

## — BEYOND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: BETWEEN THE RURAL AND THE URBAN

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### RÉSUMÉ

Il s'agit de souligner que le droit à la ville surpasse la ville même, la nature de l'espace urbain et rural contemporain et ses relations avec la ville et la campagne sont abordées ici, pour montrer que la ville n'est plus un lieu exclusif pour l'urbain et que la campagne aussi n'est plus exclusivement un lieu rural.

### MOTS-CLÉS

Urbanisation de la société, Droit à la ville, espace rural/urbain, campagne-ville, urbanisation extensive, Lefèbvre.

### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the nature of contemporary urban and rural spaces and their relations with the city and the countryside. The main purpose is to highlight that the right to the city surpasses by large the city itself, showing that the city is not anymore an exclusive place for the urban and the countryside is not anymore an exclusive rural location.

### KEYWORDS

Urbanization of society, Right to the city, rural/urban space, countryside-city, extensive urbanization, Lefèbvre.

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At the dawn of the 21st century almost half of the 126 million countryside dwellers in Latin America were still enduring poor living conditions, in fragile ecosystems or in degraded areas. In many countries, it is still possible to observe an increasing consumption of social space with clear impacts on the livelihood territories of different social groups, as they become deeply affected by intensive use of chemicals in agriculture, aggressive deforestation and mining investments environmental devastation. Urban-industrial social relations along with the expansion of agrarian-industrial activities that produce mining craters or green deserts across the urban productive sprawl gradually replace traditional production relations in the countryside, driving away traditional inhabitants from their ancient livelihoods. These countryside areas come to represent a fictional and/or arbitrary rural frontier as they become equipped with facilities enabling daily commuting. Along with this, the gradient of rurality increases in many urban peripheries (metropolitan or else) sheltering former countryside dwellers. The rural/urban dichotomy dissolves. Thus, we might ask: is the countryside becoming urban or are cities becoming rural?

How can the right to the city be thought of within this framework? Henri Lefebvre's (1969, 1999 and 1991) ideas on this matter give us some perspective. First, it must be considered that the struggle over the right to the city goes far beyond the city itself, mainly if it is understood as being both form and content. Moreover, what might be appraised as urban space should no longer be considered within the context of the resolution of the city-countryside contradiction, meaning likewise the surmounting of the conceptual and formal antagonism of urban and rural.

To make headway towards the comprehension of the meaning and importance of the urban to the social reproduction of the relations of production at the current stage of capitalism, it seems necessary to go beyond the discussion about their urban or rural character.

In short, this paper tries to show how changes in the organization of space may be understood as particular and distinct manifestations of apparently different phenomena, but all related to the contemporary general movement of reproduction of capitalism. Our aim is to see the city not only as an exclusive place for the urban. Thus, in the same manner, countryside must not be seen as an exclusive place for the rural. The importance of this discussion lays in the need to highlight that the right to the city transcends the city itself and has its roots in the present and arguable dilution of the city-country contradiction, in which the urbanization of society is defended on one hand and, on the other, the emerging of a new rural is (re) affirmed. If new rural configurations do emerge, the same can be said about new urban configurations. Currently, to acknowledge the urbanization of society means to recognize the hegemony

of the urban. Although, rurality still exists, as does the rural landscape itself. Hitherto it is another countryside, conveying a different meaning, although it may lack the physical attributes of the city, it is largely pervaded by, and dominated by the urban. How, then, is it possible to talk about a new rural or a new urban?

To grasp such a complex issue, our aim is to make some remarks supported by the critical social theory, to approach the right to the city from an expanded perspective. Hence, our argumentation starts with the trajectory of changes in the city and countryside, stressing briefly the origins of these notions. We then discuss the relation between form and content in ways that allow the dialectics between city and urban, and countryside and rural, to be considered as an integral part of contemporary transformations. Finally, we approach the urban-rural relations in the context of contemporary society to present some elements that enable us to think the right to the city in a broad perspective.

## — CITY AND COUNTRYSIDE TRAJECTORIES OF TRANSFORMATION

The idea of a unity between countryside and city is not new (Ávila, 2011, p. 240) and neither is the conceptual discussion about the countryside/rural-city/urban relation. However, in addition to remaining a fashionable contemporary subject, dealing with this relation requires a review of some fundamental principles that support and contribute to clarifying its sense and meaning; at the same time, it requires a fresh perspective to appraise the subject with a different glance that could overcome deep-rooted interpretations of old concepts.

