

Eighth Part:
Application of the Remedy

Chapter 31

**Private Property in Land is Inconsistent
with the Best Use of Land**

WHEN WE CONFUSE the accidental with the essential, the result is a delusion. It is a delusion that land *must* be private property to be used effectively. It is a further delusion that making land common property—as it once was in the past—would destroy civilization and reduce us to barbarism. Lawmakers have done their best to expand this delusion, while economists have generally consented to it.

A story* tells how the Chinese accidentally discovered roast pork, after a hut caught fire. For a long time, the story goes, they thought you must burn down a house to cook a pig. Finally, a sage arose to show the people this was not necessary.

But it does not take a sage to see that absolute ownership of land is not required to make improvements—only security for those improvements.

This is obvious to anyone who looks. Private property

* By Charles Lamb (1775-1834), English author.

in land is as crude, wasteful, and uncertain a device for securing improvement, as burning down a house is for roasting a pig. But we do not have the excuse Lamb's characters had, for they had never heard of a pig being roasted except when a house burned.

To us, however, it is quite common for land to be improved by those who do not own it. Most of London is built on leased ground. Tenant farmers cultivate the bulk of land in Great Britain. In the United States, the same system is prevalent.

If rent were collected by the government, wouldn't land be used to the same extent as now—when rent goes to private individuals? Wouldn't land be improved as well and as securely as now? Of course! Treating land as common property in no way interferes with its proper use.

What is necessary is not private ownership, but security of improvements. It is only necessary to tell someone "whatever your labor or capital produces on this land is yours" —not "this land is yours." People sow only to reap; they build to live in houses. These are the natural rewards of their labor. Owning land has nothing to do with it.

It was for security that landholders surrendered ownership to feudal lords. When a landlord pledged not to claim rent for twenty years, Irish peasants turned a barren mountain into lush gardens. On the mere promise of a fixed ground rent for a term of years, the most costly buildings in London and New York are erected on leased ground.* If those who make such improvements are guaranteed security, we may safely abolish private property in land.

* For instance, Rockefeller Center, The Empire State Building, and The World Trade Center were built on leased land.

The complete recognition of common rights to land need not interfere, in any way, with the complete recognition of individual rights to improvements or production. Two people may own a ship without sawing it in half. A railway may have thousands of shareholders, yet run as well as under a single owner.

Everything could go on exactly as it does now—and still recognize the common right to land—simply by appropriating rent for the common benefit.

In the center of San Francisco there is a lot in which the common rights of the people are still legally recognized. It is not cut up into tiny pieces; nor is it unused. It is covered with fine buildings, which are the property of private individuals. They stand there in perfect security. The only difference between this lot and those around it is this: Its rent goes to the common school fund—while the other rent goes into private pockets. What is to prevent the land of the whole country being held by the people in the same manner?

Consider those conditions commonly thought to demand private ownership. It would be difficult to find a place where these exist in higher degree than certain islands in the Aleutian Archipelago of Alaska, which are the breeding grounds of the fur seal. To prevent their utter destruction, the harvest of furs must be carefully managed. For without this resource, the islands are of no use.

If such a fishery were open to anyone, it would be in the interest of each party to kill as many as they could at once, without reference to the future. In a few seasons it would be utterly destroyed, as fisheries in other oceans have been.

But despite this danger, it is not necessary to make

these islands private property. Instead, the islands have been leased out and have already added over two million dollars to the national treasury—without diminishing their value. Under the careful management of the Alaska Fur Company, the seals have increased, not decreased.

These islands are still the common property of the people of the United States. Yet for far less convincing reasons, the great public domain of the American people has been made into private property as fast as anybody could take it.

Far from private property being necessary for the proper use of land, the contrary is true. Treating land as private property, in actual fact, *stands in the way of its proper use*.

If land were treated as public property, it would be used and improved as soon as there was need. But as private property, an individual owner is allowed to prevent others from using what the owner cannot—or will not—use. Large tracts are kept idle at the caprice of the owner, held out of use waiting for higher prices. Meanwhile, others are forced to use places where their labor will be far less productive. In every city, valuable lots may be seen vacant for this reason. This means of using land is as wasteful, unnecessary, and uncertain as burning down houses to roast pigs.

If the best use of land is the test, then private property in land is condemned—as it is condemned by every other consideration.