



The grandeur and decadence of the suburbs

Looking back on three decades of analysis of social and political change

Violaine Girard and Jean Rivière



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Periurban areas emerged in the 2000s as “new” spaces indicative of recent changes in French society – the weakening of the middle classes, the rise of the far right, etc. However, these spaces, which have been put under the microscope since the 1970s by geographers, sociologists and political scientists, cannot be reduced to the simplistic image promulgated by the media every election season.

“One fine morning, the French woke up to discover that a baobab tree had grown in their garden”.¹ Following the last presidential election, in 2012, this was the sentence that opened an article in *Le Monde* describing the sudden arrival of periurban areas under the media spotlight as a result of the growing electoral success of the Front National (FN; the French National Front). Although this phenomenon is indeed something of a sensation in a journalistic field governed by a constant search for something new, can this type of analysis of urban contexts really be said to be new in the field of French research? This is the question that we shall address in this article; however, our aim is not to conduct an exhaustive examination, but rather to try to identify, through the most emblematic research, some key tendencies and themes in the way periurban areas are considered. We shall focus in particular on changes in the social make-up of these spaces, as well as on the question of how electoral dynamics are analysed. In the process, we shall leave aside certain important areas of study – such as the land-tenure and environmental issues resulting from urban sprawl, commuting, and other day-to-day movements that punctuate the lives of periurban households – in order to underline the fact that scholarly representations of residential spaces are dependent on the social and political categories used to define the people who live there.

Following numerous socio-historical changes in French society, the image of periurban areas has been forged in particular according to the way in which the “middle classes” have been considered from a social and political standpoint; conversely, the image of the middle classes has also been influenced by research into their residential spaces, especially in suburban and periurban areas.² Recent interpretations of the situation of the periurban middle classes, however, differ greatly from those that prevailed up to the 1980s (Bacqué and Vermeersch 2008): beyond the close link between the middle classes and periurban areas, there are significant factors of social differentiation even within the middle classes, as within the working classes. It is therefore only by endeavouring to

¹ Raphaëlle Rérolle, “Le Français, cet ‘*Homo periurbanus*’”, *Le Monde*, “Culture & Idées” supplement, 2 June 2012.

² Regarding sociological studies from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and their role in the construction of a petty-bourgeois mindset associated with private housing estates in urban areas, see Magri 2008.

precisely define which fractions of which classes reside in periurban areas that it is possible to move beyond a simplistic vision of both the social and electoral changes affecting them.

Periurban development in the 1970s and 1980s: the burgeoning middle classes move to the country

