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## The right to the village? Concept and history in a village of South Lebanon'

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### **Abstract:**

Lefebvre's Right to the City has sparked debate about urban space and raised questions concerning public space, social exclusion, citizenship, housing, and governance. In this paper, we ask whether rural claims to rights could be fruitfully conceived as expressing a kind of 'Right to the Village', in the spirit of Lefebvre's 'Right to the City'. We carried out a microanalysis in the village of Sinay – located in Jabal 'Amil, South Lebanon – of cases of people's claims for a right to housing and a right to cultivation. The methodology is based on ethno-sociological fieldwork in combination with geographical, agricultural and landscape analyses. Our study shows the limits of applying the 'Right to the City' framework in the rural context, and proposes modifications to that. The case study reveals the partial success of a claim for rights, and the difficulty for actors of translating particular rights into global and lasting claims to a 'Right to the Village'.

**Keywords:** *right to city, right to the village, South Lebanon, struggle, property*

## I. Introduction

In the village of South Lebanon where we have been working on documenting the long-term relation between land-tenure and land-use, villagers speak proudly of how they claimed their 'rights' from landlords. In the case of both house plots and the cultivation of land, they express this in terms of *haqq*, the equivalent of 'right' in the particular and of justice in the abstract. On occasion they speak of such action in the abstract, *mutalabat bi-'l- haqq*, demanding rights/justice through struggle and social movement. In practice, their contestations achieved some of their ends but not all. And so, in line with the theme of this issue, we thought to ask whether their claims to rights could be fruitfully conceived as expressing something broader: a kind of 'Right to the Village', in the spirit of Lefebvre's much-feted slogan, the 'Right to the City'- although the villagers did not interpret their actions through any such global abstraction.

The structure of our inquiry is as follows: we first consider what could be a 'Right to the Village' faithful to Lefebvre's own formulation. We note the limitations in his formulation and propose modifications. This exercise remains an abstract one. Turning then to the two contestations from our village of study, we consider in space and time what proved achievable at the level of the village of Sinay in South Lebanon. Since at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the lands of Sinay have been owned by persons from outside the village. This history exposes the partial success of a claim for rights within the evolving regional and international reproduction of the governing property order. It examines and highlights Lefebvre's treatment of the rural world through an urban theory. And it suggests the difficulty for actors of translating particular rights into a global and lasting claim to a 'Right to the Village'.

### **Lefebvre and a 'Right to the Village'**

Henri Lefebvre's *Le droit à la ville* (written in 1967 and published in March 1968) was a manifesto for the proletariat to retake the city from where it had been banished to the edges, the peripheral slums or suburbs, as part of remaking '*la vie urbaine*' [urban life] (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 108). At times, Lefebvre distinguished three elements in this 'right': first, the right to appropriation – both a practical right to use, to

occupy and to access the city's spaces, but also a philosophical concept ; second, the right to habitation; and third, the right to participation in all decisions that produce the spaces of the city. Appropriation gives inhabitants the right to 'full and complete usage' of urban space in the course of everyday life; space must be produced in a way that makes that 'full and complete usage' possible (Purcell, 2002). The right to inhabit "implies a right to housing: a place to sleep, [...] a place to relax, a place from which to venture forth" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 19). Lefebvre insists on the differentiation between a right to inhabit and property rights. The right to participation includes the right of inhabitants to play a role in the modification of their space (Purcell, 2002).

For Lefebvre, the Right to the City is not only a right to sociality and urban life, but also a right to use and access urban environmental resources, including social, political and material resources (Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 2009; Mitchell, 2003). Lefebvre defines the Right to the City as the right "to urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of...moments and places..." (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 179). The concept of the Right to the City has stimulated much debate about urban space and raised questions concerning public space and social exclusion (Mitchell, 2003), citizenship (Amin and Thrift, 2002), housing (Weinstein and Ren, 2009), and urban governance under neoliberalism (Harvey, 2012, 2008). Such debates are not limited to Western countries but have been developed in countries of the South, such as India (Bhan, 2009), Brazil (Budds and Teixeira, 2005), South Africa (Parnell and Pieterse, 2010) and Lebanon (Fawaz, 2009).

