Spinning the web: New social contacts of Prague’s suburbanites

Petra Špačková *, Martin Ouředníček

Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Science, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development, Albertov 6, Prague 2 128 43, Czech Republic

Abstract

Suburbanization is one of the most important processes changing the nature of metropolitan regions in Europe’s post-socialist countries. This paper evaluates the importance of social contacts of new suburbanites on local level social cohesion and development. The paper employs examples from empirical research into new suburban communities in the Prague metropolitan region of the Czech Republic. Our results show that both internal and external social ties are developing in such newly built areas, which is important for the well-being of both the neighborhood and the municipality. Internal ties foster the social cohesion of a neighborhood, while external ties encourage development of the whole municipality (e.g., via political participation or informal contacts).

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Introduction

At the core of a complex literature on suburban development is a critique of suburbanization that focuses upon the erosion of social capital (EEA, 2006; Putnam, 2000; Salamon, 2003a, 2003b; TCRP, 2002). A similarly negative perspective has also been visible in a large part of the post-socialist urban literature, where a substantial number of authors have criticized the social environment of suburbs (Hirt & Stanilov, 2009; Hnilíčka, 2005; Šykora, 2003; Timár & Váradi, 2001). In contrast to these scholars (who study suburbanization theoretically or use general metropolitan indicators; e.g., Putnam, 2000), we argue that suburbanization has no significant impact on the worsening of the social environment in the Czech Republic.

The aim of our paper is to analyze and evaluate the social relationships developing within new suburban localities in post-socialist cities, using the Czech Republic as our focus. We assess the state of social cohesion, using a differential view of the social ties among new suburbanites and the mechanisms evident in the establishment of new social networks, institutions and activities. “Spinning the web” is a metaphor for the establishment of new social networks, which we employ throughout this article. We imagine the internal and external social ties of a local community as a spider’s web, spinning both the inner and outer threads.

Suburbanization as a negative phenomenon

A negative perspective on the urban environment has a long tradition in urban studies (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Lupi & Musterd, 2006). This applies also to studies on suburbanization. Starting in the 1950s, the process of suburbanization has been widely criticized in the American literature. Suburbs were considered as places of conformity, mediocrity, social anomy, and social pathology (Keats, 1956; Mumford, 1961; Whyte, 1956). These stereotypical images of American suburbia were later termed the suburban myth (Berger, 1961). But empirical research based on participatory observations showed a different image, illustrating the diversity of American suburbs and the heterogeneity of local social systems (Avenarius, 2008; Berger, 1960; Dohriner, 1960; Gans, 1967).

In recent years, a critique of the suburban social environment has (re)appeared in connection with the introduction of the concept of social capital. Putnam (2000) regards suburbanization as one of the causes of the loss of social capital and a degree of civic engagement. Oliver (1999) assumes that high social homogeneity of suburban communities implies a lower level of political participation. In addition, the time-space organization of suburbanites’ days is considered to be problematic, particularly when the amount of time taken up by commuting considerably reduces chances for informal contacts with neighbors (Putnam, 2000). But Modarres and Kirby (2010) argue that such negative commentaries are not grounded by solid empirical evidence.

A similar wave of criticism of the suburbanization process has appeared recently in the post-socialist countries (Hirt & Stanilov, 2009; Timár & Váradi, 2001). Authors in the Czech Republic blame suburbanization for the loss of social cohesion (Šykora, 2003) or the social isolation of suburban residents (Hnilíčka, 2005). Most of the critique is not based on thorough empirical analyses of the social environment but rather adopts the negative insights derived from literature on suburbanization in the West European and North American context. Recent empirical studies show that the reality is different and the negative consequences of social life in...
suburbs are overestimated (Bernard, 2006; Leetmaa, Tammaru, & Anniste, 2009; Puldová & Ouředníček, 2006; Soós & Ignits, 2005; Więcław-Michniewska, 2006).

