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## Who Owns the Earth?

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The task of conservation, restoration, and rational use of the earth is vitally linked to the question of "Who should own the Earth?" The ever widening gap between rich and poor, both within and among nations is a primary source of conflict and violence, a trigger mechanism for warfare. The root cause of this local to global mal-distribution of wealth problem is the inequitable ownership and control of the planet's land and natural resources.

The ownership of land resources and valuable land-sites ultimately determines the social, the political and consequently the mental and physical condition of a people. Attaining an ethic of wise and careful stewardship of the Earth is likewise inseparable from the task of securing the well-being of individuals. The health of the human being and the health of the Earth are interrelated. It is unlikely that environmental degradation will cease until the exploitation of the human being is alleviated. The pressures upon those who are themselves exploited to exploit in turn each other and the environment is great.

### Wholistic Perspective

These issues are not separate. They cannot be ordered in a linear progression of steps one, two, three - disarm, restore the environment, then work on economic justice issues. Human survival must be secured on all fronts simultaneously if it is to be secured at all. The causes and conditions of warfare, environmental exploitation, and human degradation cannot be considered apart from each other but are woven into the institutionalized fabric of the current state of the world. The whole cloth must be woven anew.

Peace is not only the ability to resolve conflicts non-violently but to ascertain conditions of basic justice and fairness in human interactions. Force has most often predominated over fairness in the long history of human affairs. Territorial conflict has for millennium been a root cause of war. The price of peace has too often been the cost of continued injustice and conditions of economic servitude. Veterans of

war, little more than mercenaries to begin with in many cases, come home to want and poverty.

Fifty percent of the homeless in America today are estimated to be veterans, and fifty percent of those served in the Vietnam War. Military induction has been the only way to “be all you can be” for millions of America’s lower class people. Many risked their life for “their homeland” yet had no inherent right to any part of that land when they returned home.

### **Basis for Justice**

Can a safe and secure planet be inhabited by a few masters and many slaves? The various states and cities comprising the USA may be “safe” from invasion from each other because of the initial agreements of confederation that created the nation state two hundred years ago. Yet there is ever mounting death and violence among the underclass that find survival increasingly more difficult while the middle class is being steadily taxed into oblivion. An enduring peace must secure justice, yet the actual basis for justice lies in affirming and restoring economic rights, a subject about which there is not yet enough consensus for the kind of unity or purpose and action essential to the task.

For instance, peace advocates recommend that a department of peace be established in order to teach strategies of non-violent conflict resolution. But from what established ethic can a conflict be resolved between a landowner with 1000 acres of land and 1000 landless peasants? Do we divide the land in half and give each of the landless a small parcel so that the large landowner now holds 50%? Do we equally distribute all the land so that each peasant has one acre? But some acres will surely be better located or have richer soil than others. And what about the children?

### **Maldistribution of Wealth**

The cry of “Land and Liberty” of the Russian revolutionaries led to a Marxist-Leninist, state-bureaucratic socialist remedy, but with curtailment of individual freedoms and with an economic elite emerging nonetheless a few decades down the road. The American Revolution proclaimed “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” but adopted Europe’s Roman-based land law system. In the USA today, three percent of the population owns 95 percent of the private land, land values rise faster than wages, and the resulting mal-distribution of wealth is securing the very conditions that our forefathers and mothers had hoped to escape.

The paucity of real non-violent solutions to the problem of the concentration of land and resource ownership has led by default to violent upheavals and poorly conceived arrangements that are often short-lived. The landlord is killed but the

peasants fight and compete against each other only to have once again the powerful and ruthless few emerge to control the many.

### **Equal Rights to Earth**

No, these are crude attempts at solving the problem. Just as every human being strong and weak is considered of inherent equal value as a person with the right to self-expression, so every human must have a fair and equal right to the Earth itself. The right to the Earth cannot be vulnerable to the whim of partisan politics. The right to the Earth must be vested in the people themselves, in a way that can be understood and monitored by the average individual.

### **Need for a New Synthesis**

Those of good will who would improve the conditions of the poor and the people as a whole are polarized into the right/left, Democrat/Republican traditional camps. While their good intentions may be similar, their means are in direct opposition, leading not to balanced progress but to barren compromise, resulting in increasing human and environmental degradation.