Lefebvre regarded industrial capital as having created an almost universal *urbain*, thus his slogan of a 'Right to the City' appears as a sort of global revolution:

This calls for, apart from the economic and political revolution (planning oriented towards social needs and democratic control of the State and self-management), a permanent cultural revolution. There is no incompatibility between these levels of total revolution, no more than between urban strategy (revolutionary reform aiming at the realization of urban society on the basis of an advanced and planned industrialization) and strategy aiming at the transformation of traditional peasant life by industrialization. Moreover in most countries today the realization of urban

society goes through the agrarian [re]form<sup>1</sup> and industrialization. There is no doubt that a world front is possible, and equally that it is impossible today. This utopia projects as it often does on the horizon a 'possible-impossible' (Lefebvre, 1996, pp. 180–181).

Addressing the changes in France in the 1950-60s, Lefebvre notes the interaction and interrelation between the rural and the urban, and the transformation of the countryside. The city in Lefebvre's words is an "*oeuvre*" (a making); it is the result of a production of space and the production of sociality in the city. He argues: "the expanding city attacks the countryside, corrodes and dissolves it. Urban life penetrates peasant life, dispossessing it of its traditional features: crafts, small centres which declined to the benefit of urban centres (commercial, industrial, distribution networks, centres of decision-making, etc.). Villages become ruralized by losing their peasant specificity" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 119).

Indeed, the argument could be made that Lefebvre foresaw the urban and industrialisation as fundamentally subsuming the village. So, rights to space in a village would be the same as in a city, working class inhabitants having rights to housing, to the use-values needed for work, and to governing of the space, simply in a space of smaller population concentration to the city. But is this really satisfactory? Is there nothing that is specific to the nature of the space being so claimed or to the nature of the *oeuvre* in a village as opposed to a city?

The rural crisis according to Lefebvre is the result of the expansion of 'urban fabric' following *la maîtrise complète sur la nature* [complete control over nature] in rural areas and thus the loss of *la vie paysanne traditionnelle* [traditional peasant life] (cf. chapter 9 in Lefebvre, 2009). These two terms, *la maîtrise de la nature* and *la vie paysanne traditionnelle* are not helpful. One would need to take into account Lefebvre's emphasis on making [*oeuvre*] rather than his off-hand reference to domination of nature. Thus, in a manner that 'the urban' does not allow us to

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<sup>1</sup> The French original reads '*réforme agraire*', the standard English translation for which would be 'land reform', not 'agrarian form'. See Larousse where *réforme agraire* is « Transformation des relations existant entre les groupes sociaux pour la propriété et l'usage de la terre » : [http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/divers/r%C3%A9forme\\_agraire/19362](http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/divers/r%C3%A9forme_agraire/19362)

theorize, conceiving of 'the village' necessarily means that one part of the *oeuvre* in such a space is the making of nature into a productive space. In other words, if we wish to redeploy Lefebvre's *droit à la ville* towards a parallel but distinct *droit au village*, we must treat 'nature' not as an object (*maitrise de la nature*) but as a party in the human work (*oeuvre*) of making food and other objects. We need also to be precise concerning the conditions alluded to by Lefebvre's reference to '*réforme agraire*' [land reform]. In his reasoning, Lefebvre considers agrarian reforms as part of an ensemble of reforms (Merrifield, 2006). This implies that if villagers are to be able to exercise rights to the space of the village, they must own the land, or at least enjoy very stable rights to it, as for example, if land is formally owned by the state. More widely, be it with regard to the *droit à la ville* or a *droit au village*, Lefebvre evokes political participation but with no real specification of the governing institutions that can award or recognize a right in law and how actors previously excluded may force this recognition. In the case of the village, the problem of *auto-gestion* [self-management] is important: to what extent are existing forms of municipal government legally empowered to play such a role? Or are other forms of social mobilisation required to transform those existing forms of government? And lastly, while the '*droit à la ville*' supposes that the power called upon is ultimately that of the state (the city of Paris doubtless being Lefebvre's model), how village society can address 'the state' directly may be less evident.

Let us now consider particular historical moments when a claim against organized power was actualized. Below, after a short description of the village, we consider two short accounts, the first concerning a claim to continue to cultivate land and the second to obtain land for building homes.

