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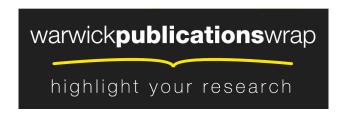
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Thinking Past Henri Lefebvre: Introducing "The Theory of Ground Rent and Rural Sociology"

Stuart Elden and Adam David Morton¹

Henri Lefebvre's works on the production of space, the right to the city and the urban revolution have, in the years since his death in 1991, become a standard reference for much radical geography. From early, pioneering, engagements by David Harvey (1973), Neil Smith (1984), Edward Soja (1989), Rob Shields (1999) and Neil Brenner (i.e. 1997, 2000), to a range of book-length studies over the past two decades (i.e. Elden 2004, Merrifield 2006, Goonewardena et. al. eds. 2008; Stanek 2011; Butler 2012), Lefebvre's work is increasingly part of the theoretical canon. His position within Western Marxism is still somewhat marginal, though the translation of other works such as the *Critique of Everyday Life* (2014) and the collection *State, Space, World* (2009; see Brenner and Elden 2009) have brought him into proximity with wider debates.

But the predominantly urban focus of much of this work is in danger of marginalising another of Lefebvre's interests, which is the question of the rural. Indicative here would be the reading of Lefebvre as 'a critic of the historically unfolding dialectic of urbanisation' in building a critique of political economy as a production of urban space (Charnock 2010: 1298, 1292). This enclosure of the critique of the political economy of space within the urban fails to provide a dialectically open articulation of space from the rural to the urban. Put differently, such reductionism essentialises a critique of the political economy of space to urban space at the neglect of the rural-urban dialectic.² As Lefebvre (1973: 10; 1976:8) reminds an attentive reader, the

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The attempt to claim proprietorship over Henri Lefebvre's critique of the space of political economy is a further troubling aspect of such "Open Marxism", with earlier indicative critiques of the latter including Bieler and Morton (2003), Bruff (2009), or Bieler, Bruff and Morton (2010).

specificity of the capitalist mode of production of space is revealed through a focus on 'the "land-labour-capital" relation, the constitutive trinity of capitalist society', which of course echoes Marx's own analysis of the 'trinity formula' in Chapter 48 of the third volume of Capital (1894/1998). There Marx makes the relation explicit: 'Capital — interest, land — ground-rent, labour — wages'. While Lefebvre's work on the rural cannot be reduced to the analysis of ground-rent, it is of course fundamental to his analysis, as this essay makes clear.

Lefebvre's wider work on the rural takes into account cultural and material dimensions. His analysis of rural culture can perhaps most strikingly be seen in the chapter "Notes Written one Sunday in the French Countryside" in the first volume of the Critique of Everyday Life (1947; 2014). But this was a retrospective of something already being lost, and indeed it was the process of examining the urbanisation of rural landscapes that first led Lefebvre to interrogate the urban as a category in itself. Lefebvre's doctoral dissertation, awarded in 1954, was an examination of peasant communities in the Pyrenees, and was accompanied by a detailed study of the Campan valley (published as 1963). The initial work on these projects had been completed while he was in the area during the Second World War. He then entered the CNRS in Paris to undertake work on rural sociology. Lefebvre deepened his analysis of peasant communities and social classes (1949, 1951, 1956a), and began work on sociological and political-economic issues (1953/2003a, 1956b/2015).3 He also took part in a number of collaborative projects at the CNRS, though a history of rural France with the historian Albert Soboul was never completed. Lefebvre used the area around his family home in Navarrenx as a particular object of analysis, and wrote a book on the region (1965a). It was the discovery of gas and sulphur deposits near Lacq (about 20 kilometres away) which led to a major transformation of the landscape. This was both industrialisation—the construction of the extractive, storage and transportation

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The 1949, 1951, 1953 and 1956a publications are reprinted in 1970; 1956b has never been reprinted. Other rural pieces not collected in the book include Ballard (et. al. 1950); Lefebvre et. al. (1953)

infrastructure—and urbanisation—the building of the 'new town' of Mourenx to house its workers. He traced this process in the book *Du rural à l'urbain* (1970a), which collected some, but not all, of his earlier essays on the rural, as well as pieces on the transformation and ones on predominantly urban concerns. From the mid-1960s Lefebvre's concerns were almost exclusively on urban questions, leading to a sequence of books including *The Right to the City* (1966; 1996); *The Urban Revolution* (1970b; 2003b); and *La pensée marxiste et la ville* (1972; English translation forthcoming). These culminated in the theoretical study *The Production of Space*, wherein Lefebvre (1991: 323, original emphasis) questions 'What of the part played by *land*, as concept and reality, in this context?'. Albeit not without some problems in his analysis of Marx on landed property, Lefebvre (1991: 323-4) then states:

Marx's initial intention in *Capital* was to analyse and lay bare the capitalist mode of production and bourgeois society in terms of a binary (and dialectical) model that opposed capital to labour . . . but it presupposes the disappearance from the picture of a *third* cluster of factors: namely the land, the landowning class, ground rent and agriculture as such.

