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## The Right to the Village

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### Introduction

While there is a flourishing literature on “the right to the city”, an phrase launched by Henri Lefebvre as a demand and a call to action (*Le droit à la ville*, 1968), few have taken up this idea and applied it to the rural world (Barraclough, 2012). Could a “right to the village” be established? The proposal sounds something of a joke, but one might wonder what is funny about the attempt to transpose to a symmetrical domain (the village as opposed to the city) an expression that has become so famous and fruitful in its original coinage. Illustrating the perceived absurdity of the expression, the call for contributions in preparation for this was initially translated (wrongly) into English as “straight to the village”(as in English, the French word for “right” has multiple meanings). And yet... whereas David Harvey (Harvey, 2008) sees here an “empty signifier” that anyone could lay claim to, and which should be taken as a starting point for argument, and whereas the possible interpretations, content and codifications of the “right to the city” are an object of enquiry for many researchers and institutions, the “right to the village” could provide an offbeat avenue into an examination of the relations between space and sociopolitical claims. It could even cast light (through an effect of symmetry?) on the right to the city itself.

### 1) Why the “right to the village”?

#### a) Urbanocentrism?

The “right to the village” sounds so odd in particular because there is a certain urbanocentrism in the so-called radical social sciences, which claim adherence to Marxist or Marxian approaches and aspire to social and spatial change. Could it be that these

flourish more on urban concrete than in rural loam? True, English-language political ecology in particular has developed through the study of peasant societies in the global South. Some would say that there was even a “rural bias” in development programmes in sub-Saharan Africa, long characterised by an excessive focus on agriculture, on the figure of the peasant farmer, to the detriment of connections between cities and countryside (Charlery de la Masselière, 2005). In addition, certain concepts in urban geography, such as the gentrification explored by radical geographers, have been reapplied to rural phenomena (Richard, 2009). Despite this handful of bridges between rural and urban, however, Henri Lefebvre has inspired an immense body of work that focuses on the city and is rarely transposed to other spaces, for example with D. Harvey, who concentrates almost exclusively on urban areas. The search engine of the radical geography journal *Antipode* comes up with 1305 articles for the keyword “city”, 1258 for “urban”, as compared with 204 for “countryside” and 705 for “rural”. Closer to home, of the 33 articles published in the “focus” section of our own young journal, half (16) make explicit reference to the city in their titles, as compared with only four which refer to the rural world. Spatial justice would thus seem to be marked by this focus on the urban, and environmental justice too, given that the early work was a denunciation of segregation in American cities (Blanchon et al., 2009). There has in fact been recent development in urban political ecology, by English-language authors with a strong grounding in Marxist approaches (Heynen et al, 2006). The revival of radical and/or critical geography in France, and the work of transmission on research from the English-speaking world, are therefore centred around research on the city (e.g. Clerval 2013, Giroud and Gintrac 2014), serving further to entrench this polarisation.

Such an imbalance might seem paradoxical since, by concentrating on the city, and therefore neglecting half the population of the planet and more than 95% of its land mass, these approaches constitute an injustice, or at least a “spatial bias”. Rural spaces are also, it should be recalled, home to the planet’s poorest populations and territories (lower average income than in the city, less access to food, to health, education, etc.). The description of social inequalities within the rural world, between incomers and natives, between large landowners and the landless, between the dominant and the dominated in highly hierarchical societies, is nevertheless a constant of geography, particularly in the

global South. These inequalities are moreover further exacerbated by growing mobility, by periurbanisation, and by the multifunctionality of rural areas. However, these inequality-based analyses rarely extend into considerations of justice. Yet the city is not the only space where inequalities, frustrations and conflicts are experienced.

There are many explanations for this urbanocentrism, to do with the history of geography as a discipline, with the formation of “schools” of geography – or sociology – urban, rural, radical...; with the love-hate relations between French and Anglo-Saxon social sciences; and with the circulation of ideas and approaches. This huge question cannot be covered in its entirety here, though a few pointers may be found in Alphandéry and Billaud 2009, Keucheyan 2010, Claval 2011. Nonetheless, it remains crucial in the pages that follow, given that this issue of the journal has chosen precisely to explore the decompartmentalisation and the transposition of approaches, concepts and terrains, through the somewhat parodic and provocative expression “right to the village”.