## **II. Sinay: study in rural changes**

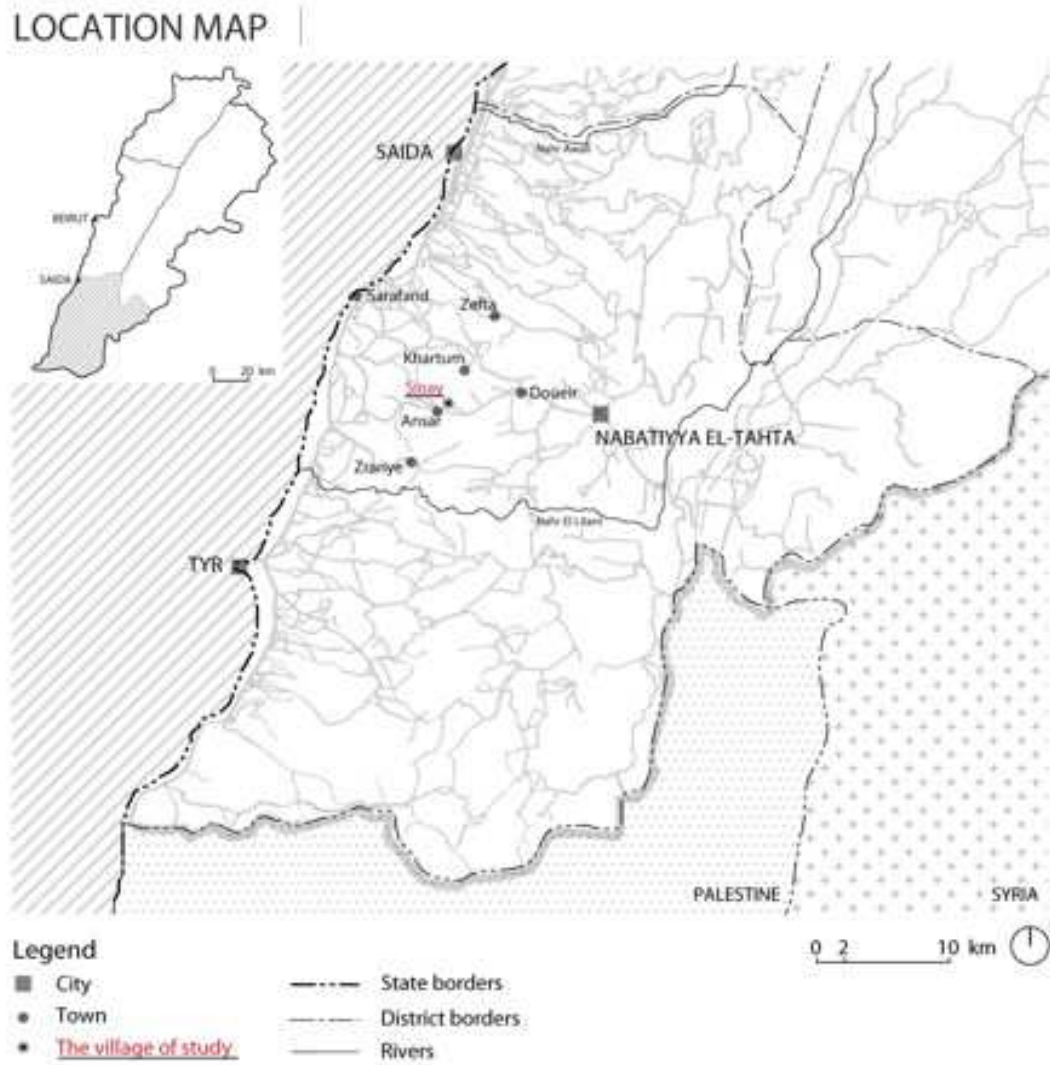
Jabal 'Amil is the historical name of the southern extension of Mount Lebanon, extending over an area of around 2,000sq km from al-Awwali River to northern Palestine. After the creation of the Lebanese state in 1920, when a number of villages were annexed to Palestine, Jabal 'Amil became known as South Lebanon (Bazzi, 2002). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jabal 'Amil was a zone of commercial passage linking the

Syrian mainland to other parts of the Ottoman Empire. However as Beirut's harbour grew and the Beirut-Damascus railway developed, Jabal 'Amil lost its commercial importance. Its economic and political role decreased while Mount Lebanon developed (Mervin, 2000). Predominantly rural in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jabal 'Amil's landscape changed with its integration in the global market (Bazzi, 2002; Mervin, 2000). Tobacco plantation, migration, economic changes, and the geo-political location of Jabal 'Amil in relation to Palestine and the Zionist occupation and state-building, mark the transformation of the area (Jaber, 1999).

In Lebanon today, the rural and the urban are very closely linked. The extensive rural exodus since the 1960s, followed by Israeli invasions (the most important in 1978, 1982 and 2006) and occupation of South Lebanon (1982-2000), led to the transformation of the main cities (Fawaz and Peillen, 2003). Return migration from Lebanese cities to villages, and migration to West African countries and back strengthened the link between the urban and the rural. In Jabal 'Amil, the city of al-Nabatiyya was a village in 1890; it developed into a town in 1934 and is now the main city and capital of the administrative district of al-Nabatiyya (Mazraani, 2012).

