

GUEST COLUMNIST

'People values'— and the power over people

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THE ISSUE of land ownership is political dynamite, because it implies power and wealth.

We usually hear about land in the rural context, where food is grown. We understand that if the peasants have no right of access to land they starve. We do hear of people starving in Africa, in Asia, and we're led to believe that the people have no good land.

The World Bank reported in 1975 from a study of 83 countries like India, Honduras, El Salvador—African, Asian, South American countries—that slightly over 3% of all landholders control almost 80% of farmland. An extreme example was the poorest state in India, Bihar, where 90% of the 53m. people live off the land and three-quarters of the cultivators own less than 1% of the land.

In Honduras only 667 families and two banana companies own 85% of the cultivated land. Much of the prime land of the large family estates either lies idle or is used for cattle raising. Three-quarters of the population of almost 3m. struggle for survival on the remaining land, most of it mountainous.

In Brazil a mere 1% of the farms take up over 43% of total farmland. In contrast, 50% of the farms are left with under 3% of the land.

Enrique Penalosa of Colombia, Head of the UN Habitat Conference here in Vancouver in 1976,

said that for the last 300 years the burning question in S. America had been rural land reform. When the people become urban, he said, the burning question in S. America will be urban land reform.

But land ownership is even now **primarily** an urban issue, since most of the world's people are now urbanized.

Urban land values are people values. They arise because of the presence of agglomerations of people. One who first recognized this as important for urban studies was Ebenezer Howard, a shorthand court reporter! You will find his views in *Garden Cities of Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Howard wove into his plan for future urban places the idea that urban values should be siphoned into the public treasury so that the very values arising from the presence of people should be used to pay the costs that also arose from the presence of the people—the cost of water, solving special health problems, disposal of sewage, and so on. Howard picked up this idea from an American, Henry George.

Urban land values are people values. People go to a certain place because it offers good possibilities for production or exchange. Businessmen bid to occupy the best, most accessible sites just as farmers bid to occupy the most fruitful acres.

Only if we understand the

magnitude of land values in the city can we get any conception of the meaning of land ownership. We in the city tend to link land ownership to the farmer who owns 100 acres, 1,000 acres, maybe 5,000 acres in the Cariboo. All we have, if anything, is a city lot. But the value of an acre of land surrounded by people is many times worth what most of us will ever own, and control. Acres are meaningless. One hundred thousand acres in the Scottish highlands are worth less than ten acres in central London. It is still true that "To own land in London is to possess considerable power over the activities of its citizens. . . . However diverse, however magnificent, however national or even global in importance London may be, the fact is that most of it stands on land owned by private individuals." Arguments about the state of the urban environment ". . . lead back to one essential question, the control of land."

This power was established in similar ways almost everywhere, such as the kings' grants—land titles by "force and fraud," as one author put it. That's why land ownership is political dynamite. It's control over life itself—which does not square with the general belief that all people have the same right to own the earth. Our system of land ownership is a deficient attempt to reconcile the need for individual security with the recognition of these common rights.