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## Suburbanisation



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# Suburbanisation

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**This article discusses suburbanisation as a determining element of spatial development in Germany and Central Europe since the postwar era. To that end, suburban spaces are treated as a component of metropolitan regions. In addition to providing an overview of the status of research into suburbanisation, the article will address issues related to discourse, policy, and planning.**

# 1 Introduction

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Suburbanisation is a key concept in urban and spatial research that has long contributed to the analysis of the developmental dynamic of metropolitan regions (Brake/Dangschat/Herfert 2001). Suburbanisation refers to the expansion of urban settlements beyond the borders of the core city into its surrounding regions, triggered by the migration of households and companies. Today, this traditional understanding of suburbanisation has become considerably more differentiated. Through processes of urban growth to polycentric  $\triangleright$  *Urban regions*, the distinction between the core city and the environs – a classic topos in the suburbanisation debate – has proven to be increasingly problematic. There is also the maturation and aging (and sometime stagnation) of suburban subareas after decades of rapid growth. At the same time, the developmental dynamics of the core and periphery tend to converge, and the inner cities in some urban regions are once again residential locations in demand ( $\triangleright$  *Inner city*). This poses again a new challenge for spatial research and planning.

From the viewpoint of  $\triangleright$  *Urban planning* or  $\triangleright$  *Regional planning* and also from a normative perspective, suburbanisation is highly controversial. This mainly applies with a view to the consequences of urban growth in the outer zones which are assessed to be negative. This includes the utilisation of  $\triangleright$  *Open space* for settlement purposes, the necessity of providing additional infrastructure, and the increase in motorised transport through the expansion of individual action spaces ( $\triangleright$  *Action space*). The more the peripheral areas are part of the larger, complex urban region, however, the more problematic such evaluations become – especially since this involves longer-term developments, which can only be corrected with a long-term view.

Recent literature on suburbanisation reflects this changed viewpoint of the urban peripheries insofar as it is spatially and temporally differentiated: apart from the dichotomy of city  $\triangleright$  *City, town* and environs, it points to the high degree of variation within the category of suburban space ( $\triangleright$  *Space*) (Clapson 2003; Keil 2013). Types of use, socio-economic structures, and forms of urban design are less homogeneous and one-dimensional than assumed. The aging of suburban spaces, which is currently becoming more significant, also contributes to this picture (cf. Hesse/Hoffschröer/Mecklenbrauck et al. 2013). Against this backdrop, what follows is an overview of the state of suburbanisation. To that end, various threads of analysis and argument are combined: an empirical-quantitative approach, qualitative approaches based on the living environment, and considerations of the discursive settings in society, policymaking, and  $\triangleright$  *Planning*. The focus here is on developments in Germany and Europe; the extensive situation regarding suburbanisation in North America, apart from a few exceptions, will not be discussed.

## 2 The status of suburbanisation in Germany

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### 2.1 Definition and concepts

Suburbanisation was a central element of  $\triangleright$  *Urban development* in most industrialised nations in the 20th century. This is the case despite the fact that there are notable differences between European, American, Canadian, Asian, and Australian cities regarding the scope and range of

suburbanisation, its temporal dynamics, and its impact on spatial structures. In Europe, the origins of suburbanisation can be seen in the emergence of districts of villas in Victorian England in the 19th century (cf. Siebel 2005), and sometimes even prior to that. It can be generally assumed that the rapid urban growth at the turn of the century and the development of mass consumerism in the postwar era created in the first place the preconditions for the emergence of the suburbs and suburban space that have long shaped industrialised society (Harris/Larkham 1999).

The process of suburbanisation is, by definition, brought about by the migration of the populace, but also of industry, trade, commerce, and free time pursuits to the outskirts of the city and beyond. The more distinctly suburban spaces have expanded, the more migration patterns and commuter flows have changed, from the original core-outskirts gradients to more complex interactions and spatial patterns. At the same time, they take on a specific form, beyond the traditional organisational concepts of urban planning and ▷ *Spatial planning (Raumordnung)* (Sieverts 1997). This is associated with a change in the ▷ *Relations between cities and surrounding regions*, which is no longer primarily shaped by hierarchy and dependence, but is more balanced. This circumstance is also implied whenever the theorem of ‘post-suburbanisation’ is invoked (Dittrich-Wesbuer/Knapp/Osterhage 2010). In contrast, the term ‘peri-urbanisation’, which is popular in the French-speaking world (cf. Paluch 1997), refers to suburban spaces and in particular areas outside the core city.

