

# BLOWN AWAY BY THE DESTRUCTION

TODAY'S predominate systems of land tenure, which gives absolute ownership of land and other natural resources to individuals, is detrimental to the environment. It sanctions the destruction of plants and animals, and justifies the robbery from future generations of their right to a clean and bountiful world.

Real estate speculation and inequality of distribution create situations in which people are forced to destroy forests, an essential link in the biological system of the planet. Though there may be particular cases where a certain piece of land has had the advantage and protection of a beneficent owner, private property in land has been, on the whole, an antagonistic influence on the well-being of the environment.

Though this paper is focused on the environmentally ill effects of the present system of land ownership, it will clarify its point to briefly visualize a better system. This system would radically change our perceptions of the land and radically alter our land use patterns. Rather than feeling as if the individuals who used the land "owned" the land, it would be recognized that their use of the land constituted a loan from the community and from future generations. Chief Seattle, in his address to President Pierce's 1854 offer to buy a large tract of Indian land put it well:

"We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother but his enemy, and when he has conquered it he moves on. He leaves his fathers graves behind and does not care. He kidnaps the earth from his children. He does not care. His fathers' graves and his children's birthright are forgotten. He treats his mother, the earth, and his brother, the sky, as things to be bought and plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert."

As well as not being owned, land would be distributed in such a way as to enable those who needed it most to be the stewards of the land, rather than the present system whereby a few land owners engross massive estates and shut the many out, creating a desperate class of landless people who all too often must destroy the environment to survive from day to day.

The philosophy of property in land embodies a moral and legal right to destroy the environment. According to *American Jurisprudence*, an encyclo-

paedia of law, "Property" refers to the unrestricted right to an objects use, enjoyment and disposition.<sup>1</sup>

This philosophy confers an absolute right to the indefinite use of our forests, rivers, air and hills upon an individual to the exclusion of all other generations present and future. It is insensitive to the independent right of plants and animals to the enjoyment of their own lives, treating them, within the definition of property, as mere inanimate objects. It is a belief system whereby 'a gift that comes only once in the lifetime of the planet, namely ancient, native forests, representing over 100,000,000 years of complex biological evolution,'<sup>2</sup> may be clear cut for the short term profits of the land owner.

It embraces the maxim "one may do with one's own what one wills" in a totally inappropriate context, that disenfranchises the future to a wholesome environment.

The rape of the environment, a now somewhat familiar metaphor, can be further illustrated by the parallels between land ownership and marriage. According to Andrea Dworkin, "Marriage laws sanctified rape by reiterating the right of the rapist to ownership of the raped."<sup>3</sup> As the marriage certificate creates a property in the woman, "providing a legal qualification that a husband cannot rape his own wife,"<sup>4</sup> so the title deed creates a property in the land, providing a legal and irreproachable right to the rape of the environment.

Land ownership has a detrimental effect on the environment through the large unemployed landless or semi-landless population created by the present deliberate and profitable characteristics of real estate speculation and inequality of distribution. These characteristics are essential to a profitable land ownership system, because by with-holding the plentiful, good agricultural land from the poor, it for-

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# THE ECONOMICS OF TATION

Report by  
Anders Corr

ces them to become low paid wage earners for the rich.

Throughout the world tolls are being levied on the environment by countless unemployed landless families who, denied access to agricultural land, must seek survival in the fragile soils of native forests. According to Philip Johnston, President of CARE, an organization working on education and sustainable agriculture in developing nations,

"To feed their families, poor farmers in Nepal are clearing forests for farmland. The soil quickly becomes depleted and the farmers are forced to clear more land, cutting down even more trees. In the mountainous areas of Guatemala, landless farmers are forced to plant crops on steep hillsides where rain and wind sweep away topsoil, leaving the land useless."<sup>5</sup>

Brazil is an especially glaring example of needless destruction. Government land policy contributes to deforestation by conferring title to land upon the clearance of the forest. A cleared forest is legally an "improvement" on the land.

The inequality of land distribution is another leading cause of deforestation. Catherine Caufield, in her book *In the Rainforest* states:

"Brazil has 2.3 acres of farmland per person, which is more than the United States, the world's greatest exporter of food. Taking potential farmland into account but still leaving aside Amazonia, each person in Brazil could have 10 acres. Instead, 4.5% of Brazil landowners own 81% of the country's farmland, and 70% of rural households are landless."<sup>6</sup>

Many of Brazil's landless, facing starvation, clear the rain forest which in 1988 was 8 to 10% smaller than its original size.<sup>4</sup> It is ironic that the amount of Brazilian rainforest left, 3.8 million square kilometers,<sup>8</sup> is nearly equal to the amount of agricultural

land that is not being farmed but is being held out of production for speculative reasons by the few powerful landlords. If utilized and distributed in an equitable manner, this 3.35 million square kilometers<sup>9</sup> would virtually halt Brazil's destruction of the Amazon, the world's largest tropical moist forest.

In addition to creating a large class of desperate landless families, inequality of distribution impedes the worker, who by nature of her or his work has an individual and personal relationship with the land, air and water, from making decisions regarding the best way to treat the environment. Profit oriented orders issue forth from a landed class of owners who have no personal connection and understanding of the amount of environmental destruction that their policies, often carried out far away in corporate headquarters, actually perpetrate. With a system in which the worker was the decision maker and steward of the natural resources, the responsibility and benefits of environmentally sustainable industry and agriculture would be squarely on the shoulders of those with the closest relationship to the land.