### **b) Rural and urban, same struggle?**

Apart from his titles as a philosopher and a sociologist, which are undisputed, Lefebvre is sometimes described as a geographer. A very questionable assertion, given that no geographer would so lose sight of the materiality of landscapes as to claim that all of France’s country areas are “urbanised”. Sociologists like T. Paquot are less reticent about such claims, pointing to ongoing processes of acculturation – albeit in some cases incomplete – and employing very broad definitions of “urban”.

All the same, it is too often forgotten that Lefebvre was very familiar with rural societies, to which he dedicated a dozen years of research, whether on the Pyrenean valley of Campan (Lefebvre, 1963) or in the mass of documentation he accumulated on peasant struggles and agrarian reforms around the world. What he seemed to find interesting were the conditions for the development of socialist revolutions in agricultural countries, and for the transition from a traditional peasant society to a socialist society. It was a long and patient effort, punctuated by publications that found little readership, until the author moved on to tackle urban issues. According to him, it was the eruption of the tower blocks of the new town of Lacq-Mourenx above the forests and cornfields of the “Béarnais Texas” that triggered his shift from rural to urban (cf. *Du rural à l’urbain*, 1973).

His 1968 book *Le droit à la ville* (The Right to the City) was the first publication to mark this change of direction.

However does this “right to the city” really have that much to do with the city? It is a tough question, given the different possible readings of a concept that Lefebvre never really defined with any precision, which can be interpreted as emphasising theoretical formal rights or more concrete, “substantive” rights, largely individual rights or collective rights, *one* generic right to “the city” or a plurality of rights (to housing, to income, etc.) (Marcuse, 2009). The right to the city is no less than “a higher form of right: right to liberty, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabiting. The right to the *oeuvre* (to participatory activity) and the right to *appropriation* (very different from the right to ownership) are implied in the right to the city” (Lefebvre, 2009, p.125, our translation).

In addition, the urban tropism is significantly qualified by the blurring of the boundary between city and country. In fact, for Lefebvre, cities and countrysides are in a dialectical relationship, are defined and evolve in relation to each other, with the distinction between them tending to dissolve: in his view, the ancient countryside, like the ancient city, are both being overtaken by the rise of “urban society”, and of “commodity value” by contrast with “usage value”. “The contradictions of the city, of its fragmentation, of the emerging urban society and urban ethos, are being superimposed on those of the industrial era and of the agricultural era” (Lefebvre, 1973, pp.13-14). “The urban ravages the countryside; this urbanised countryside is in contrast with a dispossessed rurality, an extreme case of the great poverty of the inhabitant, of the habitat, of inhabiting” (Lefebvre, 2009, p.107). Following this thread, Harvey (2008) sees not two contrasting spaces but an ensemble of porous spaces, unequal in development, dominated by capital; the countrysides seem to be steered from outside by dynamics originating in the metropolis. On the global scale, they look like the most dominated spaces. At regional scale, they are diversified by the selective combination of different services: reserves of agrarian space, of energy, of labour, of building land, of leisure, of “nature”...

This continuity between rural and urban allows to break down the partition between analyses, both conceptually and spatially: the right to the city could therefore, in theory, make it entirely possible to explore rural dynamics. As Bühler et al. point out in this issue,

Lefebvre clearly states that what he calls urban is not attached to a specific geographical materiality. Harvey (2008) also interprets the right to the city very broadly: if it is the right for everyone to exercise power over the processes that shape urbanisation, since the same processes shape the countryside, the right to the city or the right to the village are ultimately the same thing. Purcell (2009) likewise criticises reductionism in the right to the city (including in Lefebvre!). For him, the right to the city is important for its revolutionary potential, its capacity to mobilise inhabitants and rethink the struggle against neoliberalism. A narrow interpretation of that right, confined to urban space and ignoring the rural world, would therefore compromise that ambition. Instead, Purcell proposes a broad and inter-scalar definition of the right to the city, as a right to inhabit space, on which a new way of thinking and practising citizenship could be founded. Lopes de Sousa (2010) similarly denounces the insipid interpretation of the right to the city – emptied of its revolutionary aspirations by international and Brazilian institutions of urban governance and by NGOs – and calls on us to reconsider the radicality of contemporary social movements, which are not only city based: quoting the Brazilian Landless, the Mexican Zapatistas... As evidenced by the connection between the Landless and the Roofless in Brazil, there is in fact a continuity between agrarian struggles (land for cultivation) and the urban struggle (land for housing), for people moving – not to say shunted – between cities and countryside, at the risk of being excluded from both. Nonetheless, Lefebvre wrote of the “right *to the city*”, not to the village, to the countryside, to space... and he is followed in this by the vast majority of researchers, notably Harvey, in asserting that “the revolution will be urban, or there will be none” (Harvey, 2008, p15).

