

Peri-urban areas and the city: individualism *versus* collective behaviour

Journeys through the Pays de la Loire

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The issue of urban sprawl is increasingly subject to a split in opinions across the scientific and the political communities. Debate focuses on two main aspects: first, the capability of peri-urban areas to contribute to new standards of sustainable development; and second, an interpretation of life in peri-urban areas as characteristic of a withdrawal into the home and of a growing individualism that challenges the very foundations of what it means to “live in society”. Insofar as this second point is concerned, recent analysis emphasizes the growing tendency for people in peri-urban areas to live “among their own kind” (Donzelot, 1999), the refusal to deal with the “presumed conflict with others” (Lévy, 2001, p. 7), a withdrawal into the home and an exodus from the city, together with the rising number of National Front voters in these areas (Grésillon, 1998). On the other hand, some observers view peri-urban areas as emblematic paradigms of the city of choice, for example, within the conceptual framework of the emerging city (Dubois-Taine, Chalas, 1997), ascribing the power of emancipation to this form of mobility.

In both cases, the image of the peri-urban is monosemic and based on archetypes that have a hard time standing up in this kind of area.

As in the rest of the city, peri-urban areas are primarily characterised by considerable socio-economic heterogeneity, albeit it with less extreme cases. On the other hand, typical households are somewhat homogeneous, with a significant majority of families with children. The key peri-urban paradigm is the family, not belonging to any specific social category, either middle- or working-class (Jaillet, 2004, Estèbe, 2004). Social heterogeneity in peri-urban areas is in fact constructed on the basis of multiple levels of differentiation:

- according to economic means, which impact strongly on the choice of place of residence.
- according to cultural capital, which mainly affects perceptions of the city.
- according to past residential history and social mobil-

ity (rise in social status and/or escape from social housing neighbourhoods).

- according to gender, with a more positive attitude to mobility in the case of men.
- according to age, in particular, the social group of “young people” who have a much more negative view of peri-urban life.

The spatial consequences of all this are the development of socially distinct belts, with an opposition between an inner belt largely inhabited by upper middle classes and an outer peri-urban belt mainly made up of solvent working-class households, even though cases of over-indebtedness are common. Superimposed across this predominant structure are sector-based differentiations that often reproduce differentiations found within the inner city, together with fine differentiations made between *communes* (municipalities), or between estates, depending on the age and the size of the housing development, or between the different segments of the property market, with an opposition between renovated farmhouses usually inhabited by management-level employees and old built-up areas in market towns, where the inhabitants are likely to be living in insecure conditions or even in poverty.

The central issue therefore lies in how we are to interpret the rise of individualism within peri-urban areas: is it an essential condition for extending citizen participation (Singly, 2003) or are we witnessing the rise of the “uncertain individual” (Ehrenberg, 1995) engendering social withdrawal and fear of the Other? On the one hand, the weakening of social structures inherited from Fordism allows the individual to choose and modify his/her practices, especially in terms of spatial practice, which in turn also allows him/her to make a conscious choice to live and be involved in society, in other words, to act like a “real citizen”. On the



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other hand however, this makes the individual more fragile, the obligation to make autonomous choices affects his/her psychic balance, and can result in various forms of social withdrawal and an over-valuation of private life, together with a certain disdain for public life. And yet, is there no collective dimension or, *at the very least*, a certain level of cohesiveness that might counter such an interpretation? To what degree are the inhabitants of peri-urban areas becoming more aware of such collective dimensions? To tackle these issues, three dimensions of peri-urban life will be explored in detail: the choice of place of residence, spatial practices in daily life and social life.

Residential histories are mainly dependent on the family's financial options and the availability of land and housing property. Do the reasons given for the choice of place of residence include a desire to escape from the city and a rejection of urban life, or are more positive reasons given? Spatial practices change upon arrival in a peri-urban area, characterised by greater mobility but, above all, more loop trips and pre-determined routes. All the same, is there really such a thing a peri-urban lifestyle, emblematic of the rise of individualism, or are we not simply talking about variations on urban lifestyles? Is the relationship to the city experienced by people who live in peri-urban areas, compared with other residence geotypes, subject to more intense urbanophobia? Social life is another useful indicator of the nature of individualism present in peri-urban areas. Is it characterised by distance in personal relationships and a rather morose social life, or does it indicate a rise of a renewed interest in being involved in civic life?