The separation between city and countryside is one of the facts that have marked deeply and definitely, since remote times, different human societies. Contemporary transformations, following the 3rd Industrial Revolution, increased the blurring of the city-countryside dichotomy and lessened the precision of the terms rural and urban, that were used, until recently to qualify directly and respectively life in the countryside and in the city. That is what leads us to reflect on their contemporary construction and meaning.

In the beginning, there were the countryside and the city. Or the city and the countryside, as some theorists emphasize (Jacobs, 2000). From its birth, the city was characterized as the space of power, party and consecration, exchange and concentration of collective surplus. In concentrating institutions, laws and management, religious rituals and cultural manifestations, monuments, market places and everyday life collective services, it constituted itself as the center of social life. The existence of a city territory, however, was independent

of the fact that community members dwelled inside the *urbanum* limits, that is, the space constructed from the furrow of the plow carried by sacred bulls. The city, the *urbe* – magnified and symbolized by the *urbs* of Rome – became the territory that materialized the society politically defined by the *polis* or the *civitas*, therefore providing a conclusive meaning to the idea of civilization.

The countryside, the surrounding space that always had some urban centrality as its reference was the city complementary, antagonist and defining territory at the same time. The creation of municipalities may be understood as a response to this sense of complementarity between the city and the countryside, through the establishment of autonomous management units.

City and countryside, substantive and constitutive elements of human space, related to different ways of life, constituted regions (and municipalities) articulated and related to the centrality of some hegemonic cities, engendering qualifications: attaching the urban as something peculiar to the city (*urbs-urbis*), and the rural as something peculiar to the countryside (*rus-ruris*).

Many were the transformations in the city and countryside, especially in the last two centuries. The city, originally a political and mercantile center that subordinated the countryside through its political-ideological domination and through the necessary realization of the production in its marketplaces, went through a radical transformation with the arrival of industrial production in its territory.

From a privileged space of party, power and surplus, the triad emblematic of civilization, it became the space of production itself. The gathering in the same place of dominant and subaltern classes, as required by the reproduction of industrial capitalism, enabled the city to subordinate the countryside definitely and completely, not only in its organization but rather through its higher productivity. The city, thus, became the primordial space of collective life, and also the territory of the industrial modern production, concentrating the production (and reproduction) conditions demanded by the manufacturing cooperative process.

Having fallen into disuse, the term urban (Cardoso, 1990; Carpintero, 1998) was rescued with the strengthening of mercantile capitalism and began to be used to designate the characteristics of the mercantile city and of its dwellers. As urban life changed, it began to mean and to translate itself in different scales. At a local scale, it manifested in the location of industrial production in the city territories or in its surroundings; at the regional-global scale, in its indirect influence in articulating other cities and regions and thus redefining its insertion in the social division of labor. Therefore, distinct centralities were built in different degrees and intensities, from central places in agrarian regions to urban centralities, juxtaposing industrial and political-administrative

activities and agents in the same space.

Soon, urban life would no longer refer only to the city, but also to the production and consumption of commodities and to the reproduction of the capitalist relations of production created and developed within the urban-industrial context. The arrival of manufacturing activities into the city provoked its transformation from *oeuvre* into product (Lefebvre, 1969 and 1999), analogous to its transmutation from use value into exchange value, which is furthermore a condition for the survival of capitalism and to the reproduction of the relations of production.

The countryside, once a privileged space of life and agrarian production, loses its potentially self-sufficient character after its total subsuming to the city. This subordination encompasses, besides the sphere of production and creation of commodities, its dependence for products, technologies and services offered by the city. Moreover, the agglomeration economies (Lösch, 1954), guaranteed the concentration of general conditions of production required by the development of the (re) productive process of industrial economy, synergic articulations in the creative field and development of an urban-industrial culture, many times seen as traces of modernity, rather inconclusive and which has dominated nearly all social space integrated by State industrial capitalism throughout the 20th century. Jacobs (1969) *plays* theoretically with the increasing complexity of urban-rural economy under the city yoke and Soja (2000, p. 12) (re) elaborates the term *synekism* to refer to the synergic qualities peculiar to the cities.

Many were the theoretical attempts to comprehend last century's urban-rural issues, from the Chicago School to a wide ensemble of neo-Marxist theorists (Saunders, 1984). Further studies sought, then, to comprehend the meaning and specific function of the city to capitalist accumulation (Castells, 1972). The perception that something new was happening in urban-industrial regions raised difficulties to the comprehension of what would be the nature of social space. After May 1968, Lefebvre foresaw the virtual reemergence of the importance of daily life and collective urban reproduction in setting new limits to the industrial hegemony that had dominated the production of social space by imposing its logic centered on exchange value.