### **c) The impossible, the unthinkable citizen of the fields?**

“The social division of labour between the city and the country corresponds to the separation between material work and intellectual work, and therefore between the natural and the mental. (...) The country, simultaneously practical reality and representation, will convey the images of nature, of being, of the original. The city will convey the images of effort, willpower, subjectivity, thought, though these representations will not be detached from real activities” (Lefebvre, 2009, p.26-27). True,

these lines relate only to the development of the “ancient city”, Greek or Roman, but one cannot help but think that this – to say the least – unambiguous vision of the countryside had percolated into his conception of contemporary rural spaces. For Lefebvre, the city represents the quintessence of social life, because it is perceived as the space of encounter, of the unexpected and of the possibility of freedom, and he is followed in this by many geographers of the urban (Mangeot et al., 2012). This urban tropism is not unconnected with a class tropism (for Lefebvre, it is the working proletariat of the city that will drive the urban revolution), reflecting “classical” Marxism’s distrust of the peasants. In Marx and Engels, particularly in the *Communist Manifesto*, peasants, dulled by life in the fields, are perceived as conservative, even reactionary, and constitute secondary actors who are to be guided by the urban proletariat.

This devaluation of the countryside can only lead to citizenship being assimilated to city dwelling. Etymology has much to do with it, because in many languages the word for “citizen” and “city dweller” is the same, or at least has the same root. Woods (2006) explains the persistence of this association by the Weberian model of the genesis of citizenship and of the modern state, in and through the ancient and mediaeval city. Urbanisation appears as one of the ways whereby individuals, escaped from the grip of a status-based society structured into classes, clans or lineages, were transformed into citizens and organised human government in a rational fashion. By contrast, rural societies appear as trapped within a hierarchical structure where rights and responsibilities remain concentrated in a few individuals. This is something like the old opposition between “community” and “society” made by Tönnies, the former being the characteristic of the village, whereas the transition to the latter is triggered by urbanisation.

There is little more active democracy or citizenship to be found in the “desire for the rural” or the “countryside idyll” of the North West European countries (Champion, 2001; Bonerandi and Deslondes, 2008; Richard, 2009). It is imbued with an image of the countryside as a bucolic environment, landscapes of aesthetic harmony and heritage, offering city dwellers thirsty for greenery a special contact with “nature”... A nicely sterile vision of the rural world, which tends to cover over the social and political antagonisms that run through it. And this rosy and consensual image is in no

way specific to the countrysides of Europe. In India, Gandhi's heirs like to hype the eternal world of the villages, the countryside as a guardian of national traditions, a place of solidarity and community organisations, in contrast with the cities, the loci of vice in all its forms. Yet we know that the city has no monopoly on democratic awareness and rebellion. Opposite Gandhi was Ambedkar, another hero of Indian independence. Born an "untouchable", he denounced the "ghettos" where the lowest castes in the villages were imprisoned. Today, *dalit* ("oppressed") movements, bearing aloft portraits of Ambedkar, pass through rural India as they do through urban India, and Maoist "naxalite" guerrillas hold entire districts of central – rural – India... Rousseau in his time reminded us that houses make the town but that citizens make the city (*Du contrat social*, I, vi, note \*, p12). There is no question that rural struggles for citizenship exist.

However, these visions of amorphous or harmonious countrysides maintain a vicious circle. They are perceived as apolitical not just by analysts, but also by politicians and the media. As Fautras shows in his exploration of the "rural roots" of the Tunisian revolution in this issue, it is as if the countrysides were politically invisible: with less economic clout, neglected by politicians and the media, they scarcely feature in the analysis of the Arab springs. The struggles that take place there, and their outcomes, are little-known, which lends an appearance of legitimacy to their invisibility.

