

# French suburban spaces, a long stigmatization

Suburban phenomenon beyond data :  
political and cultural representations in French geographical sphere

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Introduction: data, a social construction of experts, with effects on definitions... of French suburbs for instance

- Data seems to be very rational and concrete in relation to mathematic models or analysis. Based on
  - Administrative perimeters (new or old)
  - Number of inhabitants
  - Density
  - Continuity of urban building, or not
- But data is a social construction over concrete aspects
  - Depends on short historical periods (or geographical moments)
  - Depends on areas and scales
  - Human experts are shared between concrete evolutions and their own representations, and life contexts
  - Representations are individual, but also collective
  - And sometimes linked to types of occupations (geographers, architects, planners)
  - And relations between themselves (included State's technicians).
- Finally, definitions and data are quietly normalized in a specific moment and space,
- With spatial, social and political consequences of choices.
- And suburban/exurban issues definitions and approaches depend of these choices

Introduction: data, a social construction of experts, with effects on definitions... of French suburbs for instance

- Representations, normalizations and data have concrete consequences.
- Beyond particular vision, these elements participate in common look to spaces and landscapes, and to their construction and future
- Concretely, data and their definitions have psycho-social effects on:
  - Learning, in school, from primary level to academic one. So a lot of elements are learned as evidences
  - official reports are based on (Senate...), with same consequences, particularly for demographical data
  - the same for different types of local authorities, as municipalities, towns, counties... with consequences on local or national policies
- Therefore, normalization is evidence for actors or stakeholders
- But there is no evidence in fact, even if Internet “forgets” past
  - even for institutions like INSEE (Institut National de Statistiques et d’Etudes Economiques), the French bureau for statistics.
- And geographers participate in construction and definitions
- And had a long ambiguous look to suburbanization: forgotten, embarrassing, accounting with rural or urban areas...

# I. Between analyze, participation and worry (1950s-1980s)

## 1. Looking urbanization and suburbanization

### a. Mainly Paris at the beginning (Brétagne, 2015)

- Chabot 1946
- Chombart de Lauwe

### b. American and British influences

- Because phenomenon starts before, overall in the USA (in the 20s)
- First analyses and statistical definitions in the US
- Long term work of Peter Hall in the UK

### c. First definitions in France

- Creation of the INSEE in 1946, national board for census and data
- This board keeps the traditional definition of urban municipality, created in 1846 (municip. Accounting at least 2,000 inhabitants living in the main place where is the town hall)
- And in fact, rural municipalities are all municipalities which are not urban

# I. Between analyze, participation and worry (1950s-1980s)

## 2. Adapting to a new situation

- a. In France, car civilization really started in the 60s, even if urban expansion began sooner
- b. New definitions
  - Urban agglomeration, 1954
  - ZPIU (Zone de Peuplement Industriel et Urbain), 1962
- c. New words (rurban, rurbanization, for instance)
  - Mitage, one or few houses built in a rural areas, like the work of clothes moth, and more and more
  - Rurbain, as suburban or exurban in the 1970s and by the beginning of 1980s
  - Périurbain, the same definition than rurbain. In French, périurbain has a wider definition than in American English, including suburbs and exurbs, even if definition of périurbain may be foggy, because French geographers do not agree with each other
- d. An ambiguous approach

In the US, suburbs, houses with urban continuity  
Exurbs, no urban continuity, in villages, often far away

# I. Between analyze, participation and worry (1950-1980)

## 3. Geographers' representations in a changing world

- a. Understanding the current urban movement
- b. Holding back a vanishing world, like preserving a binary approach, urban and rural
- c. But diversity in French geographers
  - Some participating in public planning
  - Some have a proximity with urbanists and architects, and statisticians
  - Ruralists
  - Marxist geographers
    - A group less politicized than others (sociologists)

Suburbanization, a disturbing topic for academic geographers

## II. 1990s-2000s, containment of suburban pressure

### 1. Sprawl and confusion in the landscape

a. Suburban explosion in the 80's

b. French sentence "étalement urbain" has the same sense than urban sprawl

- Everywhere
- Without stopping

c. Representations: a more and more negative movement

- The no-city, la "non-ville", without past and future, same urbanism without respect of specific heritage of each town and city
- (suburban)"vomit", like disease, sprawling on heritages
- (suburban) leprosy like contagious disease, with landscape disfigurements and deformities

## II. 1990s-2000s, containment of suburban pressure

### 2. Preserving rurality

#### a. The fear of a rural disappearance

- Urban everywhere
- The rural at its service (suburbanization, waste storage, recreative amenities...)