Among the triggering factors of suburbanisation, ▷ *Urban research* primarily specifies the land market (land price gap between the core city and city outskirts; ▷ *Land market/land policy*) as well as a high location quality (open space, ▷ *Landscape*), which have long made suburban spaces preferred areas for first-time home owners (Walker 1981). A lack of available space and land prices as well as usage conflicts between ▷ *Housing* and trade (noise, deliveries) are also deemed drivers of the relocation of space-intensive and price-sensitive commerce, industry, and trade uses (▷ *Industry/trade*) to the city outskirts, sometimes in connection with industrial and business parks that feature a higher quality of facilities. Due to those locational features in comparison to the core cities, suburban areas drove growth in the urban regions for quite some time. However, that only became the case as a result of policy-based planning regulations, and would be difficult to imagine without catalysts such as infrastructure policy, the ▷ *Provision of local public infrastructure* or tax incentives (grants for first-time home owners). Growth strategies pursued by local authorities in the context of intermunicipal competition were also decisive here.

The interaction between these factors has brought about spatial configurations that, in comparison to the core cities, are normally distinguished by lower ▷ *Density* (population density, job density, building density), a peripheral location, less functional diversity, and facilities with a comparatively low level of equipment and services (▷ *Infrastructure*, accessibility). In connection with this, a clearly greater homogeneity of social classes, if not conformity of social milieus (▷ *Milieu*), is discussed. Among the structural typologies of suburban areas, often pithily designated ‘suburbia’, areas with detached and semi-detached houses are often emphasised. But the spectrum is broader: large housing estates in particular formed a classic feature of urban peripheries in western and eastern Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia for a long time. In the prosperous metropolitan regions, the multi-storey construction often seen in ▷ *Housing developments* has long been a determining feature of suburban spaces, in considerable quantitative orders of magnitude: in western Germany alone (without Berlin), there are around 10 million apartments on the peripheries of the core cities and in their immediate environs (BMVBS

[Federal Ministry of Transport, Construction and Urban Development] 2009). This represents one-third of the housing that existed in the 1960s and 1970s. Industrial and trade locations arose in urban areas or those on the city outskirts to a large extent, and, recently, with a large percentage of office and service use as well (▷ *Services*). Moreover, specialised transport and logistics hubs, which have increasingly emerged since the 1990s, have a distinct affinity for suburban areas near the core cities for functional, economic, and urban development reasons. This especially applies to airports, which are now no longer in the core cities, but must be located on their outskirts or even far beyond.

## 2.2 Forms of suburbanisation

In a quantitative respect, suburban areas are still a blank space to some degree. Official statistics and ▷ *Spatial observation* do not capture this spatial category as such; due to distortions through municipal borders, only approximate values can be presented here. Table 1 provides a breakdown of area size, population, and employment in Germany in 2011 by suburban spatial categories. Complementary areas near the city, and closer or wider interactional areas, form an aggregate here of a considerable magnitude, accounting for around 37% of the area, around 46% of the population, and around 38% of the working population.

What follows is an outline of the development of the 50 metropolitan regions of Germany from 1997 to 2009, building on data sets from the ongoing spatial observation as well. It is based on the urban region model of the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (*BBSR*), which distinguishes here between core cities and intake areas defined as suburban (cf. Hesse/Hoffschröer/Mecklenbrauck et al. 2013). The two spatial categories, core city and its environs, have developed inconsistently from a demographic perspective. In most suburban areas, the population has grown – above all in the economically strong regions of southern Germany. Most suburban areas develop similarly to their respective core city. Regions with the strongest population declines are mostly in eastern Germany. However, cities such as Jena, Dresden, and Leipzig show a positive development of the core cities with a shrinking of suburban areas. Suburbia is significant in terms of aging: the percentage of people over 65 has increased considerably compared with the core cities. The only exceptions to this are the eastern German regions (except Berlin/Potsdam), with a strongly marked aging of the population in the core compared with the outskirts. If suburbia is clearly under the influence of ▷ *Demographic change*, net migration also shows that suburbanisation is continuing, primarily in prospering areas such as Hamburg, Frankfurt, Munich, and Stuttgart. Growth and shrinkage tendencies exist side-by-side or parallel to each other. Suburban areas always win out when it comes to migration; migration losses have been observed in the eastern German suburban areas and structurally weak western German regions (Ruhr area, Saarbrücken).

