

Concerning "Common Land"

By JAN J. POT

With respect to the discussion on private vs. common land: What is the difference between "common land" and "state land"? Every uninformed person will exclaim, "That's the same thing!"

What is meant by the principle "equal rights to all land"? Do I have an equal right to your landed property? Do I have an equal right to park my car in your garage? "Equal right" makes no sense.

Also "land held in common" doesn't make sense, because the only thing the "common" entity can do with it is to hand it out to users (except some land held for common use by the state). "Equal access"? No! Trespassers will be prosecuted. If I pay the full rental value to the common treasury, I may fence in my landed property. And nobody will have the right of any access to my site.

Not equal access to the land but to the value of the land only. Land trusts and single tax colonies do not hold the land in common; only the value of it - by way of the collection of rent for the common treasury.

I know what is intended by the idea of "common land." But that does not make sense to the man in the street. Let us then improve our vocabulary: not equal access to land, but rent for the benefit of all.

By PROF. SANDOR BALOGH

One must distinguish between equal right to actual use and/or possession on the one hand, and equal opportunity to obtain the exclusive use or possession of a property. Land value taxation seems to be the perfect solution to this latter objective without communal use of property. With LVT the most efficient gets to use the land and the rest will share from the value created on the land through the tax (rent).

In a modern technological society this is the only rational way to reward the individual and still protect the rights of all. Private property plus LVT is a magic combination that accomplishes all that the communal property was supposed to do in a more primitive economy.

As land is getting more and more scarce, i.e., as population grows while land remains the same, we cannot practice a form of communal ownership where let us say 100 acres of communal land could be used by 10 families to let 100 cows graze on it, as could have been done 300 years ago. Today there would be perhaps 100 families grazing 10,000 cows on that same land. How would you guarantee "equal rights of all" on that 100 acres? Pick the most productive families and let them share the land based on their bids for the price (tax) on that land? This does not even consider builders who might also want the right to build on the same land! How can you give equal right to all? By using the land for one purpose you prevent its use for another. It is absurd to say that "all have equal rights." You can only talk about equal opportunity.

If even the Russians are studying the Hungarian system, with its very limited recognition of individual incentives and moving away from a more collective system, why this nostalgia to turn the clock back to 17th century England?

Because communal land would turn the clock back to the most primitive stage of society. Today the only people practicing it are some of the primitive tribes in Africa, who starve between famines. Or at best, communal land system would put us back to the pastoral stage that Indian tribes practiced when the white man came to America.

As I stated in GJ Nos. 51 and 53 (to say nothing of much reiteration over the decades), I believe in land value taxation on privately held land. This does not rule out other methods - e.g., leasing public land. I wondered whether some communal land might be held by those groups so disposed in modern society. This is not a proposal for all society ("us") but for those - perhaps few - who wanted to do so. Surely they should be allowed to do so?

In the course of the discussion points are raised which ought to be sorted out. Common property is that which belongs to all men in common; that which all men have an equal right to use and enjoy. Government property is that which belongs to the state and is subject to the direction of the government.

We must also distinguish between "equal rights" and "joint rights." Equal rights pertain to the right of a person to use a portion of the earth that is unoccupied, limited by the equal rights of others (the Lockean proviso). Joint rights would mean that everybody in the world has a stake in every piece of land in the world. This was a point on which Henry George corrected Herbert Spencer in A Perplexed Philosopher.

Equal opportunity is certainly what we want. But we cannot quite do without equal rights. The former is based on the latter. Mr. Pot incorrectly states the concept: it is not "equal rights to all land" but the equal rights of all persons to land. This does not mean to all land (which would be joint rights), but to some land. As stated by George: All men have a right to life; man cannot live without land; therefore all men have a right to land. It was to implement this equal right that George's proposal to confiscate the rent of land was formulated.

As for the man in the street, or anybody else, use whatever appeal will work. But no matter what the approach, it will need explanation. The remedy for ignorance or misinformation is not to yield to it, but to provide enlightenment.

It is not quite the case that single tax colonies and land trusts deal only with the rent of land. They hold the land and rent it out. New renters deal with the common entity.

I would like again to point out that wherever common land with private earnings was practiced, it was not voluntarily ended but was ended by force and fraud. It was so with the Diggers in - yes, 17th century England. They worked abandoned land to practice their belief that the land is for all but what a man produces is his own. They were forcibly removed by "respectable society." In the 19th century the Cherokee Indians were modernizing, practicing farming and building houses, but holding onto a tribal ownership of the land. President Jackson forced them off. To this day, Indians, including those modernizing, hold land tribally. African tribes do not suffer because of tribal land but because of inhuman governmental policies and being forced to barren lands. See also Fred Foldvary's article on p. 11. Perhaps American farmers ought not go back to the 17th century, but subsistence farming is at least better than their being forced off their farms, many committing suicide. On the other hand, maybe we should look back at the 17th century to see what went wrong.

As for the necessity of private property in land for production, let's not forget that perhaps 90% of the people of the world own no land and do most of the work. As for the remaining 10%, many do not work but live off the others.

Private possession and use of land with full land value taxation? Yes! But rejecting the idea that the earth is the birthright of all mankind? No!