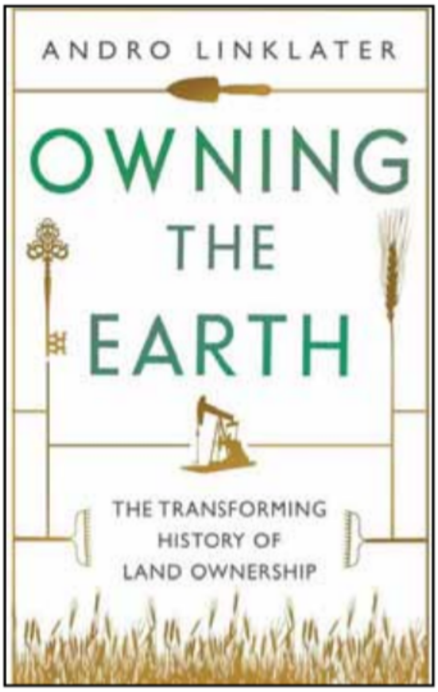

OWNING THE EARTH
THE TRANSFORMING HISTORY OF LAND OWNERSHIP
BY ANDRO LINKLATER
Reviewed by Lasse S. Andersen

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Surveying the world before the year 1800, most of the world's land was held either collectively by various traditional bands and societies or corporately by the higher establishments of church and crown. Land was embedded in conditional tenures, held in *usufruct*, and subject to rules and restrictions defined by the societies that inhabited and controlled the territory to which it belonged. In just two centuries, however, this situation has been radically transformed by the seemingly unstoppable force of the most consequential idea in modern history: The concept of exclusive, individual property in land.

Such argues Andro Linklater, the Scottish (yet Kent-based) historian, whose final work *Owning the Earth* (2013) was published just months before he died in 2013. It stands as a monument to a lifetime of research into the history of the transforming power of landownership. His first foray into this topic, entitled *Measuring America* (2002), explored the largest ever land sale in history, the carving up of the American West in the two decades after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, which saw 13,8 million acres of public land being sold for the average price of less than $1.70.

This book traces the global reverberations of this transformation; a transformation that dwarves in importance any of the modern political revolutions, and which has spread like a viral infection across the globe.

Linklater's go-to metaphors are epidemiological, and his position is one of deep ambivalence. Unarguably, private landownership has laid waste to whole civilisations and displaced entire peoples – often eradicating them from the face of the earth. But it has also generated an unprecedented degree of prosperity and personal freedom, protecting it with democratic institutions. It is both the most destructive and creative cultural force ever unleashed, capable of reshaping individuals and societies in its own image wherever it takes hold. The essential truth that *power follows property*, which the English republican James Harrington was the first to formulate and theorise in the 17th century, is still fundamentally correct, and for the sake of democracy, Linklater argues, 'a realistic scenario for 2050 has to consider how the earth will be owned'. Because ultimately, private property is a force more powerful than democracy.

Linklater's narrative is populated with a wealth of familiar and unfamiliar characters drawn from all over the world, but at its core it is about the rise and fall of the best (or least bad) form of private landownership: the property-owning democracy – a vision of society which emanated from Britain, from the Levellers and Diggers in particular, but which received its most exemplary formulation and implementation in the thoughts and actions of Thomas Jefferson.

It is a story replete with missed opportunities, deep historical ironies, and unintended consequences. The danger of private property is that it tends towards undermining the egalitarian and democratic society which it engenders and supports only as long as ownership is sufficiently distributed. And Jefferson was aware of the danger, arguing for distributive inheritance laws and writing to James Madison from pre-revolutionary France that 'the earth belongs in usufruct to the living.' In the end, however, when he presided as President over the sale of vast amounts of public land he failed to act on this principle. Had the land been sold on leasehold tenures rather than freehold, which Linklater assures us was 'not unthinkable' given Jefferson's views, the rights of future generations to a stake in the soil would have been better secured. Two centuries later a similar opportunity presented itself when the Soviet Union collapsed and a transition to a market economy was required. Thirty distinguished economists from the West wrote an open letter advising President Gorbachev not to sell off the land, because in the long term the superior economic solution was to charge rent for it. "Their argument," Linklater insists, "was precisely the same as Jefferson's: leasing the land would allow future generation to enjoy a rising income from its growing value, while the sale of it would give a small gain but allow speculators to make the largest profit." Alas, this was yet another failed opportunity.