Table 1: Land area, population, and employment in and outside metropolitan regions, 2011

	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Percentage	Population	Percentage	Working population	Percentage
<b>Core</b>	1,2500	3.50%	23,439,707	28.64%	10,727,711	37.89%
<b>Complementary area of the core</b>	1,4345	4.02%	12,870,440	15.73%	4,340,198	15.33%
<b>Closer commuting zone</b>	6,1676	17.27%	13,187,923	16.11%	3,173,836	11.21%
<b>Wider commuting zone</b>	92,946	26.03%	11,686,659	14.28%	3,268,970	11.55%
<b>Outside the metropolitan regions</b>	175,663	49.19%	20,659,014	25.24%	6,803,815	24.03%
<b>Total</b>	357,130		81,843,743		28,314,530	

Population and area as of 31 December 2011  
 Employment (workplace) as of 30 June 2011

Source: Ongoing spatial observation by the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, statistics from the Federal Employment Agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit*)

In over half of suburban areas, the number of employees has increased – somewhat more than in the core cities as a whole. In contrast, the eastern German regions are especially affected by a decline in employment figures. Tertiarisation increased enormously in the western German suburban areas from 1997 to 2009, while it tended to decrease in eastern German subareas. In the top group of suburban areas, the increase in employment figures in the tertiary sector even overtook the core cities. The unemployment rates declined in all suburban areas of Germany, and the economic development was also more positive than in the core cities. The development of the settlement areas and public thoroughfares shows a higher land take in the suburban areas compared with the core cities, which have more limited land reserves at their disposal. Empirically observed, the suburban areas are relatively robust as a whole in comparison with the core cities. Moreover, they are strongly differentiated from the perspective of their characteristics and features in and of themselves, but also in comparison to the core cities, and among each other.

### 2.3 Suburbia as a category of the living environment

The qualitative change in suburban areas is strongly differentiated by typology and region. This has also been observed in other European countries, such as the United Kingdom or France. In the past, many suburban areas have taken on typically urban qualities. They have been influenced by ▷ *Urbanisation* and exhibit a diverse housing environment, and are high quality locations with considerable employment market potential – in principle, the very qualities people seek out in suburbia. This is connected with a diversification in ▷ *Lifestyles* and everyday organisation, to which research is gradually opening up. The residents of suburban areas include first-time

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home owners or families with children, and increasingly couples, single-person households and migrants. They are tenants in multi-storey buildings, or live in terraced houses or detached or semi-detached houses, depending on the regional housing and labour markets (Beckmann/Hesse/Holz-Rau et al. 2006).

Many families in urban peripheries are also experiencing changing needs for space, especially those with children and adolescents, particularly where both parents work full-time or due to changed perceptions of gender division of labour. It can be harder to overcome complex space-time patterns in the dispersed structures of suburbia than in core cities (Menzl 2007). In polycentric regions, as shown by findings from the urban regions of the Bergisches Land and Bonn (North Rhine-Westphalia), decisions about where to live and everyday life are strongly regionalised (Dittrich-Wesbuer/Föbker/Osterhage 2008). Finally, certain groups tend to form socio-moral islands or archipelagos: they create social-spatial arrangements in which distinction serves to isolate them from other social groups. This phenomenon was formerly observed mostly in homogenised, middle-class suburbia. But today it is seen just as much on the outskirts as in the more prestigious parts of the core city – a sort of melange of suburbanisation and ▷ *Gentrification* (Frank 2011; Mace 2013). Overall, the findings of such studies are that the traditional dichotomies of core city and environs are obviously no longer suitable to adequately describe socioeconomic developments and their spatial settings in urban regions and their outskirts. This includes the debates around ‘post-suburbanisation’, which further develop the traditional understanding of suburbia (Phelps/Wood/Valler 2010).

