Land and Poverty in the United States: Insights and Oversights

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Charles C. Geisler

ABSTRACT. *The paper departs from conventional treatments of poverty as a function of income and employment. It advances the view that analyses of poverty cannot be separated from those of wealth and that land influences wealth and poverty in a variety of important ways. This case is supported by revisiting the place of landed property in the distribution of wealth in America and three areas of land policy which redistribute wealth. The paper expands the definition of poverty to include land, having established ties between land and income, land and security, and finally land and the sustenance of a healthy environment.* (JEL Q24, R14)

I. INTRODUCTION

Surely one of the most encompassing theories of poverty originated with Malthus's well-known thesis that high human fertility yields famine and misery. There are three possible exits from the Malthusian trap, one which Malthus grossly underestimated (technology) and two that he did not: limiting reproduction and owning real property (Daly 1992). Analysts since Malthus have played out the endless connections between the first two variables and the many expressions of inequality and poverty. Yet most social scientists have joined neoclassical economists in dropping land and property from the list of critical variables in current poverty equations. In this paper I suggest the implausibility of this situation and challenge poverty researchers to reintroduce real estate into their analyses.

At one level, it is not surprising that many view land a minor ingredient in today's domestic poverty mix. As the economy becomes ever more service dependent, land is no longer seen as an important factor of production, social status, or employment. Those who farm the land ceased to be the target of rural public assistance by the 1960s (Dudenhefer 1993). Later in that decade a Presidential National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty stated: "As the country developed, access to income from natural resources became a less important factor in income distribution. The majority of Americans now derive none of their income directly from these resources" (1966, 133). Though persistent, rural poverty afflicts a relatively small portion of the total population and has been eclipsed politically and demographically by inner city poverty.[1] Land has become negligible not only to economists, who define poverty rather exclusively in terms of income and employment (Daly and Cobb 1989), but among other disciplines as well.

The present paper has three purposes. First, I show that the alleged disjuncture between land and poverty is historically unfounded and continues to be inaccurate today. The resulting inattention to land makes poverty less rather than more tractable. Next I review the poverty implications in three land research domains—skewed land ownership, preferential land regulation, and public ownership which serves the public unevenly—with the intent of calling forth new research coupling poverty with land. My final purpose is to challenge the official, income-based definition of poverty for its neglect of land. This neglect is itself a form of poverty pervasive in modern cultures

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[1] Poverty is officially defined by the Social Security Administration as the minimum income an individual must have to survive at a particular point in time. At times it is adjusted for noncash transfers for such things as food, housing, and medical care; it tends to bear a close relationship to the unemployment rate (Greenstein 1989).

which see themselves as using land chiefly for consumptive, recreational, and aesthetic ends rather than production, material sustenance, and wealth generation. Revisiting the land dimension of wealth and poverty makes possible a broader concept of poverty integrating losses to ecosystems with losses to the social system.

II. NATURAL RESOURCES, WEALTH, AND POVERTY

Current inattention to the place of land in poverty generation is a departure from various traditions, conservative, liberal and radical. Locke attributed poverty in seventeenth century England to a natural failing on the part of some members of society to appropriate and improve their landed birthright (Macpherson 1990). The True Levellers, the Chartists, and reformers such as Tom Paine, William Godwin, and Thomas Spence all linked land hoarding to misery and poverty among the masses (Sakolski 1957). Ricardo declared land availability the major determinant of per capita output, while Malthus warned that the most abysmal form of poverty, famine, would follow from finite land resources in a world of exponential population growth (Spengler 1961). Proudhon took the categorical position that landed property of any kind was theft and the source of indigency for the propertyless (Eltzbacher 1960).

Better known is the position taken by the American founding fathers with respect to property and social welfare. John Adams wrote "the balance of power in a society accompanies the balance of property and land.... If the multitude is possessed of real estate, the multitude will have the balance of power and, in that case, the multitude will take care of the liberty, virtue, and interest of the multitude in all acts of government (Adams 1969, 376–7). Jefferson, when in France, wrote to Americans that "property of this country is absolutely concentrated in very few hands." Noting the grave consequences for French society, he concluded that "legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property" to ensure democratic and productive capacities of a nation (Boyde 1953, 681). Self-appointed heirs to the founding fathers of all political persuasions have echoed their conviction that broad access to land and property is a cure for privation and social turmoil.

Social Reformers such as Henry George injected originality into the land-poverty nexus. His works ([1892] 1975, [1881] 1982) on the land question at home and abroad posited land as the great engine of national wealth, if properly taxed. George believed that land belonged to everyone, that the public interest was not served by individuals getting rich because of their neighbors' hard work, and that taxing the full rental value of land would generate enough revenue to support government services and break the syndrome of "progress and poverty." Sumner's essay on *Land Hunger* (1913, 31) less stridently examines poverty in a demographic context: "The most important limiting condition on the status of human societies is the ratio of the number of their members to the amount of land at their disposal. It is this ratio of population to land which determines what are the possibilities of human development or the limits of what man can attain in civilization and comfort."

The twentieth century has had its share of commentaries on land as a seedbed for wealth and poverty as well. Many are chronicled, together with relevant case law reflecting the evolution of property, in McDougal and Haber's compendium (1948). *Property, Wealth, Land.* Nor have the inequalities of poorly distributed land and improvements escaped attention. Spengler (1953) noted that property income is more unequally distributed than is labor income, and Gaffney (1972) wrote that property wealth is more concentrated than income in general. Collins (1974) showed that real estate wealth concentrates in cities, but is poorly distributed and fails to underwrite the urban development it might. Molotch (1976) argues that local growth proponents have significant land interests which appreciate with growth, concluding that growth often means a redistribution of wealth from the general public to local elites.