This study is based on two types of empirical material. First, quantitative processing of residential mobility and daily mobility matrices (home-to-work and home-to-place of study) covering the entire Pays-de-la-Loire region (source: RGP99, INSEE) have been used to characterise the socio-spatial functioning of various sized towns, including Nantes Metropolitan Area and the smallest towns in the region. Next, to ensure that this study has a more interpretative aspect, a series of interviews were held in the peri-urban areas of several towns (thirty-five households in the area around Le Mans, in particular, together with the area around Nantes, Laval, Mayenne and small towns of 2,000 to 3,000 inhabitants, such as Fresnay-sur-Sarthe), and forty-eight logbooks kept to record the mobility practices of a household over a period of one year. Most of these households were questioned on several occasions, using a double interview method (Hoyaux, 2002) as well as interviewing several members of the household (man and/or woman and/or teenagers) at different times.

The reasons behind the choice (or lack of choice) of a place to live

It should first be mentioned that residential mobility is intense and never operates in one direction alone. Thus, in the Pays-de-la-Loire region, 35 to 40 % of the people living in peri-urban areas in 1999 arrived within the nine preceding years but, in the opposite direction, a third of those who

lived in such areas in 1990 have since moved away. There are two main population groups that tend to move away: first, and in large numbers, young people moving out to study or to work in a large urban centre; and, second, a not insignificant number of families that move away because of a change of job, developments in the course of home and family life (an addition to the family), or because of restructuring the family due to divorce, among which moving back into the city centre is relatively uncommon and extremely selective in terms of social life. People do also move away when they retire, but this remains an undeveloped trend, quantitatively-speaking, demonstrating the desire of peri-urban dwellers to grow old in this type of place of residence (Luxembourg, 2005). New arrivals are mainly families with children, with mainly well-off social categories in the inner belt and solvent working-class categories in the outer belt, but in all cases the social structure is more distinct than for the existing population.

Before discussing mobility as such, we shall look at what prompts the decision to come and live in a peri-urban area? To analyse the different forms of mobility that lead people to move to peri-urban areas, the way in which a number of households proceed at the very moment of moving was specifically monitored (for a small sample of eight households). In addition, and taking a more conventional approach, interviews with the other households served to reconstruct their entire residential history and their reasons for coming to live in a peri-urban area.

The desire to own one's own house is still deeply-rooted in the French population and largely explains the wish to live in a detached house in a peri-urban area. The ideological features of the detached house have been well-documented for many years (Haumont, 1966). The ultimate goal of many households is still the home ownership model, even though it may still represent different things to different people and even seems to be becoming more widespread in certain metropolitan contexts (Bochet, 2006). The financial arguments in favour of home ownership are often stressed: "After the age of 30, you don't want to pay rent any longer, it's like throwing good money after bad," (JP, peri-urban area east of Le Mans); together with the hope that one might "at least succeed in this area of life," even though one's professional career may be subject to uncertainty. The hypothesis regarding social reassurance (Jaillet, 2004) manifested by conforming to the detached house ownership model can thus be confirmed, while also being reflected in the rise of a certain form of individualism. This form of individualism is not specific to peri-urban areas, but is found to a large extent in this type of area, in view of the structure of the predominant residential histories. These reasons are also backed by a desire to mark out the stages of family life. "For us, it was also a way of proclaiming that we have started a real family, you know, without our own house, it wouldn't be the same," (C., peri-urban area north of Le Mans). Because new babies are born, because "building a home together" is also a

commitment into the future, becoming homeowners rhymes with perpetuating family values, a collective form that also transcends the autonomy of the individuals that make up the household. Viewed from this angle, the immediate interpretation of the household's desire for autonomy as indifferent to how society functions as a whole is possibly a hasty conclusion. Notwithstanding, the decision to live in a peri-urban area is also the result of a lack of options. There is no choice but to buy into the detached house model (Semmoud, 2003) because the property market offers scarcely any other alternative to families with children. Migration to peri-urban areas is primarily imposed due to the availability of land and housing property in a context in which ownership of the home is valued above everything else.