The essays in *Du rural à l'urbain* are only indications of a much more extensive study, under the title of the *Manuel* (or *Traité*) *de sociologie rurale*, which was intended to be a major work. According to Lefebvre's biographer Rémi Hess:

It contained a theorisation of concepts of rents, ground revenues, the distribution of ground revenues, and the relation between rents and markets. It had an important part on agrarian reform, both theoretical and practical. It showed how agrarian reform, initially revolutionary, was slowly recovered [récupérée] in different countries, notably southern Italy, Mexico and Spain. There were also other cases examined where agrarian reform was not totally recovered, as was the case later, notably in Iran. Additionally, there were many studies of terrain in the *Traité*, in particular Tuscany and the Pyrenees (Hess 1988:169).

Given Lefebvre's interest in land reform dating back to the 1930s in Russia and China, it seems at least possible these countries too would have been discussed (see Hess 1988:166-7; 2001:xix-xx). Yet this comprehensive study—Lefebvre apparently worked on it for three years (Hess 1988:169)—was never published and the manuscript lost. Hess tells the story of how the manuscript, in a late draft, was stolen from a car parked near the Panthéon in Paris (1988:169-70). While a newspaper advert in *Le soir* offered a reward for its return, the manuscript was never found, and Lefebvre never rewrote it. His focus turned—as the collection itself suggests—from the rural to the urban.

Consequently, attention has tended to privilege an emphasis on the organisation of space and the power relations that course through the urban in Lefebvre's reconceptualisation of space and geography. This is at the expense of his mode of approaching urban and rural sociology together.

In his preface to the third edition of *Du rural à l'urbain*, Hess recounts Lefebvre's interest in the history of peasant movements, but says that 'he found few interlocutors either inside or outside the [French Communist] party. For example, he wrote a work on ground rent which did not find an editor. In that work, he had studied ground rent [*la rente du sol*] but also the sub-soil [*du sous-sol*], which ultimately led him to questions of oil' (2001, xx; see 1988, 167-8). Lefebvre was apparently told that 'to look at ground rent is not Marxist. It is Ricardian' (quoted in Hess 1988:168). Summarily put, Lefebvre is principally known today in English-debates as a writer on cities, significantly stemming from his focus on the 'right to the city' (1996, 2003a). However, Lefebvre's contributions to rural sociology, the politics of land, and 'the agrarian question' (Kautsky 1988 [1899]) have been largely overlooked, which is the aspect that the publication of this essay seeks to correct.

The following essay is one part of his work on the rural. Taken from *Du rural à l'urbain*, it was originally published in 1956 in *Transactions of the Third World Congress of Sociology*. A slightly different version was published in Spanish in 1965 in the *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, which indicates the Latin American interest in his work, and hints at the continual importance of these questions there today notably in relation to the different pathways to capitalist development through agrarian transformation.⁴ The essay, while brief, is wide-ranging, covering theoretical reflections linking Marx (and Ricardo) and Lenin on issues of ground rent, differential and absolute rent, monopoly capitalism as well as commentaries on several social formations across Europe. The analysis in this short piece is, of course, only a minor compensation for the missing work. We hope that this translation, alongside one other rural piece in *Key Writings*

The text has been translated into Spanish twice, as Lefebvre (1965b) and Lefebvre (1971: 77-84).

(2003a), will be one of several on this theme to appear over the coming years. Others demonstrate his interest in cultural and political concerns beyond the narrowly economic. Yet, even on its own, we believe that this piece provides a fulcrum for wider debate on issues of rural sociology in Henri Lefebvre's work relevant to contemporary historical sociology, political economy, geographical, and Marxist approaches to ground rent, uneven development, land reform and agrarian studies.

This neglect encompasses a lack of attention paid to Lefebvre's engagement with issues of landed property and rent from a Marxist perspective, including the distinction between differential rent and absolute rent and then ground rent as an expression of capitalism (Marx 1894/1998; Marx 1862-63/1971). It is the notion of ground rent understood as a socially determined category—a social relation of production—arising from a historically conditioned process, via primitive accumulation, that confers, in the form of landownership, the ability to appropriate from objects of nature (land, water, and mines) the demand of a payment for their use, even in the form of the least fertile land (through absolute ground rent).