Sinay, a 6sq km village, is located in the district of al-Nabatiyya – 89km away from Beirut and 13km from the city of al-Nabatiyya (see figure 1). As any other village, Sinay comprises a particular society, a built environment, open spaces as productive units and a natural environment. The main agricultural zones of the village (fig.2) are *dahr al-zayf*, *dahr karady* and *dayr qubba* also known as *al-duhur* as well as the valley between these hills, where a seasonal stream passes. The villagers first settled on a fourth hill surrounded by terraced agriculture. They refer to that area as the old village. The plateau extending from the old village is divided into two areas: *al-hamra* partly covered by a maquis formation of oaks and shrubs and now dominated by the urban development of the village; and '*al-hamra khallat al-sahra*', the area south of the major street of Sinay, where the first extension of the village started.

Figure 1: Location map showing the village of study at two different scales.





**Figure 2: Historical map of the region in 1962, with an outline of current municipal borders. The map shows the local names of the areas – the spelling was kept as per the original French transliteration.**



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Sinay today has a registered population of approximately 1,800 persons, with 680 adults according to the last electoral list.<sup>2</sup> Of these, around 400 live full-time in the village and more than 150 people live and work in West Africa (mainly in Abidjan); the rest live in cities such Beirut and Saida. We find in the village around 350 housing units, 100 of which are inhabited or owned by outsiders to the village. Emigrants reside part-time in the village: those living in Africa spend some holidays in the village (usually one month a year), and those living in Beirut often come over the weekends. All villagers belong to the Shi'ite community, a fact that we shall find relevant to the path that their negotiation of right took in the Lebanese political system.

Livelihood and socio-professional activities are diversified: we find farmers, construction workers, quarry workers, shop workers, mechanics, garage owners, entrepreneurs, cooks and state employees. Migration led to increased social inequalities among the villagers. Agriculture in the village became a marginal activity during the late 20th century. Today only fourteen families are farmers: three of them farm full-time, while the rest are part-time farmers.

The modern agrarian evolution of Sinay can be divided into three periods:

(1) From the later 19<sup>th</sup>-century to the 1930s, Sinay formed an agricultural space owned by a single landlord and cultivated by landless peasants who until the 1930s gave the landowner a share of their cultivated crops. Over the years, peasants worked the same parcels, assigned by the landlord. The main crops planted were rain-fed lentils, wheat and barley. Peasants had substantial holdings of animals such as cows and goats, for milk and meat products, as well as for agricultural operations. Animals were used to create terraces on which crops were planted; their power of traction also limited the form and size of farmers' plots. The peasants lived in a small area of the village lands (now known as the old village). During this period, each peasant family had a right to use a small plot of land for building his or her house. However, inhabitants did not have any property titles. For their houses, they held deeds wherein the landlord acknowledged their occupation of houses. This social

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<sup>2</sup> It is a particularity of the Lebanese electoral registration system that persons are registered in their native place not their current place of residence elsewhere in Lebanon.

dependency relation bound the landlord to the cultivators for working land, and the cultivators to the landlord for protection.

(2) Between the 1930s and the 1960s, Sinay became a *balda*, or a village attached to the nearest town Ansar. The agrarian system of the village evolved and capitalist agriculture developed. The major owner<sup>3</sup> in the village aimed at developing the village's space as a large agricultural productive unit: he introduced cash-crops such as tobacco, encouraged the planting of fruit trees (especially olives), and drew up contracts (*mugharasa*) for tree planting with the farmers. *Mugharasa* is an agreement between the landlord and the farmer, whereby the farmer plants a parcel with fruit-bearing trees. After fifteen years, the farmer comes to own half the parcel. Slowly, villagers thus came to own small areas of agricultural land. This period was also marked by large waves of internal and external migration. Remittances allowed inhabitants of the village to buy their houses or small plots on which to build new houses. This changed the social and spatial structure of landholdings in the village from a single landlord to a number of outside landowners, some of whom developed orchards. However, the great part of the land of Sinay remained in the hands of Owner  $\alpha$ .

