cultural differences that arose later in the project. Seven gated communities: 3 with single family housing, 3 with attached townhouses, and 1 apartment complex--were studied in the two regions (Low 2003). Utilizing family contacts and real estate agents to gain entry to these communities, we employed a "snowballing" sampling technique using each interview respondent to lead to the next. It was a slow process to recruit interviewees: a total of fifty households were interviewed over the first eight years, and another four more recently.

The two-hour open-ended interview was organized around a semi-structured residential history conducted in the home with the wife or single woman, husband or single man or husband and wife together. The majority of the interviewees were heterosexual European Americans and native born couples; however, four interviews were conducted in households in which one spouse was from Latin America, West Africa, Asia, or the Middle East. Interviewees were 18 through 75 years of age. The absence of minority residents, particularly Hispanics in San Antonio, is indicative of the middle and upper middle class composition of their gated communities. The men interviewed were mostly professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers; working

in industry as businessmen, managers, and foremen; or retired from these pursuits. The majority of the women were stay-at-home mothers and wives or worked part time. Of the three single, widowed or divorced women in the sample, two worked full time and one was retired from full time employment.

Participant observation was ongoing in the shopping, transportation, and recreational areas near each development. The analysis of participant observation field notes focused on identifying empirical evidence of changes in the local environment. Further, it produced data on naturally occurring conversations and everyday observations that provide a test of ecological validity for the interviews.

Field notes and interviews were coded by emerging themes throughout the research process. A thematic content analysis of the interviews and documents collected from the media, marketing, and sales materials provided the documentation of the range of discourse available.

Ethnography of Market-rate Co-op Apartment Buildings in New York City

The study began in July, 2006 and is still ongoing with a goal of interviewing 25 co-op residents in New York City to compare with the 25 gated communities in the New York area. To date we have collected 18 interviews and have analyzed 13 of these for this presentation. For this paper, 12 of the interviews were with single participants while the thirteenth was a couple.

Through personal contacts and interested colleagues we located residents willing to be interviewed. In some cases a key informant refers others who might be willing to speak to us. As opposed to the gated community study, it has been easy to find people, but more difficult in that we are not interviewing multiple residents in any one building or apartment complex. Instead, we are making every effort to sample small to large buildings in three of the five boroughs (i.e. counties) of New York City: Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens, and to include a variety of age, marital status, sexual orientation,

ethnic and/or racial, and gender characteristics to capture a broad range of resident experiences, opinions and attitudes.

The sample includes participants who own and reside in co-ops in New York City. An attempt was made to solicit participants with varied backgrounds when possible, yet they remain fairly homogenous. Participants range in age from 29 to 71 years of age; 3 of the 13 interviewees analyzed in this paper are men. Ten of the 13 participants identify as white or Caucasian, with the other three identifying as African-American, Latino, Filipino, and Asian. Four of the participants identified themselves as homosexual, eight as heterosexual, and two individuals did not identify their sexuality. All participants have completed college. Occupations include lawyers, professors, artists, graphic designers, corporate vice presidents, and research directors. While participants were not asked to identify their socioeconomic class, their ability to purchase a co-op suggests they are in lower middle to upper middle-income bracket.

Interviewees live in apartment buildings throughout the city: from singles-oriented Chelsea to the family-oriented Upper West Side, and from the Forest Hills in Queens to Park Slope, Brooklyn. Most participants reside in studios and one or two bedroom apartments ranging from 400-1700 square feet. Four buildings had fewer than 25 apartments, five had 90 to 140 apartments, and two buildings had over 150 units. Participants had occupied their present co-op for six months to 20 years, with a median of 3 years of occupancy. Most buildings became co-ops in the early 1980s and a few were converted in the mid-90s. Almost all participants experienced a complicated application and interview process, and three are on their co-op board.

The one to two hour open-ended interview was organized around a semi-structured schedule that includes the same residential history used in the previous study with additional questions about doormen, the co-op board, the building conversion, and

the application process. Interviews are conducted in the home with the individual or of a couple together.

A similar process of searching for emerging themes and theoretical coding is being used. For this presentation, we selected four thematic areas: safety/security, “people like ourselves”, moral minimalism, and representation as the basis of our analysis to compare our findings from those from the gated community study.

