

HISTORICAL turning points are viewed either as revolutionary (Marxism) or social crises that need to be contained (Conservatism).

They might more usefully be characterised as synoptic moments. This draws attention to the public's need to engage in a debate about the nature of their predicaments, to fathom the direction in which they wish their communities to move.

Issues which are normally excluded from public discourse intrude into the collective consciousness. Notably, this is the case with respect to the vexed question of the ownership and use of land and natural resources. We should not be surprised, for the modern era has displayed an irrational determination to exclude a permanent solution to people's natural rights to land; so "the land question" must feature as an intrusive element in synoptic moments.

THE WORLD is currently in the midst of such a moment.

One of the architects of this moment is Mikhail Gorbachev, who as head of the Soviet Communist Party realised that "we couldn't go on living like this". He adds in his memoirs: "This understanding was the starting-point for everything. And one should not imagine it as a 'sudden revelation'...I won't claim that I entered my new office with a detailed action plan in my briefcase, but I had a pretty clear idea of the first steps to be taken."

Post-Cold War introspection exposed the flaws in the command economy. But capitalism was not to enjoy its triumph for long. Conventional market economics had no answer for the long-running disaster in Japan, the Asian implosion, the Russian collapse and this year's crisis in Brazil.

For most of the time, the people responsible for the market economy are not willing to acknowledge that the primary reason for the persistent failure of public policy is the unwillingness to accept that the market in land and natural resources is the major destabilising force.

We believe that the following statement could withstand the forensic examination of scholars: the primary constraint on civilisations over the past four millennia has been the diversion into private pockets of the net income that is needed to underwrite the full development of arts and sciences.

Culture has been impoverished because publicly created value - what we today call the rent of land and natural resources - is hijacked by a small number of people. The outcome has been the perversion of culture, the suppression of latent human potential and the contortion of societies into systems driven by the logic of conflict.

To preserve this disgraceful state of affairs, language and laws were fashioned to lull people into a semi-comatose state. Periodically, however, a fortuitous convergence of events drags people out of Dreamland and into the crystal clear pools of time that encourage deeper reflection.

IN THE PAST it was the political establishment - the landowning class - which curtailed discussions about property rights in land.

As a class, landowners no longer exercise direct power over the legal process. Nevertheless, late 20th century society is still not able to disentangle itself from the legacy of the 18th and 19th centuries.

But buried deep in our collective unconscious is the knowledge inherited from our primordial past. Once upon a time we did take for granted the right to enjoy the use of land. This use right was codified to ensure survival over tens of thousands of years of human evolution.

The principles of social fairness and ecological efficiency were embedded in the customs of the clans, before being betrayed with the onset of what we call civilisation.

The central challenge for reformers today lies in the excavation of those codes and their reformulation to meet the needs of people in the 21st century.

Manchester sociologist Simon Miller has noted the significance of synoptic moments. It is at these points in time that societies seek to modernise.

Dreamland

But at the same time, some people emerge to proclaim their rights to land, which they usually articulate in terms of the revival of folk memories.

Miller views such groups as romantics. He believes that the scholars who have researched folklore histories romanticise the past by distorting the facts. His case study is Mexico. With the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, President Salinas decided that it was time to scrap Article 27 of the Constitution which gave people the right to land. This right originated with Zappata's movement, which demanded "land and liberty". Predictably, says Miller, a group would emerge to oppose the modernisation project by claiming that removing the constitutional right to land was a denial of national identity.

The Zapatistas who took to arms did favour modernisation; but not at the expense of the denial of their right to land. Have they embarked on a futile escapade, romanticising the pre-conquest society in which people exercised traditional rights to the land that was confiscated by the Spaniards? The land rights campaign is not restricted to Mexico.

- In South America, Brazilian peasants are intensifying their demands for the right to settle on the vast areas of fertile, under-used land.
- In Africa, attempts to redefine land rights in countries like Uganda, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa preoccupy governments. The debates lead in different directions. Mozambique opposes World Bank efforts to privatise the land. South Africa seeks to accommodate traditional rights while consolidating the freehold mentality inherited from the apartheid regime.
- In Europe, the British government has accepted the need to define land reform for Scotland.
- In Asia, the discourse takes several forms. In the Philippines disobedience discloses the profound discontent of landless peasants.
- Australia and New Zealand, a more successful campaign is being deployed by aboriginal peoples and Maoris to re-assert their traditional right to land.
- Russia has to redesign itself entirely. Under President Yeltsin, Russia has been compliant in adopting a constitution and laws that accommodate the wishes of its mentors in the West. And yet, the modernisation project stumbled on rights to land and the related tax policy. Russia's political opposition could not stomach the primitive freehold model which was on offer. Were the Deputies in the Duma romantics who opposed modernisation for the sake of being bloody-minded? Or were they trusting their gut instincts until they could articulate a coherent programme of reforms faithful to their history while facilitating the future?



Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost was seminal in opening up the '90s as a synoptic point in history

IN THE PAST, synoptic moments were allowed to glide into history without fulfilling people's expectations.

The opportunity of a substantive reconstruction of France in the 1790s was missed. Similarly, the Founding Fathers failed to construct a constitution consistent with the need for a sustainable society in the New World.

The past two centuries have seen valiant attempts at articulating the set of rights to land which corresponded to the new economy based on the factory mode of production. The most notable effort was in the British Isles (1880-1910). Hopes were dashed in every case.

But, if we learn the lessons, we can now redeem the past.

There are distinctive qualities about society at the turn into the 20th century, notably globalisation and the transformation of workplace practices initiated by the micro chip. But we should not be deceived by external appearances. The underlying realities remain constant. People need to work and eat; they need to occupy a space and they yearn to enjoy freedom without interference from others. They continue to harbour the psychic need to enjoy the landscape of their birth and to share in the rewards that come with participation in civic institutions.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment saw that the challenge was to correctly define the relationship between the individual and the community; and the individual and the environment. That challenge remains valid to this day.

- We still have to formulate the mechanism that enables every citizen to know that he and she has not been deprived of the equal right to enjoy the bounty of nature.
- We still have to define the terms under which both the individual and society may use the natural environment to fulfill current needs while preserving similar opportunities for future generations.

These issues will not be resolved until we determine the character of the society that we want. It is premature to dismiss visions as romantic just because they are articulated by marginalised groups who seek to define an agenda that challenges the interests of those who control the social system.

THE REBELLIONS of land rights activists remind us that existing laws are deficient.

The sacred documents tease the mothers of Africa and South America who cannot put enough food into the bellies of their children. Article 3 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person". This is a corruption of the natural rights philosophy formulated by John Locke who knew that life and liberty were meaningless if they were disconnected from land. That is why he defined "Life, liberty and estate" as everyone's natural right. Modern constitutions will remain seriously deficient until that one word - Land - is written back into people's rights.

It is incumbent on scholars to explore the past in order to provide a hard-headed assessment of the social processes that enabled "pre-civilised" peoples to evolve cultures in all their rich and resilient varieties.

Politicians must develop strategies for translating the eternal verities into the rules that would enable people to prosper within their confined space on earth. Romantic though they may appear from the slogans on their banners, the dispossessed will always be the first to recognise the moments in history when they can emerge from Dreamland to remind us that they have not abandoned their right to a place under the sun.