

What is the place of abandonment in Planetary Rural Geographies?

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Abstract

Millions of hectares of farmland have been abandoned over the past decades globally. Yet abandonment remains a neglected "outside" of both the Planetary Urbanisation debate and the emerging field of Planetary Rural Geographies. Engaging with abandonment can benefit both these debates and help overcome persistent and new binaries between the rural and the urban.

Introduction

What is the place of the rural in planetary geographies? Wang et al.'s (2023) framework of Planetary Rural Geographies (PRG) offers answers to this question by embracing "the radical potential of a planetary perspective" to better understand "more-than-human and more than two-dimensional" interactions, while countering "the narrative of planetary urbanisation". Within PRG, "the rural" is part of a "hybrid world in which places and processes can be both rural and urban", expressions of a "global pattern of rural/urban co-existence" (Wang et al., 2023). The authors aim to avoid essentialising the rural or treating it in isolation while, at the same time, taking it seriously as a site of empirical study and conceptualisation.

I am sympathetic to this endeavor, appreciate how the PRG framework brings together important debates in original ways, and expect it to inspire interesting research and debates. As in related discussions about "Geographies of ruralization" (Gillen et al., 2022) published in this journal, one may ask if PRG, even while proposing a relational framework, eventually reiterates the urban-rural binary by foregrounding the rural, and if and how this may be problematic (Baird, 2022; Ortega, 2022). In this commentary, I want to direct attention to another implicit and neglected "outside"¹ of the planetary urbanisation (PU) framework and, so far, PRG: abandonment. Farmland abandonment is a global phenomenon with planetary implications. Millions of hectares of farmland have been abandoned over past decades and continue to be abandoned every year. Their future use has important, although sometimes exaggerated, implications for global food security, carbon sequestration, biodiversity and ecosystem restoration (Xie et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2023). Hence, I ask: What is the place of abandonment in Planetary Rural Geographies?

¹ Critics, including Wang et al. (2023), have taken issue with the claim that PU stands for an "urban theory without an outside," as Brenner (2017) has put it.

Abandonment as a neglected “outside”

Thinking with abandonment may help to differentiate the critique of PU further, and also help overcome binaries between PU and some of its “rural” critiques. PU, its lead authors have emphasised (Brenner and Schmid, 2015), is not about the urban as we know it, and not about cities. The urban here is a theoretical category, not an empirical one. This is not the place to recap the epistemology underlying the PU thesis. The more condensed variants of the argument suggest that the historical phenomenon of planetary urbanisation is characterized by the intensification and expansion of capitalist relations across space. PU requires the “operationalization of the entire planet [...] to serve an accelerating, intensifying process of urban industrial development” (Brenner, 2017: 21). In this process, non-city spaces are transformed into operational landscapes, “zones of high-intensity, large-scale industrial infrastructure” (Brenner, 2016: 125), or “swept into the maelstrom of urbanisation, whether as supply zones, impact zones, sacrifice zones, logistics corridors or otherwise” (Brenner and Katsikis, 2020: 24). PU is conceptualized as a process unfolding in a “capitalist world system that continues to be shaped profoundly by the drive towards endless capital accumulation” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 161). Accordingly, PU stands for the proclaimed generalization of historic processes of “intensification”, “concentration”, “densification”, “expansion” and “operationalization” rather than the generalization of any specific form of urbanity. Hence its neglected implicit “outside” may be not so much the rural but rather extensification, contraction and abandonment.

Just as the PU thesis implies the rural in principle, it also implies decline and abandonment as moments of “differential urbanization” and “creative destruction” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 168). Yet, just as this literature in effect privileges the urban, it also privileges expansion and intensification. Much of the critique of PU has focussed on (re)claiming and foregrounding the rural. PRG can benefit from engaging with abandonment which remains underexplored not only in PU but also in those parts of rural and agrarian studies that focus narrowly on capitalist expansion and intensification. Emphasizing abandonment is not to neglect the dominance or devastating consequences of these processes. At the global scale, and at a high level of abstraction, the expansion/intensification thesis also applies to land use change. Over the past decades, cropland expansion has exceeded cropland abandonment by roughly three times (Potapov et al., 2022). And yet, if we were to interpret abandonment as merely an exemption from the rule, we would risk missing many of abandonment’s ecological, political, and conceptual implications and possibilities. To sketch out the relevance of abandonment for PRG, and by extension PU, I turn to Wang et al.’s (2023) three geographies of planetary rurality as spaces of crisis, conflict, and hope.