## 3 Suburbanisation – discourse and policy perspectives

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### 3.1 Interpretive models

Suburbanisation has not only brought about material territory, but has also always been the object of individual and collective projections, a mirror of social modernisation and spatially-based identities (▷ *Identity, spatial*). The suburb was privatopia and dystopia at the same time – on the one hand, the manifestation of a longing for a private place of retreat, which offered the possibility of maximising the respective advantages of city and rural areas and avoiding the disadvantages of each. Moreover, it involved accumulating assets and safeguarding the future. On the other hand, the suburban space was a projection screen for the extensive criticism of urban growth (cf. Nicolaidis 2006; Vicenzotti 2011), primarily from the ranks of architecture, urban planning and the core cities. In the emerging industrial cities, it was the ‘anarchy of the suburb’ that provoked people’s criticism (Maderthaler/Musner 1999). Later, suburbanisation worked like a type of ‘image interference’ on concepts of spatial organisation (Kühn 1998). Furthermore, indirect, negative consequences on the core cities were lamented, such as social-spatial separation through selective migration (and therefore also the loss of steering power) or a relocation of purchase power flows in the ▷ *Retail trade*. This criticism came mostly from the perspective of the core city, seldom from the viewpoint of the outlying areas themselves (cf. Hesse 2010).

In the recent past, suburbanisation has been characterised by two different perceptions

in urban planning and research. One perception stems from this traditional criticism and invokes a narrative of decline (cf. Gallagher 2013 for an overview of the mainly North American discourse). The demographic change, new consumer preferences and increasing transport costs challenge and call into question the foundational conditions of the suburban space as such (see also Kuhn 2002). Where factors such as ▷ *Urban expansion*, constantly increasing demand for housing and commercial spaces, or affordable ▷ *Mobility* lose their significance, the weakening of suburbanisation is interpreted as a type of secular demise of suburbia. From the private paradise of a good life in the suburbs, a dystopia emerges that, in addition to the social costs, now also manifests itself in certain disadvantages. However, this narrative is speculative in that it makes sweeping assumptions and underestimates the capacity of suburban spaces to transform. Here as well, social contexts often remain hidden.

On the other hand, there is a growing awareness that ▷ *Urban redevelopment* will be needed in the future not only in the city centre, but also on the aging outskirts. This change presents new challenges for research and for planning stakeholders – precisely because suburbia has emerged from the development logic of growing agglomeration (▷ *Agglomeration, agglomeration area*). Some catching up will be needed, e.g. in the context of infrastructure policies, since suburbanisation was made possible at a basic level through the street network, especially the network of motorways. Public transport options (▷ *Public transport*) are structurally disadvantaged in dispersed spatial patterns. Suburban train networks, the classic driver of suburbanisation, were previously built to a largely radial pattern. Direct connections between the outlying areas are rather the exception here (e.g. the ‘regional west expressway’ (*Regionaltangente West*) in Frankfurt). Demographic stagnation or decline also constitutes a new situation for suburban areas. There are almost no experiences or strategies to overcome them. Recently, the generational change in suburban households and the consequences for neighbourhoods of detached and semi-detached houses have become a focus of research and practice (Wüstenrot-Stiftung 2012). In the face of aging, ▷ *Migration* and high vacancy rates, the adaptation of such areas to these new circumstances needs to be addressed (through building renovations or improvements of the surroundings, for example). Suburban life cycles are diverse, however, and the action logic of urban redevelopment is confronted with specific problems in the peripheries and a clearly different spectrum of stakeholders than in the core city.