Lefebvre (1969) brought up a debate around the right to the city to question its functional fragmentation, including the concept of dwelling as something in itself, apart from the right to the city, the spaces of power, of leisure and culture, and to urban centrality itself. He criticized the approach to the housing question as a human and social function enclosed in itself and with a logic of its own, identifying such reasoning as a class strategy, an excuse for the bourgeoisie to push the proletarians and the poor away from the city center (locus of collective wealth, power and culture) towards its outskirts, to the periphery.

According to Lefebvre, the explosion of cities over surrounding spaces, and virtually over the whole territory, widened social space at national (and planetary) scale to constitute a virtual urban society. Here *virtual* is understood as a potentiality to come to being. This virtual urban society would be accompanied by an urban revolution. What would be this urban revolution? It would express itself in the recreation of urban praxis, in the re-politicization of the city based on use-value and on growing restrictions to industrial production, privileging an urban perspective based on collective reproduction and on use-value.

Now, it is possible to understand that the urban revolution manifests itself also through the extension of the urban tissue to the countryside, as well as the extension of the general conditions of production (and reproduction) to national and regional space, along with the expansion of what it is most particular to the city, in short, along with capitalist relations of production as a whole, it also extends the germ, or the virus of politics (from *polis*) and citizenship (from *civitas*) to all national space. Thus, the politicization of collective life space, formerly restricted to the cities, becomes a national question. Since the 1970s, urban social movements flourished everywhere, embracing a wide and diverse ensemble of political concerns, from collective consumption and reproduction to environmental issues. As the politicization and citizenship struggles initiated in the cities rippled into the countryside, reaching extensive regions, and agrarian and native populations were displaced from their dwellings and livelihood spaces, the urban qualification of these movements lost its former meaning.

## — FORMS AND CONTENTS: DIALECTICS BETWEEN CITY-URBAN, COUNTRYSIDE- RURAL

This trajectory justifies the statement that urbanized space is no longer an exclusive feature of the city, but rather, it virtually became a feature of social space as a whole. The extensive urbanization (Monte-Mór, 1994, p. 169) turns somehow into a metaphor, in order to grasp contemporary social space taken over by urban-industrial relations. In this sense, nowadays it is possible to speak of a un-differentiation between urban and rural. Taking those terms – urban and rural – as representations of certain perceptions and practices, their comprehension requires, besides an historical approximation that culminated into a metaphor, a reflection on their conceptual reality.

City and countryside, understood here as representations and mediations, bring to mind images that lie in a particular way (as a collective reference recall) in each individual memory and imaginary, informed by life experiences. These images remind us landscapes, spaces, rhythms and specificities of their

own. These representations of the imaginary, named by Lefebvre (1991) as representational spaces, coexist with other representations and rationalizations of what the city is, as well as the countryside and nature itself. And the latter ones, the representations of space, combining knowledge and ideology, are informed by hegemonic conceptions that recall us a conceived landscape. As it was previously stated, the idea of the city recalls buildings, activities and people agglomerations. At the same time, the idea of countryside recalls crops, animal farming, forests, mountains and wide extensions of land. Although these representations change over time in each society, city and countryside can be perceived as forms and contents with their own independent meanings.

To grasp the city as a form implies to think about it not as a mere receptacle of social processes, reducing it to a set of structures and infrastructures. Instead, to comprehend abstractly the city and the countryside as forms demands a dialectic perspective starting with the relations between form and content. One way to approach it is to follow analogically Marx's (1975) procedure, beginning with the commodity abstract form to further understand the capitalist system and reveal its content as a synthesis of multiple determinations. In a pre-capitalist phase, the city itself could be seen initially as a form produced through spatial practices, informed by representational spaces and spaces of representation. Such historical form reveals itself in a more or less immediate way stressing its content as use value; nonetheless, the city itself and its contents may change.