The purpose of publishing this essay is therefore to provide a necessary and important corrective to this neglect within the extant literature by providing an insight into previously marginalised writings by Lefebvre on rural sociology and ground rent.⁵ This focus is significant for the connections Lefebvre establishes between contexts of rural sociology, historical sociology, and the production of space within Europe. It is also all the more important for the connections Lefebvre establishes between these themes in and across Europe in their commonality with alternative agrarian regimes in contexts of uneven development elsewhere. To cite Lefebvre in this register on rural sociology from his essay in *Du rural à l'urbain* (Lefebvre 2003a: 119):

In a hundred ways, the capitalist form of private property subordinated to itself previous forms: those of the clan or tribe, communal or feudal. The fact emerges clearly from the study of the agrarian structure of "underdeveloped" countries: colonial or semi-colonial countries, backward sectors in capitalist countries.

Michael Woods's book on the rural, for example, briefly mentions Lefebvre as the theorist of space (2010: 10) but does not examine his rural work.

This content of uneven development and rural sociology becomes especially important in Latin America, for example, a region that Lefebvre visited, including presentations at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico and the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) in Venezuela, where he also visited the barrios of Caracas in the 1970s (McGuirk 2014: 161). The essay presented here, then—'The Theory of Ground Rent and Rural Sociology'—is interesting for at least three main reasons.

First, it speaks to a range of themes that are touched on throughout Lefebvre's wider work on rural sociology. These include:

- the Marxist theory of ground rent, from Ricardo through Marx to Lenin, and the comparison of ground rent, differential and absolute rent that are relevant to debates in Marxist agrarian studies;
- agrarian reform, with reference to France, Italy, Spain, and wider regions and countries in the throes of uneven developmental catch-up and colonial exploitation;
- the theory of uneven development represented by the subjection of agrarian landholdings to capitalism and the co-existence of different forms of property relations belonging to different historical epochs of social development;
- the contradictory movements emerging from agrarian reform, including the problem of the peasantry and 'sedimentations' that demand a doubling of history and sociology when seeking to analyse and explain the condition of uneven development; and
- the demand to address these factors within a theory of political economy, linked to the theory of ground rent, developed from classical Marxist contributions.

Second, amidst these wider themes, there is a clear methodological emphasis and appeal to address the doubling of history and sociology relevant to past and present debates in and beyond historical sociology. Therefore, in 'The Theory of Ground Rent and Rural Sociology', one is reminded of Lefebvre's later, slightly more detailed, outlining of his regressive-progressive methodological principles relevant to analysing rural sociology. For Lefebvre (2003a: 117), this involves three steps:

- a) Descriptive. Observation with participant observation in the foreground using survey techniques, interviews, questionnaires, statistics;
- b) Analytic-regressive. Analysis of reality as described. Attempt to give it a precise date.
- c) Historical-genetic. Studies of changes in the previously dated structure. Attempt to give a genetic classification of formations and structures, in the framework of the overall structure. An attempt to return to the contemporary as previously described, in order to rediscover the present, but elucidated, understood, explained.

The analytic-regressive/genetic-progressive process, a specifically Marxist methodological approach to the state and rural sociology, thus prompts a focus on both history and sociology in producing historical sociology. Lefebvre argues that the successive regressive-progressive steps are a means of understanding what he calls 'the possible'—a historical analysis of the present's conditions of possibility, and a revolutionary, progressive analysis which makes possible futures (see Elden 2004: 38). Or, as Lefebvre puts it in 'The Theory of Ground Rent and Rural Sociology', 'the sociologist who wants to understand and know, has to double as a historian. How can one understand the agrarian structure of southern Italy without history?'

Third, this then leads to a wider set of resonances between not only Lefebvre, in relation to classical Marxist work on land (e.g. Marx 1862-63; Marx 1894/1998; Lenin 1899/1960), but also to figures that widen this optic, such as Antonio Gramsci or José Carlos Mariátegui. Our contention here is that Lefebvre's focus in this essay and his wider writings on rural sociology link in interesting ways, for example, with Gramsci's unfinished prolegomenon to the Prison Notebooks entitled 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question' (1926), as well as his later and much wider carceral writings in the Prison Notebooks. For sure, Lefebvre was guarded in his assessment of the contemporary Marxist movement in the 1960s, counselling against an 'official Marxism' based on empiricism and positivism 'under cover of a philosophical phraseology' through which the philosophy of praxis would be stymied. The result, for Lefebvre writing at that time, would be a technocratic and 'ideologised Marxism' justified in one particular form, namely that of Antonio Gramsci's privileging of the Party, the 'modern prince' (Lefebvre 1968: 36). But whether or not these concerns were more cast within the shadow of his own tensions with the PCF, Lefebvre was nevertheless drawn towards the hegemony of