Despite these acknowledgments, the only place one discovers land systematically linked to poverty in government accounts is in the occasional federal reports on the distribution of wealth of America. Herein, real estate (minus debt) constitutes 40 percent of total net worth of all U.S. households (or, if debt is not removed, 47 percent of gross assets—a percentage that has risen over the past quarter century) (Table 1). The share of real estate held by the bottom 90 percent of households comprises roughly half this amount. The other half is held by the wealthiest 10 percent of households and also shows a slight upward trend. The real estate belonging to the very rich (top 1 percent) accounts for just under 10 percent of net household wealth in recent years.

Several points are important here. First, real estate continues to be a significant factor in the composition of overall national wealth and is not diminishing as some suggest. Second, the wealth in real estate holdings is skewed in favor of the rich (10 percent hold equity roughly equivalent to 90 percent), a fact that is understated in Table 1 because indirect ownership of property of all kinds increases with wealth. Third, real estate (particularly equity in family homes) forms a significant portion of national wealth held by the nation's bottom 90 percent of wealth-holding families (Joint Economic Committee 1986). The smaller relative place of real property in the assets profile of the top 10 percent is deceptive, however. It can lead one to conclude that equity in real property is a trivial asset for the wealthy in absolute terms, which it is not. And it can dull our sense for the wellspring role real property plays in building future fortunes, most notably by those few who, by national standards, benefit from enormous equity assets.

It is curious that land (in the form of real estate) is routinely acknowledged as a source of wealth but largely omitted in any form in discussions of poverty. Perhaps this says less about the relevance of land than our general reluctance to see poverty as a function of extreme wealth. In any case, to assign land a negligible place in theories of poverty is historically misinformed and of little service to public policy committed to poverty reduction. We turn our attention next to land itself, shorn of improvements and the other embellishments of real estate. We examine three separate areas of land research and dwell on the implications therein for

TABLE 1
REAL ESTATE AS PROPORTION OF TOTAL NET WORTH AND GROSS ASSETS, 1963, 1983, AND 1989

Real Estate* Owner Categories	1963	1983	1989
All U.S. Households:			
a. Real estate minus debt as % of total U.S. household net worth	NA	40	40
b. All real estate as % of total U.S. household gross assets	42	45	47
Wealthiest 1% of All U.S. Households:			
a.	NA	9	9
b.	4	9	9
Wealthiest 10% of All U.S. Households (minus B):			
a.	NA	13	14
b.	11	13	15
Bottom 90% of All U.S. Households:			
a.	NA	18	17
b.	27	22	23

Sources: Joint Economic Committee (1986) and Kennickell and Woodburn (1992).
*Includes all real estate (residential and nonresidential) not held in the name of a business, though individual real estate used for business purposes is included.

wealth distribution and poverty generation. The first domain is private ownership of land; the second is public regulation of private land through the police powers of the state; and the third is public land policy with particular attention to the distribution of benefits.

III. LAND OWNERSHIP AND POVERTY

For all its egalitarian rhetoric, the United States is not exempt from the problems of acutely unequal land distribution. The great majority of households referred to in Table 1 do not own land. They rent or lease what land they need for dwelling or business purposes. Among those who do own land, the "super-owners" (top half of 1 percent of the largest landowners, including corporations) have title to 40 percent of the nation's land and the top 5 percent own three-quarters (Lewis 1980). The bottom 78 percent of landowners own a mere 3 percent of private land. This lopsided ownership situation is more extreme in some states than others. Private ownership is most concentrated (with the top 5 percent owning at least 80 percent of private land) in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Louisiana, Maine, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming and Hawaii. In all but seven states 95 percent of landowners possess no more than 25 percent of their state's land (Bills and Daugherty 1980). Thus, although most of the American land base is privately owned, a relatively small portion of the population actually own land and concentration appears to be increasing (Geisler 1993).

A similar picture of land concentration emerges if one examines ownership in agriculture. Agriculture occupies nearly two-thirds of the private land (or 878 million acres), yet has a mere 3 million noncorporate owners out of roughly 250 million people. Wunderlich (1993) reports that the 4 percent of private owners with the largest holdings own 47 percent of the agricultural land and that the 30 percent with the least land hold 2 percent of this base. He concludes, "The pattern of landownership determines who will gain and who will lose from private and public decisions about what happens on the land" (1993, 5). If there is a relationship between inequitable land holdings (agricultural or otherwise) and poverty generation, however, few have bothered to elaborate the connections.

This degree of ownership concentration is remarkable when one considers that it swept over one of the earth's most favorably endowed continents, where no previous land concentration existed, in a mere twelve generations. This happened, notwithstanding the protections for land ownership under the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, preemption acts to protect squatters, over a dozen homestead acts to meet the land aspirations of immigrants, and the release of over a billion acres of land by the federal government over the two centuries (Table 2). It happened despite the eloquence of land reformers such as Greeley and Gompers, and frequent testimonials by popular presidents such as Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, McKinley, and Franklin Roosevelt. Yet by 1880, fully a fourth of all farm families remained in tenancy, a proportion that increased rather than decreased for the next half a century. By the mid-1930s, though more people worked farmland than at any other time in the nation's history, 42 percent were tenants (Kloppenburg and Geisler 1987).