Findings

Security/Safety Issues

All US studies of gated community residents report that between 70-80% of interviewees say that they moved because of their fear of crime. This finding is similar for Latin American, South African and Chinese gated community residents as well, even though the amount of crime in these contexts varies tremendously (Low 2007). In the United States, where the fear of crime has increased since the mid-1960s, there has been a decline in violent crime since 1990. More paradoxical, however, is that many say they feel safe and secure because of the gates, but then question whether they really are any safer. Donna for example comments:

Donna: ...That's what's been most important to my husband, to get the children out here where they can feel safe, and we feel safe if they could go out in the streets and not worry that someone is going to grab them....we feel so secure and maybe that's wrong too.

Setha: In what sense?

Donna: You know, we've got workers out here, and we still think “oh, they're safe out here”.

Another resident adds:

It's like they can slip in and slip out. Where there's no record of these guys at all. They're here today and gone tomorrow.

Co-op residents seem less worried about safety than gated communities, yet most single women interviewed identified safety as a prime reason for selecting their current building and neighbourhood. The combination of a screening process and gate-like actors, such as doormen, maintain a homogenous community which provides a 'safe' space in the urban environment.

As Yvonne puts it:

I've seen them stop people at the door whom they don't recognize and so you feel kind of safe, you know, you're going to be in the building with people that are supposed to be here.

However, Vanessa is not sure the doorman really makes a difference:

...you have the security of the doorman which I don't really believe is all that secure. [Giggles.] I think anyone can just walk in but, gives a little bit of piece of mind.

Like Vanessa, Kerry is also unsure of how important the doorman is in keeping unwanted intruders out:

...this guy calls me and he said, "I'll be over in a little bit." They did not call up! He was – he said to the doorman –and maybe the doorman recognized him from before or something ... All of a sudden, there's a knock on my door! I'm like, "how did you get past security?" You know, I thought I was gonna get my little warning.

For Sarah there is a disparity between the safety of her co-op and the streets and other buildings of the surrounding neighbourhood. She attributes crime to nearby institutions, but still feels it is safe for her family:

And there [is] no crime that I know of in the building. But on the street: oy! Now I don't know crime on the street at all but we have a Salvation Army and a SRO

leftover from the old Upper West Side which I sort of approve of. And there was someone shot in Riverside Park one morning. Um, the police go to that building [points across the street]. I mean, I'm sure things go on that building. I've seen it. But they never bother me.

In contrast, Yul's Queens apartment building has security guards rather than doormen, and he has heard of problems such as apartment break-ins. He has taken some steps to secure his apartment:

Yul: Actually, when I moved in there was a break-in but I think it was an inside job. Someone on the third floor, in fact...Somebody went in through the hallway and then they, they came in through the kitchen window. Then they ransacked the place.... Yeah. So I make it a point to lock my windows in the kitchen and, um, I have a fire escape here and I make sure that's locked.

From the analysis of our first 13 interviews there is a range of sentiment concerning the safety of their co-op and neighbourhood, but the majority of interviewees say they feel safe, regardless of the crime that may exist in their building or neighbourhood. This sense of safety may be attributed to doormen, although three of the 13 interviewees have intercom and buzz-in entrances. It also might be attributable to the perceived safety of the neighbourhood, although, a number of residents think their buildings are safe even though there is some crime on the surrounding streets. This sense of safety is in sharp contrast with the fear and insecurity of gated community residents, and may be attributable to living with people who they feel are socioeconomically similar.

People Like Us

Low (2003) argues that the fear of crime expressed by gated community residents is not just about incidents of burglary, but also about those who are thought to perpetrate it. Gated communities do not have many public places where strangers

intermingle, and their relative isolation and homogeneity discourages interaction with people who are identified as “other.”

M. P. Baumgartner’s (1988) study of an upper middle class suburban town outside of New York City illustrates how this social isolation is transformed into moral expectation, and becomes a yardstick by which residents measure the social order and safety of their neighbourhood. Outsiders even appearing on residential streets upset locals, and strangers by virtue of their race or unconventionality are singled out as “suspicious” if merely walking down the street. Residents explain their behavior by citing their “fear of crime,” by which they mean “predatory behavior by strangers.” Thus, most gated community residents talk about their fear of others--workers, domestics, Blacks, Mexicans, and “ethnics”—as part of their explanation for why they live inside a secured enclave. Co-op apartment residents do not live in the same settings that Baumgartner (1988) and Low (2003) describe, but a similar homogeneity is created through the application process. As Vanessa says:

....there is a certain feeling like knowing that anyone else had to go through the same agony to get by the CO-OP board, it almost makes me feel a little bit better ... that my next door neighbour isn't this ex-murder or that they are not paying their rent by selling drugs [giggles].