#### **d) Time to break free of Henri Lefebvre?**

But ultimately, do we really need Lefebvre? In our issue, only two articles really pick up the challenge of taking him on – not necessarily in full agreement with him – and tackling the "right to the village" in the light of the right to the city. It is probably no accident that the only contribution we received in English reflects the popularity of Lefebvre in the English-speaking world.

The right to the city remains fundamental in the article by Bühler et al., the only entirely theoretical piece, which fully embraces the goal of departitioning and complementarity in approaches to the subject, and considers the epistemological challenges raised by the formulation of the right to the village. In their analysis of Lefebvre, the authors emphasise his "neglect" of the countryside and its converse, his



fascination with the city and urban life. On the one hand, “closed in on themselves, clientelist and conservative” rural societies. On the other hand, an ideal urban world which “reflects a mental and social configuration: that of simultaneity, of gathering, able to emancipate individuals in society”. Drawing on a rich bibliography concentrating on French and Western rural areas since the 1970s, and especially on the “local development movement”, their critique of Lefebvre leads the authors to advance the hypothesis that rural spaces possess morphological and social specificities that can work in favour of emancipation and greater autonomy for their inhabitants.

This hypothesis, as well as the answers proposed by the authors, raise certain questions. Might not this perspective encourage a form of spatial determinism? Are there spaces which, by their morphology per se, are more conducive to revolution than others? Bühler et al. consider, for example, the low population density and availability of space in the countryside as a defining factor for the (social) resources of emancipation, whereas Jacques Lévy, by contrast, in his film *Urbanité/s Urbanity/ies*, sees high urban density as a driver of revolution. Barraclough, on the other hand (2012), considers that relations to the nonhuman are a promising avenue in exploring the specificities of a right to the village compared with the right to the city. In fact, Bühler et al. do not tackle these environmental aspects, and the other articles in the issue deal with them only episodically. Apart from these opposing or qualitatively different visions, the real question is what is the role of “space” – which would then need to be defined – in the genesis and structuring of social movements (Ripoll 2005).

In the article originally written in English by El Nour et al, the subject is an “international” Lefebvre seen through the prism of the English-language authors who have reworked him (cf. Purcell 2002, and the diptych of inhabiting/appropriating). Here, the objective is quite different, since the article aims to show that transplanting the notion to the rural areas of south Lebanon reveals above all the failure of the struggles and the continuity of the domination experienced by the peasants. The article stresses that the Lefebvrian perspective is probably too procedural, focusing on self-expression and citizen emancipation and not enough on the materiality of the

means of subsistence, in this case on the need for better distribution of the means of production, and hence for agrarian reform. It also shows the need to understand the struggles of the “village”, and their partial failure, within a wider economic and political context. In south Lebanon, there is no state that guarantees and takes responsibility for land rights, only the Amal movement, which is both a religious political party and a militia. The economy of the “village”, through the big landowners, is also dependent on the Lebanese diaspora.

For the rest, most of the authors in this issue have chosen to break free of Lefebvre and from those who followed him, or even frankly to ignore “the right to the city”. For them, defining what might be “the right to the village” requires description and analysis of the struggles underway in their specific locations of study. This choice is probably indicative of the empirical methods of French geography or sociology, founded primarily on fieldwork, and therefore only likely to marshal the stars of *French Theory* as a last resort. However, it also reflects the fact that ruralist authors, often remote from the theoretical corpus of urban geography, are somewhat unfamiliar with Lefebvre and the right to the city. In fact, Lefebvre is less employed in France than in the USA. Laborious to read and difficult to apply, so rich but tangled – even woolly, some say – is his thinking, he in any case seems highly theoretical by comparison with the empiricism of most of the research represented here.

## **II . What rights? For whom? Spatial justice in the countryside**

The right to the village, a village where one retires to cultivate one’s field like the wise Cincinnatus or one’s garden like Candide, could be anything from the right to retreat or to wisdom through to extreme forms of reclusiveness or eremitism. But there is no Walden in our issue: the countryside is a space of conflict and struggle, not peaceful meditation.

In this respect, our articles are on a continuum with recent works. On France and Europe, for example, Bonerandi (2014) or Pagès (2005), without really adopting an approach in terms of spatial injustices, have managed to show the very high levels of rural poverty, all the more perturbing for the lack of media attention. In English and at global scale, a publication like *The Journal of Peasant Studies* makes it an explicit

goal to “foster inquiry into how agrarian power relations between classes and other social groups are created, understood, contested and transformed”. A brief inventory of the special numbers published over the last 10 years highlights the themes of land grabbing (3 special issues between 2009 and 2013) and agrarian reform and struggle (in Zimbabwe, in Chiapas...).