By definition, concentrated land ownership precludes broad-based ownership, by

TABLE 2
FEDERAL LAND DISPOSITION 1781–1983

Type of Disposition	Acres
Grants to States	328,480,000
Public, Private, and Preemption Sales, Mineral Entries, and Other	303,500,000
Homestead Sales and Grants	287,500,000
Railroad Grants	94,400,000
Military Bounties to Veterans	61,000,000
Other Private Claims, Sales, and Grants[a]	69,500,000
Total	1,144,380,000

Source: Fairfax and Yale (1987).
[a] Includes Timber and Stone Law and Desert Land Law sales; Timber Culture Law grants and sales; and land claims recognized as valid grants by foreign governments prior to acquisition of the territory by the United States.

the poorest ethnic minorities in particular. Despite special protections in our law for American Indians, the attrition of their land base is a national scandal. As original proprietors of the continent, they saw their lands reduced to roughly 150 million acres at the onset of the Indian wars in the 1870s and to roughly 54 million acres today (Kickingbird and Ducheneaux 1973). Frequently the use of this land has been leased to non-Indians by the Bureau of Indian Affairs without Indian permission and with royalties bearing no relation to the market value of the resources taken (Kelly 1979). In the 1970s Native Alaskans lost their aboriginal rights to vast regions of the nation's largest state and in the 1980s came perilously close to losing lands reserved for them in the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act (Berger 1989). Powerful non-Indian coalitions seek to abrogate what Indian treaties remain, a recipe for wholesale land alienation, cultural deterioration, and poverty.[2]

Black poverty and land loss are, by many accounts, highly correlated as well (McDougall 1984). Blacks have relinquished title to all but 4 million acres of the nearly 17 million acres of land they held in the South at the start of the century (Browne 1973). This alienation process assumes added significance in view of research linking land ownership with health and self-esteem (Woofter et al. 1936), with personal effectiveness (Stacy 1972), political power and democratic behavior (Griswold 1948), economic well-being (McGee and Boone 1976), and access to credit (Raper 1936). Land redistribution to Black farmers has been proposed as a sweeping anti-poverty measure for southern Blacks (Salamon 1976), about which more will be said later.

Hispanics have likewise experienced massive land alienation over the past century and a half. The most volatile issue for the Mexican American community continues to be the violations of the Treaty of Hidalgo which, at the close of that Mexican-American War, promised former Mexican inhabitants full Constitutional protections, including property rights (Knowlton 1970; Lux 1984; DeBuys 1985). Less is known generally about the current state of Hispanic land tenure and its relationship to living standards than about that of Blacks and Indians. In a welcome gesture to improve the record, the federal government commissioned studies on the land holdings of Hispanics (and of Indians and Afro-Americans) in 1978. Once completed, these studies were never published.[3]

It is an unvarnished irony that landownership, still associated with social status, good citizenship, family security, and even piety (Moyer 1969), is being weakened as a transmitter of these attributes due to skewed tenure patterns. American culture has long esteemed landownership as a means of livelihood and as economic leverage against poverty. But American reality is another matter. Public nonchalance about the social pathologies arising from the land concentration evident in repeated studies (Goldschmidt 1978; MacCannell 1983; Swanson 1980; Vail 1982; Lobao 1990), may well be an outgrowth of the land negligence in academic circles already referred to.

IV. LAND REGULATION AND POVERTY

Land use regulation, which redistributes control rather than ownership, redistributes wealth without drawing attention to the fact. The 1992 *Lucas v. South Carolina Coastal Council* case is illuminating in this regard. Herein, the Supreme Court ruled that only total regulatory takings must be compen-

[2] See Williams 1987 for a sophisticated argument favoring abrogation. Congress may, at any time, negotiate away Indian lands with impunity (Wilkinson 1987).

[3] This research was contracted by the Farmers Home Administration of USDA in the late 1970s to assess the impacts on minorities of Section 509 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1972, as amended, at the request of the Secretary of Agriculture. The purpose was to study the problems encountered by rural persons seeking title insurance for real property encumbered by remote claims or liens. Reporting subsequently focused on heirs' property among southern Black landowners (Emergency Land Fund 1980), on ownership derived from Spanish Land Grants (Natural Resource Center 1980), and on land titles clouded by Indian land claims (Institute for the Development of Indian Law 1980).

sated (Coursen 1992), thus acknowledging that valuable property rights may shift hands through regulation without redress, except when the transfer is absolute. The result is that tremendous wealth in the form of beneficial economic uses can legitimately be taken from property owners so long as it is done in the public interest. Such regulation is an understudied domain for poverty researchers, shaping as it does the social composition of communities, their population and economic growth, the value of real estate, and the property taxes on which local social services and infrastructure depend. Despite ample precedent in our society for invoking regulation when non-land assets become concentrated, land use regulation in America is rarely triggered by the existence of land concentration.

From their inception, land use regulations in the United States have had important equity effects. In the last century, most states granted private corporations the power of eminent domain and therein the prerogative to seize others' property rights with only token compensation (Scheiber 1973).[4] In the present century, with the advent of zoning, the equity effects have fallen noticeably on minority and low income communities. According to Clawson (1975, 484). "As land use planning and zoning have operated in the United States over the past half century, they have been discriminatory in their effect and often in their intent—discriminatory to racial and ethnic groups, but even more so to economic groups." New York City's attempts at zoning in 1916 set the stage for using land use controls to secure privilege. Wealthy Protestants and German Jews used zoning ordinances to protect Fifth Avenue real estate from the spread of Polish and Russian Jews seeking to expand the garment district of Seventh Avenue (Popper 1984). Subsequently, local zoning spread rapidly across the country where, after World War II, it was often used to bar minority homeowners access to suburbs (Ellickson 1973; Bobo 1975; Plotkin 1987). Through much of the current century, those in power have used land use controls to benefit themselves (Geisler 1980; Heiman 1988) and to advance their plans for growth (Molotch 1976) or no growth (Hagman 1974).

It can, of course, be claimed that land use planning served the interests of the poor indirectly through the separation of conflicting land uses, controlling housing densities, protecting air and water quality, enhancing biodiversity and aesthetics, and the improving quality of community life. These and other benefits are of most immediate benefit to people with decreasing marginal returns from the consumption of food, clothing, shelter, and consumer durables, that is, those least likely to be poor (Linowes and Allensworth 1973; Ervin et al. 1977; Fitchen 1992). Because much land use planning hinges on the segregation of land uses and residential densities, its potential for social segregation is obvious. "In the United States," according to Ellickson (1973, 705), "zoning generally works to the detriment of the poor and near poor, racial minorities and renters; it operates for the benefit of the well-to-do, particularly homeowners, by artificially increasing the supply of sites on the market usable for only expensive homes and thus reducing their cost."