abstract space in defining the capitalist mode of production. 'Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched?', he asks in *The Production of Space*, to highlight space as something more than simply the passive locus of social relations (Lefebvre 1991: 11). In so doing, he states that 'the concept of hegemony was introduced by Gramsci in order to describe the future role of the working class in the building of a new society, but it is also useful for analysing the action of the bourgeoisie, especially in relation to space'. Hegemony is therefore crucial to the history of state space in terms of repressive violence as well as forms of knowledge and power (*savoir*) or critical subversive knowledge (*connaissance*) to generate differential spaces of class struggle (Lefebvre 1991: 10). For Gramsci, there is a similar stress on hegemony as the presence (or not) of 'sedimentations of the older history of a country' or 'vicious sedimentations from past historical phases' that shape both the spatial state form but also more widespread conceptions of life and morals in what he referred to as 'common sense' (Gramsci 1992: 167-9, Q1§61; 173, Q1§64). The uneven and combined characteristics of development were captured thusly:

'In Italy we have the beginnings of a Fordist fanfare (exaltation of the big city—the great Milan, etc.—capitalism is still at its beginnings, etc., and the preparation of grandiose urban plans' (Gramsci 1992: 169, Q1§61).

Earlier, in 'Some Aspects of the Southern Question', Gramsci also sketched the territorial, class and spatial relations of social development that were elaborated in such a way as to encompass the circumstances of uneven development in Italy between North and South; complex relations of class stratification, racial domination, the question of intellectuals and the social function they perform in conditions of class struggle; and how best to mobilise subaltern classes against capitalism and the bourgeois state in order to break the ruling power bloc (see Morton 2010). 'Any accumulation of capital on the spot', writes Gramsci (1926/1994: 332) with a deeply spatial and geographical sense, '. . . is made possible by the fiscal and custom system and by the fact that the capitalists . . . do not transform their profits into new capital locally, because they are not local people'. Therefore it is reasonable to accord with scholars such as Chris Hesketh (2014: 3) that 'space is thus not an empty stage onto which social relations are projected, but rather it

is these relations themselves that contribute to the changing mise-en-scene of development'. By analysing the contradictory ways in which the capital relation attempts to define the spatiality of the state, the social relations relations of hegemony can then also be revealed. Further, there is a resonance here with Mariátequi in Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana and his similar emphasis on the conditions of uneven development in Latin America. In Peru, with the uneven development of capitalism and the combined conditions of latifundista property relations, the indigenous land tenure system, and foreign capital there resulted in a 'twisted liberalism' [liberalismo deformado] (Mariátegui 1928/1968: 73). This led to the development of commercial crops for agricultural export in coastal regional plantations that was entirely dependent on the colonisation of Latin America by Western capitalism. 'One of the most evident causes', writes Mariátegui (1928/1968: 97) with pressing relevance to present conditions of food production, 'of the rise in food prices in coastal towns is the displacement of traditional food crops by cotton on the farmland of the coast'. This can then link to the wider relevance of Henri Lefebvre to work on political economy, rural sociology, Marxist agrarian studies and uneven development in the Latin American context on agrarian structure and capitalist restructuring (e.g. Bartra 1993; Byers 1996; Bernstein 1996/97; Bernstein 2000; De Janvry 1981; Morton 2013); controversies on agrarian reform and agrarian policies on the transfer of ground rent (Grinberg and Starosta 2009; Kay 2002; Ramírez 2009); wider debates on the question of land (Tribe 1978; Massey and Catalano 1978; Gidwani 2008; Mitchell 2012) and considerations of peasant struggles for land and agrarian reform in and beyond Latin America, including debates about wider peripheries of capitalism and 'hybrid' forms of agrarian capitalism including distinctions between 'free' and 'unfree' labour (Banaji 2010; Brass 2011; Shanin 1983; Teubal 2009). Lefebvre did not simply theorise rent in relation to the rural, but also in his book on Marxist thought and the city, there is a chapter devoted to capital and landed property (1972: 109-47). However in his work on the production of space, he shows how conceiving of land simply as rent is a partial and reductive analysis. As Marx (1867/1996: 705-6) indicates this can be linked to the reconstitution of peasants in

possession of the means of subsistence into propertyless individuals compelled to sell their labour and thus how, through the diffusion of primitive accumulation, the problematic of uneven development takes on both a temporal and spatial accent. It is to be hoped that future translations of Lefebvre's work on the rural will further open up such questions.

To sum up succinctly, the multiple resonances of the essay translated here relate Lefebvre's ideas to contemporary work on historical sociology, political economy, rural development, Marxist agrarian studies, and the Latin American context in which Lefebvre's ideas continue to find a receptive audience.

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