The centuries between these two enormous land-sales were marked by numerous minor land-reform moments all over the world, breaking down old feudal-like structures with varying success and unleashing the creative power of private property.

The ideology of the independent citizen as the bedrock of society helped the revolution along, especially in British settler colonies such as Australia and New Zealand, where it gave rise to institutions more democratic than those of Great Britain itself. The price was the displacement of the original peoples whose homeland was declared *terra nullus*.

The most interesting aspect of the book is the description of the tension between property-owning democracy, which requires a wide distribution of land, and the rivals to this egalitarian outcome, both past and present. Linklater dwells in particular on two major setbacks, both relating to America, and both of which cases where private property was dislodged from the egalitarian ideal with calamitous consequences.

One obvious setback occurred in the American South where, instead of the evaporation of the institution of slavery, which had been the vain hope of Jefferson, it was his own republican vision of independent proprietorships that evaporated, being replaced by the rapid spread of the large-plantation system, which facilitated the migration of slavery as an institution to the new territories south of Virginia, especially in the decades after Jefferson's death in 1826. The Civil War was the inevitable result of this regression. And the defeat of the Confederacy, which could have sparked a new beginning, marked yet another failed opportunity. The political demand for a comprehensive redistribution of land to the emancipated former slaves was crushed as southern plantation-owners were restored to their lands during the period of Reconstruction.

In more modern times, Linklater focusses on the sudden and unfortunate *volte-face* of American foreign policy that occurred as a consequence of the Cold War. The central character in this story is the enigmatic US civil servant, the Georgist sympathiser Wolf Ladejinsky, who is arguably the most influential person that you have never heard of. Rising through the ranks of the Department of Agriculture, Wolf Ladejinsky, a Ukrainian refugee from Bolshevik collectivisation, became the organising genius behind the post-war reforms in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, which redistributed land on a massive scale and created the material foundation for the stable path towards prosperity and democratic institutions.

From the 1950s, however, this strategy fell into disrepute as the sanctity of private property was buttressed in the ideological war with communism, rendering all redistributive schemes much less palatable to the Western powers. Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, the elected President of Guatemala, was the first to feel the consequences of this abandoned faith in land reform when his new government was overthrown in 1954 in a CIA attempt to prevent the United Fruit Company from having its vast uncultivated landholdings (four hundred thousand acres) seized and redistributed. The safety of these American assets now mattered more than the democratic future of a nation in which 70% of the arable land was controlled by 2% of the population. In that same year, President Ngo Dinh Diem took power in South Vietnam and promised to distribute land to the peasants in the wake of the collapse of French rule. Ladejinsky became his personal adviser and quickly looked for ways to achieve this result.

But his usual way of going about it – expropriating excess land from absentee owners in exchange for bonds - had now fallen out of favour, not least because of the draconian collectivisation of land that was being carried out in the North by Ho Chi Minh. In this context, President Diem opted for a much less ambitious redistribution plan, failing to win support for his regime from the largely landless population. Landlordism soon became a strategic ally in the South and land reform was no longer the policy of the US State Department.

This trend towards the by-passing of land reform was then further reinforced, Linklater argues, by both theoretical and technological developments. A general authoritarian turn occurred within the theory of development, beginning with Walt W. Rostow's influential 1956 paper '*The Take-Off into Self-Sustained Growth*', which suggested that developing countries could become prosperous through the promotion of elite-driven industrialisation alone. As Linklater writes: 'A small industrializing group could quickly achieve what land reform only hoped to do with difficulty over time. Jefferson's democratic distribution of land was irrelevant'. As this theory rose to become orthodoxy in the 1960s, it became entwined with the strong belief that any kind of capitalist development, even when brought about through state or elite direction, would generate enough wealth to eventually bring about democratic reforms. But only after a necessary period of 'authoritarian transition', as Samuel Huntington argued in his *Political Order in Changing Societies* from 1968.

Henceforth, the US State Department was committed to a development strategy of backing strong rulers wherever the threat of unrest manifested itself in nations of very unequal landownership. In Iran, for instance, the land-reform movement that began under US pressure in the 1950s, and which was masterminded by the radical Iranian economist Hassan Arsanjani, ran into the sand when the newly independent peasants, largely in the Azerbayjan region, showed signs of waning deference to the regime, which in turn gradually allied itself with the old landlords instead – without losing US support.