A geographical perspective on social ties

In the past, there was a large debate on the significance of social ties in urban society (Gans, 1967; Granovetter, 1973; Tönnies, 1887/1996; Wellman & Leighton, 1979; Wirth, 1938), which still persists in various forms in the discussion of suburban development (Avenarius, 2008; Erkip, 2010; Lupi & Musterd, 2006; Putnam, 2000; Salamon, 2003a). The importance of social networks only loosely tied to a specific location characterizes contemporary societies. These or other contacts take place among people over large distances, relatively independently of the character of the places they originate from. A considerable amount of communication has been liberated from the space, as it has moved to the cyberspace of flows of mobile telephones, Internet, e-mail communication, discussion forums or groups (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). Discussion on the “community question”, dealing with the loss or survival of social cohesion within the society, was solved using the concept of “community liberated” (Wellman & Leighton, 1979). Presented in a sociological perspective this concept sees social interaction as being liberated from the spatial dimension and the transformation of social networks into regional, continental or even global networks (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Wellman & Leighton, 1979). Overall social cohesion in society and the volume of contacts inside these transformed social networks are not declining.

Local governments, activists and geographers would not be satisfied with the declining share and number of social ties in the neighborhoods. Gradual delocalisation of social contacts raises numerous important questions about the consequences of transformed communities for neighborhoods or municipalities. Most importantly, there is a concern whether the spatially liberated social ties still include those relationships and contacts that are essential for the normal functioning of neighborhoods and municipalities (participation, local engagement, and local organisations). In his later work, Wellman (1996) showed the persisting importance of local ties as sources of people’s routine interactions, although active ties with neighbors were usually weaker than other active ties.

This paper investigates whether the delocalisation of social ties is evident in Czech suburban localities and clarifies whether suburbanization destroys social networks in suburbia or replaces traditional bonding internal ties with more diverse social networks. The latter implies networks that consist of a combination of external (non-local) and new bridging ties between new and old suburbanites. We expect that both types of ties are developing in such newly built areas and are important for the well-being of both the neighborhood and the municipality. First, internal ties foster the social cohesion of the local community (Coleman, 1988). Second, external ties could encourage the development of the whole municipality (e.g., via political participation or informal contacts). Some scholars believe that external (non-local) networks can enrich social contacts within a society (Guest, 2000; Hampton & Wellman, 2003).

When we aspire to evaluate social ties embedded in a locality, we need to delimit the extent and spatial boundaries of the units under review. The basic question is: What is inside and what is outside the study area and which relationships are realized inside the spatially autonomous unit (neighborhood) and which lead outside and can be considered as bridging contacts? The problem of geographical scale is central in studies of social networks (Forrest & Kearsn, 2001). The development of several small localities of new housing around the core of suburban villages is typical of post-socialist suburbanization (Kährik & Tammaru, 2008; Ouředníček, 2007; Valkanov, 2005), and their inhabitants barely interact with each other during the initial phase of suburbanization. This results in a fragmentation of the socio-spatial system of suburban municipalities into several social networks. But the territory of the municipality is the most appropriate for empirical research – municipalities have recognizable boundaries, they have their own administrations and budgets and a relatively autonomous public and political life.

The character of the Czech (post-socialist) suburbanization

Suburbanization is one of the most important processes changing the nature of metropolitan regions in European post-socialist countries (Kährik & Tammaru, 2008; Leetmaa & Tammaru, 2007; Ouředníček, 2007; Stanilov, 2007a; Timár & Váradi, 2001). Although the main mechanisms of suburbanization (i.e., migration of city residents to the hinterland) are similar to Western countries (Timár & Váradi, 2001), the process has specific features in post-socialist settings (Ouředníček, 2007). For example, it has never been supported by large state incentives and coherent public policies. This applies also to suburbanization in the Czech Republic. Low levels of suburbanization during the period of state socialism and a desire to live in the house of one’s own are the key drivers of suburbanization. Re-establishment of the land market, restitution of state property (land and housing) to private owners and the growing number of well-off people who can afford this type of housing contribute to suburban population growth. Relatively cheap land around the Czech cities and the rapidly declining protection of agricultural land and planning regulations are also crucial factors for the deconcentration of residential function. Although new housing construction slowed down during the economic crisis (see Fig. 1), a 3% net migration growth still intensively changes the socio-demographic structure of suburban areas in the capital city of Prague.

