

# Promised Land and Social Construct

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by David Giesen

Imagine a scramble up a mountain till after several false crests have been summited in fact the grand overlook is gained. Below stretches a vast and inviting . . . social construct. What?! Yes, an enormous canvas stretches as far as the eye can squint bearing the words Equality, No Discrimination based on Race, Creed, Color, Gender, Etc., Judgement only based upon Content of Character. Was that Moses' and the Wandering Hebrews' view? Was it Martin Luther King's? Nearer at hand is it yours?

The Promised Land is not only a social construct. The Promised Land is terra firma in the Age of the Pharaohs, in the Age of Rome, in the present. On the night of April 3, 1968 Martin Luther King riveted an audience and a nation with the words, "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that as a people we will get to The Promised Land." He spoke of a social construct, and that was emotionally and spiritually electrifying, but it wasn't enough. As living beings endowed with the physical and intellectual capacity to use this earth as the substance out of which to fashion food, shelter and clothing, we each and every need access to land to procure those necessities. Whether we mold and till the earth and its animal and plant species directly or trade our talents in exchange for necessities worked up out of animal, mineral, vegetable, every trip to the home maintenance warehouse, every jaunt to the grocery, every car drive to the mall (or digital order on-line) is predicated on access to land.

Make no mistake, Martin Luther King was well aware of what his predecessors in Savannah, Georgia demanded in January of 1865. Twenty Black ministers demanded of the liberating Union Army general, William T. Sherman, 40 acres for each family recently freed from bondage. Dignity and self-sufficiency are conditional upon unencumbered access to land "at least where there is enough [land], and as good left in common for others." The terminating words in quotes in the preceding sentence are those of John Locke, hero of Libertarians and property right advocates; I chose them to underscore the recognition by the gate-keepers of ideas that access to land is the foundation of freedom. The bigot or do-gooder may operate in ignorance of this truth, but the gate-keepers of meaning certainly are clear about this. Pharaoh owned the Nile lands and he was a tyrant. The Pharaoh used theology to manufacture consent. The slave master owned the plantation lands and he was a tyrant. The slave master used theology to manufacture consent. Moses composed a social construct featuring debt-free land for every family, and enough land to enable self-sufficient livelihood. That is the Levitical Jubilee land law. Moses announced for the first time in recorded history a very different theology, one in which consent was required to manufacture liberty. As the Torah laid it out, to experience liberty, the Hebrews would have to consent that the cosmic source (Jehova) intended land to be a commonwealth where each family had inalienable mortgage-free land. No hierarchy in land distribution.

The twenty Black ministers in Savannah, Georgia knew this Jubilee story and it inspired their demand for land. The Promised Land was no mere social construct for the Black folk. It was a construct of consent by White folk that the land was an equal opportunity resource for all. "Give us our 40 acres," the ministers spoke, "and we will have the dignity God gave us of being in God's likeness, and we will prove ourselves self-sufficient, not dependent."

But what about today? Land distribution in the Moses days was possible back when a simple but bloody switch of presiding land gods meant a change of land title. Even so recently as 1865 land could be had in the United States by military force—whether by usurping defeated Confederates or vanquishing Native Americans. But nowadays? With land titles enforced and no God in sight? Well, leave it to an American with a can-do mentality to propose a solution. In 1877 a San Francisco newspaperman and self-made social philosopher gave an address to the Young Men's Hebrew Association in which he identified the

spirit of Mosaic law, though not its very form as a model for reconstituting freedom, dignity, and access to God's Creation. A few years later that San Franciscan published his elaborated thoughts in ***Progress & Poverty***. In that treatise Henry George proposed the radical, theologically rooted, public policy of socializing the whole of annual land values. George argued that it's the presence of society that accounts for one piece of land being preferable to another, taking into account differential desirability of land on account of physical attributes, proximity to markets, and other social considerations. Land value being a function of society, George called for a tax equal to the annual value of "location, location, location." In short, George called for a social construct in which land and land values conveyed no private advantage to land owners. Labor and the product of labor—capital—would alone be the source of private income, while the revenue from the value of land would fund schools, health care, roads, bridges, courts of law, fire protection, etc.

Provocatively put, what would it take to make America great again? But here, by America, I don't mean the United States, nor do I mean merely the two continent New World. I mean the world made anew through the theology that revolutionized human thought and society two thousand years ago. To make the world anew, to restore The Promised Land, we must grapple with the social construct relating to land itself. There is fundamentally no other way to peace, liberty and dignity than by sharing the earth by consent.