

THE LAND QUESTION: A TRIBUTE TO ANNE HAILA

It started with a question, 'Do spirits own the land in Thailand?', asked by Professor Anne Haila in Autumn 2015. I was puzzled by this question and became speechless. I had no idea how to respond to my supervisor's thought-provoking question. Officially, state land and private land are the two land types in Thailand. It was unusual to think about spirits in connection to urban studies, the field of study in which I conducted my doctoral research. It sounded odd to even think about any land plots owned by spirits in the country in which I was born and raised. However, this question made me fundamentally rethink urban studies. I then marvelled and was curious to examine whether there is something in between these two land types, something about the rent, perhaps norms, customs, or traditions that we have lived with all along but overlooked, or something about the land that is not recognised by laws and out of the economic sphere of life. More importantly, this question made me doubt the applicability of the individual land ownership concept which was imported to Thailand from the West. This question was an ingenious way by which Professor Haila taught me about the land question.

Professor Haila was an Academy Professor and Professor of Urban Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland. In September 2019, she passed away at home in Helsinki at the age of 66. She received her Ph.D. from the Department of Real Estate, the Helsinki University of Technology (now the Aalto University). Her doctoral dissertation entitled *'Land as a Financial Asset: Studies in Theoretical and Real Trends'*. During the 1990s, she was a Professor at the Department of Land Use and Landscape Planning, the Agricultural University of Norway; a Research Fellow at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark; and a Senior Fellow at the Faculty of Architecture and Building, the National University of Singapore; and a researcher for several research projects.

Professor Haila was a renowned land economist and spent her academic life urging academics and policymakers to pay attention to and consider land rent and the (social) use value of land as an 'alternative' to land use based on the private appropriation of socially created rent. She had developed an urban land (rent) approach (e.g. Haila, 1990; 1988; 2016; 2017) inspired by the works of Karl Marx, David Harvey and, Henry George whose influence was clearly the strongest on Haila. She was called by the Editor-in-Chief of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* as 'the most important Georgist in the World' (see Obeng-Odoom, 2019).

In her magnum opus, *Urban Land Rent: Singapore as a Property State* (2016), Professor Haila discussed the domination of efficient land use influenced by the notions of private ownership bringing about economic efficiency by John Locke, Douglas North, and Ronald Coase. She was fearless in her critique of the enclosures and land parcelling in the history of Europe led to commodified land and the advent of rational land use. In today's cities, one of her concerns was the current trend that states and municipalities sell their public land and properties to private firms instead of using them as public goods. She used the case study of Singapore's regulating land to show 'the benefits of land as a public good'. Haila's book on urban land rent was praised.

Georgists led the way. According to Andrew Purves, the author of *No Debt High Growth Low Tax*, Haila's book, which he reviews in this issue of *Land&Liberty*, is crucial for advocates of Land Value Tax (LVT) and social justice and equality, and the Singapore case study has shown how the city-state has successfully balanced the uses of state land for public good as well as for rent revenue maximisation. Her book was also included in the distinguished list of 'Georgist books of Note' presented at the 2017 Council of Georgist Organizations Conference in St. Louis, Missouri.

This well-received book about Singapore reminded me of my conversation with her concerning the geographical biases in urban studies. I noticed that studies of non-Western cities (and cities in the global South) are often regarded as 'empirical findings', and thus the publications are usually cited as 'case examples' rather a contribution to the development of urban theory. This work of Professor Haila has shown that analytical cases can inspire other urban scholars who study non-Western cities. For me, the book has also demonstrated that it is possible to overcome geographical biases. Research on non-Western cities can and, perhaps, should permeate the process of 'reconstructing urban economics' (Obeng-Odoom, 2016).

In the current era when the focus of urban studies has increasingly shifted towards issues of global financialisation of land and housing, Professor Haila instead was interested in searching for 'alternatives' to commodification and financialisation of land. Her recent Academy Professorship project 'Urban Land Tenure' focuses on which I worked with her before her passing, non-private forms of urban land tenure, in particular, religious land, collective owned land, and communal land. The project emphasises social and moral obligations attached to urban land use besides the uses of urban land based on exchange value and market logic.

It has been over a year since Professor Haila departed us. As a member of her 'Urban Land Tenure' project, I am, and always will be, inspired by not only her intellectual work but also by her supervision and mentoring. On a personal level, after knowing her for seven years and accompanying her to several fieldwork trips in Southeast Asia, I was touched not only by her brilliance but also her open-mindedness and kind-heartedness. She always amazed me by her curiosity to learn about land tenure systems in different societies.

So, 'Do spirits own the land in Thailand?' in particular, and 'Who owns the land?' in general require urban scholars and land economists to look at and look beyond the economic sphere in association with land use. They should consider also the social sphere, social relations around the land, and the temporal aspect of urban land tenure.

Above all, one of the most precious things that I learned from Professor Haila is her advice: 'In many cases, to ask a good question is more important than to answer it', and I would like to pass this advice on to other scholars as well. While all urbanists could heed this advice, it is Georgist political economists who, in addition, are well-equipped to further develop the legacy of Academy Professor Anne Haila. 📖