



**PROPERTY:
THE MYTH THAT BUILT THE WORLD
BY ROWAN MOORE**

Reviewed by Lasse S. Andersen

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There seems to be no shortage of books dedicated to addressing the mounting problems related to the housing crisis. Among the most recent spate of these is Rowan Moore's *Property: The Myth that Built the World*, which distinguishes itself by being both eminently readable and entirely forgettable. While it sets out to deliver an autopsy of the modern ideal of a property-owning democracy, as promised by Thomas Jefferson in the 1770s and promoted by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, the book's lack of analytical rigor means that it can best be described as a loose agglomeration of interesting anecdotes intermixed with episodes and ideas involving property and landownership, mostly drawn from the Anglophone world. Did you know, for instance, that New York's famous Co-Op City, a cluster of more than thirty concrete, cruciform, Corbusian carbuncles located in the northeast of the Bronx, was built on the site of Freedomland, a failed amusement park themed on American exceptionalism. As the world's largest housing co-operative, where fifteen thousand flats provide housing for a fraction of the median Manhattan price, Co-Op City stands as a bastion of affordability in a sea of rising inequality, a bastion built literally on the ruins of the American dream. And did you perhaps also know that the one-kilometre-long Karl-Marx-Hof in Vienna, a municipal monstrosity built during the city's short-lived experiment with social democracy after WWI, functioned as a socialist stronghold against fascism in the 1930s, with an arsenal of guns mounted on the balcony balustrades. Today, the building is still in use, but its "gardens and shared facilities" are now "generating an atmosphere of communal peacefulness that is at odds with its violent history." (p. 208).

Rowan Moore is a London-based architecture critic, and the book very much reflects the author's knowledge and interests. The book's influences are mostly community oriented urban theorists and planners, figures such as Lewis Mumford and the

Danish architect Steen Eiler Rasmussen, who warned against the horrors of suburban uniformity, the isolation of urban sprawl, and the petrol-powered misery of the car-centric city. The central argument of the book, which is never stated clearly, is that the modern concept of private property, and especially private property in land, can be a force for both good or bad, and that it is the right and duty of government to make sure that property serves the community rather than the other way around. The ideal of a property-owning democracy, in other words, requires property to be regulated, managed and, in some cases, requisitioned for the benefit of the public, rather than allowing its distribution and price to be determined by the market alone. Thatcher's right to buy scheme, which transferred much of the UK's public housing into private hands, was a one-time affair that cannot be repeated, and the present-day prospective pensioner's pursuit of a passive, 'buy to let' income is only making matters worse for the ones among the younger generations that can't seem to gain a foothold on the property ladder. For all her animosity towards inflation, Moore argues, there was one form of inflation that Thatcher and her ideological friends did not fear, namely, house price inflation, and ever since the 1980s, politicians have been reluctant to allow the property market to fall. Instead, politicians have attempted to ease first-time buyers onto the ladder by various financial and fiscal means, all of which are inflationary, creating a permanent, precarious tranche of new owners that act as a political bulwark against the threat of falling house prices and the potential of taxing the unearned increment of existing owners. Like depressingly few contemporary commentators, Moore has a keen eye for the self-defeating nature of many of the ways in which politicians prefer to address the housing crisis, subsidising demand through the tax system or a reform of credit rules only then to (quietly) realise that the rewards are disproportionately capitalised by existing landowners. Indeed, Moore's go-to metaphors are for obvious reasons drug or punch-bowl related.

The real villain of the book, however, is neither Mrs Thatcher nor any sitting politician, but the 17th-century English philosopher John Locke, who more than anyone else – if we are to believe Moore's pocket history of property – is responsible for the modern philosophy of property and the idea that there is such a thing as a natural right to own land exclusively. It was John Locke who persuaded the world that merely by mixing one's labour with the soil, it was possible to turn the land itself into private property. By twists and turns, this idea came to inform the enclosures of the commons on the English countryside, and through colonialism, which Moore argues is just another word for enclosures, the Lockian notion of property conquered the world at the expense on anyone or any group who didn't work or cultivate the soil in the way Western colonisers could recognise as productive. This historical narrative is the least persuasive part of the book, not least because it heaps too much blame on one man and one specific idea. Locke's labour theory of property was in fact quite idiosyncratic, and almost all influential thinkers coming after him, such as David Hume and Adam Smith, simply rejected it as absurd. Indeed, the outsized significance of John Locke is a mostly 20th century creation, one that owes a lot to an especially American effort to find a solid intellectual foundation for private property rights during the Cold War. Nonetheless, while to book is arguably too single in the choice of villain, the opposite is the case when it comes to the choice of intellectual heroes, where very discordant thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson, Karl Marx, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Henry George are all made out to travel on the same road towards a better future, albeit Marx has been seated safely in the back of the bus. Moreover, all of them failed to identify workable solutions to the housing crisis – Henry George