Patricia when asked about who lives in her buildings knows that she is living with people like herself:

I think there is a lot of homogeneity in this building...I really trusted the homogeneity of that building, that I was not going to find someone so very different from me.

And even though some residents resent the financial vetting by the co-op board and even question it, in the final analysis, residents like Kerry wonder whether it is “a good thing”:

first I'm thinking, like you know, "oh, that's a drag. Who are they to say?" ...do you just want people who – sort of haven't been vetted, walking around -- -- But – but how do you know how to vet people? ... if you're vouched for by an employer or two and you have the money to pay for it, you should be in no matter who – ...unless you're clearly on – like a freaky, you know, person – although I don't know who's supposed to be the judge of that. ... I think that's probably, ... – a good thing, probably.

Others perceive the same application process, which produces the social homogeneity residents find comforting, as racist. Without attributing the selection process to active racism, we found numerous incidents where people of color are treated differently. Yul, a Filipino, talks about racist questions during his application interview:

...towards the end that [white] guy asked me "what's your race?" and I could tell the [other board members] were pissed off he asked, but you know; I do get weird questions as a minority sometimes, things they won't ask in a job interview that you could sue for...in my Manhattan apartment one [board member] guy, they asked me "Do you cook any ethnic food that smells offensive?"

Yvonne, an Korean American comments on how the co-op board's ability to reject applicants without explaining their reasons can lead to racial and ethnic discrimination:

I think co-op boards can get away with discrimination without ... outwardly ...doing it outwardly because they don't have to tell you what they like and what they don't like. ...someone...she was an elderly woman and I think she had said "Oh could you hold the door open for me?" and if I had heard that I obviously would have held the door but I didn't. ... when she came out she was just like "You Chinese woman," I was like (clap) I turned around and I was like "Are you talking to me?" (laughs) Because I was the only Asian person around here so there will be days...I think it has to do with, and, and it might be my perception

that I think that this building is... generally like older white and it's changing, but you know, I just, I can't. ...it just shocked me. I'm like, we're in New York. (laughs) I just got called "Chinese" on the street." (laughs)

This perception that co-op boards may discriminate when accepting applications has been recently address by the City Council in New York City through the introduction of a bill that would require co-op boards to give their reasons for rejecting an applicant, and to do it in writing within five days of rejection. There is opposition from the Real Estate Board of New York and the Council of New York Cooperatives and Condominiums, even though two-thirds of the members of City Council are co-sponsoring the measure (Scott 2007).

We also found that white residents understand their sense of safety and notion of living with similar people as being produced by and producing a kind of "laissez-faire racism" that economic and social structures such as housing, labor, and status perpetuate (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997). Gary told us:

Cause first of all, there's an income screen. By the time you enter a building like that, people have at least, can afford to rent and they can mortgage for a million dollar condo. Like the apartment, I bought this for six-fifty. The one that's identical to this just got sold, and she was sold for a million two. And the person that bought it, was not acceptable to the board. Then it got re-sold for approximately a million. So, by the time you're at that level, uh, you're color blind but you don't see that many colors.

Moral Minimalism

Baumgartner (1988) argues that upper middle and middle class suburbs in the United States are moral systems, organized to promote what he calls "moral minimalism," a cultural system of controlling community conflict by external and structural means. Upper-middle class suburbs are physically and socially structured to

provide privacy and separation, and households maintain considerable social distance. Neighbors have “weak ties” to other people in the community, but although not strongly linked, they can recognize one another. Residents monitor their environments closely, “identifying those who do not belong,” yet at the same time are sheltered by the privacy made possible by these loosely held relationships.

Upper middle class suburbs, then, are a distinct kind of neighbourhood that combines diffuse interpersonal associations, homogeneity, autonomy, and independence with an absence of strangers. While this pattern of social organization may not characterize all suburbs--there is quite a range of suburban types--when it does exist it allows suburbanites to keep conflict at a minimum, and to manage problems that do arise by avoidance rather than confrontation. In these circumstances, moral minimalism results in distaste for the pursuit of grievances or censure of wrongdoing. Only when the resident can be assured that someone else will bear the burden of moral authority, and enable them to remain anonymous and uninvolved, do they approve and/or practice any overt exercise of social control. Gated communities share many of the characteristics identified by Baumgartner, and residents, in fact, search for intermediary institutions so they do not have to talk to their neighbours. And while at least half of the people interviewed by Low (2003) said they were looking for an old-fashioned neighbourhood where they knew and saw their neighbours, the corporate nature of the governance created more “moral minimalism” than community spirit. If there was conflict between neighbours, they want it handled by the homeowner association board, not by themselves. Moral minimalism changed the nature of community by reducing the amount of conflict and contact residents have with each other.

