

# Land, Culture and the Biology of Man (PART III)

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"The challenge to man today is to undo the mistake of our (comparatively recent) ancestors, and transform rights to land back to their multi-dimensional form, serving the interests of both the individual and of society."

A DESCRIPTION of rights to land to all groups in human societies, up until recent times, constituted the mechanism for ensuring stability: for it guaranteed material security for everyone. Social structures were not rigid, but were flexibly tailored to ensure a high-level adaptation to the natural resources on which mankind depended for his survival and evolution. But never was the right to life, through guaranteed access to land, sacrificed.

Disruption of traditional land tenure rights brought about dramatic changes in social relationships. The depth of those changes have not yet been fully plumbed: but the consequences have been injurious.

We are familiar with the agonising social and economic results of the Enclosures in Britain. Some of the impact on us is lost, however, since the processes dragged out over many decades. But there are recent examples which we can examine. One, a tribe in Morocco—the *Ait Nahir*—find themselves and their social constitution presented with a similar breakdown: "Massive acquisition of tribal land for agricultural colonisation and the forced introduction of private property . . . led to the breakdown of the tribal framework and . . . the formation of a landless, anomic rural proletariat."<sup>1</sup>

Competition between traditional values and practices and those invoked by modern judicial systems based on the European model, gives rise to profound social and psychological disorientation. Sharman has detailed such a conflict within the *Adhola*, a tribe in Uganda.<sup>2</sup> She shows how land disputes can be settled by the clan chiefs, but in some significant way altered in the courts. There is a direct conflict over the principles to be applied by these two sources of authority. While the clans are concerned to emphasise the rights to *use* land, "The government courts uphold the right of individuals to alienate land over which they have rights of allocation, and to allocate land without reference to their traditional obligations."

Unscrupulous members of the tribe, who think they might succeed in litigation, can enhance their proprietary rights by going direct to the courts, which "do not distinguish between rights of alienation, rights of allocation and rights of use, so that where rights of use are upheld they are transformed into rights of administration and alienation."

The clan chiefs, not surprisingly, were dissatisfied with the conflict between the two approaches. They wished to retain the traditional system of multiple

rights based on personal status, whereas the courts conducted their reasoning on the basis of contracts and absolute rights. While the traditional system could protect the rights of those who needed, but lacked land, the government courts disregarded need and favoured those who possessed, and could produce proof of a right to the use of a piece of land.

## *Groups in conflict*

Conflict over land at the individual level is paralleled by conflict at the higher level of groups. The causes, however, are frequently disguised (religion is a favourite "explanation" of friction). For while the cause of tension in relatively simple societies like the *Ait Nahir* appears clear enough, where cause and effect have been telescoped into short periods of time, problems arise when we turn to complex societies like the UK. We shall refer to two problems, Ulster and the devolution of power.

The working class people of Northern Ireland are daily at each other's throats; horrifying murders are now routine events. The cause? The most potent theory for criticising Western political democracies, Marxism, is rendered mute. For according to that ideology, the working class (comprised of Catholics and Protestants) ought to be united in directing its fury at capitalists—not each other.

The demand for devolution of power to Scotland and Wales and even the regions of England (with some people in Cornwall already claiming the ancient right to set up its own Parliament) is threatening the political stability of the rest of the UK. Why, after centuries of political and economic unification, do the Scots and Welsh vigorously demand recognition—institutionalised in Parliaments set up on their own soil—of their differences?

Orthodox political science, placing emphasis on institutions, on administrative efficiency, on the disbursement of benefits, is no better equipped to explain these phenomena than Marxist dogma. The explanation has to be sought in the primordial territorial loyalties of groups of people, the complex elements which give them their identities and constitute their unique cultures; these are the things which lead them to challenge the sanctity and strength of the modern political state.

Only by a thorough understanding of the synthesis (through evolutionary time-scales) of groups of people with their physical environment—an interaction which heavily determined the substance of their cultures—

can we understand why thousands of *Ibos* gave up their lives in a bid to separate from Nigeria; why the people of East Pakistan insisted on breaking up the state of Pakistan to create their own territorial identity, Bangladesh. Similarly—but in the opposite direction—why so many peasants of North Vietnam died in their bid to unite with their kin in the south; why so many citizens of Cyprus identify with Greece as their motherland.