There is another way in which land use planning is apt to have regressive economic impacts. According to Castle (1978), though the wealthy own and control a disproportionate amount of real estate, wealth is inversely related to the proportion of wealth invested in real estate. Thus, middle and lower economic strata owners of real property in America tend to have inordinate amounts of their wealth tied up in this form of land (Figure 1). Their economic welfare is therefore more fundamentally affected by the curbing of property rights through land use regulation than is that of more affluent property owners. If less wealthy households avoided this problem by selling their real estate, they would be more apt to face homelessness than would wealthy families,

[4] For a twentieth century focus, see Millspaugh's (1982) work on Poletown, a Detroit neighborhood in which the powers of eminent domain were flagrantly used to transfer wealth from an ethnic neighborhood to General Motors.

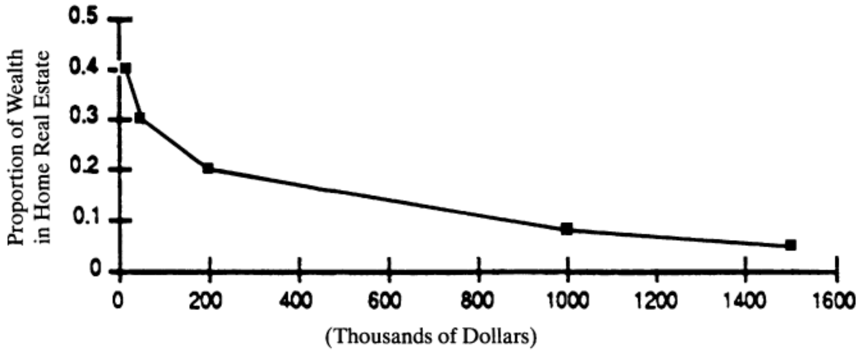

FIGURE 1
WEALTH AND HOME REAL ESTATE INVESTMENT IN THE UNITED STATES, 1977
Sources: Castle (1978) and Erlandson, Stoevener, and Shirach (1977)

for whom land and real estate holdings are important but not principal assets.

V. PUBLIC LAND POLICY AND POVERTY

Public lands in America are extensive, theoretically offering an enormous resource base with which to secure broad-based public welfare for all. Federal lands more than double the size of all the land in Italy, France, Belgium, Denmark, United Germany, and the Netherlands. If nonfederal public land is added, 42 percent of the nation's land base is public—potentially an ample storehouse of benefits for society at large, including those who have been marginalized. Yet the distributive effects of public land policy have, like those governing the use of private land just discussed, tended to favor the interests of middle and upper class people over those of the poor and powerless.

On its face, the opposite seems true. The mere existence of a vast reservoir of public land would appear to enhance the social welfare sufficiently to make talk of discrimination against the poor seem niggling. Many would claim that nineteenth century public land policy offered a de facto welfare system for millions of Euro-American immigrants, for veterans paid in military scrip, for destitute slaves in whose name abolitionists and Free Soilers campaigned for homestead acts, and for workers from squalid eastern cities (Zahler 1941). Frontier lands leveraged private investment in the west and were used to stimulate local education, underwrite special schools for the handicapped, endow technical schools for the able, and inspire land grant universities (Gates 1936; Hurst 1964). Public lands fueled the Manifest Destiny of a young nation in apparently bountiful ways—surrogate capital, full employment, unbounded raw materials, and room to grow.

Yet the history of public land policy is decidedly uneven from a welfare standpoint, not merely from its decimating effects on indigenous cultures (Mitchell 1981), but also from the standpoint of benefits foregone as the theory and fact of broad distribution diverged. From the outset, much of the largesse of the public domain went not to wretched masses yearning for freedom but to people, private trusts, and corporate entities whose economic fortunes turned on public land speculation and manipulation. Lucrative land deals attracted speculators from among the nation's most distinguished individuals—George Washington, Chief Justice John Marshall, Daniel Webster, Robert Morris (the "financier of the American Revolution"), and many more (Mcgrath

1966; Sakolski 1957; Peffer 1958; Wolf 1981).[5] Fabulous windfalls capitalized trusts, corporations, and universities (Gates 1954; Geisler 1980) and underwrote capitalism's Guilded Age. Robbins (1942) has called this transfer of public wealth on a continental scale to relatively few private hands an "American enclosure movement."

Still the notion lingers that frontier lands released to squatters and assorted claimants through the homestead acts fulfilled Jefferson's dream of a thriving republic of smallholders. The supportive evidence is mixed at best. With the exception of the earlier Preemption Acts, no general public land law prior to the 1862 Homestead Act put an upper limit on the public land a person or corporation could own, nor were such practices repealed by the 1862 legislation (Peffer 1958). Of the 400 million acres of public lands alienated between 1862 and 1900, the 1862 Homestead Act accounted for only 98 million. Where those acres did reach homesteaders, the crushing weight of high interest rates, the absence of technical assistance for dryland farming, unrealistic allotment sizes west of the hundredth meridian, and rampant corruption in public land distribution led to land monopoly on the one hand and the growth rather than decline of the tenancy already referred to (Gates 1936, 1954).