Cooperative governance with co-op boards and extensive rules produces a very similar kind of moral minimalism expressed by almost all the residents interviewed. Co-

op interviewees report how they attempt to resolve conflicts by not confronting each other and resorting to indirect tactics. For example Larry suggests:

I think the best way to live in a co-op in New York City is maintain as friendly a relationship with people, with pleasantries and so forth, but live your quiet life because I don't know, what's the Italian expression, "Don't shit where you eat." You shouldn't, you know, have a very involved life with people.

When Yul mentions a problem with another resident he recounts the series of steps he tried:

I told my friend the captain (of the building) and she brought it to the board's attention. And they said when you catch him doing it, call the security guard and he'll come up and stop the guy.

Vanessa is worried about ever bringing anything up with her neighbours because of how they might view her:

I think I probably rather have them get involved (the board), I don't want to be the one to make waves, I rather like report it anonymously.

While Yvonne simply says:

I always feel like someone's watching over my shoulder and I don't like that feeling you know and I think this building is particularly strict.

In these small ways, private governance such as the use of a homeowners association or co-op board, enhances the ability of residents to keep interpersonal and neighbourhood conflict at minimum. The complex CC&R's or co-op rules and regulations guarantee that most problems are resolved before they start. On the other hand, they reduce the amount of social interaction in the building, increase social isolation that Low (2003) reports in some gated communities. In both gated communities and co-ops, moral minimalism works against members becoming involved and reduces the possibilities of participatory democratic practice.

Representation

Gated communities are governed by homeowner associations, a special kind of residential association created by the CC&R's of a common interest development. Elected boards oversee the common property, and each home is purchased with the CC&R's as part of the deed. An extensive set of rules and regulations are mandated by the CC&R's, and homeowner associations as private entities also can make their own rules. In an overwhelming number of cases, covenants are treated as private agreements that need not comply with the constitutional standards that apply to the laws adopted by public local governments.

In 1962 there were only 500 homeowners associations in the United States, but by 1970 there were 10,000; in 1980, 55,000; in 1990, 130,000; and by 1992, there were 150,000 housing over thirty-two million people. While only one percent of American housing units were located in a homeowner association, condominium or cooperative—the three main instruments of collective private ownership of housing—in 1970, by 1998 this figure had risen to 15 percent. Today, in major metropolitan areas, 50 percent of all new housing units are being built and sold as part of a collective housing regime. Private enforcement of covenants has replaced municipal oversight in regulating the environment by zoning, and new ground rules—voting rights determined by property or home ownership and not citizenship—are being put into place. Today there are more than 250,000 homeowners associations, each serving an average of about two hundred residents. The majority of associations have responsibility for the buildings—apartments, townhouses, and single-family houses—as well as for the surrounding developed areas and landscape. The typical operating budget is between \$100,000 to \$200,000 per year, but some operate with more than \$1.5 million

Homeowner association boards make decisions that affect every aspect of community life, yet very few gated community residents get involved. George suggests

that there is considerable apathy that grows out resident's desire to let others take care of things:

There's a board of directors. We run this as a corporation, and there are bylaws and meetings. Apathy runs rampant in a homeowners association like this. People just don't show up for meetings. So people who do [show up for meetings] become caretakers for the community. Because [it is a] volunteer board of directors, there are always questions like "why are they doing that?" Well why aren't you there to say anything? It's kind of like you snooze, you lose, type of approach here. So...you have to go along with what the majority rules.

Cooperative housing has a more explicitly democratic approach to private governance based on the second Rochdale Principle, as articulated in the I.C.A.'s Statement on the Co-operative Identity. It defines co-ops as "democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions" (I.C.A., 2006). But most co-op interviewees, like gated residents, rarely participate in their building's governance choosing instead to defer policy and decision making to the co-op board. When asked if the board adequately represents residents, Patricia responds:

P: It is not a democracy.

G: So what would you consider it, if not a democracy?

P: A fiefdom [laughter]! No, I'm not sure, a co-op is not a democracy, someone is on the board, someone runs it, and you have to have someone if you are not going to do it your self and you accept what they do and that is pretty much it."

Such an attitude limits residents' participatory possibilities by ensuring that problems are resolved via a third party, but also serves to concentrate the maintenance of the morals and values behind such governance in a select few representatives. In describing his co-op board, Larry states:

...I think that at all co-ops, and I hate to make a generality, but I think at these co-ops in New York that the people who run and generally end up running the board of the co-op, uh, in a very liberal and democratic city, tend to be conservative tyrants about how they run their, the stuff...