(3) Starting in the 1960s, after Owner  $\alpha$  faced financial problems, he decided to parcel his holdings in Sinay and to sell the plots to pay off his debts. But because the plots were large and expensive for local people, 'outsiders' were primarily those who bought land in the village. Aside from one small attempt, rapidly abandoned, the new owners did not invest in agricultural development in the village. The new investments focused mainly on service and mining projects. In tandem, the mechanisation of agriculture led to a decline in the demand for labour in village agriculture. The great majority of the farmers either quit agriculture or became pluri-active, planting mainly low-labour-intensive crops – wheat and barley – at the expense of cash-crops. The value of lands for agricultural production gave way to their valuation for building plots or for sheer financial speculation for large owners. The village today is inhabited by locals and non-locals, with many socio-professional groups and activities. The landscape too changed from an agricultural space to a

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter we will refer to this owner as Owner  $\alpha$

multifunctional one. These transformations challenge the traditional definitions of what a village and rurality may be.

### III. People's claims for rights

#### Story 1: Access to agricultural land

This case study sheds light on the persistence of customary use-rights to agricultural land. Villagers speak of their subjection to landlord power having its roots in what they call the period of *al-iqta'*, 'feudal' or land grant systems (Lutsky, 1987). As late as 1939 under the French Mandate for Lebanon, all of Sinay was registered as the single property of one landlord, a prominent political figure from the city of Saida, whose descendant sits in the Lebanese parliament today. Although the holding was large, actual cultivation was by peasant families, mechanization only becoming widespread during the 1950s. We have yet to document the history of land tenure in all its detail, but until the 1950s, the land was worked by small family share-cropping units with established use-rights under strong landlord control. Two-fifths of the crop were paid to the landlord for use of the land while all other factors of production were provided by the cultivator. Unlike in neighbouring Syria, land reform was never implemented in Lebanon.

In Sinay such small family sharecropping farming survived in the area of *al-duhur* (or *dayr qubba*) (see location on figure 2) until the beginning of the civil war in 1975, although ownership of the land itself changed hands to an absentee owner who invested money made in West Africa. As the same farmer worked the same plots over the years, he or she gained a right of cultivation or right of use of specific parcels. This right was transmitted to the farmer's descendants. If the cultivator wanted to stop using the land, he could transfer his right (usually to a family member or relative). But if the farmer gave up his use-right, he could not reclaim it subsequently. This continuity of cultivation created a social understanding and acceptance of right. Across the different owners and changes in the agrarian system over the years, this type of agricultural land use-right persisted.

This system continued in the village until the beginning of the civil war, although at this stage, the political character of the *iqta'* regime in the area had long gone, and capitalist agriculture had been developed more widely in the region from the 1950s. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, although the number of families cultivating decreased, their rights to use of land continued. Aerial photographs from 1975 reveal that more than 70% of the land (the rest mostly being inaccessible to farming) was cultivated in *al-duhur*. The crops were primarily rain-fed field crops, such as tobacco, wheat, lentils and barley.

In 1975, the fighting in Beirut made it difficult for the villagers to obtain flour for bread from the city. Encouraged by the growing number of villagers who had joined leftist parties, the farmers refused to give the owner of the land two-fifths of their production and distributed the wheat they harvested to other villagers. The farmers later met with the owner of the land and negotiated a reduction of his share from two-fifths to one-fifth.

In 1998 the village of Sinay, which had earlier depended administratively on the neighbouring town of Ansar, became an independent municipality. Since then, use-rights were 'formalised'. An agreement was signed between the different farmers, the landowner and the mayor of the village. This agreement guaranteed the use-rights of farmers in return for 20% of the produce to be paid to the owner. It also gave the owner the right to terminate this agreement on condition of giving a year's notice to the farmers.

*Al-duhur* (see figure 3) is an area of the village where farmers still enjoy this agricultural land-use right. In September 2013, an incident took place between farmers cultivating areas of *al-duhur* and the landowner. The latter suddenly declared that he would terminate the agreement and lease the land to a third party for a rent paid once in cash. This lessee was then to sublet the different plots to the farmers. The farmers feared that they would either not be able to plant the land any longer or would have to rent it at a high price. Either eventuality would threaten their use-rights. Although there was no clause in the agreement signed in 1998 assuring the farmers of the future use of the land, they took action and refused to leave their



plots. One farmer stated: "It is the owner's right to plant his land personally, but we will not let him rent it to someone other than us".

**Figure 3: Overview of the agricultural area of *al-duhur*, showing the different agricultural plots (Gharios, 2013).**



Farmers developed collective action to protect their use-rights. All of the farmers met and created a group to negotiate with the landowner. This confrontation opposed seven farmers who cultivated rain-fed crops over 121 hectares (some 78% of Zone x, see Figure 4: 'zones of interest') to the owner, who remained in Senegal during the conflict but asked his agent (*wakil*) to represent him in the negotiations. The mayor of the village acted as mediator in the conflict. After several months of negotiation, a new agreement was signed in which the 20% of production was replaced by a cash-rent by plot. A detailed survey of the land use was therefore conducted to define the exact areas planted by each cultivator and to determine the individual rents. In the months following the negotiation, at least one farmer decided not to plant his land out of fear of losing money.

