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Who Owns the United States?

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40. Leach, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
42. Prattis, "Situational Logic . . ."
43. *Ibid.*
44. Crook, *op. cit.*; J. I. Prattis, "The State of the Art in Economic Anthropology," in Prattis, ed., "New Directions . . .," *op. cit.*
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47. R. Redfield, "The Folk Society," *American Journal of Sociology*, 52 (1947), pp. 293-308; Parsons, *op. cit.*
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49. R. Rudner, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966); Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1949).
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51. Boeke, *op. cit.*; P. L. Van den Berghe, "Pluralism," in J. J. Honigman, ed., *Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Chicago, Ill.: Rand McNally and Co., 1975).
52. Inkeles and Smith, *op. cit.*; McClelland, *op. cit.*
53. Inkeles and Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

### *Who Owns the United States?*

IF INTELLIGENCE and the prevailing level of knowledge determined economic policy, no one need ask, Who owns the United States? The answer would be, of course, the people of the United States, even if the people granted titles—subject to the payment of all or nearly all the economic rent to the public treasury—to some individuals who were prepared to use it. But with an unreformed property tax system that limits, in most places, the tax on the economic rent to the rate of the tax on the value of improvements in or on the land, we permit some people to own land as a quasi-monopoly with full power to levy monopoly exactions from the landless. Even where state constitutions assert that the land and natural resources of the state belong, in the first instance, to the people of the state, the fact is that the title holders are the real owners.

Now the U. S. Department of Agriculture has undertaken what it advertises as the first comprehensive survey of American land ownership ever made. Whether the project will live up to its billing remains to be seen. Years ago a committee in the U. S. Congress under-

took such a survey and I was asked by members of its staff to give advice on the statistical problems. I prepared a number of papers providing guidance on most of the problems submitted to me and the staff was ready to begin the survey when the whole project was called off. When I asked why I was told the copper interests were opposed to it and had brought pressure on key members of the committee to kill it. The vested interests did not want to let it be known what a concentration of ownership of copper ore lands existed, no doubt because the investigation might turn to what affect this circumstance had on prevailing prices for the metal.

The kinds of information a good survey would turn up were indicated recently in Florida where one of the leading newspapers, the *St. Petersburg Times*, inquired into who owns the land of Florida. Some land speculators had vast holdings, including land under water and land in worthless swamps, mostly much underassessed, and taxed very little. As development of the state proceeds, these sites will be needed for the dumping of construction spoil. Then they will be usable as building sites and their owners can levy exactions from the productive people who will use the sites constructively. Apologists for the land speculators will defend the payment as "a reward for foresight" and, as leading economists used to argue, as helping to finance developmental infrastructure by their puny tax payments. But the facts gathered by the newspaper showed conclusively that land speculators make no economic contribution whatever and, in fact, distort and delay development and cause a maldistribution of income that blights the land.

As a first step the department is asking a random sample of 52,000 owners of mostly rural property their age, sex, race, income, residence, land use and type of ownership (individual, family, corporate). Among the matters of concern to agricultural economists are patterns of absentee ownership, for it is believed that nonresident owners, especially foreign citizens, may be trying to accumulate U. S. lands that are rich in coal and oil. If the rent of these lands were appropriated for social purposes, would the citizenship of their "owners" make any difference?

WILL LISSNER