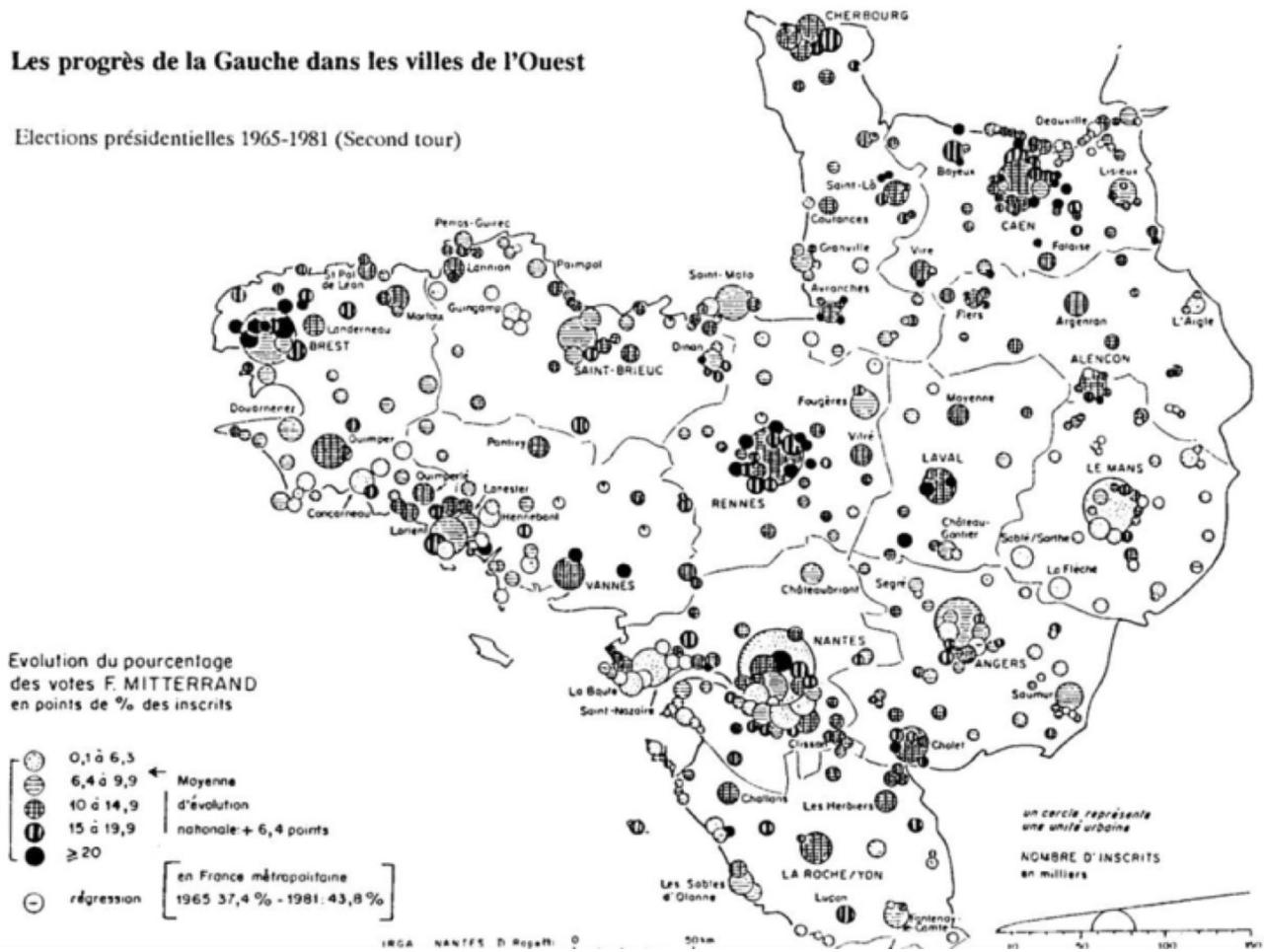
In the early 1970s, the urbanisation of areas on the fringes of French cities took off on an unprecedented scale. The 1975 census conducted by INSEE (the French statistical office) showed that this phenomenon was in fact nothing less than a reversal of the century-long trend of depopulation of rural areas (Berger 2004), affecting France a decade after certain English-speaking countries. Many households from the city, overwhelmingly from the middle classes and the upper portions of the working classes, then settled in rural communities close to cities, causing many localised social changes. The consequences of the arrival of these people, initially described as “rurban” (Bauer and Roux 1976), quickly attracted the attention of researchers from various disciplines in the social sciences, who benefited from high-quality interactions through the Observatoire du Changement Social (Observatory of Social Change) run by the CNRS (Collective 1986; Briquet and Sawicki 1989).

