

Editor's Introduction

The Man/Land Nexus

Fred Harrison

THE TWO global problems that require urgent attention stem from the failure to elaborate a vision of practical ways for solving disputes arising from how we occupy and use space on earth.

The environment has its world-wide network of activists who appeal for changes in the way that we abuse our natural habitats. Unfortunately, with a minority of notable exceptions, these activists fail to identify a general mechanism that includes the power to drive change in behaviour in the desired direction.

The second problem is the inability to peacefully co-exist with neighbours. This spatial problem manifests itself in seemingly irreconcilable conflicts at all levels:

- the residential community: witness the plight of mothers in Belfast who, taking their children to school, run the gauntlet of harassment from families of a different religious persuasion who live in neighbouring streets;
- the national level: regions that challenge the legitimacy of others to influence their future (such as the Basques in Spain);
- the international level: two countries like Indian and Pakistan cannot agree on the territorial limits of their countries within Kashmir.

When the sovereign nation-state reigned supreme, military power could be used to contain the tensions as peoples of different ethnic origins struggled to control the space they needed for expanding populations and from which to draw the resources to sustain their cultures. That power is now losing its effectiveness.

These two seemingly distinct problems, given their common roots, ought to be tackled as part of a single reform programme. This would accelerate remedial action by mustering the countervailing power that is needed to override the obstacles to rational and fair remedies.

But we should not underestimate the profound problem that is associated with the solutions. Property laws are at the source of these dysfunctional forms of behaviour. These laws inhibit respect for both the way we use nature, and the way in which we do not respect other people's equal right to occupy space. But many

people believe that these property laws are written in human nature; and are therefore not negotiable.

A democratic debate is necessary to re-examine the fundamental principles of property rights and their associated obligations. The justification for initiating that debate is the prize of sustainable peace and prosperity. The alternative is the continuation of conflicts over the use and control of space, the currency of which is military fire power.

The complexity of the issues needs to be acknowledged because the debate must include the fundamental reassessment of the human condition itself. Political discourse is bedevilled by popular notions of human nature which, if they are written into the genetic code, would seem to consign us to perpetual conflict. We assume that people wilfully damage the living environment, and that they wilfully abuse their neighbours for personal gain. That people are capable of such behaviour is not denied. What needs to be challenged is the degree to which such personal action originates with the psychology of individuals or the dynamics of a social system biased against the peaceful resolution of those issues that relate to the distribution of land rights and obligations. Dysfunctional behaviour of the individual kind would not affect vast numbers of people if it did not run with the grain of social laws that were designed to deliver abusive forms of behaviour. Is the social system structured to override natural human values (such as empathy for other humans, and the commitment to universal principles such as fairness) to produce dysfunctional behaviour on a mass scale?

In this issue, Geophilos contributors reopen the debate by investigating some theoretical and social issues from the perspective of property rights and duties.

A FRESH APPROACH to the pre-history of the mind, and of early social formations, may lead to a clearer understanding of what motivated people as they shaped the cultural ligaments of early communities. These were the people who settled the land and developed an economic surplus that could be invested in a better future. Timothy Glazier offers a personal view on the issues and reviews some of the literature on one of the vital starting points for a reassessment of the possibilities of creating a peaceful and prosperous third millennium.

Language is one analytical starting point. It may conceal preconceptions about human behaviour and social systems that need to be investigated. An illustrative study is the biography of a

leading archaeologist, V. Gordon Childe. His Marxist paradigm was to shape popular attitudes through his influence in the lecture theatre. Is it correct, as Marx and Childe claimed, that civilisation is necessarily built on the back of exploitation? In complex societies, are specialists in the provision of labour services ("elites") necessarily engaged in an unequal exchange with the people who worked the land and, more recently, manned the machines of the Industrial Age?

The significance of such explorations is that it may make us realise that there are available more options than is generally supposed to policy-makers who are trapped in the vortex of global disputes about authority over territory.

