



THE POWER BROKER
BY ROBERT A. CARO

Reviewed by Lasse S. Andersen

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New York City has always occupied a special place within the movement for land value taxation. Not only was it the scene of Henry George's mayoral campaign of 1886 and subsequently the place of his tremendously well-attended funeral in 1897, but since the nineteenth century New York has also provided land reformers everywhere with a striking example of how urban expansion and municipal politics interact with the landscape and the land. Central Park in particular stands as a monument to an extraordinary sense of foresight and vision, as well as it provides an instantly familiar illustration of the fact that it is the land that increases in value when society develops, and that the most valuable aspect of land is its location. Indeed, Manhattan as a whole, with its famous, photogenic skyline, is a stunning demonstration of how a scarce supply of land can be counteracted by building upwards and conquering vertical space through the use of concrete and steel. With close to 1.7 million people living together on an island that is little more than 58 square kilometres, Manhattan is the quintessential, modern cityscape, with a population density that is surpassed only by places such as the Mong Kok district of Hong Kong. As such, it also provides some of the most striking cases of unearned income derived from the rising rental value of land, perhaps most famously the staggering wealth of the old, Episcopal parish Trinity Church on Broadway, which was founded in 1697, and which as the owner of fourteen acres of prime Manhattan land has a property portfolio today of more than six billion dollars.

While this might be an extreme example, the history of New York is in many ways simply the history of the modern world *in extremis*, with so much of Western civilisation being downstream what happens on Wall Street or 5th Avenue, perhaps especially in the twentieth century. This is undoubtedly also the case with the master builder Robert Moses (1888-1981), the man who more than anyone else is responsible for connecting the island of Manhattan with the surrounding boroughs of New York City, him being the driving force behind most of the bridges that today

span the Hudson and the East River, establishing the central nodes of the network of roads that provide access in and out of the city for millions of motorists every day. And because he built these structures in New York, Robert Moses became, through his influence and example, the father of the American expressway system, the system that connects city to city and city to suburb throughout the whole of the United States. Moses' influence and legacy is a testament to the fact that the true conquest of space that occurred in the twentieth century was not so much the conspicuous verticality of skyscrapers but the lateral expansion roadway, which among other things transformed human beings into routine commuters, living highly segregated lives in areas zoned for residence, commerce and industry.

In Robert Caro's *The Power Broker*, which celebrated its fifty-year publication day in 2024, the story of Robert Moses is wonderfully intertwined with the story of New York, indeed of America in the 20th century, and the book is effectively a biography of both the city and the man. For this reason and many more, it is justly considered to be among the best biographies ever written, perhaps rivalled only by Caro's subsequent biography of the life and times of Lyndon B. Johnson, of which the now octogenarian author is currently engaged in writing the fifth and final volume - out of a projected three volumes. In both of these massive biographies (*The Power Broker* is over 1200 pages long!), Caro is interested in political power - how it is acquired, used and abused by men who proved to be exceptionally skilled at seeking, finding and wielding it. In the case of Robert Moses, it is also an examination of how one man became so consumed with the pursuit of power that he grew increasingly blind to the misery and discontent that his decisions caused among the people, the very people whom his large-scale infrastructure projects were ostensibly intended to help. The fact that one man could have such an effect on the people, and also remain in power for more than forty years, is in itself an astonishing fact, and the marvellous thing about Caro's biography is that the source of his power is so thoroughly examined and exposed, with many insights to be gleaned of great relevance to anyone interested in land value taxation, as well as connected issues such as congestion pricing. For instance, when Moses very early in his career was planning to build Jones Beach on the southern coast of Long Island, he needed political approval to carry out this vast enterprise, which he secured in part by disclosing to the susceptible voters in the key committees where the access points to the beach would be located, thereby giving them the opportunity to buy the land before its value soared. Foreknowledge about land development, Robert Moses realised early on, could be used to grease the legislative process and thus become a source of power. Indeed, the existence of Jones Beach today is evidence of the political persuasiveness of being able to speculate on the rising land values caused by public investments in infrastructure.