Studies of abandonment and planetary geographies

Studies across different geographic contexts show that abandoned farmland, alongside abandoned villages and infrastructures, is widely conceived of and described as a symbol of a *crisis* of the rural (Dzenovska, 2020; Frei et al., 2020; Vorbrugg, 2022). The problematization of abandonment can reflect ideological imaginaries of tidy and “civilized” landscapes. Farmland abandonment can indeed result from political-economic or agroecological crises, from the overuse and exhaustion of soils or water resources, or military conflict, and it is often related to a loss of livelihoods. It can also be a driver of crises, such as recent large wildfires burning from boreal forests to the Mediterranean. Not all of the crises related to farmland abandonment are crises of capitalist accumulation, however. In Soviet Russia, for instance, fossil fuel revenues were poured into cultivating ever more land, even in places which would require intensive irrigation or fertilization and still produce relatively poor yields. This excessive historical farmland expansion is part of the genealogy of later large-scale abandonment. In addition to the often-violent implementation of market reforms, the post-Soviet

agrarian crisis and the land abandonment that followed also echo the ecological and economic crises rooted in the Soviet agrarian system (Vorbrugg, forthcoming). As Soviet agriculture was highly industrialized, the contraction and abandonment that followed can be understood as “de-ruralisation” (Wang et al., 2023) and de-industrialisation at the same time. The interplay of intensification, expansion, contraction, and abandonment is complex and often context-specific. Furthermore, farmland expansion and abandonment can occur in close spatial proximity (Potapov et al., 2022), and both can be relatively short-lived (Crawford et al., 2022). All of this complicates broad brush and teleological narratives of expansion and intensification and their crises.

Conflicts around actually abandoned land are distinct from land use conflicts. When such land is currently not used or claimed by humans, controversies may instead evolve around “competing propositions for Earth futures” (Wang et al., 2023). They may concern whether the land should be used for food production, for restoring ecosystems or for planting trees to sequester carbon (Zheng et al., 2023). Abandoned land can signal relative indeterminacy and openness in which different land use options seem possible. Perspectives focusing too narrowly on intensification and operationalization risk missing such moments of openness, and more generally the significance of policies and politics in land abandonment and reuse. PRG’s epistemological emphasis on context and contingency can be useful here. When abandoned land is “rediscovered” as a resource that may serve different aims, it can quickly transform from an ignored object into a controversial issue. Conflicts can arise between different truth claims, and claims to expertise, taking the form of knowledge controversies which are about defining the objects and stakes more than struggles about an already clearly defined resource (Barnaud et al., 2021; Frei et al., 2020). These expert-driven discourses are often labelled as urban, and rural perspectives as populist. Studies of abandonment can help to unpack such political articulations, including new rural-urban binaries they generate.

Abandoned land is increasingly rendered into a symbol of *hope*. Many scenarios for rewilding, restoring ecosystems and biodiversity, and sequestering carbon imply using abandoned farmland (Xie et al., 2020). In expert and popular discourses, framing abandoned farmland as a “hidden resource” (Pearce, 2023) with a “wealth of opportunities” (Visser, 2020) has become an increasingly impactful alternative to crisis framings. Studies of farmland abandonment can help to illuminate how far such claims are substantiated, or if they fall into the trap of projecting hope on land they falsely imagine as available and uncontested, or as having certain physical properties it may lack (Crawford et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). They can also help to illuminate how far people are willing to return to abandoned land which is a crucial question for different scenarios; even ecosystem restoration on abandoned land can strongly rely on human stewardship (Daskalova and Kamp, 2023). To live up to this task, studies of farmland abandonment should engage in “epistemic pluralism” (Wang et al., 2023); take seriously, draw on and expand the different ways of knowing abandonment; and contribute to diversifying imaginaries of future land trajectories. This may include Indigenous and other marginalized perspectives which often have been violently excluded to falsely present land as void of human uses and claims (Penados et al., 2023). This may also include closer intradisciplinary dialogue between human and physical geographers to converge on insights and open new perspectives on abandoned land as a complex and hybrid socio-natural entity.

To summarise, studies of farmland abandonment confirm the need for context-sensitive, relational, and heterodox approaches that take “the rural” seriously as a site of empirical inquiry and conceptual work, as emphasised by Wang et al. (2023) and others. They can inform and enrich both PRG and PU by turning attention to the often complex, non-linear, and political processes related to abandonment, and their important ecological and social implications. Reserving a place for abandonment in both PRG’s and PU’s conceptual vocabularies will help achieve this aim and may further stimulate new dialogues between and across these two debates.

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