Another prevalent notion is that the wilderness aspects of the public lands have enriched the national character of the public at large (e.g., Nash 1975). Doubtless this is true, though its proponents say little as to the distribution of these intangible benefits across the U.S. population. On this point, various commissions advising the government on matters of land acquisition have noted that federal lands are not well distributed over the continent nor easily accessible to urban minorities and lower income citizens (PCAO 1988; NRC 1993). This is not surprising in historical perspective. From its inception, the National Park system expressed patrician land use planning views on a national scale (Olwig and Fog 1979; Foresta 1984; Heiman 1988).[6] Railroads magnates were quick to see the business opportunities in promoting Yosemite (Runte 1990), Yellowstone (Nash 1982), and the Adirondack Park (Popper 1984). Hays (1971) and Steen (1976) render comprehensive accounts of how the business community, guided by self-interest, promoted public land expansion to insure sufficient raw material stocks for future needs. Today the public lands enrich corporate concessionaires in and around national parks, and private luxury resorts operate on Forest Service lands.

The public lands have not, despite their designation as public, escaped private market forces, commercial use, private development, and de facto ownership by the rich and powerful. As Wolf (1981, 457) states: "The management and administration of the federal lands today reveal significant vestiges of privileged arrangements with special-interest groups . . . [f]ederal land-management practices still forward private economic commercial objectives more than they address broad national economic and social needs." Like others (e.g., Lamb 1982; West 1982; The Economist 1988), Wolf documents ways in which public land policy subsidizes the wealthy today as it did in the past. This includes one-sided access to timber, grazing, water, and minerals rights for well-endowed interest groups, lucrative commercial concessions to U.S. and foreign corporations, and private recreational complexes on or near national parks, forests, and seashores. Others (Arnold 1982; McDonald and Muldowny 1982) document the relocation hardships accorded the not-so-

[5] We are prone to underestimate the power of land-derived wealth in our nation's history and the fact many modern fortunes trace their origins to land profiteering among previous generations. Charles Beard (1949) laid the groundwork for this thesis over a generation ago in his economic interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, a view corroborated by McGuire and Ohsfeldt (1984) more recently.

[6] Laurence Rockefeller epitomizes this depiction, having influenced national park development in Hawaii, Montana, New York, Maine, Virgin Islands, and elsewhere (Heiman 1988).

TABLE 3
RESETTLEMENT AND FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION LAND REFORMS IN NEW DEAL, 1933–1943

	Number of Projects	Families Settled	Acres Resettled
Community Settlements	13	1,150	92,000
Scattered Settlements	19	1,117	75,000
Subtotal (Black)	32	2,267	167,000
Total (All)	200	20,000	1,865,000
Goal (All)	NA	200,000	10,000,000

Source: Salamon (1976).

fortunate as a consequence of federal land acquisition and consolidation.[7]

There is continuing debate over whether public land policies help stabilize local economies and thereby avert poverty (Clawson 1976; Johnston 1984). The Reclamation Act of 1902 and the Resettlement Administration of 1934 were bona fide examples of public land policy dedicated to the alleviation of rural poverty. The former was eventually amended to accommodate expanding agribusiness in the West (Taylor 1973), and the latter was discontinued because it was "communistic" (Geisler 1984), placing only 10 percent of its target population on the land (Table 3). Public land revenues have been an important source of funding for state and local governments for generations, but fluctuate in relation to natural resource prices and federal government cuts in resource-based revenue sharing (Fairfax and Yale 1987). Community stability has been whiplashed by the changing fate of the 1964 Land and Water Conservation Fund. Herein, Congress created a war chest from offshore oil lease receipts to purchase recreational lands accessible to people of all income levels. Over the past quarter of a century, however, the Fund's emphasis has shifted from recreation to wilderness and backcountry acquisitions due to lobbying by environmentalist interests (Glicksman and Coggins 1984). Matching funds for state and local governments have effectively disappeared (Figure 2).

Although many view "public landlordism" as an impediment to growth and a source of regional poverty, some research suggests this need not be the case. In the course of examining the effects of New Deal land policies on Black farmers in the South, Salamon (1976) determined that one-third of all nonwhite landownership was adjacent to major federal landholdings in the Southeast where, with the transfer of these property rights, land-based minority-owned enterprises could succeed at relatively low cost. His detailed report on such opportunities to the U.S. Department of Commerce, completed at a time when Black land loss was accelerating, was met with legislative silence. If history is our guide, the same proposal tailored to benefit nonminority enterprises would probably have sparked enabling legislation, subsidies, and accommodating bureaucracies.[8]

VI. TOWARD A LAND-BASED CONCEPT OF POVERTY

The remainder of this paper attempts to incorporate land in a theory of poverty. To this point I have attempted to show that the

[7] Better known examples include the Forest Service's handling of Hispanics in Northern New Mexico, the National Park Service's treatment of African Americans in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia and the U.S. Virgin Islands, of poor Whites adjacent to Maine's Arcadia National Park, or the Bureau of Land Management's handling of Northern Shoshone in the Big Mountain area of Nevada.

[8] See Greer 1984 for an argument that the U.S. Forest Service, and to some extent other federal agencies with recreational mandates, nonetheless see themselves as maintaining the health and vigor of all Americans, especially those of working class backgrounds.

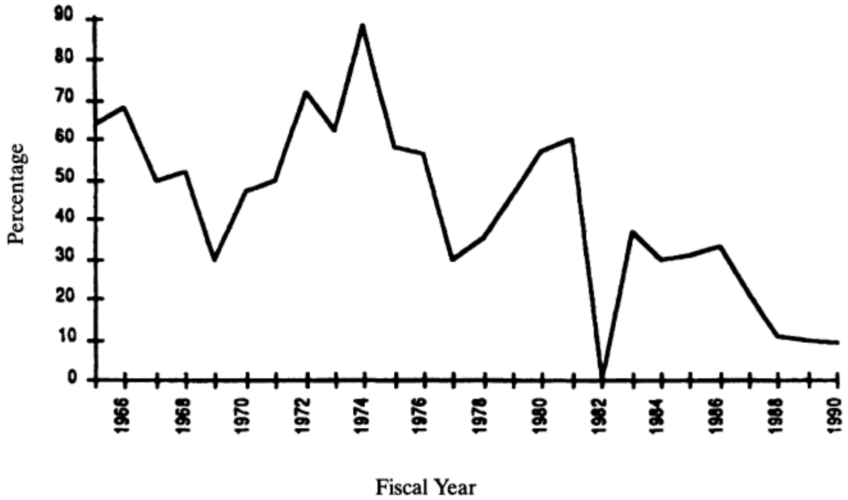

FIGURE 2
ANNUAL PERCENTAGE OF LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND APPROPRIATED TO STATE / LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, 1965–1990
Source: NRC (1993)