No matter how grand the goal, without a consensus of means and method well-intentioned and progressive people on both sides of the political seesaw will just keep bouncing up and down, ultimately going nowhere except deeper into the hole in the ground at the middle. Meanwhile, the institutionalized Roman land tenure system continues to make rot out of our political democracy and a mockery of ideals of human freedom as the under-classes are the first to be strangled by the unidentified and invisible hand of creeping land rent.

### **Capitalist-Socialist Dilemma**

Socialist type solutions to the problem have resulted in unwieldy and inefficient bureaucracies that, while more evenly distributing produced wealth, depress productive powers by inhibiting individual freedom and incentives. Capitalist arrangements, while maximizing efficiency in production through competition and reward for individual incentive, cannot resolve the mal-distribution of wealth problem because of the basic flaw in putting the land base in the same market category as labor-produced wealth.

The real power in any new political grouping such as the "Peace and Environmental Coalition" and other "Green" efforts will emerge firmly when the right/left, Republican/Democrat tension is resolved not through compromise but through the articulation and actualization of a solid and dynamic synthesis. Such a higher middle ground must arise from an appreciation and unification of the highest values of both sides. Namely, concern

for fairness in the distribution of wealth and collective societal needs as emphasized by the left and individual freedom and incentive with efficiency in production valued by the right.

### The Keystone of Synthesis

There is a way to attain both fairness in distribution and maximum efficiency in wealth production, of securing collective needs and furthering individual freedom. The approach is based on the equal right of all to the land and natural resources and the right of the individual to the products of labor. The method based on this ethic is to collect for the people as a whole the “ground rent” which means the value of land and natural resources, and to remove taxes on labor.

A condition of “ownership” of any particular landsite or natural resource is payment of the ground rent back to the community as a whole. Ground rent is the proper source of public finance for the collective needs of the community. The “commonwealth” is thus supported by the “common wealth.” Alternatively, ground rent can be redistributed by direct payment back to all individuals, much as a company returns dividends to its stockholders.

It is not necessary for each person to own land outright in order to secure his or her fair share of the Earth. Persons “owning” land or resource rights would profit through their labor, which is untaxed, not through the privilege of exclusive ownership. If they have a better located land site or richer mineral lands, they pay higher ground rents back to the community, thus equalizing results of labor applied to greater or lesser valuable natural resources.

There is no need to forcefully confiscate land titles in order to secure the equal right of all to the Earth. With ground rent as the source of public finance the people as a whole become the “owner” and a title deed functions as a “lease” agreement. The community “allows” individual private use of sites on the condition that its fair rental value is paid to the community. If a particular land site is misused or abused, then the community must charge a higher rate to pay for damages and cost of restoration. Thus there is individual incentive for proper care of the Earth.

### The Necessity of Ground Rent as Finance Source

Public finance on all levels - local to global - must be collected from that which is the “commonwealth”- the ground rents of the land and resource base. Taxes from any other source raised for whatever worthy goal or peace or environmental needs, food, jobs or medicine, ultimately depress wages and capital formation necessary to secure basic human needs while the inevitable increase in land values is pocketed by the few who own the land. We must always ask the bottom line question when proposing ideas for a safe and restored planet: “Who benefits and who pays?”

Thus we see that the source of public finance is every bit as important as the purpose to which public funds are directed. Just as the health of the roots of a tree

is crucial to the production of abundant fruit, so must public funding come from the proper base in order to procure a healthy wholesome society. Advocating the redirection of tax dollars away from amaments and toward peace education and conflict resolution, away from environmentally damaging activities and toward restoration and stewardship will not automatically better conditions of life for the majority of people. Ending the arms race will not in itself free resources, which will then feed the hungry and house the homeless.

Whatever immediate advantage might be wrought from a redirection alone of tax dollars will in due time be annulled by increase in land values to the benefit of those few holding title. Financing redirected from the military budget and into food stamps or subsidized housing or rent supplements will again be to the ultimate advantage of landholders who can charge just that much more for agricultural and residential lands, and we are back again at square one or worse.

### **Greens are on the Right Track**

Fortunately, “Green” efforts in several countries have included platform planks that do advocate ground rent as the basis of public finance even though other parts of their agendas are sometimes contradictory in terms of means and methods.

On the global level the Law of the Seas Covenant is an example of a ground rent basis for public needs as it has affirmed that ocean resources are the common heritage of all and a proper source of funding for global institutions.