This brings us to the first aspect of household residential history, and the serious constraints that affect households: the cost differentials of land and property. Property prices vary by a ratio of around 1 to 10 times the price between the inner boundaries closest to the city centre and the outer peri-urban belt (minimum price of 9 euros a square metre in the area around Le Mans). For first-time buyers, especially if they are looking to build a new house, the cost of a plot of land may account for a major proportion of the total cost, or only a very small proportion of the total cost. Similarly, this has a major effect on the price of old properties. In fact, households often take account of the characteristics of the property market before they start looking. In the interviews, some of them said that they defined an area in which to look excluding *a priori* the centre of the agglomeration, and within a radius from the centre that varied in light of their financial means. For instance, J. and S., a couple where he works in the western outskirts of the Le Mans and she works in the city centre, defined a sort of banana-shaped area covering a broad sector to the west, excluding the centre and pericentre of the agglomeration, but including the immediate peri-urban area. Their final choice was a *commune* in the inner peri-urban belt, based on property prices there. The framework within which people look for a house is thus seriously restricted by the property market, in which prices rocketed between 1988-1990 until reaching a turning point around Year 2000.

The steps involved in looking for a house are also somewhat emblematic of increasingly individualistic behaviour. In the case of the old property market, there is no standard method but rather a range of possibilities taken up in varying degrees by different households. In the example given above, J. and S. clearly defined an area in which to conduct their property search, in view of the relative proximity to different places: the places where they both work (in other cases, the area defined is closer to the woman's workplace, looking ahead to her role in the daily running of the household and transport for their children); potential schools, often on a very precise scale (seeking proximity to a specific



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primary school), and, although much less commonly, looking ahead to the requirements relative to school catchment areas for lower secondary schooling although never, in our small sample group, for sixth form schooling; proximity to where close family members live, collateral relatives and, above all, parents, who are often needed, at least part of the time, to help look after young children, especially in the case of families on modest incomes in the outer peri-urban belt; and place of birth, of more or less imaginary roots, which makes at least one or both members of the household feel a certain attachment to the place. For example, around fifteen years ago, H. decided to move to a peri-urban *commune* in the northeast of Le Mans “because my family comes from here” (in fact, they come from a place a good ten km away), and this even though he still worked in the south of the agglomeration at the time.

The features of the property are the primary criteria on which the final decision is based, thus confirming previous analyses (Bonvalet, 1994). First, the family looks for a certain number of rooms, where this criterion is also an important factor in the family’s subsequent mobility, together with a number of simple characteristics: a bedroom on the ground floor for older households thinking ahead to retirement; a garden of a certain size; occasionally, a work-room for do-it-yourself; usually a large living room for the more affluent households, etc. Features relative to the property’s spatial location may also be factored in, sometimes in a contradictory manner depending on the household: “we wanted to move to the country but still, we didn’t want to feel cut-off” (T., who used to live within the pericentre); “so, after that, we said, in future, there’s no way we’d ever live on a housing development again” (A., who bought a small

farm that had been partially renovated following an initial unhappy experience on a housing development in the inner peri-urban belt).

Furthermore, within this very limited framework, households want to buy property that is... empty! In fact, the property market only consists of properties that are available at time t and, depending on the requirements they have set down, it is uncommon for a household to visit more than about thirty properties in its house hunt. Occasionally, the choice is much more limited, to just 5 or 6 houses preselected by the estate agent, or even, in the case of H. and L. to a single house: “This is where my mother used to live, we liked the house and it wasn’t expensive (they were returning to the area after living in Nantes), so, there was no point looking any further.” The chance that a property becomes available at time t , an irrational attachment to an area, the layout or a specific feature (“we just fell in love with it at first sight” is an expression reiterated by many of the interviewees) usually clinches the deal, in other words, is usually the deciding factor in the purchase of a particular property.