omission of land from discussions of poverty is a serious oversight. Land policy in its various forms has impoverished some and enriched others in ways that do not seem random. Yet the distribution of real property, its regulation, and the deeper implications of public land policy are neglected in the great majority of research on poverty in the United States. Wolf (1981, 536) ends his lengthy work, *Land in America*, calling for change:

> The physical environment, and especially the land, deserves more focused attention. Connections between land, power and wealth need to be dragged out of the closet, carefully examined, and used to forge more direct and more effective national, state, and local policy. We should imprint the land purposefully, intentionally, by design—not by wistful indifference or frustrated negligence.

But how to go from negligence to relevance? The current definition of poverty rivets on income. Yet poverty has less to do with the distribution of income than of wealth. The broader, wealth-based approach opens the possibility for linking human poverty to the less quantifiable aspects of land and to the impoverishment of the larger land-dependent environment.

A theoretical realignment is in order if we are to move beyond the impoverished definition of poverty of the present. Lewis Mumford wrestled with a variant of this dilemma half a century ago, addressing himself to both Jeffersonian idealists for whom land was the ultimate resource and to the promoters of modernism for whom land was merely an income-yielding commodity. Prior to and during the Depression era, "back-to-the-land" became the common cry of the Nashville Agrarians, New Dealers, intellectuals in the Catholic Church, decentralists, and sundry other reformers objecting to the woes of urban material culture in America (Shi 1987). Instead of rejecting their land-based welfare visions, Mumford (1938) sought to moderate their anti-urban bias and proposed land-based green belts, garden cities, and related strategies for reaching urban populations. Somewhat later Mumford (1962) contended with the manifest land-negligence in urban renewal schemes which shunted the poor to high-rise complexes with organic ties to neither land nor community (Miller 1986).

Mumford challenged those who neglected land in their prescriptions for human welfare, while admonishing others who romanticized land-based living to the exclusion of those whose access to land was less direct. His writings construe land as integral to societal welfare beyond its value as a productive asset or a speculative good. Herein, Mumford is returning to an element of faith among the founding fathers—that land and the pursuit of happiness are profoundly interrelated. The Mumford challenge is to discover how land in its many forms brings value to our lives rather than to declare it obsolete. In so many words, Mumford calls for the rejection of income-based poverty accounting which arbitrarily stamps the lowest income quintile "poor," although families therein, as Gans (1972) reminds us, often have both wealth and well-being. And among the four "nonpoor" income quintiles are many families whose wealth and welfare, from a fuller perspective, are precarious.

Current conceptualizations of poverty will benefit, then, if amplified to encompass land as an ongoing component of wealth. This can be done in a three-fold fashion: land as a productive resource contributing to income, land as a source of security which contributes to wealth, and land as a principal element of the ecosystem upon which the pursuit of happiness and human sustenance depend. The inclusion of "land," thus specified, in analyses of poverty acknowledges its income potential but goes further. To lose access to land is to lose more than equity and rents; it is to lose a stream of benefits, amenities, and satisfactions which income alone cannot replace. It is therefore of use, in establishing the larger association between land and poverty, to suggest ways in which each dimension of land just noted might mitigate existing poverty.

A. Land as Productive Resource

Even though the American economy is often characterized as service-based and "post-industrial" (Figure 3), land continues to be a productive resource and source of employment. In addition to its contribution to real estate, a key sector of the economy, lobbyists for the timber industry and for agribusiness frequently draw attention to the array of occupations that depend indirectly on farming and forestry. The same could be said for mining, tourism, and recreation sectors. Many additional jobs directly tied to the land are invisible because they have moved abroad, relocated there to reduce domestic labor costs.

Indeed, over time scholars have viewed land as an important source of employment in general (e.g., Ransom 1932; Firey 1990) and point to a peculiar virtue of land—its potential to buffer against economic downturn. This was true on an unprecedented scale in the 1930s. Todd (1977) suggests the sobering possibility that, were an economic debacle like the Great Depression to strike again (or a war, or natural disaster), the United States could not readily fall back on the land because of tenure impediments and because it is losing the cultural capital with which to successfully manage the land. A simple indicator of this loss—i.e., poverty at the cultural level—is the Gini Ratio for farmland ownership. It has shot from .63 in 1930 to .92 today, with "explosive social consequences in urban slums" (Gaffney 1993, 120).[9] Firey (1990) discusses the negative effects of losing the land's buffering influence, both in terms of employment and political stability.

Thus, to omit land from discussions of poverty is to omit a significant source of raw materials, a productive resource in its own right, a major (albeit increasingly indirect) contributor to employment, and a refuge from poverty when emergency strikes. Add to this the loss of informal economy, an acknowledged poverty safety net. High percentages of Americans garden, hunt, count on fuel wood as a major energy source, and diversify their survival strategies through local land-based "economics" (Fitchen 1992;

[9] Gini Ratios measure unequal distribution by summing and standardizing disparate data into one number. As the ratio approaches 1.00, concentration intensifies and the small get smaller of whatever is being measured disappear. See Gaffney 1993.

