

Land and Privilege

Gar Alperovitz ["You Say You Want a Revolution?" November/December 2005] reminds us that "economic instability radically weakens all forms of civil society network-building, including those that nurture democracy and communities' interests in their environments." Solving the problem of economic instability means facing up to a fundamental truth: that the system of law in place in virtually every society around the world secures and protects entrenched privilege at the expense of equality of opportunity and true liberty. The world is organized around the idea that some persons have a superior claim to the Earth and its life-supporting systems, with the result that billions of people are marginalized, oppressed, and forced to live without access to the "goods" necessary for a decent human existence.

There was a time in history when access to the Earth was far more equally available. Tribal societies thrived for thousands of years under communitarian structures that treated nature as common property. The capacity to produce surplus was quite limited, but these societies functioned without the hierarchical structure that eventually appeared when the hunter-protectors evolved into a militaristic caste that shared power with those who took advantage of the general fear of

the unknown to establish themselves in the priestcraft. The resulting kings and aristocracies demanded tribute from those who actually produced wealth. The priests demanded tithes (and sacrifices) as payment for their services to keep the gods pleased.

Today, aristocracies no longer have the ability to demand direct tribute, nor do organized religions in most countries have the legal authority to require tithes be paid. These forms of wealth confiscation have been replaced by claims on production by those who control access to nature. Mere ownership allows non-producers to demand a payment from others simply for access.

Thomas Paine argued in "Agrarian Justice" that anyone granted control over land owed a "ground rent" to the community for this privilege. The American writer Henry George greatly expanded on this argument but was largely ignored; the mentality of the late 18th and 19th centuries was one of human conquest of nature. We continue to live with the results.

The world's leaders made a remarkable commitment to implement the principles espoused by Paine and George in the Law of the Sea Treaty, a proposal for sharing the oceans' natural resources that is opposed by monopolistic corporate and nation-state interests. Not only do we desperately need the Law of the Sea, we need a corresponding Law of the Land so that "ground rent" finally becomes community property.

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