The force of the articles that follow lies therefore in what they tell us about the struggles running through a wide variety of rural areas (Lebanon, Tunisia, France, India, South Africa), and about their aims (rights to what, or right against what), the people involved (whose rights and advocated by whom), their methods (how to protest, claim, negotiate, combat) and their outcomes – the reader should be warned that the success stories do not seem to be legion. We will not try to summarise these texts here, but simply to highlight certain issues that recur from one article to another, tackled differently depending on the authors.

### **a) Fighting for what? Land...**

It is no surprise to find that a recurrent subject of these struggles is land, access to land, defence of land, control of land. Our contributors write of the dispossession of farmland (in Tunisia, Fautras), of the forced displacement and relocation of populations (in India because of a dam, Cabalion), of the struggle for permanent rights to the use of land and access to housing (in Lebanon, El Nour et al.), of the control of urbanisation and construction (in Cape Town in South Africa, Guyot et al.), of the occupation and defence of rural space against an airport project (Notre Dame des Landes in France, Pailloux).

We will not find cases here of peasant land being grabbed by large companies, an issue much plugged by NGOs and the media, or of major agrarian struggle: no Chiapas here, no Naxalites. Nor any of the “urban bias” in policies denounced in the past by Michael Lipton (1976). Although our articles relate to certain high-profile events, whether in France (the movement opposing the building of the airport of Grand-Ouest), or around the world (the Tunisian revolution), they are more interested in “ordinary dispossession”, in “day-to-day injustices”, perpetrated by the State (India), by the big “traditional” landowners (in Lebanon), by private investors (in

Tunisia). The big struggles that hit the headlines remain scarce compared with these thousand little combats, where little is ultimately gained, but which highlight the multiple facets of day-to-day resistance.

There is nothing specifically rural about the issue of land. In fact, almost all the places explored here are “town-country” spaces, sometimes morphologically mixed, with complex economies and mobile inhabitants. These are hybrid zones: periurban areas (Cape Town, and to a lesser degree Notre Dame des Landes); fairly built-up country areas (Lebanon); a new relocation village, which is “townlike” in its layout and the style of its houses (India); country areas which provide economic activities for city dwellers with multiple jobs (Tunisia). In addition, all the authors emphasise the multiplicity of functions, meanings and values attached to land, which partially encompass urban problems as well. Of course, there is farmland, a recurring leitmotiv in most of the texts, an object of struggle for its economic value as the material basis of production. However, land is also understood as a place to live, a medium of housing: the “right to the village” in the strictest sense... (India, Lebanon). In Cape Town, the issue is land as landscape, the instrument of a combat that is not defensive: natural, agricultural and architectural landscapes are mobilised by a well-off white minority of self-proclaimed “country folk”, to construct a certain vision of rurality and to exclude poor black populations. Because through or beyond these material values, land is also a medium on which social identities and even political movements are built. As Fautras writes of Tunisia, land “constitutes a family heritage and the ancestors memory; it contributes to the sense of belonging, to dignity and honour.” And for the degrowth activists analysed by Pailloux, the rural land of Notre Dame des Landes, whether farmland or urbanised, is valuable for what it represents ideologically, i.e. the antithesis of the trend towards metropolitanisation.

### **b) Social inequalities, land inequalities, spatial injustices**

The topic of access to land, in these different aspects, certainly relates to spatial justice: an inegalitarian social order is reflected in unequal access to farmland, or to housing, codified by land law and embodied in specific spatial forms, which in turn contributes to frustration and a sense of injustice for some, to acceptance,

negotiation or struggle, leading to a possible transformation in the relations between dominator and dominated. The whole process works like a vast feedback loop, given that differences in access to land (spatial injustice) are both a cause and consequence of social injustice.