**Figure 4: Map of Sinay showing the 'zones of interest' where contestations took place. Both the aerial photograph and the cadastral map are from 2005, and given by the CNRS (National Council for Scientific Research).**



Legend:

- ■ ■ Zone x: Contestation over farming rights
- The 20 hectares requested for urban development
- The 20 hectares obtained for urban development



This conflict pitted an almost unfettered individual property right against agricultural land-use rights. Indeed, so strong is the former that there would have been no contestation had the owner planned to cultivate the land himself. In that case even the most longstanding use-right would have been powerless before the property right. The agreement reached demonstrates the resistance of actors who hold socially established rights to work land in the face of the legal power of the landlord. Yet, that the resistance was limited to the farming community of *al-duhur* reflects the

reduction of rain-fed agriculture in the household economy. Agriculture in Sinay has become a secondary component : work in the city, labour migration to West Africa and the Gulf, and the transformations of the regional agrarian system since the 1950s reduced the weight of this sector in the village. Agriculture is not the main source of income in the village even for the farming families, save one farmer and one older herder. Migrant labour and the mechanisation of agriculture allow for the resilience of agricultural production. Yet the collective action of the farmers does assert their right to work the land and expresses the value of agricultural activity, not simply as a part-time occupation, but as an expression of the village's identity.

### **Story 2: Access to housing**

If access to rain-fed agriculture engaged only some villagers, all were concerned by a conflict with another landowner from outside the village over land for housing.

In 1956, Sinay had about 400 inhabitants, who lived in the old village site, a small area of the municipal territory. Most of the houses at that time consisted of two rooms: one for living and the other for the cattle. The rest of the village land was given over to agriculture or scrub forest, in large blocks owned by a handful of wealthy individuals from outside the village who had bought the land from the original landlord in a small number of transactions.

In the 1960s, as a result of an earthquake that destroyed many houses, financial support from the state allowed for the reconstruction and expansion of several homes. However, the built-up area of the village remained very small compared to the growing population in the village. As we have noted, poor prospects as sharecropping farmers encouraged many residents to leave agriculture and to search for other types of jobs. Young men from the village migrated to Beirut and to West Africa, building on paths of individual migrants opened from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. From well before the beginning of the civil war, remittances represented a significant source of livelihood for many people in the village. Yet in 1975 the Lebanese civil war took the form of urban fighting. Many villagers working and living in Beirut returned to the village. The small area of the village site became ever more crowded. In the face of this, the property investor who held the agricultural land in *al-hamra* (also



called *tell er Roueiss* on figure 2: Historical map of Sinay) was rumoured to be planning to cash in on the increasing value of real estate, by parcelling the land officially so as to sell smaller plots at much higher prices. He was free to do this in principle, given that in Lebanon virtually all land is legally open to construction (and the taxes paid on real estate transactions are minimal) (Bakhos, 2005). For Lebanon's elite, the impoverished south held the promise of a 'new frontier' for land speculation.

With the escalation of the civil war and the political vacuum in its early years, villagers began to think of taking land for building by force. After several meetings, the villagers developed a plan. They drew up a census to determine the total area required. It was agreed that each family should obtain an area proportional to the number of sons older than twenty years in age: 0.1 hectare for one son, 0.2 ha for two to four sons, and 0.3 ha for five or more sons. This census revealed that the total area needed was 20 ha. The villagers then created a three-person committee responsible for the study of the project: to select the land, to develop a plan, and to partition the land. The site selected was located on good flat land in *al-hamra*, easy to build on, and adjoining the main road from al-Nabatiyya to the village. With the help of an engineer, the committee developed a plan dividing the space by family into neighbourhoods. This plan took into account previous farming land-use rights so as to reduce potential conflicts. Villagers who cultivated land in an area were to obtain building plots in the same zone that they farmed.

