



Call for papers: Right to the village

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The « right to the city », an idea launched by Lefebvre, has fostered a huge body of work. However, it is very seldom applied to rural areas.

I) Why a right to the village?

The phrase sounds strange because so-called radical, or critical, social sciences are so strongly city-centered. This urban bias means that the largest part of the world is neglected, which could be viewed as a form of spatial injustice. What are the causes and consequences of this bias? The question can be addressed either from the viewpoint of the rural world, or from the viewpoint of the way thought and discourse about it is framed.

Rural areas encompass the most deprived populations and lands of our planet. The description of social inequalities within these areas, between migrants and locals, landowners and landless labourers, between the dominating and dominated groups, runs through much of research, in the global South in particular. These inequalities tend to deepen with the development of mobilities, the sprawl of cities, and new functions in rural space. Cities are not the only place where inequalities, frustrations and conflicts are experienced.

This raises the issue of the place of rural areas in Marxist-inspired social sciences. While cities have long been seen as a place making insurrection, claims, and collective rights possible, the countryside carried connotations of submissiveness, and peasants were seen as necessarily individualistic and dominated. This was repeatedly proven false by events: the Mexican or Chinese revolutions were peasant movements; current struggles against the privatisation of seeds have to do with rural issues, as do movements such as the Brazilian Sem Terras, the Indian naxalites ; alter-globalisation movements posit the rural world as a more sustainable alternative.

The societies of the « global North »'s dream of rural areas as bucolic ideals obscures the many inequalities and conflicts of the countryside. The issue is also political : in many languages, the words « citizen » and « city-dweller » are one and the same, or at least closely related, which raises the question of rural citizenship : why is the city-dweller so obviously a political subject, and why shouldn't the inhabitant of the countryside be recognised as one ?

II) What right(s), what village(s)?

A. Whether in villages as such, or smaller settlements, what are the social and political inequalities that shape space? Are gaps widening between « big » landowners and landless labourers, indigenous people and newcomers (be they European neo-rurals or pioneers on Southern newly cultivated lands)? There are issues around housing and segregation, with for instance the case of the Untouchables in India.

In villages there are forms of domination, but also of resistance: what of villages destroyed or displaced in processes of collectivisation or resource exploitation, or during wars? What occurs when a village is the result of a coercive process of relocation or formerly mobile or dispersed populations?

B. « Village » may be taken more metaphorically as referring to the rural world in general and agricultural space in particular. Issues of land ownership is at the heart of spatial justice in rural areas, maybe more so than in cities since land is an essential economic resource in addition to offering housing. Does the right to the village include a right to land for agriculture or pasture?



Globalised food production, new anxieties about food, and contestations of productivity-oriented agriculture: all have to do with new forms of integration of exclusion, and raise new issues in terms of access to means of agricultural production. Is land grabbing in globalised spaces of agricultural production a threat to peasants' rights, or is it likely to create new ones? What is the impact of anti-GMO movements, movements for the recognition of peasant knowledge, for local food-buying or fair-trade, in terms of rights, or identities, ideals or representations of societies' relation to land, to the living and to the world? What geographies of agricultural spaces derive from these new claims and rights?

C. What content can be given to a « right to the village » in a world in which the majority (though not a large majority) of the population lives in cities, while the concentration of power and capital in metropolitan regions is much greater, and urban and rural space meld into each other, and are increasingly connected by flows of people and goods? What are the possible connexions between right to the city and right to the village?

In cities, the village may be dreamt of as the solution to urban problems; the « village » label is applied to cosy middle-class neighbourhoods, and « urban gardening » is promoted as a means to preserve biodiversity, educate children, integrate the jobless or the elderly, or produce food more locally.

What, also, of the opposition that often arises between the interests of rural and urban people? Is the old question raised by Lipton of an « urban bias » at the national and worldwide scale still valid, and does it operate more locally on the outskirts of cities where environmental or agricultural preservation clashes with the spread of landfills, shopping centres or housing estates. The battle for environmental preservation sometimes operates to preserve privilege against the inroads of all sorts of « undesirables », the poor, Romani and assorted hut-builders. Middle-class, leafy suburbs have been described as « select clubs » (Charmes), which raises the question of who owns the countryside.

The « right of the village » is sometimes deemed superior to that of the city: are there a specific right, and a form of justice, to be inspired from village life? From Auroville to new ruralism, utopias can be rooted in rural environments, but what specific ethics do they represent? Are they new models of spatial and social justice, or merely new faces of domination?

Submissions should be sent no later than October 15th, 2013 to

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