The decision must then be validated and justified and many of the interviews revealed that it is only at this point that the issue of the relationship to the city is taken into account. A first sub-group consists of households moving from social housing estates. In terms of figures, they are few in number, but their specific route into the peri-urban area has a strong influence on perceptions of the city. In this group, household members often talk not of escaping the city but of getting away from a particular social environment. Some described the gradual decline in living conditions in the neighbourhood where they used to live and,

even though some still have good memories of the place, their desire not to live in such a neighbourhood ever again is manifested in an anti-urban discourse. However, most of the households that move out to peri-urban areas have not, in the recent past, been residents of social housing neighbourhoods. These households exhibit two attitudes, swinging from one to the other: occasionally, the move into a peri-urban area is accompanied by an anti-urban discourse, as if their new geographical situation (Lazzarotti, 2006) meant that they have to assimilate certain values and attitudes and internalise new social norms. More commonly though, they use a more positive discourse, focusing rather on the search for new living conditions, a safe environment, a pleasant living environment, comfort and space in the home, etc., often expressed in reference to the children: “We wanted the children to grow up in the country, it’s important for them to grow up knowing what a cow or a squirrel looks like, and that’ll never happen in the city” (A. and E., who live in the peri-urban area around Nantes). If the location in relation to the city is included in this discourse, it is more a matter of getting away “from the anonymity of the big city” rather than its urbanity, or even, in many cases, to “find” a better social life than before. Escaping from the city may thus be underpinned by a process of developing social awareness and commitment as much as by a process of rejection.

Even though the residential move to peri-urban areas manifests a distinct rise in the household’s sense of individualism and autonomy, it is nonetheless difficult to draw any exclusive conclusions from the discourses used to justify such a move. For some households, the decision involves more positive values, including the potential of a better social life, while in other cases, it may indeed reflect a withdrawal into the home and a rejection of life in society. In fact, this form of residential mobility is very largely induced by financial constraints and it is only after the fact that it is justified by a discourse constructed on the basis of a set of values and images. The model of the detached house and the underlying ideology are undoubtedly inherent in this discourse, but the households were able to distance themselves from such behavioural injunctions. It should be noted that this ability to distance oneself is also dependent on social status. Households that “are just managing to make ends meet” paradoxically find it more difficult not to conform to social norms, whereas the discourse and practices of households with secure financial means or cultural backgrounds are often more subtle.

Peripheralisation of spatial practices versus the value accorded to the city centre

Spatial practices are also an effective indicator of the nature of peri-urban households’ relationship with the city. Living

in peri-urban areas implies intensive daily mobility demands, mainly met by car use. Within the outer peri-urban belt of Le Mans, around 85 % of the active population works in the centre or in the area immediately surrounding it (source: RGP99, INSEE). This percentage is slightly lower within the inner belt due to the development of local business activity and secondary urban centres, and also decreases the further you go towards the outskirts of the labour pool.

Reconstructing the households’ travel routes demonstrated that their mobility patterns are generally planned more precisely than in other residential contexts, i.e. the households have a certain number of journeys planned each day, even if the exact destination may be decided at the last moment. Last minute changes are, in fact, quite frequent, requiring a high rate of mobile phone use to reconcile the needs of all the different members of the household. Their journeys also follow loops, involving a series of stops in different places and different reasons for the journey, whereas, in the city centre, returning home between journeys is more common (Cailly, 2004). Trips into the city are also more focused on centres on the outskirts rather than in the centre of the city. This, incidentally, is one of the main arguments used in portraying a drop in the participation in urban life on the part of people who have moved out to peri-urban areas.

But does this necessarily imply a rejection of life in the city and, more specifically, of life in the city centre? In fact, once again, we find a very broad array of possible attitudes, from a rejection of the city centre and purely utilitarian trips into the immediate outskirts, to a frequent and active involvement in the centre, often accompanied by a very positive discourse about the city. “Well, once I’ve come home, you can’t expect me to go back into town! Not to mention the fact that it’s impossible to find a parking space there (...). People don’t talk to each other (...). You’re better off staying home!” (W. outer peri-urban belt, to the west of Le Mans). “We love to eat out, go for a walk (in the Old Town), or go to the cinema for the evening... We often go to concerts too. Really, it’s still only in the centre that anything goes on,” (A., inner peri-urban belt, to the west of Le Mans). This swinging between attraction and repulsion is seen both internally, at a personal level, depending on different times of life and one’s immediate concerns, and externally, concerning the entire population of peri-urban areas. Underlying the individualisation of practices and relationships with the city, there lie collective ways of thinking. Spatial distance and social distance combine to explain the lesser propensity of the inhabitants of outer peri-urban areas to spend time in the urban centre, whereas the attitudes of those living in the inner belt differ very little from the attitudes of people living in the densely-populated centre.