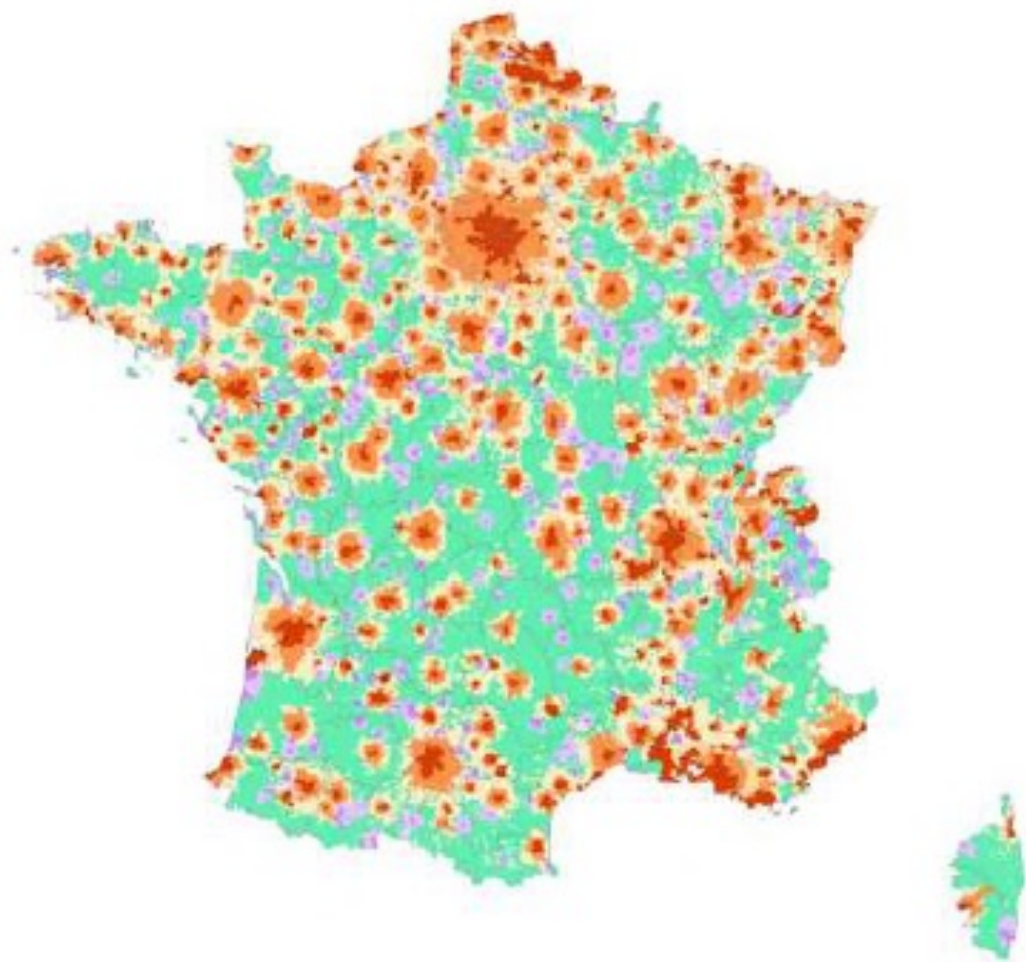
#### b. A rural less and less agricultural

- Less lands
- Increasing of land prices for farmers
- Competition with land for housing, providing a better price

#### c. A lobbying to maintain a statistical and geographical presence

- The heritage of a rural France
- A combination with small towns
  - Animating rural areas
- Maintaining a balance: influence of politicians and geographers on data definitions in the 90's