because he, Moore argues, both overestimated the revenue of a single tax and underestimated the difficulty of assessing land values. In reality, Moore argues, there is no one solution and no silver bullet. His preferred solution is instead to do as much as possible simultaneously on many different fronts, first of all to increase the supply of housing, both through a reform of the cumbersome and expensive UK planning system and through publicly funded building schemes such as the English and Scottish New Towns of the mid-20th century. And building public housing on London's cherished Green Belt is not off limits in his opinion, but preferably in a way that is not as hard on the eyes as Co-Op City in the Bronx.

Notably, Moore is also in favour of taxing land values, but only if he can be reassured that "taxes raised from me and my like would be well spent: on addressing housing need elsewhere, for example." (274). To this reader, at least, it is somewhat baffling why such a condition should only apply to a tax on the unearned increment of land, rather than simply to all taxation, but a good explanation is provided in the book's conclusion. Here the conversational tone that has characterised the narrative throughout is replaced by a more confessional style. As if one is suddenly transported to an AA meeting, the author suddenly stands up and announces that he himself has been drinking heavily from the proverbial punch bowl. "My name is Rowan Moore, and I am a millionaire," he writes, specifying that he presently owns "assets well over a million pounds sterling". The size of his wealth, however, is not the cause of his confession, but the source of it is, being almost exclusively the result of having "lived in a time and place in which the ownership of a home has been a ticket to an unearned and untaxed fortune." (273). It is at this point that one realises that a central motivation of the book is a kind of embarrassment of riches, brought on by the realisation that he has earned more by being a homeowner in the past thirty years than by being an architecture critic. The situation is reminiscent of Anthony Trollop's *The Warden* (1855), in which the honourable clergyman Mr Harding finds himself becoming increasingly embarrassed by the unearned income he receives from the lands of his Church. In the end, Mr Harding concludes that the money is best kept in a clergyman's pockets, and something similar indeed happens in Moore's book. After admitting that he in fact owns not only a flat in London but also a house in France and field in Sussex, Moore concludes that, until government begins to increase the supply of housing, he will "probably act much like other people who own: striving to protect my assets, aiming to get a high price when selling and a low one when buying." After all, family comes first, and he understandably wants to leave a share to his children, so that they at least can afford to ascend the property ladder. (275.)

This kind of honesty is refreshing, and the self-exposing attitude constitutes by far the best aspect of the book. In the end, Rowan Moore knows that he is himself one of the villains of his own book. He is well-aware that the enemies of solving the housing crisis can't be reduced to a group of right-wing Thatcherites, not to a mythical 1% of wealthy people. The enemies of any comprehensive solution is mostly well-meaning and well-to-do people who sincerely want to change things for the better but only insofar as it is on their own terms and doesn't affect either their children or their back yards negatively. It is a story as old as democracy, perhaps especially a property-owning one. 📍



A TRIBUTE TO MICHAEL LEAROYD (1944-2025)

Written by Gavin Kerr

Others who knew Michael for a lot longer than I did may already have offered tributes. But just in case you haven't yet received anything, here is what I've managed to come up with:

I first met Michael about 10 or 12 years ago when I started coming to HGF events at Mandeville Place. Michael's enjoyment at being involved with the organisation and running of the events came across very strongly, as did his keen interest in the work of Henry George and the subject of economic justice. He always made me feel welcome at these events, at a time when I didn't know many other Georgists and sometimes found it difficult to engage.

Michael had an insatiable appetite for online lectures, seminars, and workshops on a wide range of topics, and many a time I joined a late night meeting hosted in New York to find Michael already in attendance. But it was only when I myself became involved with the running of the Henry George Foundation that I got a clearer sense of Michael's passion for and dedication to economic justice. Ever present in council meetings, Michael's thoughtful and often challenging contributions were extremely helpful in ensuring that difficult subjects were not 'swept under the carpet'. The arduous task of delivering hundreds of copies of *Land & Liberty* was one which Michael performed with distinction for many years, courageously ensuring that the magazine was delivered promptly even when this had clearly become difficult for him to do, right up until it was simply not possible to continue.

Michael's friendship, dedication, and enthusiasm will be long remembered, and he will be greatly missed by all who knew him.



HGF BRIEFING NOTES

FRIDAY MEETINGS

Our Friday Study Groups are continuing and are without question one of the best ways to get introduced to the important work and ethics of 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 led by Bart Dunlea.

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

Meeting ID: 838 8066 6680

Passcode: 544247

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

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

Meeting ID: 879 4440 8537

Passcode: 603155 📍