

Suburban Affiliations: Social Relations in the Greater Dublin Area, by Mary P. Corcoran, Jane Gray, and Michel Peillon. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010. 333pp. \$39.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780815632146.

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Suburban Affiliations seeks to situate life in four Irish suburbs within broader international sociological debates on suburban experience. The authors problematize this literature from the outset noting a tendency to characterize suburbs as either "alienated deserts or highly organised communities" (p. 257). Mary Corcoran, Jane Gray and Michel Peillon seek to offer a more nuanced intervention into these debates by examining suburbs as "arenas of affiliations" where residents experience a form of communality which is "neither entirely superficial nor deeply intimate" (p. xix). The study opens by locating Irish suburban experience within the contrasting bodies of research on suburbs in the United States, Britain and Europe. Surprisingly, Irish suburbs appear to embody many of the problems evident in the studies of American suburbs where low rates of public transport, high levels of car use and lack of public infrastructure impact residents' capacities to build affiliations. In addition, there is a tendency for residents of Irish suburbs to be clustered at similar stages of the life-course, particularly in Dublin's newer dormitory suburbs where the needs of school-going children provide a strong basis for building affiliations.

A key feature of the study is an attempt to interrogate the embeddedness and attachment to place experienced by Irish suburban residents. Of critical interest in this context is the experience of the residents of the new suburb of Rathath, who live in housing estates built around a small Irish village outside Dublin city. These residents move to this suburb with a

dream of an Irish rural village experience which is not matched by the sub urban sprawl and weak infrastructure which then engulfs this rural idyll. As one resident shrewdly observes "I think the problem before was, people bought houses, they bought into what they thought was country living. And then suddenly realized it was not going to be, it was going to be suburban living" (p. 206). Despite these challenges however, these affluent middle-class pioneers of Ireland's new suburbs manage, with some success, to build their own sense of community and identity far away from friendship and family ties in the greater Dublin area.

The disappointed expectations of these suburbanites contrast sharply with the experiences of residents in the suburbs of the Irish country town of Mullingar who in many cases, have been brought up in the town and look to family and friends rather than neighbors for their affiliations. The tendency of these residents to rely on extended family networks in particular demonstrate the continuing importance of family within Irish social networks and Irish value systems— a feature highlighted in the very earliest sociological studies of Irish society (Arensberg and Kimball 1940).

The findings on community activism are particularly important as Ireland is often characterized as a society where the demands of community supersede society-wide projects in terms of social movement activism (Connolly and Hourigan 2006). Corcoran, Gray and Peillon find evidence of a wide variation of community activism motivated by grievance, with a focus on service as well as commitments to secularization. However, these community-level actions remain fragmented and do not at any point translate into wider social protest. Thus from Alberto Melucci's perspective, the "we" of these organizations does not become transformed into the more coherent "we" which might generate a more broad ranging political transformation of Irish suburban experience (1996).

The authors conclude by making a strong case for the importance of "affiliation" as a model for examining connectedness and embeddedness within suburbs as opposed to the overused concept of social capital. "What we are arguing is that an affiliated suburb constitutes a 'good enough' suburb as a place to live. The affiliated suburb implies communality which should not necessarily be considered inferior to community: it simply constitutes a different social configuration" (p. 269). Thus, their research points to a view of Irish suburbs which is similar to Janowitz's characterization of suburbs as a "community of limited liability" (1991).

Suburban Affiliations is a detailed and nuanced study which makes a significant contribution to sociological research on suburbs in Ireland and beyond. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods used by the authors yields a rich seam of data which will be invaluable to future scholars of suburban experience. More importantly, the research presents a range of interesting questions which require further explanation and interrogation. The continuing salience of extended family, the lure of suburban pastoralism and the vibrancy of activism around education and secularization are themes which would benefit from more detailed ethnographic research. If there is a weakness, it is that the model of affiliation itself would have benefited from further elaboration and theorization in a form which draws more coherently on recent sociological research on emotion. Overall however, the book provides a fascinating insight into an aspect of Irish society which has been subject to little sustained empirical research.

References

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