Rural areas as laboratories of social change (1): the geographers' view

In the early 1980s, it was above all geographers specialised in rural contexts who first considered these questions, at a time when the field of geography was undergoing profound changes. While the foundations were being laid for a social geography – conceived in part as a geography of practices and behaviours, whether academic, religious or political (Frémont *et al.* 1984.) – and the study of electoral issues was making a timid comeback in the field, a number of studies were adopting periurban areas as their backdrops. Political change in national elections was already being seen as an indicator of social changes in progress in periurban spaces, along with the change in sociological make-up of municipal councils (Berger 1985). Research from this period, often in the form of monographs, highlights the clashes often brought about by the integration of new populations, and emphasises the significance of “lag effects”, that is to say a sort of latency period observed between the arrival of new populations and the political manifestations of these arrivals: staggered additions to the electoral register, followed by shifts in the control of municipal councils, the speed of these changes depending on the type and strength of community leaders, etc. From a broader perspective, taking in a larger range of spaces, and thanks to cartographic analyses (see the map below), the paper titled “Effet urbain et progrès de la gauche dans le Nord-Ouest français” (“Urban effects and progress of the left in North-West France”) would show that urban sprawl tends to benefit the Socialist Party in Western France (Rapetti 1987).

Les progrès de la Gauche dans les villes de l'Ouest

Elections présidentielles 1965-1981 (Second tour)



Translation of main text: **The advance of the left in towns and cities in Western France**

Presidential elections 1965–1981 (second round)

Change in the percentage of votes cast for F. Mitterrand as a proportion of all registered voters, expressed in % points

Source: Rapetti 1987

At the same time, geographers in South-West France were questioning the link between the process of periurbanisation and the first electoral successes of the FN. Based on INSEE's 1982 census and the results of the 1984 European elections for individual municipalities in the Languedoc-Roussillon region, the authors deconstructed a certain number of platitudes that had begun to circulate at this time – and which still circulate to some extent today – concerning explanations for the rise of the far right³ (Bernard and Carrière 1986). One of the arguments advanced by the authors examines the influence of recent residential mobility, which, in “new urban municipalities”, appeared to be a “risk” factor encouraging votes for “extremist parties”. The authors do not, however, go any further in their interpretation and quite rightly stress the wide variety of social categories contributing to the impressive population growth of the Languedoc-

³ “The supposed link that the Front National believes exists between a high percentage of foreigners and a high unemployment rate has never been established, with the exception of new urban municipalities, where it does exist to a limited extent. However, it must be remembered that there are, in fact, fewer foreigners in these towns than anywhere else: in these municipalities, where the population is growing rapidly and where agriculture is dying out because of competition for land from the construction industry, the dominant form of accommodation is individual housing whose design and style excludes foreigners, North Africans first and foremost. Furthermore, as unemployment rates in these towns are lower than they have ever been, we must look elsewhere for the origin of the readily expressed preference of recent arrivals – who are also very often new to the Languedoc region – for the Front National” (Bernard and Carrière 1986).

Roussillon region in the early 1980s: retired people (from both within and outside the region), foreigners (from North Africa and elsewhere) and young households originating from urban areas (and whose social positions are extremely heterogeneous). This study is a useful reminder that the growth of the “baobab” is not as new as media commentators often suggest.

Rural areas as laboratories of social change (2): the sociologists' view

Social changes during this period would also polarise debates in the field of sociology: the rise of intermediate and higher professions and the development of mass consumption led some to argue that French society was in the process of “middle-class-isation” (Mendras 1988) – in stark opposition to other sociologists who continued to support a vision of a clearly differentiated social structure crossed by inequalities and power relations.⁴ It was in this theoretical context that Catherine Bidou published, in 1984, her investigation of the “new” salaried middle class, in a pioneering work studying periurban spaces (Bidou 1984). The author, adopting a resolutely empirical approach, focuses on the lifestyles of these households, precisely because they make their “way of life” a distinctive social marker: these “everyday adventurers” pay a great deal of attention to their “living environment” and demonstrate an associative activism in favour of protecting their environment or socio-cultural activities. With high levels of cultural capital, these public-sector employees working in the fields of health and education strived to set the tone in the “new” residential spaces that, in their eyes, made up the emerging periurban communities, in which these residents would become increasingly involved, via municipal councils, from the local elections in 1977 and 1983 onwards.