In 1976, some beneficiaries started preparing their lands, while others even started building. In 1977, at the request of the landowner and investors, a force from the Amal movement<sup>4</sup> from outside the village intervened and tried to stop the work in order to protect the rights of the private owner. Although the majority of the villagers concerned were members of the Amal movement, clashes took place. Amal's leadership managed to stop the construction and transferred the

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<sup>4</sup> The Amal movement is a *shi'i* political group and a militia that controlled South Lebanon since the beginning of the civil war. During that time and because of the absence of a state, the Amal movement played a state-like role in the area based on sectarian divisions in the country at large. Nowadays, the movement is one of the main political powers in Lebanon. For more information see: Augustus Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the soul of Lebanon*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1987.

management of the conflict to the Shiite Council (*majlis shi'i*).<sup>5</sup> Negotiations were undertaken between the landowner and villagers. In the *majlis*, the owner tried to criminalize the villagers' action, insisting on its illegality, while the villagers defended their right to live honourably in their village in terms of religious principles and local belonging, criticizing the high price demanded by the owner for the plots.

Amal did not want to support one or the other of the conflicting groups because they needed the support of both. On the one hand, the strength on the ground of the Amal movement since 1978 was based on the young activists in the region, including youth from Sinay. On the other hand, the economic orientation of Amal was based on the protection of private property (*Waraqat amal*, n.d.). Furthermore, Amal relied on the financial donations and backing of wealthy people such as the owner of the land in question. The negotiations thus stagnated.

Wider political developments engulfed Sinay and the region. The village came under direct Israeli occupation between 1982 and 1985, local resistance groups formed spontaneously in the village, closely related to the Amal movement. These groups were poorly equipped, using non-military weapons such as ordinary hunting guns. The villagers risked their lives to defend land that they did not, and in general could not, own. At the time only some 5% of the village land was owned by local people. Their resistance – for Sinay and for Lebanon – gave some strength to the villagers' demands. As a result, their bargaining position improved: they emphasized their role in the liberation of their village, pitting it against the purely financial role of the land owner. One of the village leaders noted: "all the people who seek land fought against the Israelis while the owner only paid money to the movement. All the Arab money did not free Arab land, but we freed our land." Yet, following the liberation of this part of the South in 1985 – the deeper South to the Armistice line not being liberated until 2000 – the demand for land and its price increased dramatically, encouraging real estate development across the liberated areas of South Lebanon. The land owner in Sinay began to set in motion the division of his land into housing plots and fixed the selling price at 40 000 LL per 0.1 hectare. The villagers again

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<sup>5</sup> The *majlis shi'i* is the most important religious authority for the Shi'ite community. It was founded in 1967 by the Imam Musa al-Sadr, who also founded the Amal movement in 1975.

appealed to the leadership of Amal to intervene and a new phase of negotiation began.

At the end of 1987, the two sides reached an agreement, not without compromises from both. The owner agreed to sell 20 ha to the villagers at a third of the original price (around 15 000LL per 0.1 hectare). But the owner changed the location of the land chosen by the villagers. The new location was less advantageous, as about five hectares were on hilly terrain difficult for construction. The landowner also demanded that the money be paid as one block payment. The villagers accepted these conditions and requested the assistance of a rich person of the village (who had made money in West Africa) to advance the amount agreed. Later the beneficiaries would each repay him their parts of the whole. Likewise, the Amal movement guaranteed the construction of roads and supply of electricity at the expense of the Ministry of Public Works. The then Minister of Public Works was a political ally of the Amal movement.

Once the external conflict was resolved, a new internal conflict developed. The change of location affected the old plans and agreements over the distribution of plots between the villagers. Competition over the choice of plots engendered tensions between the different beneficiaries. Moreover, the man who financed the land obtained three hectares, and four mediators in the conflict, all outsiders to the village, obtained 0.1 hectare each. This reduced the remaining land available for distribution. Likewise, the physical difference between the plots in the hilly and the flat land created yet other conflicts. The man who financed the land purchase set different prices depending on the location of parcels: parcels on the main road were more expensive than those further away, and plots on a slope were cheaper than those on level ground. So, economic differentiation between the villagers – resulting from migration and remittances – increasingly took spatial form.

Three consequences of the long struggle for housing plots should be noted. First, the leadership of the Amal movement played a central role in re-orientating the conflict: from villagers' claims to housing as an entitlement, to paying for village land, albeit at acceptable prices, free of abusive speculation. This change reflects Amal's principle of protecting and managing private property right while trying to

meet the livelihood needs of the villagers. Second, the distribution of land for housing became a showcase of emergent social inequality in the village and of the role of labour migration in class differentiation in the village. This illustrates the thesis of Henry Bernstein that social conflict over land reveals the deepening of social differentiation and class formation (Bernstein, 2004, pp. 190–225). Third, the conflict has essentially transformed land-use in this area, from agricultural production to urban housing (see figure 5). The building encouraged further real estate expansion in the village, the landowner proceeding in 1990 to parcel all the rest of the good land of *al-hamra* for sale as housing plots (see figure 2: map of Sinay and figure 4: 'zones of interest').