While a few co-op residents view this hegemony of morals and values (similar to gated community residents) as the price to be paid for nonparticipation, others cite it specifically as their reason for not participating. After describing her board as “all very rich, white men who would intimidate me,” Kerry rationalizes her nonparticipation as follows:

Maybe if I knew that the board was comprised of people who were sort of like me, or at least they tried to have different kinds of people on the board, and that that was a requirement, that like the board be comprised by a representative of – representatives – like it would be, uh – a microcosm of what the building is.

Carmella, an active member of her co-op board, echoes this sentiment while detailing an interaction with a recent applicant:

One buyer came – she came with her husband, she’s Japanese, you know, and then he... He didn’t know the names of the people on the board or who was on the board, so he called later and said, “Oh, my wife is so relieved that there are two Asians on the board. She felt so comfortable. She was so nervous.” I mean, there was no reason for us – for her to feel -- nervous [laughs]. But uh, you know, that’s how she felt. So I think that even having one minority is not a comfort zone. You need a sort of group of – a certain threshold of diversity that makes people feel comfortable, I feel.

In addition to the hegemony often found in co-op boards, co-op residents often cite a lack of information regarding the governance of co-ops as an obstacle to participation. As Kerry puts it:

I'm assuming that if the board is voting on... some changes, then that has to be. But I don't know enough about building construction to know things like that, in order to be – to say what should or shouldn't be fixed, so partially I don't want to be – I don't participate because I feel like it's out of my – my domain, you know. I mean, if the question was, 'are we going to paint this floor purple or pink?' you know, that would be a thing I could have an opinion on.

In failing to fulfill the fifth Rochdale Principle, which the I.C.A. defines as the obligation for co-ops to “provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives,” the participatory potential of co-op residents is limited (I.C.A. 2006). The lack of structural and procedural knowledge that we found among co-op residents appeared to further reinforce the hegemonic representation provided by the co-op board.

Discussion and Conclusion

This essay began by asking why gated communities are seen as increasing social segregation and political disengagement, while co-ops are assumed to promote sociability and politically progressive values when both are forms of private governance and collective private ownership. Such assumptions, in regards to co-ops, were found to be inconsistent with our data. Co-ops, like gated communities, were found to increase social segregation and political disengagement. While co-ops were found to promote political values, these values were more in line with the political leanings of board members rather than any specific political ideology.

Greater differences were found in the discussion of sense of safety and security, in that gated residents have developed an elaborate discourse of the fear of crime and others to explain why they moved to their secured communities. Co-op interviewees, on the other hand, generally feel safe in their buildings, often due to the gatekeeper effect of

the doorman, or because the building is located in a neighbourhood perceived as safe. There was variation, however, in the responses to how safe co-op residents feel due to the location of the building, the effectiveness of the doorman, and knowledge of crime in the area. We also think that the comfort that co-op residents express about living with people like themselves contributes in some degree to this sense of safety. Unlike gated communities that have a condominium structure, co-op interviewees express relief that they knew that all prospective buyers would have to go through a rigorous vetting process to be a co-op member. The financial credentials of all applicants are reviewed, such that co-op residents “know” that they will not be living with someone who was socioeconomically different, much less “an axe-murderer”. This same application process, however, is perceived as reducing diversity within the building.

In gated communities, the “complex CC&Rs guarantee that most problems are resolved before they start” (Low 2003). While the same can be said for co-ops, our interviews indicate these complexities also appear to mystify everyday governing practices for the average co-op resident. Moral minimalism, hegemonic representation and a lack of structural and procedural knowledge not only produces an environment which insulates residents from local conflicts and disagreements but also excuses rather than promotes political participation, resulting in a tenuous shoe-string democracy. Under such conditions, anti-democratic practices such as race-based discrimination are subversively expressed as a kind of “laissez-faire racism” – removing such practices from the political realm. The portrayal of these practices as apolitical appears to construct a psychosocial bubble in which co-op residents can comfortably ignore them. Like “niceness” in Low’s (2003, 2008) analysis of how a sense of middle class whiteness is maintained among gated residents, the co-op environment of restricted economic access and living with “people like us” reinforces social relations and structures that unintentionally discriminate against minority applicants and produce an uncomfortable

environment for minority residents who live there. As in the gated community case, private governance structure of co-op boards legitimates and rationalizes socially segregated housing and practices that would otherwise be open to public critique.

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