The true source of Moses' power, however, was his ability to draft legislation in such a way that politicians only realised too late that they had handed him powers that they had never intended him to have. Through deceptive clauses hidden in seemingly irrelevant details and obscure reference, Moses was able to grant himself the power of eminent domain, a power he first used against the rich landowners of Long Island in order to create parks for the recreation-hungry masses, but which he over time increasingly used to demolish several middle or lower-class neighbourhoods in order to make way for another expressway through a densely populated area. He also used the same clever legal tactics to grant himself indefinite power over the public authorities with which he had built and then managed the bridges of New York,

authorities such as the Triborough Bridge Authority. Normally, these semi-public bodies or institutions would cease to exist once the bridge had been built and the bondholders had been paid, but Moses found a way to turn them into perpetual revenue-making machines for his own personal empire, with toll-money and bonds from one authority being used to fund other road construction projects elsewhere. In this way, Moses was liberated from seeking funds from the city, making him both independent of much of the political process and indispensable to cash-strung politicians with a desire to see things happen fast and, from their point of view, affordably. But this independence from the normal constraints of politics rendered the people of New York hostages to the whims and preferences of one peculiar man, who for idiosyncratic reasons had a strong dislike of public transport. To Robert Moses, the future of transportation was the private car.

Ironically, Moses never learned to drive himself, and in true aristocratic fashion he never really understood that cars would not remain the recreational vehicles of a predominantly leisured class but would instead rapidly become the required means of transportation for the working people, facilitating the necessary daily commute between home and work. Throughout his long career, during which he effectively managed to privatise (indeed, personalise) large aspects of New York's urban planning system, Moses remained a prisoner of an extremely car-centred dream about New York, one that finally crashed headlong into significant public opposition when he proposed in the 1960s to demolish a large slither of Greenwich Village in order to make way for another expressway, this time traversing the entire width of Manhattan. Sadly, it was only when his destructive methods affected this neighbourhood of mid-Manhattan affluence that the press awoke to the brutality of his ways. When it was the largely lower-class and immigrant community of East Tremont that was flattened, no such uproar ever materialised.

Robert Moses was an extremely flawed man, but Robert Caro's biography about him is so close to perfect that it has never been out of print for the past 51 years since its publication. Over the years, it has acquired a cult-like status, commanding deep respect for its wealth of detailed research from journalists as well as from historians and politicians. For land reformers of all persuasions there is a marvellous miscellany of details about land, land acquisition and land politics, so much so that it deserves to be read and discussed along with other great books about these topics. Part of the pleasure of reading the book is the palpable sense, evoked very skilfully by Caro, that things could easily have been different. If only Moses had redirected the wealth of his penny-empire into the construction of public transport, New York would today be a much less car-congested place. And if only the conquest of space would have focussed on the demand-side of the equation as well as the supply-side, then maybe New York would not simply have been a readily-available illustration of high land values but also a demonstration of the benefits of high land value taxation. The creative way in which Moses' raised a revenue his many projects, essentially without anyone taking notice for decades, is fascinating in itself, and the odd fact that he inadvertently developed a system of congestion pricing, creating a financial feedback-loop of roads, cars and tolls, is enough to recommend the book. 📖



HGF BRIEFING NOTES

HGF OPEN DAY EVENT

The 2025 HGF Open Day event will take place on Saturday the 20th of September. Please keep an eye on our website for details.

NEW LAND VALUE TAX WEBSITE

Though not directly affiliated with The Henry George Foundation of Great Britain we would certainly be amiss to not be mentioning a new website of likely interest to *Land&Liberty* readers.

With the internet domain www.landvaluetax.co.uk safely in hand a few good people have joined forces and created a clean, modern, easy-to-navigate website with the sole purpose of promoting land value taxation in its purest form.

The slogan "*Land Value Tax - Simple, fair and impossible to avoid*" is on point! And so is this advice from the site to LVT supporters:

The first rule of business is "stick to your core business". Wandering off is a recipe for getting into trouble.

You may have an axe to grind: "free the badger", "help the hedgehog", "heat pumps for all", "trees are for hugging", "bury carbon", "clean up our rivers", "use wool for insulation", "stop fracking", "wild meadows reduce stress", "end grouse shooting", "tax the rich", "leave oil in the ground", "nail the Normans", whatever.

Some, or all, of these may be very laudable - but for heaven's sake - don't dump them onto LVT or they will become hostages to fortune, there will be endless arguments (a presentation on LVT becomes an argument about grouse shooting!) and nothing will get done."

Here at *Land&Liberty* we welcome the site's ambition and rigour.

Go to: www.landvaluetax.co.uk

FRIDAY MEETINGS

The Friday Study Groups are an open, interactive, and dialogue-focused way to get introduced to the important work and ideas promoted by The Henry George Foundation of Great Britain.

The Afternoon Study Group with its regular timeslot from 2:30 P.M. to 4:00 P.M. is still led by Bart Dunlea.

Go to: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83880666680>

Meeting ID: 838 8066 6680
Passcode: 544247

The Evening Study Group has its timeslot from 6:45 P.M. to 8:15 P.M. The evening sessions are led by David Triggs.

Go to: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87944408537>

Meeting ID: 879 4440 8537
Passcode: 603155 📍