In the post-socialist literature, the main focus is on the impact of suburbanization on changes in the social structure of destination localities and on the characteristics of new suburbanites (Hirt, 2007; Kok & Kovács, 1999; Ladányi & Szelényi, 1998; Leetmaa & Tammaru, 2007). Research reveals a reduction in population polarization between the core city and surrounding metropolitan regions and a simultaneous increase in segregation within the suburban area (Ruoppila & Kährik, 2003; Sedláková, 2005; Soós & Ignits, 2005; Tammaru, 2001, 2005; Tammaru & Leetmaa, 2007; Timár & Váradi, 2001). A heterogeneous population structure is appearing in Czech suburban municipalities as a result of suburbanization (Ouředníček, 2003). New suburbanites are younger and better-educated than old residents in the suburbs (Table 1, see also Ouředníček, 2007; Vobecák & Kostelecký, 2007). While Prague is more attractive to younger people at the beginning of their housing consumption, families with children are over-represented among suburbanites (Fig. 2). Kährik and Tammaru (2008) describe a similar development of the age structure of suburban migrants in Estonia.

Data and methods

The empirical part of the paper is based on field research within the Prague Functional Urban Region (FUR). It consists of three administrative districts – the Capital city of Prague, and the districts of Praha-východ (Prague-East) and Praha-západ (Prague-West). Our data come mainly from two surveys: “Development of socio-spatial structure in the Prague Urban Region” and “Urbanization processes in the Prague Urban Region” carried out by the
authors. The surveys “Development of socio-spatial structure in the Prague FUR” were conducted in May 2002, June 2004, and October and November 2010. We asked mayors of “suburbanized” municipalities in the Prague FUR and peripheral city districts of Prague to participate in a questionnaire survey. We consider mayors of municipalities and city parts to be key actors of local communities as they work and live predominantly in the local environment. We asked about the new developments in the municipalities and urban districts, and on its impact on local community life.

In the first two phases of the survey (years 2002 and 2004), our interviewers contacted all respondents personally, explained the research aims and consequently arranged a personal appointment to complete the questionnaire with them. Although this method is
highly time-consuming, it increases the response rate consider-
ably, exceeding 80% in each year. In total, we received 84 (of 100) completed questionnaires in 2002 and 156 (of 180) in 2004. In 2010, our interviewers communicated with respondents by phone and asked them to send the questionnaire by email or mail. The response rate was still satisfactory (60% or 93 out of 155 com-
pleted questionnaires). As we succeeded in covering all suburba-
ized localities around Prague (see Fig. 3), the enquiry can be
considered as representative.

The second survey “Urbanization processes in the Prague FUR”
was designed as a complementary source of information about the
social environment of suburban localities. An extensive question-
aire survey among new residents was carried out in June 2006. As
it was not possible to make a comprehensive survey and ad-
dress all new residents of Prague’s hinterland, case study research
of several municipalities was carried out. The general social com-
position of the population (demographic variables, socio-economic
status) and physical qualities of new housing are comparable
throughout the Prague FUR. Nine suburban localities were chosen
to include both traditional as well as recent developments at a
greater distance from the central city. The survey contained ques-
tions concerning the integration of newcomers into the local com-
munity and the establishment of new local relationships, their civic
engagement and political participation.

The sample of respondents was based on random selection
within defined localities of new developments with the aim of cov-
ering approximately 50% of new housing units in each settlement
(with the exception of one municipality with extensive develop-
ment where 30% of new housing units were covered). Based on
our positive experience with the previous surveys, all respondents
were contacted personally in their homes. Our interviewers
explained the research aims to them and generally arranged an
appointment to pick up the completed questionnaires (only 10%
of respondents sent the questionnaires by mail).

