



THE NEW ENCLOSURE
BY BRETT CHRISTOPHERS
Reviewed by Lasse S. Andersen

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An encouraging phenomenon in today's fraught political landscape is the steady appearance of more and more scholarly books on the subject of land and housing. What in previous centuries was called the "land question" seems to have returned to some extent, fuelled by the economic turmoil of the past decade and, more specifically, by the crisis in housing affordability which has only been magnified by an economic recovery based on low interest rates and quantitative easing. Despite this resurgence of attention, however, the importance of land is still struggling to make a real impact on the thinking of the 'progressive' elites in politics and academia. Labour's two most recent election manifestos, for instance, failed to mention land or land rent, and the burgeoning literature on neoliberalism is still largely blind to the unique significance of land, despite the fact that the biggest privatisation by far since Thatcher came to power in 1979 has been the gradual sale of about 2 million hectares of public land – roughly 10% of Great Britain's landmass.

It is with the intent to both explain and remedy this intellectual lacuna that Brett Christophers has written *The New Enclosure*, an impressively detailed and comprehensive exposé of forty years of land privatisation in Britain, couched in a language that seems designed to resonate with critics of capitalism on the left, perhaps especially those who are still attached to some version of Marxism. The ideological framework that Christophers adopts himself is best described as a loose kind of Marxism, relying in particular on three modern interpreters of Marx – Karl Polanyi, David Harvey and Doreen Massey – but also on Adam Smith, whom we are told would enjoy this company much better than the contemporary land privatizers in the Adam Smith Institute.

More than an ideological defence of land nationalisation, this book is an argument against privatization as the default alternative to public ownership, and its great strength is the detail with which it documents the failure of privatization to deliver on its central promises, especially the promise of increased efficiency in land-use.

The private sector, he argues, is arguably even more disposed to hoarding land than the public sector, with private developers being able to target the construction of new homes to the most profitable 'absorption rate' rather than actually satisfying the demand for housing. There is simply a lack of compulsion in the existing system, since vacant land, even with a planning permission, is neither subject to the Council Tax, nor risks forfeiting its planning permission. In fact, planning permissions, which are increasingly forthcoming despite claims to the contrary from developers, provide the opposite of a compulsion to build, given that the rise in the value of a plot of land that a planning permission engenders allows developers to immediately bank a wind-fall gain, postpone development and possibly leverage the land for further purchases. Moreover, while there is a lack of compulsion in the private sector, a new new kind of compulsion has emerged in the public sector. A large portion of the book is dedicated to explaining this phenomenon.

Ever since Thatcher inaugurated the neoliberal era in British and began downsizing the public sector, the culture in and around Whitehall has been dominated by an ideological compulsion to identify excess public land and sell it. The operating assumption behind this compulsion, according to Christophers, is the idea that the allocative function of the market is always superior to what can be achieved through bureaucratic or democratic discretion. Land held in public ownership is thus *prima facie* presumed less efficiently used, and once 'surplus' land has been identified, which it inevitably will be, the default position has been to dispose of it rather than, for instance, reallocate it within the public sector or lease it to social entrepreneurs for non-economic reasons.

This neoliberal compulsion to sell land of course stands in direct contrast to the compulsory purchasing powers embodied in the 1947 Town and Planning Act, through which the public acquired vast amounts of land (at its existing use-value) to build council houses, public transport and New Towns. A clear strain of nostalgia for this post-war moment is detectable throughout the book, and the old Labour objective of land nationalisation does indeed figure as one of the alternatives to privatisation that Christophers wishes his readers to consider. However, Christophers is not arguing in favour of simply nationalising land. What he is ultimately against is the commodification of land, and public ownership is not necessarily a guarantee against that as he demonstrates with reference to the many local authorities that have been compelled (by Whitehall) to behave like profit maximising property companies.

What he wants to see is for land to become embedded in more non-profit institutions controlled by the people who use it. For Christophers, land is somewhat equivalent to a public good; a public good that provides benefits to the community through its accessibility, which will gradually diminish in proportion to the spread of exclusive ownership. Rather than a boon, private land is a trade-off that gets progressively worse as the balance shifts in its favour.