Afghanistan was the first major test in the third millennium of the ability of statesmen to bring imagination and wisdom to the negotiating table. The warring factions realise that they must move beyond the tribal model of social organisation, but why should their political landscapes be constrained by the framework of the nation-state? That model – in Europe by way of constitutional change, in much of the rest of the world by default – appears to be rapidly falling into obsolescence.

That the options are richer than we commonly suppose is dramatically illustrated by the Indus Civilisation, which is less popular for both scholars and the public but which may contain more secrets of relevance to the future of humanity than Egyptology. It would appear that the people who settled within the water courses fed from the Himalayas lived comfortably with their neighbours without the need for the techniques of coercion that attract us to the civilisations that flourished on the banks of the Tigris and the Nile.

ONE HYPOTHESIS that invites investigation identifies the surplus from land as instrumental in determining social relations. History is replete with examples of how the income from raw natural resources dictated the distribution of political power and the quality of peoples lives. The social significance of the rent of an edible rock – salt – is reflected in the networks of trading routes, the political arteries through which power flowed, the location of settlements and the formation of international allegiances.¹

There was nothing inevitable about the structure of power that evolved on the back of the control of this one resource, a fact that needs to be borne in mind when we review the distribution of income and political influence in early civilisations. Rent is the taxable surplus of every community. This surplus, the material basis

of civilisation and the product of the creative union of nature with community, may be used for good or for evil. Initially, it was used to advance the condition of humanity: it constituted the means for developing the arts and sciences which extended the boundaries of peoples minds and aesthetic senses.

But it is equally indisputable that, in many societies (but not, it appears, in the Indus Civilisation), the social character of rent was, sooner or later, transformed. This privatisation of the community's revenue could only be executed by excluding others from an equal right to participate in the formation and enjoyment of the culture of their society. If this analysis is correct, it begins to identify the paradox of why, today, we have abandoned the respect we owe to nature; and why we cannot live as good neighbours.

From such generalisations we can develop deeper understanding of the roots of disputes throughout the world whether the Cyprus stand-off between Greek and Turk, the Israel-Palestine intifada, the Balkan genocides, to name just three which appear to originate in controversy over land rights. The disputants propagate a winner-take-all mentality, and the peace-makers reinforce that psychology by retaining a one-dimensional view of earth. A model of land that articulated a complex layering of space that could include cultural and racial differentiation associated with cooperation – if that is what people want – would prove to be a more fruitful tool for tracing the steps that may lead to lasting peace. One new approach to sharing geo-political space has already been described by Prof. Fred Foldvary.²

TENS OF MILLIONS of people are caught between the blades of ecological exploitation and social exclusion. Reason alone, its application in the investigation of the sources of collective trauma, has not proved to be sufficient for either comprehension of the problem or its remedy. And yet, there appears to be no mystery about how we may calibrate the social structure to achieve a benign Man/Land Nexus. The philosophy of equitably sharing the rental surplus of nature's resources is deeply embedded in the primary documents of the philosophers of the Enlightenment; but something has precluded European and North American societies from adopting the fiscal policy that matches the philosophy of property.

It seems, therefore, that we need a learning-by-doing action programme that supports rational and just outcomes. A model of action is offered here for discussion which locates civil society at the heart of a purposeful democratic strategy that aims to change

society in progressive, non-catastrophic steps; through evolution rather than revolution. The goal is to empower people in a way that leads to new forms of co-operation through enlightened individual behaviour. The forms of action should embarrass the mainstream political system in a way that would encourage it to shift the structure of power in favour of changes that comply with justice. What, in practice, does this mean? How can civil society hope to influence power structures that command considerable influence over the media and monopoly over police power?

Favouring the push for change is the fact that the nation-state is obsolete. It appears to have lost the will to survive. The reality of this assessment appears to be endorsed by Britain's Home Secretary, David Blunkett. He has called for a public debate on "where power lies in modern Britain". He claimed that government had "responsibility without power", which was the "worst of all worlds".³ If the government of the nation with the fourth largest economy in the world is wilting, carrying the burdens of state without the power to implement appropriate policies, to whom has the power reverted?