In the inner belt, even though the local offer, implying shops, services and cultural or sports activities, are well

developed, consumer choices are mainly made on the broader scale of the city. The most basic daily tasks (buying bread, taking the children to play football, etc.) are performed locally, but irregular and high-value activities can be undertaken in the city (a special purchase, practising a specific sport, etc.). In contrast, on the outer edges of the peri-urban area, the local offer is still under-developed, except in small towns, but the demand for social activities, and especially leisure activities, is also lower or less manifest. "Wednesdays [in France] mean an afternoon off school (...) but the problem is who's going to look after the kids, it's sheer panic (...) fortunately my mother comes from time to time because otherwise I don't know how I'd manage." (L., outer peri-urban area north of Le Mans). The lack of services, for example, childcare services, is felt to be a serious problem in outer peri-urban areas far from the city centre, but is compensated for by the family network rather than having to turn to a childcare centre in the urban centre.

Essential family expenditure is, in any case, mainly catered for in out-of-town shopping centres, which mainly lie on the route of daily journeys and are easily accessible by car. In addition, the main form of transportation in peri-urban areas, given the lack of any credible alternative, is still the car. In reality, this mode of consumption is by no means emblematic of peri-urban life, but is the norm in contemporary society. In contrast, even if these out-of-town centres are always travelled to, there are slight differences depending on people's social status. While this is the accepted model for the working classes, the more affluent classes are much more critical in their view of this mode of consumerism (Cailly, 2004). The relationship to the city is thus affected by a contemporary tendency to peripheralise spatial practice, yet the significance of this tendency does not only lie in a rejection of urban values, but also, and above all, it is a sign of conforming to the dominant consumer models.

The main differentiations between households are based on consumption - leisure, shopping, cultural consumption and practice, which are still activities that can be carried out in the city centre and in these peripheral areas alike. Thus, for a certain number of households, the more affluent and which mainly live in the inner peri-urban belt, the city centre remains a familiar place, in which they feel involved with an attitude that is not at all neutral, in fact, a high value is often set on it in people's discourse. The activities that "count", for example, activities which may have dimension whereby a sense of identity is affirmed, take place in the centre, not in outlying areas: "The thing I love most is the theatre (...) I'm a member of a club (in the city centre) (...) I often go to see what other people are doing too, so I often go into the centre" (S., peri-urban area north of Le Mans). In contrast, for working-class households in the outer peri-urban belt, the city centre offers more inconveniences than social amenities: difficulty finding a parking

space, anonymity and problems understanding behavioural codes are the factors emphasised where this is the case. In some cases, the stressful aspects of the city are mentioned ("it's the crowds of people that scare me, that really makes me feel stressed") but it would be dangerous to conclude that such a perception of the city is common to all inhabitants of the peri-urban belt.

Relationships with the city are therefore not at all mono-semantic: people travel into the city for utilitarian purposes but it is also an important reference space for some households. Travelling into the city, or at least to its peripheral urban centres, is common to all the inhabitants of peri-urban areas, but the value attributed to these peripheral areas (and the very quality of the "city") varies substantially from one person to the next and also depending on the person's social status. For a significant proportion of this population group, the city centre is perhaps travelled to less frequently than was the case a few years ago, but since such journeys are less a matter of having no other choice, a high value may be set on this type of area, and may even generate strong identifying feelings. The individualistic nature of these practices thus opens the door to a broader choice of spatial references, in which the centre of the city remains one possible option.

Diversity of social life spaces

The third aspect that may help us to understand the significance of peri-urban individualism involves a whole set of practices that may be included under the term "social life". Social life takes place within spaces, for example, in the places where one maintains one's social relations (family and friends), or the places where one performs an activity with high relationship-oriented content, such as being involved in a club or association.

From this point of view, there is no archetypal peri-urban household that would supposedly have only a few social relations. The frequency of such relations is in fact highly variable. They may be maintained in the form of visits to one another's homes, typically the case in family relations rather than relations between individuals (more often within the framework of peer groups). In our sample group, some of the households tend to have very minimal social lives and really withdraw into the home, receiving very few guests and those that do visit tend to be member of the family. There is no standard profile for this type of household, which is found among the working-class and more affluent classes alike. It is more the result of personal or family history marked for many years by poor social relations, and moving to a peri-urban areas is not a specific cause of such a decline in social life: "When we lived there (rented accommodation in the pericentre), we didn't go out very much either." (W. peri-urban area west of Le Mans).