The downside of this strategy, however, lay in the poor productivity of agriculture that landlordism often entailed, given that large absentee landlords tended to maximise rents rather than profits. But this obvious economic problem was then subsequently solved by the advent of Norman Borlaug's Green Revolution, which prevented millions of people from dying of starvation, but which also changed the nature of agriculture in such a way that, unintentionally, it enabled the rulers of developing countries to side-step land reform without having to forgo on the economic and social benefits of agricultural productivity.

In hindsight, Linklater argues, it is easy to see that democracy was never the likely result of an authoritarian transition, and the fact that the extremely unequal landownership in the Levant and Middle East was never addressed properly meant that the Persian Spring and the later Arab Spring, which was taking place just as he was researching his book, was unlikely to produce stable democratic results. Democracy was unable to thrive in places where the ownership of the earth was not widely shared

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– a truth whose relevance also applied to the seemingly more entrenched democracies of the West.

As the 2008 financial crash revealed, private landownership could produce extremely perverse results when the ideology of homeownership combined with the caprice of financial capital to generate credit-fuelled boom-and-bust cycles. Instead of producing independent citizens, this situation only produced indebted consumers, operating within a political system dependent upon maintaining the inflationary growth of rising property values. Thus, while the ideal of a property-owning democracy was rendered uneconomic and dangerous in developing countries, the financial liberalisation of the past fifty years in effect undermined the ideal in developed countries.

It is difficult to do justice to the scope and ambition of Linklater's book, which is worth reading exclusively for the wealth of historical detail and the surprising connections and juxtaposition. Ultimately, however, the book remains somewhat undertheorized, and the impressive range of material serves to disguise that Linklater doesn't have any answer to the question of how the earth should be owned in the future. What he does have is a strong scepticism about the "merely economic" understanding of landownership and a deep nostalgia for the pre-modern way of seeing property in land as something more conditional than a commodity, as something embedded in society rather than owned.

Regarding the Georgist remedy, he is clear about the justice of reclaiming the rent of land for the benefit of society, either through taxation or leasehold tenures. But in his brief discussion of Henry George, which is regrettably his only engagement with 19th century Britain, he expresses great doubts about the feasibility of assessing the unimproved value of land.

The fact that land value taxation has already been implemented in numerous countries is regrettably unexplored, but this lacuna is perhaps less regrettable than the fact that he so readily concedes the economic argument to the proponents of exclusive, individual property in land.

The taxation of land values is not only the economist's favourite tax. It is also a practical way of actually enforcing that conditionality of private property in land that Linklater longs to return to – without knowing how.

FRIDAY MEETINGS AT MANDEVILLE PLACE
Friday study groups at Mandeville Place will continue into the Autumn Term.

As usual please keep yourself updated with news about the Friday study groups on the Henry George Foundation website.

Please go to:

www.henrygeorgefoundation.org/events/friday-events

OPEN DAY EVENT 2021
The annual Henry George Foundation Open Day Event has now been scheduled.

The 2021 Open Day will be taking place on Saturday the 18th of September. With Great Britain still enduring the prolonged consequences of the Covid19-pandemic this year's Open Day event will not be held at Mandeville Place but move to the online platform Zoom to which we have now grown accustomed.

This year's event will indulge participants with these themes:

"The Land Question and Community"
Joseph Milne will consider how the privatisation of land, the rise of modern industry, and the evolutionary ideologies of progress in the 19th century destroyed the self-sufficiency of communities and turned free people into wage labourers.

David Triggs: *"George, Marx, Socialism and Money"*

"It's a beginning: The Land Value Tax in Baden-Wuerttemberg"
Dirk Lohr will take us through the successful campaign for the introduction of LVT in Germany.

Andrew Purves: *"Singapore: Property State"*

Frank Peddle and William Peirce: *"A celebration of the publication of The Annotated Works of Henry George Volume IV: Protection and Free Trade."*

"Generating Awareness of Henry George's Principles of Cooperative Individualism": Edward Dodson will transcend the traditional labels of 'Georgism' and the 'Single Tax' by exploring the principles of cooperative individualism.