

# Begging the Question

◆  
**Alex Begg**

## **Empowering the Earth Strategies for Social Change**

Green Books, £10.95

◆  
**Fred Harrison**

ALEX BEGG'S thinking was shaped by his work as an activist in the UK's "green" movement. He claims that he is not guilty of the self-indulgence that characterises much of political theory, which is divorced from the realities of action.

Power is what it's all about, he stresses, and unless we understand the nature of power we cannot empower ourselves. Instead, we are implicated in the exercise of power by others, whose motives are to control rather than to liberate.

Begg sets out to empower his reader with an analysis of the ligaments of that structure of power which incorporates all of us into a single working system. His is an organic theory in which he seeks to relate the origins of power to the vitality of Earth itself. People are empowered by their deriving energy from the sun. It seems that it is the earth that empowers people. So why he should entitle his book *Empowering the Earth* is somewhat perplexing.

The book will inspire green activists to engage in projects such as trying to block the construction of roads on greenfield sites, and the occupation of trees to thwart the felling of forests. But I found the volume a disempowering disappointment. For, ultimately, he fails to come to grip with the core of the power structure: the core that clenches raw power and has no intention of releasing any of it to the likes of Alex Begg.

WE SEE from the figure which appears on page 262 of the book (reproduced opposite)

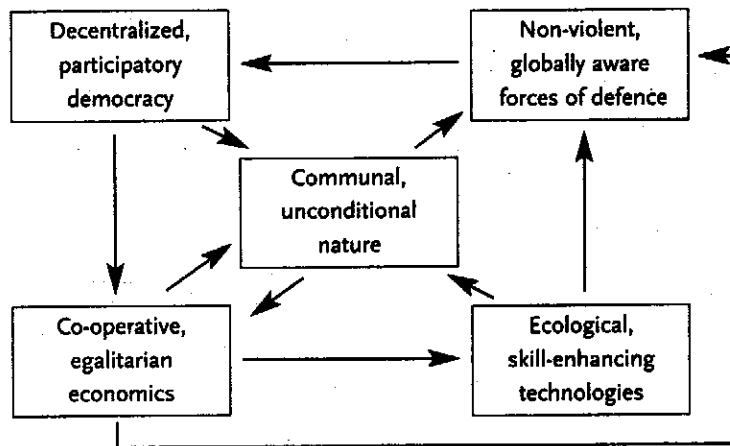
that nature – communalised, and unconditional – is at the heart of what he calls "the overall social system we are trying to build". A communal ethic of some kind in relation to the resources of nature is central to the objective. We need access to land, to tap its energy. People think that the dollars controlled by corporations, and the votes in the pockets of politicians, represent power; but according to Begg, "they are ultimately just symbols".

Access to land, he writes, is the crucial variable for any strategy for social change. Energy from the sun is captured at the surface of the earth. "This is why land has always been the rallying cry for so many social movements. The power bases of the rulers can always be dispensed with, provided our connection with the land is secure."

But what is the mechanism by which this central objective can be achieved? He does not offer an answer, beyond repeating the one sentence which states that "access to the land has historically been such a contested issue".

In fact, Begg makes a virtue of the absence of a vision of how we might get from here to there. He insists: "There is no root cause, there is no prime mover or first principle". He opposes conclusions, simple answers, bottom lines, and is proud of it.

Too many political movements have built their ideologies on statements of the type, "the root cause of our problem is ...", "the source of all



power is ..." I have no wish to add to the competing grand narratives.

As a consequence of this refusal to elaborate on the origins of the distribution and sources of power, we are left with definitions such as power being "the flow of matter and energy, and the influences that shape those flows". Every one of us has power, to a more or less extent, and we participate in the interaction that sustains our communities. And there is "no easy way to measure someone's power".

IT IS correct that we need to distinguish the power to emancipate ourselves (which is good) and the power over others (which signifies an unequal distribution of power). Begg is correct to insist that no-one is without some power, and therefore is able to reshape his or her destiny to some extent.

But unless energy is focused on a goal that is tangible, history tells us that the masses will continue to be manipulated by those who have a clear focus on their future, and therefore best able to deploy their existing power over others.