The article “Suburbanisation et pouvoir local” (“Suburbanisation and local power”; Dressayre 1980), taken from a monograph of a small village in Brittany under the growing influence of the town of Dinan, is one of the first French works to specifically consider these municipal consequences of periurbanisation. Taking as his starting point the idea that “these peripheral areas are prime settings for the observation of social change”, the author first provides a highly detailed study of physical changes in the village, changes in its social make-up, and changes on the local political scene, noting that the outgoing municipal council “did not show resistance to suburbanisation, but, on the contrary, supported it”. He then shows that, faced with the disintegration of rural solidarity as a result of urban sprawl, the new municipal team implemented a policy whereby new associations play an integrating role, with the aim of obtaining a local consensus on a new village identity: the “apolitical discourse” appears to be the “only option able to mitigate the contradictions generated by the process of suburbanisation”.

Around the same time, Michel Bozon and Anne-Marie Thiesse (1985) investigated in the Valois area to the north-west of Paris (in the administrative region of Picardy). They questioned the opposition between old and new residents and showed that this division is partly counteracted by the social differentiations that cross these two groups: the “more working-class housing estates”, which are described as a “kind of synthesis between residential housing estates and old-fashioned agricultural workers' villages” can be distinguished in particular from the villages where the wealthiest households reside. At a time when there was a decline in analyses based on social class, in the mid-1980s, these studies focus on changes in periurban spaces, reaffirming the importance of lifestyle and class affiliations in structuring local social relations. The 1990s would bring with them a long hiatus in studies of periurban areas: a large proportion of urban research at the time focused on social-housing areas, in particular following the success of the theme of exclusion – to the point that private suburban/periurban housing estates and the move towards home-ownership would be considered “blind spots of French sociology” during this period (Beaud 2006).

⁴ In particular Pierre Bourdieu (1979), who, a few years earlier, had described the “petty bourgeoisie” as aspiring to belong to the upper classes.

Periurban areas in the 2000s and 2010s: the decline and urban exodus of the middle classes?

It would not be until the early 2000s, and the “return of social classes” (Chauvel 2001; Bouffartigue 2004) in the field of sociology, that new work on the periurban areas would emerge; however, it is in connection with the question of “neighbourhoods” that researchers would return to this type of residential area. Under the influence of interpretations that encourage a “spatialisation of social problems” (Poupeau and Tissot 2005), periurban areas appear as a kind of space symptomatic of the “problems” that threaten French society. Seen first as a place of middle-class insularity, they then became – in line with the prevailing journalistic discourse – the embodiment of the white working class wooed and won over by the FN. Beyond these generalised interpretations based on denouncing growing social perils, several empirical studies presented a more complex vision of these areas, showing that they in fact remain very heterogeneous socially.

Is periurbanisation a source of segregation?

The early 2000s saw a revival in analyses of periurban areas in debates on residential segregation. It is of note that it was a sociologist specialised in the *banlieues* (the generally disadvantaged inner suburbs of French cities), Jacques Donzelot, who was one of the first to once again take an interest in periurban spaces. His approach fits in with a model that aims to describe all the developments of the contemporary city, namely the “three-speed city” model, to which an entire issue of the journal *Esprit* was devoted in 2004. Periurbanisation is closely associated with the idea of the middle classes wanting to escape the traditional suburbs in order to preserve their “community”. Caught between the old city centres, taken over by the upper classes, and working-class neighbourhoods in decline, it would seem the middle classes feel forced to “secede” and find a “means of reassurance” (Jaillet 2004) in a lifestyle associated with individual housing. Other authors criticise the residential “choices” of the middle classes: their “separatism” (Maurin 2004) or “residential closure” (Charmes 2011) are claimed to be at the source of growing socio-spatial segregation and crumbling territorial solidarity.

