

HENRI LEFEBVRE'S WRITINGS ON RURAL SOCIOLOGY, GROUND RENT AND THE POLITICS OF LAND

Stuart Elden & Adam David Morton *FG2 2016-17*

NOTE: The Flexible Grants for Small Groups application form may have been updated since this proposal was submitted.

The Research Idea *The innovative thesis of the project*

The research project intends to produce a translated and edited collection of Henri Lefebvre's writings on ground rent, rural sociology and the politics of land, with either Verso or University of Minnesota Press. This edited collection, a joint project of Stuart Elden and Adam David Morton, will include a substantive introduction, along with extensive editorial notes to the texts. The introduction will situate Lefebvre in relation to wider Marxist work on land, including classic texts such as Marx, Lenin and Kautsky, commentaries relevant to Latin America and more recent work on agrarian change. It will relate Lefebvre's ideas to contemporary work on political economy, rural development and the Latin American context in which they continue to find a receptive audience.

Lefebvre is a major thinker in a range of fields, including sociology, geography and urban studies. His work on the rural has been neglected in Anglophone debates. Stuart Elden has edited, co-edited and/or co-translated several of the volumes of his work in English, and Adam David Morton is a leading expert on political economy and Latin America, where rural land issues are of crucial importance. Together they edited and introduced one essay of Lefebvre's on rural questions, for the journal *Antipode*, which can be seen as a pilot study of the present proposal.

In addition a co-authored article on will be submitted to *Development and Change*. The essay will be differentiated from the introduction of the edited volume through its focus on peasantries and social movements.

Background *Current research reference points and their limitations*

In the last few decades the French Marxist sociologist and theorist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) has become a major figure in debates in geography, political economy, historical sociology and cultural studies. He wrote over sixty books, only some of which, including the three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life* and *The Production of Space* have been translated into English. His central work *Metaphilosophy*, edited and introduced by

Elden, is forthcoming in 2016. His reception in political theory and related disciplines has been somewhat more muted, although this is changing with the *State, Space, World* collection.

Principally known today in English-speaking debates as a writer on cities, Lefebvre's contributions to rural sociology and the politics of land have been largely overlooked, which is the aspect that this research proposal seeks to correct.

This neglect includes 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. 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 minerals) the demand of a payment for their use, even in the form of the least fertile land (through absolute ground rent). Lefebvre's interest in these categories for understanding rural sociology and land 'reform' offers valuable perspectives.

The Focus *How the research provides a fresh approach to real-life problems*

The purpose of this project is to provide a necessary and important corrective to this neglect within the extant literature. First, it will translate the first half of the 1970 collection *Du rural à l'urbain*. Only two of the rural essays in that collection have been translated into English, one as a result of initial collaboration between Elden and Morton. After the mid-1950s, Lefebvre's attention turned—as the collection's title suggests—from the rural to the urban, a transition he saw happening at first hand in the Pyrenees, and which led to his more famous works.

It will also translate previously marginalised writings on these themes that are not in the collection, including newly discovered work (in Spanish) on ground rent. This focus is significant for the connections Lefebvre establishes between contexts of rural sociology, historical sociology, and the production of space within and across Europe. As this research project aims to establish, though, it is all the more important for the connections Lefebvre established between these themes and alternative agrarian regimes in contexts of uneven development

This text will provide the definitive study for wider debate on issues of rural and land questions in Lefebvre's work. It will have a crucial relevance to contemporary political economy, geography, and Marxist approaches to ground rent, uneven development, land and agrarian reform. These topics remain of crucial importance today, especially with the emerging literature on land-grabbing. This approach to uneven development and rural sociology becomes especially important in contemporary Latin America.

Theoretical Novelty *What conceptual innovation the research is aiming at*

The edited book will be submitted to either University of Minnesota Press or Verso. Both have published previous Lefebvre translations. Elden has worked with both presses and they have expressed interest in this project. The book will comprise translations of texts by Lefebvre, supplemented by editorial notes providing complete bibliographical references, and clarifying names and events. The translations will be made by employed translators, but carefully edited. The book will also include a substantial editorial introduction co-written by Elden and Morton, situating Lefebvre's writings in relation to his wider career and the context of their writing, and demonstrating the continued importance today for land struggles, especially in Latin America. The model for the editorial presentation will be the *State, Space, World* collection, edited by Elden and Neil Brenner.