We received questionnaires from 562 households, consisting of
1687 inhabitants. Table 2 shows the basic demographic and socio-
economic characteristics of respondents and their households. The
sex and age structure of sample households are comparable to
the entire population of new residents, which is represented by the in-
migration flow to the settlement areas. Since more educated peo-
ple are generally more willing to participate in research surveys,
the educational level of the sample is slightly higher than the gen-
eral population.

Results: spinning new webs of social ties among suburbanites

Internal social cohesion on the level of communities

It is possible to trace a certain level of agreement in the litera-
ture regarding social cohesion and the spatial impact of social rela-
tionships. While some celebrate the role of social capital (Coleman,
1988; Putnam, 2000), others argue that a high level of social cohe-
sion at the local level should not be considered as a clearly positive
element (Briggs, 2007; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Musil, 2005). A cer-
tain level of social cohesion in a community is necessary to ensure
its functioning and control and to supply the everyday needs of its
inhabitants (Coleman, 1988).

Suburbanites move to municipalities whose communities are
generally unknown to them and in general, few internal ties have
already been established. The creation of local webs in suburban
localities of the Prague FUR generally proceeds in two waves. First,
weak ties develop between new residents in the immediate proximity, and contact with older suburbanites remains limited (Fig. 6). The influence of physical and social distance plays a key role. New residents generally come from similar socio-economic conditions and most of them are at the same stage in their lives, i.e., by age. Many share the same experience with housing construction, getting to know new living environments and solving problems connected with settling down. In newly developed localities, social life is lively with a relatively high level of social cohesion: approximately two thirds of respondents stated that people in the neighborhood visit each other on a regular basis. Similarly, more than half of the respondents meet with neighbors during common gatherings. More than 60% of the respondents declared frequent mutual assistance in activities such as shopping or babysitting (Fig. 4) among neighbors. One of the most discussed topics in relation to suburbanization is the mutual relationship between old and new suburbanites (Bernard, 2006; Salamon, 2003a). As the differences between socio-economic status and life styles of both groups are apparent (Hirt, 2007; Ouředníček, 2003; Valkanov, 2005), many scholars have predicted a growing social distance and difficult communication between the groups (Soós & Ignits, 2005; Timár & Várádi, 2001). The evidence from the Prague hinterland shows a rather different picture. In most municipalities, old and new residents either respect each other or live parallel lives with no conflict. The proportions of these two non-conflict strategies differ in surveys, but have risen over eight years on account of conflict related relationships (2002–2010). In 2010, about one third of mayors stated that the social relationships between these two groups were good or excellent. Only in a very small number of municipalities were the relationships marked as bad (Fig. 5). Conflicts between new residents and local authorities are more common since many new residents demand a higher standard of infrastructure and services than is possible for a municipality to deliver. A similar situation has been found in other post-socialist countries (Hirt, 2007; Soós and Ignits, 2005).

A factor that may inhibit the creation of social ties between the two groups relates to perceived isolation. Indeed, approximately one-third of respondents (new residents) stated that they feel somewhat isolated from the older suburbanites. Physical and/or social distance was indicated as the most frequent reason for isolation. With respect to physical distance, respondents mentioned various forms of spatial separation of new developments from the older parts of the village such as the large distances between houses, a lack of roads and pavement connecting these two parts, busy roads or the perception of new houses being built on a hill above the old village. Social distance relates to the perceived difference by demographic and social characteristics and is often expressed as a division between “the old and poor” and “the young and rich”, but also in different lifestyles (longer working hours of newcomers and having children in their families), prejudices against newcomers and overall different mentalities. The importance of both physical and social distances in hindering neighborhood ties was discussed by Hipp and Perrin (2009). But
such high levels of isolation could be temporary and the integration of newcomers into the community life increases the longer they live there (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Ouředníček, 2003; Sampson, 1988).