Many of our articles give an account of the fragility of the right to agricultural land. In Lebanon, a sharecropping system has gradually evolved into direct owner farming and private property; however, with speculation and the increase in land prices, the process – whether in land cultivation or housing – seems even more socially exclusive. In Tunisia, the shift to private property and the development of “rentier” agriculture have attracted city dwelling investors. Those with the least economic clout and access to the regime, in a context of banking and administrative corruption, find themselves out of the race. During the construction of the dam in India, the displaced farmers experienced varying fates, with initial social inequality sometimes amplified in the compensation arrangements, but not in all cases: the lower castes, with their experience of protest, were able to break the correlation between initial wealth and compensation level.

### **c) Injustices, or simple inequalities?**

As this journal *JS/SJ* shows, there is nothing simple about the idea of justice, and approaches in terms of justice encounter some well-known paradoxes: either the analysts perceive injustice of which the victims are unaware or at least do not verbalise as their motivation; or injustice is a notion that depends too much on the cultural contexts, the scales considered, the social groups involved, or even on individuals, for discussion in general terms to be possible. In the Bible, Job lost his oxen, his ewes, his house, his children, and yet “did not sin or charge God with wrong”...

The notion of a “right to” or “right of” is not necessarily linked with justice: it is more often associated with a *feeling* of injustice than with a real idea of what is just or unjust. In fact, Lefebvre almost never uses the term “justice”. The situations described by our authors are complex; several discourses about justice can run side-by-side depending on the individuals, groups, institutions or scales. Justice is situated and

therefore plural. The empirical nature of these articles also shows justice being made, being constructed by the formulation of injustice, argument, the structure of struggle or negotiation.

In Tunisia, for example, Fautras writes of "the subjective and spatialised dimension of injustice: what some people find just, others find completely unjust." Several actors defend their rights to land, using arguments that reveal complex and evolving social identities, reworkings of different divisions: indigenous/alien; long-standing/recent; town/country; employer/employee, etc. The uncle of Mohammed Bouazizi, who in setting himself on fire sparked the "Arab Spring", cried foul against the banks, the big agricultural investors, the government, but is himself seen as a "colonialist" outsider by some of the small peasant farmers of Regueb. Apart from the unsurprising constant of "class" division, social demands are rooted in an antagonism to the "alien" which we might find a lot less politically correct.

As for the big Lebanese landowner described by El Nour et al., he is no doubt simply exercising his property rights by deciding to divide up his land to the detriment of poor villagers. In fact, what these villagers are calling for is not the dismantlement of these big estates, but only a continued right to inhabit and cultivate them.

For his part, Cabalion provides fuel for the debate on segregation, seen alternately as just or unjust (Lehman-Frisch, 2009), through the example of the new village built by the secular Indian authorities to rehouse inhabitants displaced by the construction of the dam. Its layout is specifically designed to erase the traditional caste-based spatial segregation. However, the consequence of this new arrangement is to weaken family or neighbourly ties (all previously governed by caste) by removing spatial proximity. In this way, the unsegregated "good village" breaks the connections between people who cannot travel far, in particular women.

The situation described by Cabalion in fact corresponds to the well-worn debates around conflicts of scale: "nimbyism" against "public interest", the interests of the weakest against the interests of the less weak, public actors against individuals... The dam and reservoir will displace more than 83,000 people, but in return will provide irrigation for new agricultural land (i.e. economic and food production gains at national or at least regional scale), particularly to the benefit of Gond populations,

which is remarkable given that they are one of the subcontinent's highly marginalised indigenous peoples, usually the victims rather than the beneficiaries of dam construction in India. There was little opposition to the dam itself. Where the challenge comes is in the compensation and dispossession procedures: the lack of information, the preponderance of written, administrative and technical language, which many do not understand. What we have here is a form of violence, symbolic or real, identified by Gupta (2012) (reviewed in this issue). It is difficult to know whether these limits to protest are explained by an acute awareness of the public interest or (rather...) by an awareness of the power imbalance.

Conflicts of scale, as opponents of the Notre Dame des Landes airport know, must be tackled by raising the local to the scale of the general: the "scale shift" (Ripoll, 2005) avoids the accusation of nimbyism. Here in particular it is achieved through the production of spatial categories defined by acronyms, which can therefore be modelled and applied in other places: GPII (Grand Projet Inutile Imposé – useless and imposed big project), or ZAD (Zone to defend, a play on the acronym for Zone d'Aménagement Différé – future development zone), have now been taken up by opponents of several French and European large infrastructure projects.