Texts to be included discuss a range of related themes:

- the Marxist theory of ground rent, from Ricardo through Marx to Lenin;
- agrarian reform, with reference to France, Italy, Spain, the USSR, and colonial and semi-colonial practice in Latin America;
- the analytic-regressive and historico-genetic method of historical sociology, adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*;
- the theory of uneven development, considered by Lefebvre as one of the 'great laws of history'; and
- the historico-sociological study of peasant communities and the question of class in relation to land more generally.

Methodology *How different disciplinary inputs will interact in empirical inquiry*

Lefebvre was an interdisciplinary writer contributing across philosophy, sociology, geography, architecture and urban studies, among other fields. As a Marxist, he saw most of his work as operating within a broadly conceived critique of political economy,

though bringing in a range of questions he thought important but neglected in dominant, orthodox accounts.

The uniqueness of this research project is that it will combine interdisciplinary elements of geographical studies and Marxist political economy through the collaboration of Elden and Morton. Stuart Elden is a political theorist and political geographer. He wrote one of the first books on Lefebvre in English, which is highly regarded and widely cited. He has been involved in editing and translating five of Lefebvre's books in English – Key Writings; Rhythmanalysis; State, Space, World; Metaphilosophy; and Marxist Thought and the City. His books on territory have won several prizes. Adam David Morton is a political economist and expert on Marxist theory, with a substantive focus on Latin America, state theory and uneven development with reference to the urban and agrarian landscapes. His book Revolution and State in Modern Mexico was awarded a premier annual political economy prize. In combination they provide wide-ranging expertise to successfully produce this edited collection of Lefebvre's texts, which need to be annotated, referenced, and situated in a wider context.

Stuart Elden has good reading skills in French and has published translations from that language of Lefebvre and Michel Foucault. Adam David Morton has good reading skills in reading Spanish.

Work Plan *How the group's work will be organised over the award period and what outputs are intended*

Initial work (3 months) will be to further investigate Lefebvre's writings on this topic. While several are collected in the book *Du rural à l'urbain* (1970), there are others in a range of places. In particular, Lefebvre's primary thesis on peasant communities has recently been published and we have discovered a substantial text by Lefebvre that was published in Spanish in 1964 but never in French, 'La teoría Marxista-Leninista de la renta de la tierra'. We believe that this is a fragment of a larger, planned work that was believed lost: the *Manuel*, or *Traité de sociologie rurale*.

We will then employ translators – French to English, Spanish to English – to make the first version of the texts. Elden and Morton will edit the translations (3 months), Elden taking the lead on the French texts, and Morton the Spanish, before providing the editorial notes.

We will then write the introduction and standalone essay, in full collaboration (6 months).

The outputs will be the edited book of Lefebvre's work and the article submitted to *Development and Change*. The collection will provide the most comprehensive presentation of Lefebvre's work on the rural question in any language.

Outcome *What further steps and what longer-term outcome are envisaged*

Longer term we hope to produce a comprehensive, multi-language bibliography of Lefebvre's work. While books on Lefebvre generally provide extensive bibliographies, none of these are exhaustive. Using bibliographical tools and library catalogue searches we will attempt to track down all the writings of Lefebvre—translations or first-publications—in major European languages: French, English, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Serbian-Croatian. Lefebvre was a frequent lecturer in other countries, and had strong links to South America and the former Yugoslavia. We know of several texts published in other languages for which no French version was published in his lifetime. These include: 'Space: Social Product and Use Value' (reprinted in *State, Space, World*); the co-authored proposal in *Autogestion*, or *Henri Lefebvre in New Belgrade*; and 'La teoría Marxista-Leninista de la renta de la tierra'. The recent book *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* is an English translation of a previously-unpublished French and part-Spanish manuscript. The editor, Łukasz Stanek, references several previously unknown texts in his book on Lefebvre. We suspect that there are other texts available—lectures and other contributions—for which no French text is available. The bibliographical work will help to unearth them, but at the same time its output will provide a major research tool, cross-referenced to all available languages. We envisage it being made available as an open-access web-resource, which can be continually be updated. Such work may enable future research and possible translation projects.