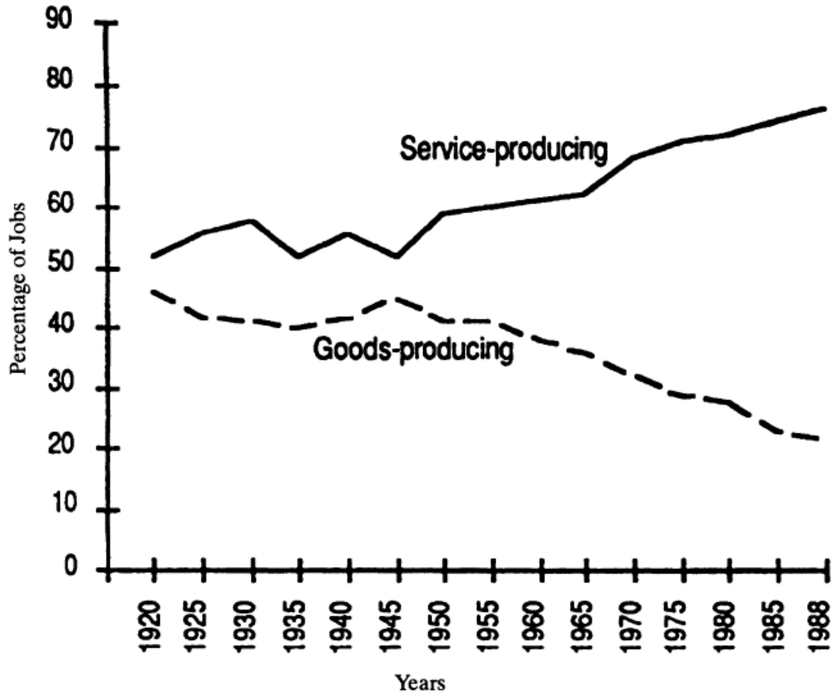

FIGURE 3
ANNUAL PERCENTAGE OF GOODS-PRODUCING AND SERVICE-PRODUCING JOBS, UNITED STATES, 1920–1988
Source: Data from Census Bureau (for years 1920–80) and Handbook of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bulletin 2340, August 1989 (for years 1981–88)

Gillespie, Lyson, and Harper 1990). It seems justified, in retrospect, that the Presidential Commission which authored *The People Left Behind* in 1967, warned that poverty is much more than income insufficiency and addressed land and housing issues in 25 of their 158 recommendations. Current homelessness in America, greater than at any time in our history except the Great Depression, is as much a land as an income tragedy (Geisler 1988).

B. Land as Security

As shown in Figure 1, for those who own land in America, real property is a disproportionately important source of security for families of lower means. Real property should therefore be conceptualized as a major asset and principal source of credit among families which possess it—over and above its contributions to employment and productivity noted above. In addition to the tens of thousands of Americans who are buffered from poverty through indirectly held real estate (life insurance, pension funds, and securities), many who own it directly depend on it to supplement their social security and thus avert poverty in old age. Two examples dramatically underscore this economic buffering effect of land.

The United State will soon have the oldest population of 31 nations recently examined by the U.S. Census Bureau, with one out of three elderly Americans being 80 years or older by the year 2005 (Koretz 1987). These facts have enormous implications for poverty policies in the future because as more of the population enters retirement, employment-based income declines in importance compared to annuity incomes, land rent, and returns from land liquidation. Consider the case of retiring farmers, for whom farmland tends to be a principle asset and source of security. Farmers aged 65 and over own a staggering amount of private land both in terms of farmland acreage and value (Table 4). These 312 million acres are almost double the amount of cultivated land in Canada (Canada Yearbook 1985). While this "bulge" in real property assets among older farmers is to be expected, it is naive to ignore the role it plays in protecting the rural elderly from poverty and must be considered in discussions of their full, life-cycle welfare.

Similarly, elderly Americans in general own substantial equity in nonagricultural real property. Among the elderly, home equity represents a more important asset than savings and income, which decline upon retirement (Schultz 1976). These are Americans who pursued the American Dream, attained it, and who now expect to utilize the returns from this investment or its cash value to ease their retirement concerns and stave off poverty (Streib 1976). A decade ago, the U.S. Senate (1984) estimated that elderly Americans held $600 billion in home equity. The same Senate committee sought new ways to shield these elderly from indigency late in life. Through "reverse annuities" and other mechanisms, the committee proposed to convert these land-based assets into income flows which would protect older Americans from careless or unplanned liquidation of their home equity and reduce the threat of poverty among the aged.

C. Land as Sustenance

Just as poverty is more than a lack of income, so is it more than the absence of wealth defined as security and material prosperity. For the great majority of people, human and environmental welfare are inseparable but in ways that are not always obvious. Loss of the latter, though often subtle compared to loss of one's job, income, or pension, is nonetheless impoverishing. Over extended periods, the welfare of society is as dependent on ecosystem diversity and stability as it is on economic diversity and stability. Yet, as summarized by Orr, the life-support system humans depend on is in serious distress:

> As the sun sets tonight over the offices of the Social Science Research Council, *Homo sapiens*, the Council's primary object of study, will have: (1) deforested another one hundred and fifteen square miles, mostly in the tropics; (2) added some fifteen million tons of carbon to the atmosphere; (3) driven between forty and one hundred other species into extinction; and (4) eroded seventy-one million tons of topsoil. Because of this hyperactive biped with a big brain, the planet will be a little warmer, the rain a little more acidic, the ozone layer a little thinner, and the fabric of life a little more threadbare. (Orr 1992, 163)

TABLE 4
SIZE AND VALUE OF U.S. FARMLAND BY AGE GROUPS, 1978

Age	Total Acres	Total Value	Average Acreage
35	52,000,000 (5%)	38,711,680,000 (7%)	75
35–44	135,330,000 (13%)	82,953,600,000 (15%)	102
45–54	229,020,000 (22%)	116,135,040,000 (21%)	138
55–64	260,250,000 (25%)	138,256,000,000 (25%)	145
65	312,300,000 (30%)	160,376,000,000 (29%)	137

Sources: Jones and Barnard (1985) and Geisler et al. (1983).