During certain periods of the *coexistence* of the city and the countryside as forms, both could be understood as phenomenonic manifestations of certain contents, or even as concrete manifestations, in social space, of what would be the urban, on one hand, and the rural, on the other. If the urban – as content – is (or was) a quality or a difference, according to Lefebvre (1969, p. 72), so is the rural. If the content of the urban is, or was, the party, the meeting, the simultaneity, the centrality, a quality born from quantities, the content of the rural world would be by contrast, the peacefulness, the calmness, the isolation, the sequential, the peripheral, a quality without quantities. From a critical perspective with a distinctive approach from the appropriation and use of the terms urban and rural by common sense, which usually associates at once the urban with the city and the rural with the countryside, it may be said that neither one nor the other can be defined as attached to a material morphology (in practice, in sensitive-practice) nor as something that can be apart from it (Lefebvre, 1969, p. 78). However, Scheme 1 does exactly that, in order to illustrate briefly such rapports. Neither urban nor rural constitute timeless essences, or systems between systems, but rather differences in terms of content and quality.



city	countryside	form	appearance
urban	rural	content/ quality	essence
industrial	agrarian	function	process

*Scheme 1 (source : Limonad, 2010)*

Transition periods between historical phases of capitalism production models delimited by industrial revolutions constitute critical points, in which former coherences and social relations are blown apart. Such moments are important to allow the understanding, albeit partial, of these changes. Thus, the moments of transition between the three industrial revolutions of capitalism are here taken in consideration. As it has been previously said, the introduction and the hegemony of Henry Ford's mass production model (2nd Industrial Revolution) contributed to transform the relations between the countryside and the city, between rural and urban. The emergence of the industrial capitalist production model adds a third element to the dialectics between form and content that blows apart former historically established relations: the industry infiltrates itself between the city-and-urban and the countryside-and-rural thus breaking those (dialectical) relations between form and content, and appearance and essence.

The industrial as well as the agrarian were functions that for a long time found reciprocity, respectively, in the city and the countryside, through the primacy of Fordism. Indeed, during the 1st Industrial Revolution, manufacture industries started off in the countryside near raw material and energy sources. Later on, industrial activities migrated toward the cities, where and when new general conditions of production were established based on the development of productive forces and technical-scientific knowledge. Thus, there is a point of inflexion matching the transition between the 1st and 2nd Industrial Revolutions. Besides moving towards the cities, the industry also turned exponential the previous urbanization. Despite the advance of abstract capitalist relations in societies' bureaucratic and economic spheres, such changes are more evident in the cities than in the countryside – hence the dialectics of the countryside-and-rural between form and content in some ways preserved its characteristics. It is in the city that changes occur with greater intensity. The new general conditions of production enabled the detachment of dwelling and working places, hence, a historical link between the two ceased to exist, and cities reached another level of quality, another degree of development.

Another inflexion took place with the flexible accumulation model, making those relations even more complex. The general conditions of production engendered by the 3rd Industrial Revolution allow the combination of differences within social space, thus dissolving the previous antagonisms and

complementarities between the city and the countryside. Forms, contents and functions previously articulated in accordance to a historical logic of separation, or yet, of opposition and complement between city-and-urban and countryside-and-rural are then broken. Social processes that took place in the city or in the countryside began to take place in both, as Scheme 2 tries to illustrate, although presenting differences in relation to their extension, intensity and density.

Time	Form	Content	Function
1st. Industrial Revolution	city	urban	politics, trades, services
	countryside	rural	agriculture, industry
2nd. Industrial Revolution	city	urban	politics, industry, services
	countryside	rural	Agriculture
3rd Industrial Revolution	city	urban/rural	politics, industry, services
	countryside	rural/urban	agriculture, industry, services

*Scheme 2 (source : Limonad, 2010)*

If we look only at the new forms/appearances post 3rd Industrial Revolution we notice that industrial activities and services are relocated to the countryside (once again, but following a different logic from the 1st Industrial Revolution). On the one hand, several social groups, from middle class to working class families, follow these relocations; leaving behind large urban areas and contributing to the creation of gated communities, rural developments as well as slums along the roads, by the riverbanks and on mountains abrupt slopes. On the other hand, in areas of intensive farming, rural workers lacking subsistence means migrate to the peripheries of middle-sized and small towns although commuting daily to work in the countryside.

It is, therefore, an urbanized society that arises from a process of industrialization and production of space industrially defined, in a (virtually) planetary scale, a social space that is permeated by the urban praxis originated in the city but now extended to social space as a whole (Lefebvre, 1991; Monte-Mór, 2005, 2007). In this process, city and countryside are redefined by the industrial logic and subordinated to capitalist production and accumulation, losing their original character. What constitutes the urban and the rural come to represent residues of significant social spaces almost vanished, metaphors of transformed realities currently integrated to overall global space of our days (Santos, 1994 and 1996).