Statesmen are failing to articulate coherent visions of the appropriate direction of change in social organisation. They are constrained by the conventional model, which views the future in terms of aggregating existing power into super-states, such as the European Union. But the clues to the future may be discerned within the interstices of the decaying nation-state. Civil society is initiating processes and networks which are silently challenging the fabric of the state itself.

The most illuminating example is the development of trading networks that stand outside the formal tax system on which the state depends for its existence.⁴ So far, governments in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, where the local exchange trading systems (LETS) flourish, have not sent in their tax inspectors to challenge the tax-dodgers. It may be only a matter of time before they do so. The alternative is for the LETS to amalgamate and grow like bacteria within the body politic, until it subverts the financial integrity of governments and empowers its members to assume at least some of the functions of the state.

Globally, we see non-governmental organisations (NGOs) flourishing and challenging conventional centres of power. They are aided by the internet, which is a vital instrument for fostering communications systems that sidestep the traditional organs of information, and which are therefore beyond the control of governments. People are now executing mass actions of the kind

that have seriously embarrassed governments meeting in conclave in cities that straddle the globe, from Seattle to London and Kyoto. An example is of the 60,000 NGO activists who converged on the Brazilian town of Porto Alegre to stage an alternative to the World Economic Forum, which meets in Davos but held this year's talk-in in New York. How the internet was used to by-pass corporate-controlled channels of communication was illustrated by Naomi Klein in her Guardian account of how 1,000 people gathered to hear a broadcast from the WEF:

The news was coming from an Indy Media Centre reporter who was on her cellphone in the crowd. Her voice was being streamed live on the internet. It was picked up by a micro radio station set up in the camp, where her words were translated into Portuguese and then broadcast. At one point the US server went down and was immediately replaced by a back-up in Italy.

Stimulating though these mass demonstrations and alternative conferences may be, they tend to place too much emphasis on the environmental problem at the expense of the search for practical mechanisms for addressing complex social crises, the causes of which can be reduced to a relatively few flaws in the structure of society.

POWER WAS removed from civil society in the late feudal era. That was when the rent privatisers appropriated the law-making process and installed themselves in the junction boxes through which social power flowed.

To reverse the historical injustices, it appears necessary to re-empower civil society – individuals acting in community – by restoring social control over the net income. But that does not mean merely handing the social source of revenue to the administrators of state institutions. But what are the alternatives to bureaucratic control? The starting point for a discourse on this issue is the need for the representatives of civil society to accept that people have to reclaim their equal share of the community-created income. This would entail their active participation in the disposal of that income according to their individual as well as social interests. This seems to be a pre-condition for restoring the integrity of life at the family, local and national levels. But where does civil society begin? How do people re-shape the structure of power while avoiding outright confrontation with the nation-state in a power struggle that would necessarily terminate in violence?

It appears that the goal is the development of mechanisms for accessing and sharing land; complemented with the elimination of

the arbitrary appropriation of people's earned incomes that is only possible when the state exercises the use of coercive power. These reflections imply that the general solution requires the redefinition of public and private property. Furthermore, society needs to formulate its public revenue philosophy in a way that generates income in a manner that helps to resolve spatial disputes.

These specifications of a democratic public finance system stipulate a model that reaches beyond the parameters favoured by the nation-state. We can anticipate that it will not be readily adopted without the political equivalent of psychotherapy, which takes the form of democratic debate. For public sympathy for the privatisation of rent is so deeply embedded that it will not yield without considerable resistance. Nonetheless, models of rent-sharing exist that ought to encourage a sense of optimism. Alanna Hartzok spotlights one example in this issue of *Geophilos*: how the citizens of Alaska insist on sharing the oil-rents of their territory. From this reality, it becomes possible to extrapolate a general mechanism for fulfilling the needs of the global community. Such a vision transcends the redundant borders of the nation-state and locates the welfare of all humans, wherever they may live, at the centre of the structure of power.