In contrast, other households have busy social lives, whether this is at the scale of the housing development, the village or the entire city. The most important social relations for the household or the individual may also be those that are maintained at the scale of the entire city. Some of them have not altered their social relations, built up before moving to the peri-urban area, even if this now implies more family-oriented visiting than outings as a group. Quite the contrary, the house may have become the site where an extended family or group of friends meet, (“we’ve got more space and with the barbecue, it’s really great”) making the most of the space available to have people round for the evening and have a good time (and be noisy) without annoying the neighbours (too much!).

Some households moved to the peri-urban area in the hope of becoming integrated in the local community and forging new social relations, often in reference to the myth of the warm, friendly village where everyone knows everyone. The reality is, in some cases, somewhat disappointing, due to the difference in attitude held by neighbours who have moved in search of peace and quiet or due to the strict social controls already established, notably in the case of any household that may have a slightly alternative lifestyle to the majority: “Sure, we have a nice house and go away every weekend, but the neighbours don’t understand, so, every time we go away, you should see the looks we get...” (J.P. peri-urban area to the east of Le Mans). Various cycles may occasionally be observed on housing developments, with an initial period of a very active social life, followed by a slow decline and less intense relations. In contrast, households that moved to peri-urban areas without any specific desire to integrate or that were even concerned that they might be “invaded” by the neighbours, describe their gradual integration into local social life very clearly, generally initiated via the children, school or Wednesday afternoon activities, and then building up durable and closer social relations with other households. “To begin with, we weren’t that keen to have social relations here. In fact, because of school, we found ourselves going on outings, well, my wife especially, and then you get asked to help at the school fêtes. Then you take your kids to band practice, and you have to wait in the office, and you find other people who are nice in any case, you just need to be a bit selective. And now we have real friends here” (R. peri-urban area north of Le Mans). Social mixing is not lacking either, particularly on the socio-economic level, even if, on the socio-demographic level, this type of space is largely dominated by families.

Clubs and associative activities are also quite important in peri-urban *communes*, particularly in *communes* in the inner belt. Given the size of the *commune*, the number of associations set up for sports or cultural activities, or based on an interest in learning about local heritage, or that have humanitarian aims or are based on citizen participation and action, is quite impressive. There is significant respon-

siveness to local projects and to larger-scale projects. This may be interpreted in light of the growing popularity of NIMBY (not in my backyard) initiatives but, if we look at the example of the planned high speed train link through the Le Mans region and the alternative proposals developed, the phenomenon may also be seen more positively as citizens finding ways to voice their opinions. It would therefore be paradoxical to interpret this tendency solely in terms of the NIMBY movement, while in other residential environments the low participation of residents is deplored.

Furthermore, associative initiatives are not confined to local initiatives, focused solely on community life or ordinary activities. Some associations in urban areas, geared to a public at the level of the *département*, for example, are also coordinated or run by volunteers that live in a peri-urban area and who are genuinely concerned to work for the collective good. In the area around Le Mans, a specific survey on members of associations revealed that nearly half the peri-urban residents that are members of an association are members of an association located in the city centre. Their active involvement in social and community life is therefore spread over a wide base. There is in fact an archetype, in peri-urban areas, of the person who is “over-involved” in associative activities or in local politics, which can be found in every *commune*.

In other households, involvement in social life tends rather to take the form of simply attending the activities or events organised. Attendance at organised events is thus quite significant, although this varies greatly depending on the *commune*. In one of the *communes* observed around Le Mans, local fêtes may be attended by up to 250 people out of a total population of barely a thousand inhabitants. In what urban neighbourhood would you see a similar turnout? Nevertheless, we should be wary of drawing too rosy a picture of such involvement. A more in-depth analysis of social interactions during such events would possibly show that social relations are forged above all within existing groups.

Lastly, a not insignificant proportion of the local population (around 40 % according to one mayor) stays away from such social activities. In a certain number of cases, this does not imply a lack of social relations, but rather that these relations are forged via social interaction founded on apparently unimportant trivia: “Me and my neighbour chat on the doorstep; we love to talk about TV series, or about the weather, or our families; she is a bit lonely really” (C., peri-urban area north of Le Mans). It is important not to interpret people’s social life from an elitist point of view, considering interaction such as this as an inferior form of relationship-building. The social bond created between the people concerned may be very strong.