## — URBAN AND RURAL IN AN URBANIZED SOCIETY

In such context, the concepts of city and countryside no longer express concrete and fully recognizable realities within contemporary social space. The usage of the substantive (noun) urban, as an evolution of the adjective urban (of the city), to represent today's urban-industrial reality, comes therefore to mean a third term of the dialectics of the triad, a synthesis of the city-countryside contradiction (Monte-Mór, 2007). The urban encompasses both the city and the countryside but it is different from both, in its multiplicity of forms and adaptations of their former dichotomous elements. The extension of the urban-industrial tissue from the cities onto social space as a whole produces a myriad of urban-rural forms, some like *simulacra* of cities, some like *simulacra* of the countryside, all of them connected to this urban-industrial tissue, all of them now part of the urban (Monte-Mór, 2007).

The final subordination of the countryside to the industrial city (Lefebvre, 1999) means the extension of the urban-industrial tissue everywhere, in different levels and forms, now including the industrial agrarian. It also means the extension of the urban praxis along with that tissue, the so-called extended urbanization. Thus, a separation among form, function, content and meaning also takes place as the former correspondences and reciprocities disappear (as shown in Scheme 1). However, since there is no form without content and content without form (Lefebvre, 1969) a functional redefinition, a re-dimension and a re-signification of those realities also occur as the relations among form-function-content change. Fragments of the old forms – city and country – remain as landscapes.

Moments of change when the form is separated from its former content help us to perceive the content of the forms, since usually what is offered for analysis is always a unity between form and content (Lefebvre, 1969) being constantly cross-referenced one to the other. Dialectical reasoning allows us to extend our regard beyond the opacity of form-content duality to overcome the apparent reciprocity between city and urban (adjective), between countryside and rural (also adjective). However, if the urban form, its supreme reason, that is the simultaneity and the encounter, cannot disappear (Lefebvre, 1969), what becomes of the urban when the centralities are reconfigured and restructured? And what happens when the simultaneities no longer occur exclusively on the basis of contiguities and spatial continuities and begin to happen in a time *continuum*?

The first derivative is that the geographical location and the landscape itself are no longer defining factors of what is urban or rural, of the city or of the countryside. Industrial and agrarian activities are detached from their previous locations and do (inter) penetrate each other. What differentiation is then pos-

sible? How can we differentiate them? How to speak of a new rural or of a new urban? What is the novelty? Here we are, back to the initial questions, but now Lefebvre's proposition emphasizing that « *the answer to separation and dispersion is unification* » gives a hint on how to overcome the fragmentation in thinking about social space, be it urban or rural.

Hence, if the emergence of *new rural forms* is evident, this is also valid for *new urban forms*. To accept the urbanization of society and territory implies accepting the hegemony of the urban, although rurality and the countryside itself do persist. Nevertheless, such a countryside and rurality are highly transformed and re-signified by the diffusion of the urban, subsumed to a generalized urbanity and urban-industrial tissue – the urban itself.

Indeed, these are different aspects of a general movement manifested in particular forms and apparently different phenomena. On one side, are those who favor full-scale urbanization, and on the other, those who defend the countryside and its rebirth. Both ways are myopic and fragmented, disregarding that the movements on each side being seen as predominant are mere social-spatial manifestations of a complex problem that reaches social groups, productive activities and places in different forms and scales. More important than discussing the character of the so-called new urban and rural forms and processes is to understand their meaning, to go beyond their phenomonic appearance to understand their role within the social reproduction of the relations of production at the current stage of capitalist development.

On the other hand, the urban revolution also means to set limits to industrial production concerning the demands defined by the urban (and environmental) collective reproduction, thus amplifying and relocating the focus of class struggle itself from the immediate capital/labor relations in the process of production within the factory to a struggle centered on everyday life, on the needs related to life quality. Such a struggle based on collective reproduction has its roots in urban social movements, as well as in ecological and environmental movements, both closely connected to reproduction issues. Such relocation of the central concerns regarding social emancipation, moving from hegemonic production issues (industry) to reproduction issues (the urban) – at its limit, the reproduction of life in planet Earth – and consequently the progressive limits and subordination it imposes upon the industrial capitalist logic is becoming one of the dominant elements in the restructuring and reorganization of contemporary society.

Finally, the contemporary meaning of the urban is connected to the overcoming of the city-countryside contradiction, the redefinition of the concepts of city and countryside as antagonistic forms and their metaphorical redefinition in the overall urban-industrial context of our days.

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