### 3.2 Policies, planning and governance

Policies and planning in the context of suburbanisation were long shaped by opposing interests between the core cities affected by exoduses and the municipalities in the environs that won out. Since the late 1950s, there have been instruments of institutional and planning regulations, such as core-periphery associations, special purpose associations, and regional planning. However, their effectiveness was limited, especially since conflicts involving party politics not seldom ran precisely along the urban-suburbia border – mostly with social-democratic libertarian metropolitan areas on the one hand and conservative majorities in small neighbouring municipalities on the other. Among the formal steering models, the region of Hanover and the Stuttgart regional association as political entities are considered the farthest reaching examples in Germany; however, both are rather exceptions to the rule that coordination through spatial planning and regional planning loses significance in large urban regions. Above all, it appears to be difficult to achieve a consensus on which developmental corridors are tenable and which are no longer permissible – which the local

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authorities affected normally refuse as a restriction of their planning autonomy. Such stipulations are accepted only as part of policy packages which balance out any perceived disadvantages. With a view to the action spaces of households and companies, there is a growing inconsistency between the functional area of the urban regions and the political-administrative area of the local authorities. The regionalisation of living environments has repeatedly undermined territorial policies and therefore formal competencies, as has the removal of the spatial boundaries of economic activities. Therefore, informal arrangements are strengthened, such as in metropolitan regions (▷ *Metropolitan region*), or urban-rural partnerships, as part of temporary formats such as architecture exhibitions or the 'REGIONALE' (a biennial structural development programme for the regions) in North Rhine-Westphalia. In municipal neighbourhood forums such as in Berlin-Brandenburg, city districts and the surrounding municipalities work directly together to shape joint outlooks for the peripheries (▷ *Peripheries/peripheralisation*).

In addition to the traditionally opposed interests between the core city and its environs, there are disparate interests among the suburban municipalities. Even against an increasingly localised backdrop, advantages and disadvantages, costs and benefits are often unequally distributed among the outlying municipalities. Infrastructure and accessibility issues can significantly predetermine the structure of the space. Suburbia itself, however, normally lacks the institutional means to resolve conflicts. A third aspect of the conflict of interests consists of the populace, since the residents living in the outskirts see themselves confronted with new neighbours, additional growth, and well-intended strategies of subsequent densification. This sub-urbanisation implies that negative side effects, such as an increasing extent of the area being built over, conflicts over the use of space, and growing traffic burdens, will now reach the outskirts as well – often the very things one was trying to escape by leaving the city. While long-time residents of an area seek to maintain and safeguard the qualities that attracted them there and avoid influx and densification, newcomers lay claim to the same enjoyment of the 'good life in greener surroundings'. Formerly, however, there were few experiences with balancing the benefits and costs, advantages and disadvantages of this type of location in the interests of improving life in the outskirts of the city and the urban region as well.

## 4 Outlook

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After decades of more or less continual growth, processes of suburbanisation are now differentiated in most European countries. This means that the perception of this process has changed again. If at the end of the 1990s it was said that 'peripheries are everywhere' (Prigge 1998), today the core cities are once more in focus. In growing urban regions, the maturing and qualification of suburbia is moving back onto the agenda, while in regions with declining developmental dynamics, structural adjustments represent the new challenge. 'Suburbia as a spatial category' – with its hybrid positioning between the perspective of the core city, the surrounding municipalities' own interests, and the macro-perspective of the entire area – can only deal strategically with growth, maturity, or adjustment in a limited way (Hesse/Hoffschröer/Mecklenbrauck et al. 2013). Suburban space is not only an in-between space in terms of urban development, but also institutionally and strategically. The question is whether there can be a perspective that depends neither on the particular interests of the local authorities nor on the broader perspective of the urban regions.

This call for an independent perspective for suburbia is also critically scrutinised in the context of the urbanisation of modern society that can be perceived in many places (with urbanised rural regions and parts of the city that have a somewhat rural character). This is connected with the intention of not focusing on the space itself, but on specific attitudes and lifestyles. The term *suburbanism* is also used in the Anglo-Saxon context (Keil 2013) as an indicator of a decentralised way of life that is increasingly globalised. Such a change of perspective from the space-specific argument to a social view of the encountered phenomena and problems affects a key issue of human geography. It dovetails with the impression that the question of the correct definition and delineation of suburbia, the vocabulary appropriate to that end (Vaughan/Griffiths/Haklay et al. 2009) as well as the most appropriate empirical basis remains unanswered a century after suburbanisation processes first got underway.

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