#### **d) Actors and weapons**

Not unexpectedly, our articles show that it is not necessarily the weakest who protest. In Tunisia, the germs of revolt originated in "pluriactive" families, with one foot in town, who knew enough law to fight back, and had enough "social capital" to initiate and organise opposition. In Notre Dame des Landes, as in the "western countryside", the role of often highly qualified neo-rural incomers is far from negligible. An extreme case is Cape Town, where the "right to the village" is claimed by a white social elite still often marked by the apartheid ethos. Also present everywhere is the need for a certain political culture, what might be called an *education* for struggle: this is found particularly among the degrowth activists, part social movement and part political party, but also, in a very different context, amongst the lower castes in India. The ex-untouchables in particular, a case-hardened group, accustomed to opposition thanks to the legacy of Ambedkar and a policy of positive discrimination,

are readier than the other castes to go to law to obtain better compensation. More than a simple hierarchy of wealth or power, this is about the production of legal and political cultures (Bautès et al., 2014).

Depending on the contexts, the articles set out the range of weapons deployed in the struggle: legal and illegal, institutionalised or informal, practical or symbolic, violent or peaceful. In particular, the arenas of participation in Cape Town are described in all their complexity, and appear more generally in the article by Bühler et al. on “the western countrysides” where the legitimate and the licit are far from always synonymous with “legal”. In Notre Dame des Landes, they take the form of illegal occupation and the production of an alternative space. Elsewhere, it is symbols that are the target of attack (Bouazizi goes so far as to turn his rage against himself) rather than the object of protest itself.

In this respect, we need to say something about numbers, quantities, statistics. Simultaneously a tool of management, of opposition, of negotiation, numbers are an instrument of power, but also a counterweapon of the weak. The number, guarantor of impartiality, of impersonality, a conceptual mathematical language shared by all, become a *lingua franca* fought over by embodied, situated participants. On the one hand, big public development projects such as the Gosikhurd dam in India are an opportunity for the State to conduct an in-depth accounting of all the material factors recognised as essential to the village economy: farmland, houses, trees, wells... The Indian state does not forget much. But the inventory leaves out what cannot be measured: the future (the impact of inflation and depreciation), existing illegal realities (agricultural encroachments by peasants into government land), emotional roots and attachment to the land... Statistics are the markers of a strong, managed, modern state (Foucault, 2004), democratic though authoritarian. The title chosen by Cabalion highlights the indecency of seeking to reduce the value of present existence to 328,395 Rupees. For Pailloux, in Notre Dame des Landes, a commodified, capitalistic conception of space sets a price on everything and ignores Lefebvre’s much loved “use value”, the multifunctionality of space.

Nevertheless, the language of numbers is also taken up by those who protest: to legitimise protest, to reason, to negotiate, to obtain. Environmental activists



opposing the airport count wetlands and marbled newts; Indian *dalits* count trees and wells, re-measure fields, calculate the impact of inflation on the value of compensation. The number is a way of expressing the sense of injustice. Is this the triumph of capitalist alienation, the weak trapped in the discourse of the powerful? Or is the language of the strong the only means of struggle when the others are impossible because too dangerous or inaccessible? In this case, it is less about struggle than resistance, the choice to focus on negotiation, to obtain not what seems lost in advance (the old village), but the little that seems within reach (Scott, 1985).

Finally, the struggle is pursued through words. In this respect, several articles stress the production of discursive categories that contribute to the construction of values and norms. The best example is in Pailloux' analysis of the GPII and ZAD categories. However, through the different texts we also see the emergence of other words that reinvent rurality in the service of different political aims, beginning with the word "peasant".

### **e) Forced "depeasantization" and voluntary "repeasantization"**

Some of our texts reveal a process of "depeasantization": Cabalion uses the term to refer to the abandonment of a way of life based on agriculture and community solidarity: its two constitutive factors are economic decapitalisation and the destruction of this community ethos through relocation. One might question the term employed and imagine that most of these displaced villagers, many of whom will continue to work a piece of land and in any case remain an integral part of a fundamentally agrarian society, will remain "peasants", for good or ill. The fact is that in India, as in Lebanon or Tunisia, many young people now despise work on the land – sometimes with the support of their parents, who have invested in their education – and are going off to the city, or at least contributing to the creation of "urban countryside". Since, conversely, working the land is increasingly an activity carried out by commuting citydwellers, we are undoubtedly seeing the disappearance, or at least the ongoing decline of peasantries, whether through action by the state (India), by big landowners with international connections (Lebanon), or by urban metropolises

(Notre Dame des Landes). All this ultimately reinforces the invisibility of the countryside and, accordingly, through positive feedback, to accelerate the process of depeasantization.