As a possible alternative to privatisation, he highlights the idea of a Community Land Trust, known primarily from the USA, which takes land into community ownership and develops it for the benefit of the local area on a non-profit basis. There are already about 200 of these in the UK, and by decoupling the ownership of houses from that of the land, they are able to create genuinely affordable housing. In a sense, these CLTs are nothing new. They are in effect smaller urban versions of the Garden Cities described

by Ebenezer Howard in 1898, and as such they represent one way of clawing back the rent of land for the community – in this case a particular sub-community. However, the fact that Christophers seems to prefer appropriating the rent of land through non-market solutions such as these CLTs or the public planning system means that it is doubtful what he thinks about implementing a general land value tax on all land. I suspect that he finds it a less than optimal solution for what he wants to achieve, given that such a tax, which of course provides exactly the compulsion that he rightly sees is missing in the private sector, is perfectly compatible with the privatisation of land. Presumably, an LVT still relies too heavily on the market to determine the best use of land and still implicitly values efficiency higher than other goals. In short, simply improving the economic efficiency of land-use, both in private and public hands, falls short of providing the public control and access to land that he finds desirable.

Aside from providing much valued insight into the privatization of land, Christophers also attempts to explain why it has been carried out almost unnoticed and unopposed. If this biggest privatisation ever is equivalent to a new enclosure, where are the protesters? Where are the modern-day Diggers and Levellers? Partly, this is a question that arises from his commitment to the Marxist tradition, especially as mediated through the historical work of Polanyi, who believed – based on a study of the original enclosure movement – that land was such an impossible and fictitious commodity that its privatisation was bound to be met by spontaneous resistance from those dispossessed. No stretch of the imagination, however, can pretend that anything like this has happened. Christophers provides four reasons why:

Firstly, unlike say BT or RBS, the 2 million hectares were not privatised at once. Instead, the process has been long and piecemeal and, thus, less visible. Death by a thousand budget cuts.

Secondly, the Right to Buy scheme introduced by Thatcher, through which so much public land has been sold off, brilliantly made those who would perhaps naturally be politically opposed to it the immediate and exclusive beneficiaries. In other words, a clever Tory policy of concentrated benefits and dispersed costs.

Thirdly, the fact that local authorities has often been constrained to act just as socially irresponsible as private landlords has generated a widespread dissatisfaction with public ownership according to Christophers, diminishing their sense of the land as their land and thus their willingness to defend it.

Fourthly, Labour governments from 1979 to 1997 successfully drove land off the political and academic agenda – and the subsequent New Labour government, which had abolished Clause 4 from its programme, failed to resurrect interest in land.

There are things to learn and to agree with in this book, and the depth of research should be valuable to anyone interested in land issues. However, one thing is disappointing (yet revealing): The apparent unwillingness to attribute responsibility for the lack of interest in land to his own tribe. After all, Marxism more often than not lumps together profit with land rent as equally unearned forms of incomes and thus loses sight of the uniqueness of land itself. 📌



HGF BRIEFING NOTES

FRIDAY MEETINGS AT MANDEVILLE PLACE

As mentioned by David Triggs in his *Message From The Honorary President* the Friday meetings in this spring term will focus on *Protection and Free Trade* by Henry George. A book highly relevant and directly applicable to the political and economic uncertainty surrounding Brexit. The course is presented by David Triggs and will take place in the evening time slot, 6:40 - 8:10 P.M.

The *Protection and Free Trade* course will cover:

- Trade and Civilisation
- The Role of Trade in the Production and Distribution of Wealth
- Barriers to trade, the historical roots
- Trade and Protection
- Tariffs and Smuggling
- Tariffs, Production and Producers
- Tariffs for Revenue
- Exports and Imports
- The Encouragement of Industry
- The Home Market and Home Trade
- Confusions Arising from the Use of Money in Trade
- Wage Levels and Trade
- Free Trade, Socialism and Capitalism
- Phoney Free Trade

Continuing from the Autumn 2019 term the afternoon study group sessions from 2:30 to 4:00 P.M. will be diving further into the new *Annotated Works of Henry George* under the headline *Our Land and Land Policy*. These afternoon Friday meetings will be led by frequent Land&Liberty contributor Tommas Graves.

We encourage our Land&Liberty readers to attend and continue to spread the word about all Friday activities at Mandeville Place.

FRONT PAGE LAYOUT

With this issue we are introducing a few minor changes to our current Land&Liberty front page design.

In this winter issue – as in our future issues – we will present all primary contributions on the front page of the magazine along with the corresponding contributor names.

Still, we have aspired to keep the front page modern, minimalist and recognizable to our loyal and much-treasured Land&Liberty subscribers.

Just like the magazine itself we aim for all front pages to be both inspiring and subtle for our observant and perceptive readership.

Much time and effort goes into creating every issue of the magazine that you are holding in your hands. We want to use this opportunity to thank all our bright contributors. Last but not least, we also want to thank you for both reading and for continuously encouraging us with your constructive input and feedback. 📌