The land reform agenda in Scotland prescribes another approach to the incremental transformation of the nation-state. The legal opportunity for communities to reclaim land from the modern feudalists is reviewed by Peter Gibb. The land buy-back law may not deliver system-wide benefits fast enough, but it arouses a consciousness that could elevate political discourse to realms of action that would deliver justice and economic equity for everyone within the present generation. Although currently restricted to rural property, the Scottish law may animate the imaginations of politicians in favour of a generalised solution that also embraces the territorial interests of town dwellers.

SMALL-SCALE examples of land-and-tax reform are encouraging if they are interpreted in terms of their ultimate significance as acts of counter-revolution. Civil society, in effect, is hesitantly clawing its way forward to a confrontation with the revolutionaries of yesteryear, those men who overthrew the natural order in the realms of property rights and public finance – in their quest for the privileged life.

But the voices emerging from civil society need to demonstrate an awareness of people's obligations; and their willingness to share land, through new social forms that are consistent with the multi-

cultural occupation of finite spaces. This would take the debate beyond its current limits, which with its emphasis on the ecological crisis (such as the obligation of polluters to pay) plays into the hands of people like President George Bush. He opposes fundamental reform, but can get away with flirting with fashionable notions (such as tradable permits) because they appear to be legitimated by some environmentalists.

Ultimately, however, change will occur because of the needs of ordinary people. They are creeping up on the centres of power in a manner that encourages us to hope for meaningful negotiations on the redefinition of power. But fruitful debate depends on access to relevant information. Rent, as I note in my essays in this issue, was central to the formation of civilisation. Its formative role in modern society is not so transparent. This can be partly explained by the way in which governments fail to offer statistically accurate measures of the size of the surplus that surfaces in the land market. Dr. Michael Hudson suggests that this may not be an oversight. The absence of statistics on rental income may camouflage a motivation that needs to be identified and analysed.

The use to which that data could be put is not restricted to those who wish to challenge the status quo, however. The risks incurred by the financial sector in the modern economy are larger than they need be. Because of their lending policies (land remains the best form of collateral), banks are at the perpetual mercy of violent swings in real estate prices. In the US, for example, concern has been expressed at the level of the exposure of banks to bad debts. As we have now seen from the Enron scandal, auditing procedures are far from adequate for the purpose of tracking risk. The consequences of land speculation, in particular, ought to be better understood and monitored. As Joseph Casey records, the US economy has been repeatedly destabilised by booms and busts that have claimed banks as their victims. Real estate features prominently in those banking crises. In the run-up to the crash of the early 1990s, for example, property accounted for 41% of the average bank's lending portfolio (1988) up from 33% five years earlier. But if the US government fails to offer an accurate statistical portrait of trends in the value of real estate, analysts cannot predict the downturns that wipe billions of dollars off people's savings and pensions.

Our appeal for a fundamental debate on people's rights recalls the creation of the Welfare State, which was the result of the last major public discussion. It took a world war to persuade those who held the power to initiate the debate that led to radical change. But

the socialist doctrines that dominated that discourse failed to balance rights with corresponding duties. The result is a philosophical, administrative and economic mess, as Leslie Blake and Tony O'Brien indicate in their contributions.

The politicians of the Welfare State took their principles abroad, to promote development programmes in the Third World. Today's level of globalised poverty proves that the strategies supported by billions of dollars transferred from the rich nations were seriously flawed. Poverty appears to be an institutional consequence of current laws and values. People in developing countries might do better to decline foreign aid which comes with ideological strings attached – and look to their own rich endowments for prosperity. David Smiley reviews the doctrine of the Right to Development – the so-called third generation of rights – and evaluates the principles that he believes should inform development plans if progress is to be made in the direction of sustainable prosperity.

References

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- 2 Fred Foldvary "Ethno-federalism: Geo-confederal democracy & economic justice", *Geophilos*, No. 1(2), Autumn 2001.
- 3 Speech on 1 February 2002, reported in "Don't blame us for poor services, says Blunkett", *Daily Telegraph*, London, 2 February 2002.
- 4 Peter Lang, Ch.13 in Molly Scott Cato and Miriam Kennett, *Green Economics*, Aberystwyth: Green Audit Books, 1999, pp. 146-149.