Is the overall situation insofar as regards social life in peri-urban areas any different from that observed in other residential environments? When it comes down to it, the

distinction between these areas and neighbourhoods in the centres of big cities (Authier *et al.*, 2001) does not appear to be that strong. Apart from structuring effects related to the make-up of society, the same diversity can be seen in how people take part in social life.

All-out individualism versus socially-aware individualism?

The situation regarding social life in peri-urban areas reveals a dichotomy between two possible options. First, in many ways, social relations, relations with other people and involvement in the life of the community demonstrate that behind individualistic behaviour, there is a growing trend toward being more socially-aware and involved in the community. Second, the individuation process may lead to attitudes of withdrawal into the home space, fear of others and even a withdrawal into virtual reclusion.

This dichotomy is applicable to all peri-urban households, with opposition between the inner and outer belts, differentiations between housing developments, villages or parts of *communes*, as well as sharp contrasts between households living in the same micro-residential environment. These opposing forces also operate within the household, between the individual household members, in view of different attitudes according to gender – women are more involved in the local community whereas men have more connections with the city – and also depending on the stage reached in one's lifecourse, with older teenagers being the most highly critical of the peri-urban lifestyle. These dichotomies also operate within the individual, who often feels pulled in opposite directions between contradictory feelings. On the one hand, there is a powerful aspiration to participate in social life and this feeling is often considered to be a positive goal worth striving for but, on the other hand, this attitude is countered by an impulse to reject others, due to an arbitrary minor aggression, perhaps, or an underprivileged personnel background. People are often acutely aware of such contradictions, displaying conflicting values that waver between two alternatives.

The specific residential environment may also reveal certain trends more distinctly, in particular, the differentiation between households that are interested in how society functions as a whole and get involved "to get things moving", and other households that keep to themselves, cautiously observing changes in society but feeling excluded.

At the same time, peri-urban areas are still the locus of numerous institutions. First, the majority of households are still based on the model of the single nuclear family, which

may be seen as the primary link in forming collective consciousness. The individual members of the nuclear family household have to negotiate with each other, for example, older teenagers must negotiate for greater mobility. We thus see that the individual and the collective are interrelated here. Second, the *commune*, or peri-urban village, are references that remain very much to the forefront. Individuals must find a compromise between this dimension, in addition to that of the city, with its "advantages" – the strong incentive to be involved in society –, and the "disadvantages" – intense social controls and the pressure to conform to behavioural norms.

Last, there are obvious collective dimensions, mainly in the way space is structured according to socio-economic resources. Households are not necessarily particularly aware of these differentiations, given the prevalence of discourses regarding the homogeneous nature of the territory (or territories), but households in peri-urban areas also feel, albeit confusedly, that they are not really in the centre of things in terms of how society functions. This widely-shared feeling occasionally leads to strong reactions on the part of the individual, to a feeling of being left out of urban development, notably within the outer peri-urban belt, but this is not currently reflected in a perception of clear-cut collective interests.

Nonetheless, this situation is doubtless not specific to peri-urban areas, and it would be simplistic to credit them with inherently emancipating virtues or with the values related to a rejection of society. Rather than simplistically attributing homogenous characteristics to the inhabitants of a specific area, regardless of its nature, an in-depth analysis of peri-urban areas serves to reveal general trends in the development of contemporary society. In many respects, the contradictions that affect social life in peri-urban areas appear to be emblematic of changes affecting society as a whole.

Political action therefore has a determining role to play in the future development of peri-urban areas. It will either consolidate the growing feeling that there is a collective interest that goes beyond the residential space alone, based on an individualism that is a prerequisite for fully-responsible citizen participation (Singly, 2003), or it will marginalise such areas, especially the peri-urban areas furthest from the urban centre and the most at risk, excluding them from the functioning of society, above all in social terms, content to stigmatise peri-urban areas for "keeping to themselves" and large ecological footprint, and, in this case, cases of withdrawal from society will become possible. Socially-aware individualism versus all-out individualism – the development of peri-urban areas represents a major turning point in urban history.

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