In their overview of land negligence, Daly and Cobb (1989) reassert the welfare functions of land in terms of essential space, energy, and biosphere functions. Without these functions, human sustenance itself is jeopardized, whether seen as the food chain or as renewable natural resources, as an array of vital ecosystem services or as environmental qualities and amenities. Daly and Cobb are not alone in exhorting those concerned with human welfare to revise their understanding of poverty as it relates to the land (e.g., Sumner 1913; Howard 1940; Sauer 1963; Firey 1990).

Because the land endowment of the United States on a per capita basis is generous by world standards, however, we are prone to ignore the land sacrificed to urbanization, industrialization, and our material living standard. Yet these sacrifices, what some have called "ghost acres," are not subtle when added together. Hundreds of superfund sites and thousands of toxic collection areas dot the landscape and affect air, water, and aquifer quality beyond their boundaries. High elevation spruce forests and many lakes are experiencing stress and lower productivity due to acidic precipitation (Irving 1991), and some 48 million acres of cropland suffer extreme amounts of soil erosion and fertility loss (National Agricultural Lands Study 1981). Millions more are subject to overapplication of chemicals and the ill effects of irrigation-induced selenium poisoning (Harris 1993). A third of the nation's public rangelands (217 million acres) are in poor or very poor condition, as are 65 percent (433 million acres) of all private rangelands (Runge 1984). Over half the nation's wetlands, once covering 221 million acres in the United States outside of Alaska, have been dredged or developed for "higher" uses, and ten states have lost over 70 percent of this resource (Dahl 1990). Extensive areas of fertile lands have been paved or built over; lands dedicated to federal highways alone are roughly equivalent to all the land in national parks (Klockenbrink 1991).

To be sure, not all of these losses are without benefits to society. The fact remains, however, that alleged benefits have been used repeatedly to excuse net losses in land quality and quantity. Some losses in land and related ecosystems enter market accounts and are "paid for" as far as economists are concerned; many more remain externalities to be paid for in the future—a way of reducing poverty for the present but probably not from a system standpoint in which postponing poverty is not a reduction. The real cost of these losses, today or in the future, is staggering. The replacement value of wetlands in California alone, for example, exceeds $100 billion dollars.[10] This fee is greater than what Congress appropriated for the recent savings and loan bailout, a fiasco that will eventually cost every U.S. citizen over $2,000 in taxes (Frederick 1991). Putting a price on ghost acres in the United States in the interest of more realistic accounts of "poverty" represents only the monetized value of such losses; others have noted the aesthetic, spiritual, and emotional poverty that accompanies reduced open space, aesthetics, and personal sense of place (e.g., Griswold 1948; Berry 1984; Radin 1982).

VII. CONCLUSION: LAND AS A WELFARE FULCRUM

This paper has sought to challenge a major astigmatism of modern economics and other social scientists pertaining to contemporary poverty. It has attempted to dissect poverty as generally understood and make its land dimensions transparent. We began by demonstrating that land policies, both private and public, profoundly influence the social composition of poverty because they influence wealth and constitute major stores of value. These stores influence the generation of new wealth and the distance between haves and have-nots. Later we suggested that land is an important fulcrum in the pursuit of happiness, past and present. Its

[10] Researchers at the School of Public Policy, University of California–Berkeley, have calculated the replacement value of that state's wetlands at $124.5 billion. See Common Ground 1993.

place in production, employment, investment, social security, social status, and emergency relief all nominate it for at least honorable mention as an antipoverty catalyst. Somewhat more abstractly, its place in ecosystem health further recommends it for consideration in comprehensive poverty discussions. The ecosystem nexus to poverty theory, often difficult to establish directly, nonetheless warrants serious analysis. Though not as obvious as homelessness or indigency, the link between environmental and human degradation is surely significant.

Being significant and being irrefutable can be separate things. For this reason, it is well to conclude this overview with research questions which, if pursued, would suggest how poverty theory and policy can be enriched with respect to land. For example, the easy availability of income data colors our grasp of the poverty process at the expense of non-income indicators pertaining to land. Thus the question, what land data exist or could be devised to improve income-driven accounts of poverty? How is the relationship between poverty and landownership affected by such variables as age, minority status, region of the country, and gender? How, historically speaking, has owning and controlling land contributed to wealth accumulation and concentration? What differences exist between the poor who own land and those who do not? Is landownership decreasing among the poor and, if so, for what reasons?

In terms of public policy, if landownership in the United States underwent a major redistribution, would it yield greater national welfare and would it benefit the poor? Assuming land and housing policies targeted the poor, as called for by the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty (1967) or in Salamon's (1976) detailed report, what would be the trade-offs between economic "improvement" to the land and environmental welfare requiring less intensive land uses? Is the assumption well-founded that large, private landholdings are positively correlated with good land stewardship? Under what circumstances do small holdings show similar potential? In what ways might technology be combined with land to make a shrinking private land base support more people without land degradation? What taxing strategies can be advanced to recapture society's share of increased land values in ways that don't burden the poor and near poor?

A century ago to be "land-poor" signified owning land as a principal if not exclusive economic asset. A land-poor owner had an important investment but was economically precarious for lack of asset diversity. Today we are land-poor in new ways, including our growing incapacity to make logical connections between land and various kinds of poverty which persist in our society. A starting point for correcting this condition, suggested by Matthei (1993) and urged throughout this piece, is to make the study of wealth essential to any curriculum on poverty. The connection between land and wealth is somehow more intuitive than the connection between land and poverty. Research on the former will illuminate and motivate research on the latter.

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