These analyses are let down, however, by their overly generalising objectives: by attempting to establish an ideal-typical interpretation of these spaces, their authors obscure the reality that there is, in fact, considerable diversity among periurban areas. The “periurban” statistical category, developed by INSEE and INRA (the French National Institute for Agronomic Research) in 1990, aggregates populations and residential spaces that exhibit heterogeneous, if not divergent, social dynamics (Rivière 2011). The theory of growing segregation in periurban areas is also challenged by Edmond Préteceille (2006), who points out, in the case of the Île-de-France (Paris) region, that the most socially homogeneous spaces remain the wealthiest neighbourhoods of the capital (“*les beaux quartiers*”), where households from the upper classes and the bourgeoisie flock together, as well as some social-housing areas containing those fractions of the working classes in the most difficulty. These analyses, which consider periurban spaces through the prism of the future of the middle classes, are contemporary with works that have contributed to the dissemination of the theme of downward social mobility as a means of analysing changes in French society (Peugny 2009; Chauvel 2006; Guilluy and Noyé 2004). From being a space for the emergence of new lifestyles for Catherine Bidou in the 1980s, periurban areas appear, 20 years on, to have become a place of retreat for middle classes destabilised by the economic and social transformations of the 1980s and 1990s.

Have periurbanites been won over by Le Pen and the FN?

Representations of periurban spaces underwent a further shift during the presidential elections of 2007 and 2012, when this socio-spatial category obtained unprecedented visibility in the mainstream media: in journalistic discourse, it was established as a place of social relegation for

“modest” households depicted as having only managed to become homeowners at the cost of many “social frustrations”⁵ and by moving to areas on the outskirts of cities. Several newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Mediapart*, *Le Figaro*) based their views on an essay by consultant geographer Christophe Guilluy (2010) in support of this vision, as well as surveys produced by IFOP (Fourquet 2012). The geographer Lionel Rougé also draws the conclusion that the least stable fractions of “modest periurbanites” are relegated to the most distant periurban fringes, where the rise of the FN has been observed since the presidential elections of 1995 and 2002 (Rougé 2005). It is therefore not insignificant to note that this change in discourse – whereby periurban areas had apparently now become the “refuge” of the white working class fleeing the *banlieues* – operates in favour of comments that seek to explain the rise of so-called “protest” votes in areas outside cities. The long-standing theory regarding the “populism” of the FN, shown by Annie Collovald (2004) to convey significant social disqualification with regard to the working classes, is undoubtedly connected to this focus on working-class periurban households, who are suspected of being the principal agents of the FN’s rising poll scores, even though over half of FN voters lived in urban, not periurban, areas in 2012 (Rivière 2013). Many criticisms have been levelled at these kinds of discourse, which are simplistic and miserabilist to say the least: in periurban areas as elsewhere, voting tendencies are largely determined by socio-professional status and social trajectories, and the subjective affiliations that come with these (Rivière 2008, 2012; Girard 2013).

Diverse residential and socio-professional trajectories

Nevertheless, several recent ethnographic studies adopt a less simplistic view of the social dynamics at play in periurban spaces. What these studies have in common is the attention paid to residential trajectories and the social differentiations between classes or fractions of classes. From the perspective of localised analysis of social classes, they document in detail the aspirations of owners of single-family houses. The work *La France des « petits-moyens »* (“The France of ‘low-means’ households”; 2008) has played a central role in this revival, even though its subject is single-family housing in a (sub)urban, rather than periurban, area: the fieldwork at its core, conducted in a Paris suburb, highlights the trajectories that promote households on the border between working class and middle class, and the way in which these households build upon the suburban residential space. Accordingly, the authors provide a more balanced view of the theory of a general “seizing-up” of social mobility mechanisms, by considering the “short upward mobilities” that characterise many “low-means” households. Josette Debroux (2011) focuses, in turn, on the conjugal decisions and biographical circumstances that govern the residential strategies of households from the higher fractions of the middle classes: in a sought-after periurban settlement, it is not so much downward social mobility that marks the trajectories of households than the gap between professional aspirations and actual professional situations; social positions perceived as uncertain drive the decision to move to a house on the outskirts of the city.