THERE IS some reason to be hopeful. Among the vast number of allies that the struggle for sustainable life on this planet has are those working for justice in our systems of land tenure. Joshua Karliner, in his *Political Ecology and U.S. Foreign Policy* states that "Peasant movements fighting for land redistribution ... may become the fundamental force that can reverse the surging tide of rainforest destruction in Central America. For while they are not driven strictly by ecological considerations, genuine land reform movements are inherently environmental movements in that they seek to bring food production out of the forests and off the hillsides."<sup>10</sup>

Changing the perceptions and practices of our systems of land tenure and ownership are fraught with political difficulties. Karliner explains: "Gruesome stories abound of peasant communities that were literally blown away for organizing resistance to cattle ranchers who were evicting them from their land and pushing them deeper into the rainforest.

In the mid-1960s' for example, Guatemalan peasants organized to keep their land. An armed guerrilla movement emerged at the edge of the rainforest to challenge both the government and the ranchers.

"In response, a U.S. Special forces team directed a Guatemalan counterinsurgency campaign that used

Continued on Back Page▶

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# Trumped by the market

HE WAS lionised in the Eighties as the man with the Midas touch. He had an ego to match the gullibility of the bankers who could not wait to pour money into his hands to finance the next deal.

Donald's name was magic, and he made sure everyone knew it: TRUMP went up in lights, just to remind an awestruck public that the boy had made it Big.

With an inherited \$25m, he went on a spending spree, financing acquisitions with borrowings and using the escalating value of property as collateral.

According to estimates by *Forbes* magazine, assets worth \$3.7 bn compare with \$3.2 bn he owes. With declining values, Trump is heading for a negative net worth, while struggling to generate cash to pay the interest on his loans.

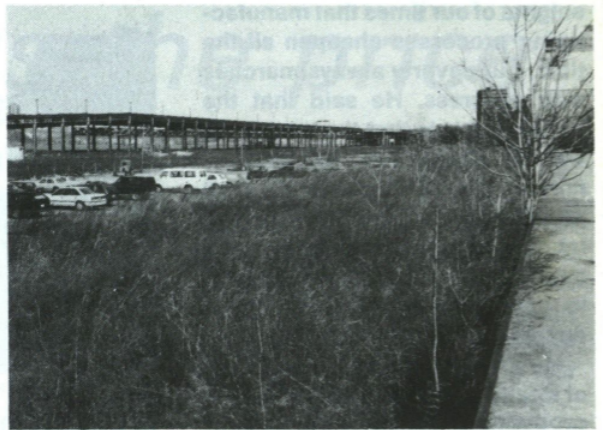
Trump placed himself on the classic escalator. Property prices were supposed to rise fast enough to cover the cost of borrowings. He paid little attention to history, which is full of land booms — and slumps.

Now Donald Trump is trying to keep his dream afloat by selling bits and pieces to pay his creditors.

Should we care about the fallen idol? Yes, because his personal fate is tied up with the social welfare of Manhattan, where he worked most of his deals.

SYMBOLIC of the man — and the Eighties — is the 100-acre derelict site on the west side, the biggest drain on Trump's cash flow.

When he bought it for \$110m in 1985, the



• One-hundred acre disaster — Trump's controversial site

Penn Central trains had already stopped shunting into the yards alongside the Hudson River.

Trump values the land at \$650m. Last year *Forbes* estimated the site as worth about \$200m. How do we explain the enormous discrepancy? Differences in expectations.

Donald wanted to build Trump City there, with buildings offering 14.5m square feet of rentable space, including a shopping mall and a 150-storey tower. Wealthy nearby residents objected.

In March, he announced revised plans in an effort to win support from the city government and civic groups. Under a tentative compromise, the developments had collapsed to 8.3m square feet, to include 1.8m square feet of motion picture and TV studios.

Rental income has been drastically revised down, along with the capital value of the site.

Trump may be struggling with his bankers, but so far no-one has pointed out that he and his kind are not the real victims of the economic crash.

The artistry of his land deals caused the price of real estate to soar and led the economy into a price-and-cost structure that could not be sustained.

Manhattan is a granite outcrop, but Trump built his glitzy towers on the quicksand of speculative values.

When the market could take no more, his empire had to crash.

## ◀From Page 57

helicopter gunships, fighter bombers, and napalm to destroy a 500-person guerrilla insurgency. It is estimated that the army killed an additional 6,000 to 8,000 people in the process. Similar conflicts occurred in Nicaragua and Honduras, and — with less violence — in Costa Rica.<sup>11</sup>

Regardless of the consequences, the struggle for equitable systems of land tenure go on, and where victories have been won, there also have been victories for the environment. During the first five years

after the Nicaraguan revolution, the Sandinista government instituted a program of land reform which successfully halted all rainforest colonization projects.<sup>12</sup>

The struggles of Appalachian farmers to preserve their lands from large coal companies in Kentucky, Brazilian rubber tappers to continue their sustainable cultivation of the Amazon, and Hopi Indians to keep Big Mountain from the steel jaws of the uranium mining companies are lights in the darkness. Support for these and other just systems of land tenure is support for a healthy environment.