The history of revolutions tells us all we need to know about how feelgood aspirations can be misdirected once the blood has been made to flow in the gutters. Whether it's the American or French

revolution, or the 20th century Socialist revolutions, we find that they all went astray and have failed to realise people's aspirations.

It seems, therefore, that we need a few people working with the revolutionaries who are able to spell out the detail of how to implement access rights to land so that everybody's equal entitlements are honoured; and that the initial distribution is within a framework that guarantees the equal rights of all future generations. Without such a blueprint, Begg's plaintive observation about the need for access to land must dissolve into dust.

This disappointing conclusion reflects the outlook of much of the green movement. Even the political parties such as Britain's Green Party, which have embraced the fiscal approach to equal land rights, have failed to flesh out the concept in a way that makes sense to less politicised people who are concerned about the abusive relationship that we have with nature.

Green philosophers, by and large, devote a great deal of energy to elaborate some of the details of what life would be like, beyond the revolutionary change. But like Begg, their fantasies are predicated on the assumption that someone else has delivered the secure connection with land. But land rights are the immediate and overriding problem.

PARADOXICALLY, environmentalists appear to put "the money problem" before "the land question". Even Begg breaks his own rule about refusing to identify root causes by blaming money for our major problems. He tells us that money is "the ultimate currency of power", which needs to be brought "under the control of co-operative organisations, and re-investing it in social change".

If, however, we can't place full responsibility on the financial sector, we can apparently flesh out the analysis by claiming that the abuse of power is "the dark side of humanity run riot. We can't go back; indeed, if we did it might not be long before that dark side rose again".

And so we are encouraged to retreat to localised trial-and-error solutions such as developing the LETS (local exchange trading schemes). These have sprouted throughout Europe and North America, and they seem to offer hope to the members who participate in the exchange of goods and services while stepping outside the formal economy. In other words, they have found a mechanism for dodging the tax system. Good for them, but one day the tax inspectors will decide that these schemes constitute a threat to the validity of conventional fiscal politics, and they will be closed down. Meanwhile, I have yet to read a critique of conventional taxation by a LETS organiser that provides a rationale for dismantling the taxes that the rest of us have to pay.

By taking the access to land issue for granted, green activists defuse their energy and therefore fail to achieve the results that their mass global movement warrants. Unfortunately, Earth is not willing to wait for us to come to our senses. Earth has a voice, and it says it does not accept being taken for granted. If people want secure access to land, they had better specify the mechanisms for achieving this. And to do so, they have to specify the distribution of power that would enable us to finally achieve sustainable social systems.

DESPITE BEGG'S denial, there is a root cause of our social and ecological problems. The nature of that cause is to be found in the monopolisation of the power that flows from the land. Unless we wish to restrict ourselves to a metaphysical discourse, we have to define that power in concrete terms. The classical economists provided us with the necessary language, and we ought to use it.

Earth's energy translates into the rent of land and natural resources. Rent represents the surplus energy over and above what it takes to enable us to continue to reproduce the population and produce the capital that helps us to generate the material wealth we need. Rent is the social surplus that is available to originate and nourish all the arts and sciences that constitute the culture of civilisation.

In other words, Earth empowers us to produce the energy (the net income) that can be devoted to the elevation of our latent spiritual, aesthetic and intellectual resources. Without a share of that rent, we are less than human. With our share of that rent, we are empowered to participate in the unique experiment that is the human journey through time. If humanity displays a dark side, we are obliged to discover whether this might ultimately be attributed to the denial of people's access rights to land.

If I am not exaggerating, it seems that – before we embark on the formulation of imaginative schemes for a post-revolutionary world – we need to devote just a little time to reflect on how we might overcome the power structures that exist to prevent people from gaining access to land.

At the very least, people who recognise that land is a question that cannot be begged need to define a structure of rights (= power) which simultaneously balances our natural relationship with Earth on the basis of respect; and balances our social relationship with each other on the basis of equality. If such a paradigm exists (it does), it enables us to analyse the distribution of power, and what steps we need to take to achieve a sustainable solution.