Conversely, it might be said, the activists of Notre Dame des Landes refer to themselves as "peasants". As with other movements, from José Bové's "Confédération Paysanne" union (peasant confederation) to the "Semences paysannes" (peasant seeds) network studied by Demeulenaere and Bonneuil (2011), the term is first a reference to the opposition to productivist agriculture and the quest for a different kind of farming. Some analysts, like van der Ploeg (2009), see in these alternative agricultural movements the emergence of a "peasant condition", characterised by the fight for autonomy through self-management of shared resources and community initiatives, with the objective of permanent resistance to the globalised capitalist "empire". In this view, peasants are the leading protagonists in a global struggle against capitalism. However, the authors in this issue advise caution, since they see the "peasant" not as a new social and political being to be identified and characterised, but rather as a discursive category employed in the construction of identities and political projects. Thus, for the Notre Dame des Landes activists, calling oneself a "peasant", like the categories ZAD and GP11, is a way of "rising in generality" to express opposition to development processes that favour the metropolitan economy.

These ruralist motifs can be deployed in the service of radically opposed political projects. In Notre-Dame des Landes, just as in Cape Town, extreme left-wing militants and frankly racist "bourgeois" are both in the business of reinventing "countrysides". They define them partially by agriculture. In Cape Town, this means the prestigious Constantia vineyard, or the sale of local, high-quality food products. In Notre Dame des Landes, it means local processing of produce for direct sale on the barricaded roads, converted into markets. Architecture is also employed as a marker of space and identity: *Cape Dutch* architecture in one place, yurts and temporary shelters in the other. "Nature" is similarly instrumentalised: species protection, endemic plants, to save land from development and urbanisation. Agricultural rurality or "mock" rurality, they both play on the same registers of opposition to the city and its world.

One has to go beyond rhetoric in order to cast light – behind the ecological postures of Cape Town’s white protesters – on the rejection of poor and coloured populations, on the exclusivity of an occupancy that must be restricted to an elite. “Are not the right to nature and the right to the country mutually self-destructive?” (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968], p.107). Lefebvre’s question is more salient than ever. It is notably taken up by Charmes (2011) who attacks the “clubification” and the “land Malthusianism” of certain rural villages near Paris that have established socially exclusive land use plans in the guise of environmental protection. “‘Nature’, or what passes for it, and survives of it, becomes the ghetto of leisure pursuits, the separate place of pleasure and the retreat of ‘creativity’. Urbanites bring the urban with them, even if they do not bring urbanity! Colonized by them, the countryside has lost the qualities, features and charms of peasant life” (Lefebvre, *ibid.*).

### **Conclusion: what the right to the village contributes to the notion of the right to the city**

Simply to confirm that there is nothing specifically “urban” about the components of the right to the city. That the desire for emancipation, for autonomy, for appropriation of a territory, can be found in rural areas (whether farmland, equatorial forest or sub-polar tundra) as they can in the city. It is time to ask why we should continue using an expression which, taken literally, could suggest that struggles for a right to the village are almost non-existent, and that rural areas are globally characterised by political amorphousness. Why not speak rather of the “right to autonomy”? “to territory”? “to the *récommune*” (re-community – a neologism coined by Lordon (2009) on the model of “re-public”)?, or even – why not? – take up Amartya Sen’s concepts of capabilities and entitlement? This would make it easier to open up this field of research to nonurban analyses, to take the right to the city out of the city: the attention of researchers – but not the zeal of militants – has up to now been too much focused on the urban world. As has been said, while cities now absorb half the world’s population, rural areas are home to the other half. As for space (in connection with “spatial” justice), we would do well to remember that, according to estimates, cities only occupy between 1 and 3% of the world’s landmass.

Even if in Lefebvre's mind, there is no contradiction between the right to the city and the right to the village – indeed it is the same thing – there is a risk that the right to the city might make many forget the countryside. If we want to fight for spatial justice, this is a good place to start.

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