### Bridging people, institutions, activities and places

Having shown the evidence of new relations developing in suburbia, a question arises about the mechanisms of spinning the webs of such relationships. The integration process of newcomers into the community usually starts from children who often interact with other children in the neighborhood on a daily basis (Campbell & Lee, 1990; Davies & Herbert, 1993). In car-dependent suburbia, the local ties of children may be especially important, bringing together their parents as well. Indeed, some survey respondents stated that the children had been an important trigger mechanism for developing social ties with other people from the village: “With the birth of our son, my wife started to come into contact with the local community.” Young women on maternity leave were shown to be very active in establishing new social relations. Their daily activity space is limited due to caring of children or restrictions imposed by poor access to transport – either due to poor public transport availability or having only one car in the household (Hirt, 2008; Novák & Sýkora, 2007). These integration pioneers play a key role in further spinning the community web as they represent important bridging contacts to the other members of households and their immediate surroundings. Similarly, Gačanová and Vacková (2008) pinpointed the role of women with children as an important integrating factor in a local community in the hinterland of Brno.

There are also other bridging components operating in suburbia: places where the residents can meet each other. These include public spaces (appropriately designed streets, a central village square, park, bus stop etc.), the sites of local services and institutions (pub, grocery store, schools, sports clubs) as well as places where other social activities can be performed with neighbors (e.g., celebrating Czech traditional festivals of Children’s day and the annual Witch Burning fire).

Institutions and places with the highest impact on the rapprochement of old and new suburbanites are those focused on children’s activities. Pre-school baby clubs, kindergartens and primary schools act as main institutions. A specific phenomenon in new suburban settlements is the rise of institutionalized centers for childcare, which provide babysitting services and leisure activities. They are generally founded and operated by active mothers and mostly recruit from new suburban neighborhoods. Childcare centers partially complement kindergartens that provide insufficient capacity in the majority of suburban municipalities. Day-care centers, kindergartens and primary schools are places for the socialization of children and the most important institutions for the integration of new residents into suburban communities. New types of meeting places such as women’s and mothers’ clubs emerge in suburban localities as well.

Mayors and municipal councils are often very active in promoting social life in a municipality. As one respondent stated: "the municipal council organizes many social activities and festival for all the residents – e.g., the witch burning fire, a celebration of the founding of the municipality, sports and children’s activities". According to the respondents, a sufficient number of meeting places may help overcome the negative effects of social and physical distance and suppress the sense of isolation. The experience from suburbs where the meeting places are lacking illustrates the importance of their presence. As one respondent claimed: “We have very few opportunities for contact with the other residents. There are no cultural events, no decent pubs, grocery stores nor sport fields. The only place where people could meet each other is the post office.”

An important integrating factor is local media. Many municipalities and locally-based organizations publish local bulletins, newspapers and websites on the Internet. The Internet discussion forums represent a unique new phenomenon serving as a meeting place in cyberspace. Susová (2009) found that discussion forums enable the creation of social ties among new suburbanites even before they move to their new houses. According to her research, new residents assigned a positive influence to discussion forums in post-socialist city is described by Kotus and Hławka (2010) in Poznań.

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1 A similar positive role of housing-estate discussion forums in post-socialist city is described by Kotus and Hławka (2010) in Poznań.
Newcomers’ contribution to community well-being

New residents bring many important contacts, but it is crucial how they are used for local development. The empirical evidence from the Prague suburban zone shows examples of newcomers’ contribution to community well-being in a variety of forms. We find rehabilitation and activation of certain institutions useful for the functioning of municipality and community, such as kindergartens, primary schools, centers for childcare and various leisure-time activities. New suburbanites also serve as key activators of the civic and political life within the municipalities – the share of municipalities where new residents participate in public affairs at least partially increases over time (Fig. 8).

New suburbanites take part in a variety of social activities, motivated by the desire to enhance the community well-being. For example, a number of suburbanites actively work on the improvement of physical environments in their neighborhoods (greenery, parks, and children’s playgrounds), organize social events (the majority of them dedicated to children) and leisure-time activities (football and tennis clubs, traditional associations of fishermen and hunters) (Fig. 9). Some of the new citizens took part in more formalized activities such as working for civic associations focused on community development or local political participation.