Another way of understanding the development of periurban spaces – contrary to a vision whereby households’ residential “choices” are portrayed as the only factor driving the rapid growth of periurban housing estates – consists of studying the central-government measures and local policies that promote widespread access to home-ownership (Girard *et al.* 2013). Anne Lambert (2013), for her part, has studied a housing estate where the middle classes and working-class families from immigrant backgrounds live side-by-side. Her work shows that, in the face of the economic crisis that has prevailed since 2008, local councillors have not managed to completely control who lives on the estate, despite trying to impose standards of architectural design that affect the cost of the houses. Indeed, these constraints are circumvented by the developers, who want to sell houses on their subdivided plots. Violaine Girard (2013) also points out that the development of

⁵ See, among others, Thomas Wieder, “Dans la France péri-urbaine, le ‘survote’ pour le Front national exprime une colère sourde” (“In periurban France, the ‘excessive vote’ for the Front National expresses an unspoken anger”), *Le Monde*, 29 February 2012.

periurban business parks, undertaken by intermunicipal bodies (“intercommunalities”), has encouraged many stable working-class households to “have a house built”. Far from suffering a socio-spatial relegation, these workers – some of whom have enjoyed professional promotions through access to supervisory posts – are, on the contrary, likely to value a model of social success linked to homeowner status. These households from the higher fractions of the working classes, who work far from the old industrial centres, have to some extent been neglected by sociology of blue-collar work. And yet the forms of politicisation of this kind of work reflect the major changes that have affected the job market for employees in manufacturing and the service sector. For example, in these business parks, where traditional forms of work organisation have been left behind, it is difficult to see the emergence of social groups that are bound by common socio-professional affiliations, as was often the case previously in single-industry rural areas. Combined with the “disqualification” of blue-collar worlds (Mauger 2006), these changes have led to an erosion of the sense of belonging to the working class, which in turn fosters various forms of distancing with regard to the political offer of the “traditional” left. Although the electoral behaviour of the working classes therefore remains heterogeneous in periurban areas, it nonetheless reflects the rising aspirations to social respectability among employees in stable situations, who seek to differentiate themselves from the less stable, stigmatised fractions of the working classes (Collovald and Schwartz 2006).

This latest research, located at the intersection of urban sociology and the sociology of social stratification, enables us to qualify the theory of downward social mobility that predominates in numerous – often miserabilist – discourses concerning “modest” periurban households. These recent studies perceive residential and socio-professional trajectories in terms of social aspirations, by showing that these aspirations can not only be a key factor of misjudgements and mismatches, but also, in other cases, sources of feelings of esteem and social respectability. Moreover, when these ethnographic approaches are combined with quantitative data describing the sociological profile of residents of periurban spaces, what emerges above all is a notion of a mosaic and of diversity, far removed from certain stereotypes perpetuated in academia and the media.

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Violaine Girard is a lecturer in sociology at the Université de Rouen, a member of GRIS (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.

Jean Rivière is a lecturer at IGARUN (Institute of Geography and Regional Planning at the University of Nantes) and a member of the "Espaces et Sociétés" (ESO) research unit (UMR 6590 – CNRS). His work is in the field of social geography, and more specifically the study of the spatial dimension of inequalities and power relationships. His work brings together the social recompositions under way in (peri-)urban environments and electoral behaviours that are expressed in these settings.

His recent publications include "La division sociale des espaces périurbains français et ses effets électoraux" (*Données urbaines*, vol. 6, 2011) and "Catégorisations résidentielles et (dé)valorisation des habitants. La campagne présidentielle française de 2007 dans la presse écrite" (in *La dimension spatiale des inégalités. Regards croisés des sciences sociales*, 2011).

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