**Figure 5: The area of *al-hamra*, where the urban extension is taking place (Gharios, 2013)**



More generally, the case concerning the right to land for habitation reveals a dialectical contradiction. On the one hand, the very possibility of mounting a claim against the land owner/speculator, a figure well tied into the quasi-state sectarian

movement of Amal, reflected the physical empowerment of the villagers during the years of military resistance against occupation. But on the other hand, the wider political environment of law and state within which Amal simultaneously governs and represents southern villagers, remains highly inhospitable for the articulation of a sustained 'Right to the Village' or, indeed, 'Right to the City'. Villagers, we have seen, have struggled for two of the elements that would compose such a Right: habitation and continuing agricultural production. But the resultant achievements are anything but a simple story of victory. While the villagers did win the right for their children to dwell in the village, the landowner had the power to transform the agricultural land with the best soil into a larger *rurbain* housing estate where large villas remind poorer villagers of their continuing modest class success on the wider Lebanese stage of the oil and remittance economy. This renders the success of the farmers in retaining their rights to cultivate the lands owned by yet another outside landowner all the more precious, yet all the more fragile. With a wave of the hand across the landscape, a part-time farmer declared: 'In time, all this land too will be built with houses.'

#### **IV. Conclusion**

We have examined here the history of struggles to obtain rights in a village of south Lebanon. As the account above reveals, the village is submitted to a wider form of government which has never admitted land reform (the bulk of the village remains legally until today the property of outside landowners), in which the very existence of any formal municipal structure was quite recent, and for which the state has failed to zone or to protect from other uses the major productive resource, agricultural land. Property in land is thus very close to the ideal abstraction of absolute real private property where owners have total control over land. For all its exceptional integration into the global economies of oil and long-distance labour migration, Lebanon exemplifies what Samir Amin has described as the fate of the third-world: political environmental pillage (Amin, 2004, pp. 29–52).

As we have seen, social transformations in the village are interlinked with migration, which has played an important role in class formation and capital accumulation.

These transformations modify the relation between rural and urban spaces and diminish the differences between them. The village is today less a place of agricultural production than one of consumption of imported goods and of the production of labour for export. The right to produce becomes consolidated in the hands of private or quasi-private interests. Property divisions are ever more visible in the village. Owners of orchards and villas build fences around their plots to prevent the entry of 'outsiders' to their lands, and thus restrict traditional land-use rights such as hunting and gathering of wild fruits and plants. The expansion of this phenomenon and the spread of urbanization limit the exercise of traditional rights of inhabitants and play a fundamental role in the transformation of the way these rights are expressed. The right to use land appears increasingly the property of private owners.

So where does this leave the 'Right to the Village'? We would contend that a more radical theoretical approach would require not developing 'a right to the village' parallel to 'a right to the city', but modelling political ecologies (social/environmental) and building a programme for political ecological change linking local to global. This paper has not attempted such a radical and programmatic approach but has confined itself to descriptive analysis of one case within the terms proposed by the notion of a 'right to the village'.

Thus, in a highly inhospitable political environment for a 'right to the village', villagers have struggled for two of the elements that would compose such a right – habitation and continuing agricultural production. The resultant achievements are not a simple story of victory. Yet the contradictions of their struggles do serve to highlight weaknesses in Lefebvre's treatment of the rural world. If there is to be a 'Right to the Village' that is not just a small-scale replica of working class rights in a spill-over of the City, it must (as Lefebvre posited) be built upon land reform (*réforme agraire*). That is to say it must rest upon the entitlement of villagers and their engagement in the *oeuvre* of productive work with nature (not the '*maitrise de la nature*' of Lefebvre) in agriculture, animal raising, gathering and hunting, and the integration of other forms of capital and work with that *oeuvre*. Indeed, given the irreducible, physical variation of land itself, and the deeper histories of production

and livelihood that mark the villages of this world (Lefebvre's *'vie paysanne traditionnelle'*), these relations of production, in all their global differences, must be central to analyses and programmes of political ecology today. But utopian abstraction aside, in the here-and-now, 'a right to the village' may only be put into practice within the bounds of time, place and political-cultural history. So, in this paper we have demonstrated moments when rights were claimed, that is when the organised power of property owners backed by the state was contested and access to housing and production in the village were partially achieved, but not a 'Right to the Village', save as a fleeting light in the dreams of working people.

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