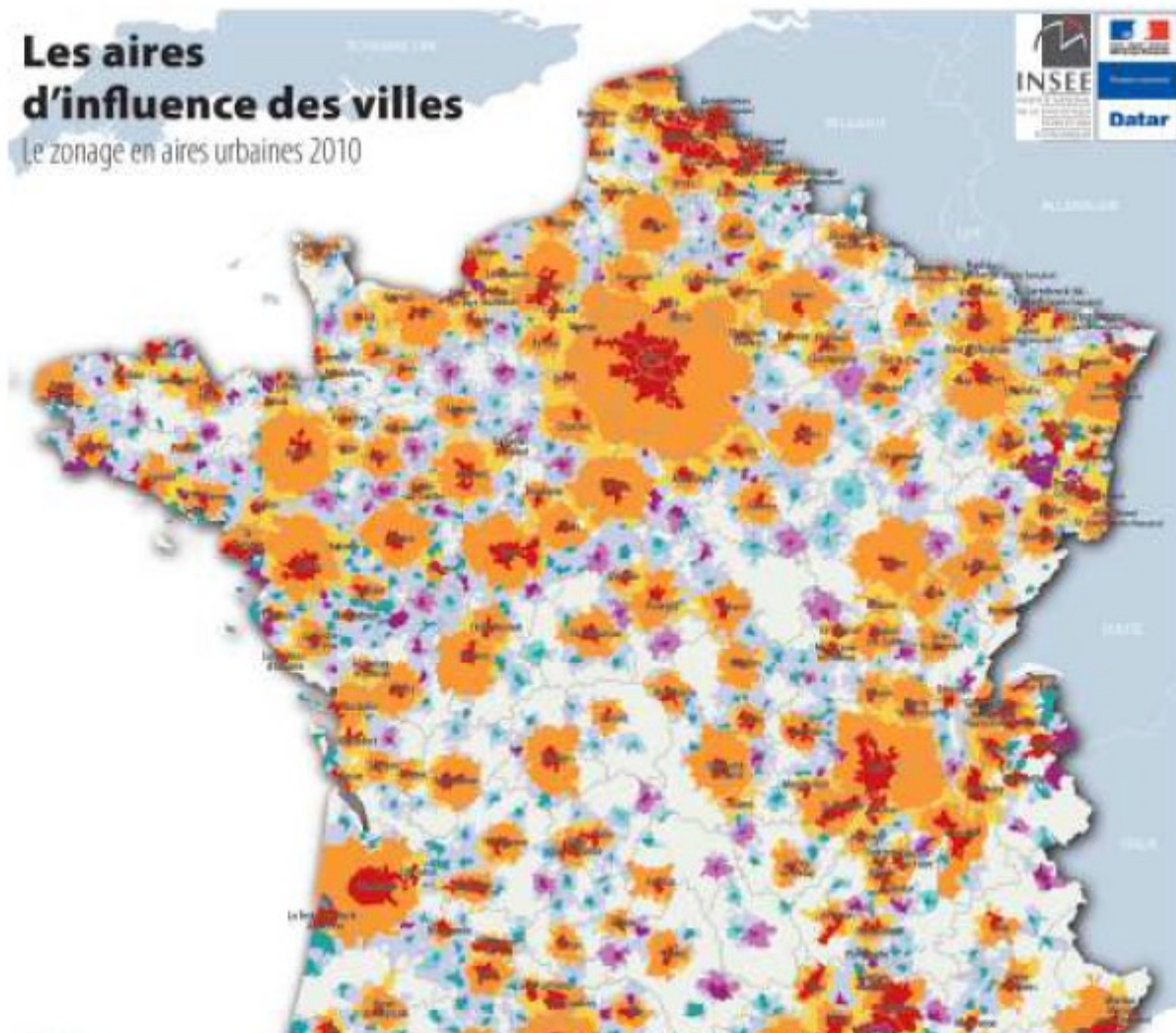




- Pôle urbain
- Couronne monopolaire
- Commune multipolarisée
- Rural sous faible influence urbaine
- Pôle rural
- Périphérie de pôles ruraux
- Rural isolé

### III. Since 2010, from “the all urban” to renewal of rural: where is suburban/exurban?

#### 1. “The death of rural areas” (GF Dumont, 2010)



#### ESPACE DES GRANDES AIRES URBAINES

##### Grandes aires urbaines

- Grandes pôles - 1 257 communes
- Couronnes des grands pôles - 12 301 communes
- Communes multipolarisées des grandes aires urbaines - 3 560 communes



Coeur des grandes aires urbaines

#### ESPACE DES AUTRES AIRES

##### Aires moyennes

- Pôles moyens - 447 communes
- Couronnes des pôles moyens - 803 communes

##### Petites aires

- Petits pôles - 873 communes
- Couronnes des petits pôles - 507 communes

- According to jobs providing by cities (central city and first suburb crown).
  - 10.000, 5.000 and 1.500
  - Commuting with at least 40% of active people
- Areas without urban influence are colored in pale grey
- An urban approach