Discussion and conclusions

The article examined claims about a loss of social cohesion, social anomy and overall worsening of the social environment within the hinterlands of post-socialist cities as a result of intense suburbanization. The empirical findings of this study provide little evidence of the erosion of social cohesion due to suburbanization. Old and new suburbanites generally “respect each other” but they do not need frequent contact and prefer weak ties to strong ones. These weak social ties emerge as a result of the efforts to effectively organize one’s everyday life among new suburbanites. We find a gradually increasing integration into local communities and participation in public affairs within the municipalities as time proceeds. The number and intensity of contacts between new and old suburbanites also grows over time. The spinning of the web of social contacts often starts between people with the highest


Fig. 9. The structure of newcomers’ activities in their local community. Note: N = 154. Source: Questionnaire survey, 2006.
probability of interrelationships. Children’s activities around kindergartens, schools and sport clubs and the gradual socialization of their parents (especially mothers) serve as mediators of initial contacts among the parents as well.

We did not find any evidence of why a specific - suburban - location would facilitate the isolation or segregation of selected social groups. Similar coexistence of new and old residents is found elsewhere in post-socialist urban regions (Stanilov, 2007; Temelová, Novák, Ouředněček, & Puldová, 2011; Valkanov, 2005). It has also been well established in the literature that the total amount and especially the diversity (quality) of social ties increase with the length of residence (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). The important factors for the establishment and sustainability of social cohesion and a good social climate in a particular locality relate also to residential stability and a low fluctuation of inhabitants in the area. Although intense suburbanization significantly changes population size and composition in suburban areas, they represent a long-term destination in the residential experience of inhabitants; for example, in comparison with many areas of the inner city and large housing estates (cf. Haase, Großmann, & Steinführer, 2012; Ouředněček & Temelová, 2009). This residential stability is supported by the largely private ownership of land and houses and the gradual networking of children in schools and local society. New suburban residential areas thus have solid preconditions to become stable parts of metropolitan regions in the Czech Republic and also elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe.

It is true that only some social ties must inevitably be tied to neighborhoods, while other parts of social networks, which are equally important for the functioning of local communities, should be delocalized from suburbia. Apart from the allocation of a large percentage of social contacts in other areas of the metropolitan regions, a proportion of relationships have been liberated from spatial entrapment and shifted into virtual space. Internet discussion forums represent a unique new phenomenon serving as meeting places in cyberspace.

External ties, which connect suburbanites especially to people active in the core city of a metropolitan region, also play an important role for suburban communities. Investigation of these networks seems to be a relevant topic of future research in the field of post-socialist suburban studies. The inflow of new suburbanites can be viewed as an improvement of socio-economic status and a widening of social networks to other extra local social groups enabled by bridging contacts outside the local community. External bridges are important as they can facilitate contacts and information from different (external) groups of actors (Burt, 2004), i.e., in the case of suburbanization predominantly with the core city of the metropolitan area. For example, most new suburbanites commute to work in the core city (Tammaru, 2005). The transfer of information and knowledge must at the same time be enabled by the establishment of networks between new and old suburbanites (Guest, 2000) – i.e., by the incorporation of new residents into the public life of municipalities.2 We conclude that the most important building blocks of the new organization of social networks within suburbia are ties established both inside the local communities and those leading outside these communities. We believe that this newly spun web could transform suburban areas into more open, active and prosperous parts in the Central and Eastern European metropolitan regions.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank guest editors of this special volume T. Tammaru, R. van Kempen and M. Gentile, editor of the journal A. Modarres, and the anonymous referees for providing insightful and very helpful suggestions and comments on earlier drafts of this paper, which aided greatly in revision. The authors are grateful for the financial support provided by the projects SP/415/212/07 of Ministry of Environment of the Czech Republic and 404/10/0523 of the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic.

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