III. Since 2010, from “the all urban” to renewal of rural: where is suburban/exurban?

## 2. European Union and the issue of density

### a. Building a comparative statistic

- Eurostat issue: building comparative data

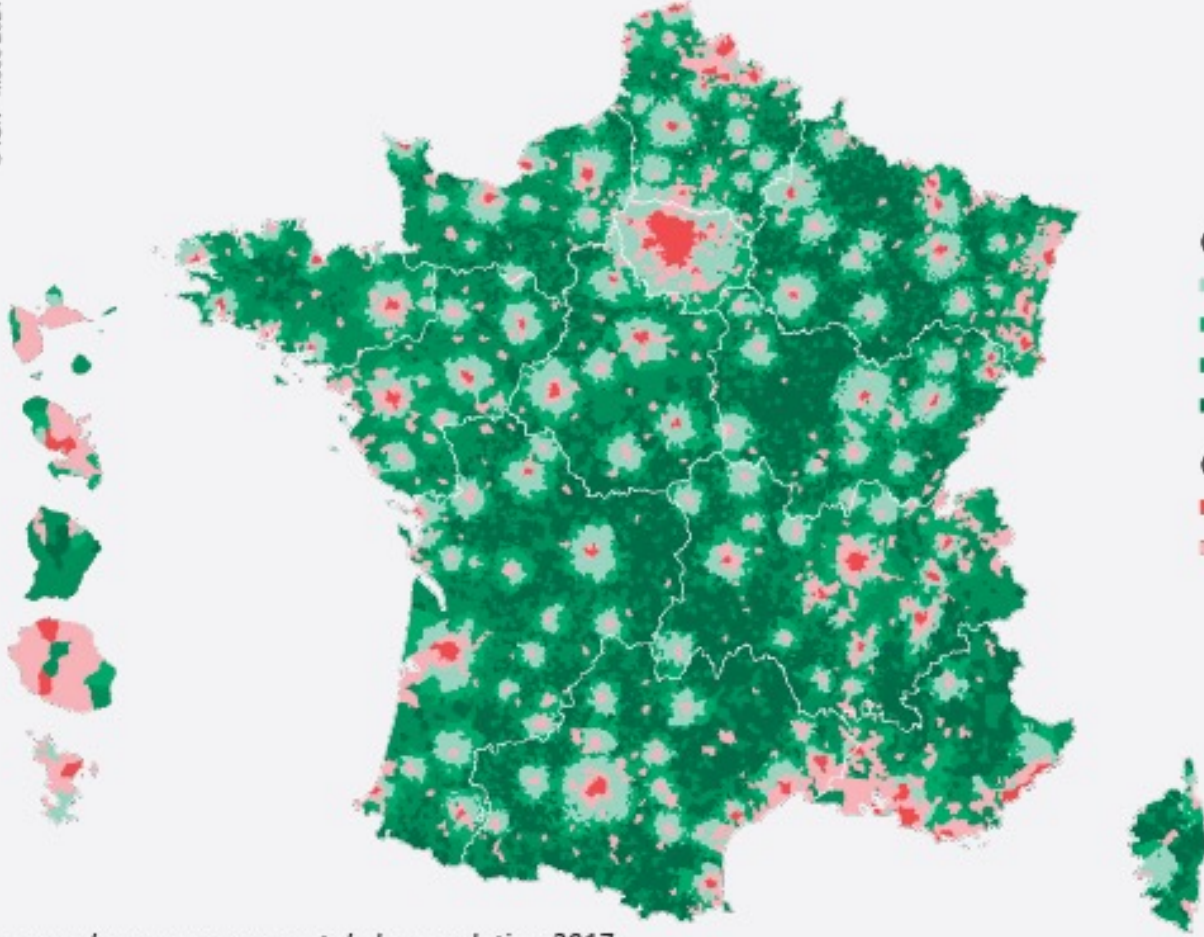
### b. The new dimension of “density”

- Several levels of density, from weak to high densities
- A complex hierarchy of density
- With urban units of at least 50,000 inhabitants
- Integration of suburbs within urban units

### c. Consequences (Bouba-Olga 2021)

- Rural is come back, included into “low” and “very low” densities
- Most part of suburbs are included into rural areas (map next slide)
- Other are part of urban crown with higher densities

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- Catégories du rural**
- Sous forte influence d'un pôle
  - Sous faible influence d'un pôle
  - Autonome peu dense
  - Autonome très peu dense
- Catégories de l'urbain**
- Urbain dense
  - Urbain à densité intermédiaire

Suburban and exurban areas

Source : Insee, recensement de la population 2017.

# Conclusion

- Statistical approach is not the only one to definite suburban evolution
- Otherwise, geographers often refer to data, today and yesterday, to understand and classify areas.
- Of course, data building is not objective, representations are important into this construction
- Finally, geographers are and were shared to suburban/exurban evolution
- But beyond data and fear for the definition of rural, other approaches exist, more social, and geographical, than statistical
- In France, statistically, until now, périurbain is always an in-between

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