Only then can we see how the transformation from communal rights to land into private rights has been a fundamental cause of disequilibrium in social systems. Only then can we understand the dynamics of change in the contemporary world, which are seeking to undo the work of the European powers which over three centuries have amalgamated territorial peoples into artificial political unions within borders which have no cultural or biological validity. Only then can we begin to get down to the work of redefining rights to land which, harmonised with the fundamental principles developed over not thousands but millions of years, will serve the future interests of mankind.

#### *Ancient and modern societies*

Societies have functioned as stable units because they implicitly recognised the need for a communal basis to land rights. These rights, as we have seen, subsist in groups—rather than individuals—and are founded on need for, and the actual use of, land.

These latter principles are abstracted from land tenure systems in their various forms employed throughout time in contrasting ecological environments. Their persistence has not been due to a convenient accident. They were built into the genetic structure of man the social animal. There is no other way to account for their presence in different social systems and persistence through time; only now are we beginning to understand the significant causal relationship between genetics and cultural forms. As Hamilton affirms: "Thus we would expect the genetic system to have various inbuilt safeguards and to provide, not a blank sheet for individual cultural development, but a sheet at least lightly scrawled with certain tentative outlines."<sup>3</sup>

The challenge to man today is to undo the mistake of our (comparatively recent) ancestors, and transform rights to land back to their multi-dimensional form (serving the interests of both the individual and of society) and to ensure that possessory rights are grounded in need and use. We argue that the system which meets modern needs takes a fiscal form: the distribution of land values among the community through the taxation system—the taxation of land values, which was effectively the system adopted by human civilisations extending back several thousands of years. We can examine the efficacy of our proposed solution in the context of some of the awesome problems which need to be—and eventually must be—tackled. We shall examine two (related)

problems: food shortage, and despoliation of the environment.

The UN estimates that about 460 million people—



about 15 per cent of the total world population—are suffering from malnutrition. If anything, this is an under-estimate. Now one way of tackling the problem is the creation of more family farms on the huge tracts which are either idle (but privately owned, therefore excluding those in need) or, through their very size, are farmed at below optimum levels. Land reform programmes in the third world aim to resettle people on to land. Where this is actually accomplished, two main results can be discerned: (1) less pressure on urban areas, and (2) increased food output, due to improved productivity.

But what of the people who are not included or who are left behind in the urban slums? Are they to be denied a share of the benefits? And why should those on the land be free to enjoy the higher economic rent which results from increased yields? An *ad valorem* land tax slices a part of the farmer's income away from him—the part he had no hand in creating—and enables a government to disburse it for the well-being of the whole community.

And now, the ecological hazards facing mankind. From north-west India, to Senegal and Chad in Africa, the sands of the deserts are creeping over the natural fertility which sustains life. Peasants in highland Pakistan and the valleys of Indonesia cut down saplings for firewood and trigger off soil erosion which in turn floods the fertile plains, silting up the irrigation channels and smashing the ecosystems built up over millions of years. The lesson is clear: somehow, to restore the earth to its natural fertility, man has to engage in a gigantic crusade aimed at conserving the existing environment—only then can the deserts be pushed back.

But who is to undertake such a task? Individuals have neither the strength nor the resources. Clearly, it must be a communal task. Let us assume, then, that man has the wisdom to undertake such a land reclamation project; let us assume that the resources are channelled into developing the skills which enable us to turn infertile soil into lush gardens of wheat and fruit. Who should own that land? Which theory of property rights is consonant with the objective?

It would be anathema to justice if such land, having been converted from desert to grassland, were owned privately by individuals! Ought it not to be recognised as the property of the whole community? And yet, the physical work of watering and planting the

edge of the desert would be performed by individuals, people who loved the land, enjoyed lives paced by the seasons of nature; these people, too, must receive their rewards. How can their interests be harmonised with the rights of the community? Again, we can reach no conclusion other than the institution of a tax on the value of land. For this fiscal measure both guarantees returns for labour expended on the land, and ensures the creation of a social fund from which to finance the arts of civilisation (which include the development of knowledge and resources for pushing back the encroaching deserts).

#### *In search of answers*

The foregoing conclusion may seem self-evident; yet the ethic which dominates the non-communist world today is that of private property which, when related to land, is barely decades old in most countries of the world, and only a matter of hundreds of years old in a few European countries (though traceable back to its socially-significant origins in the Classical world—with which, not surprisingly, we associate slavery on the massive, institutionalized scale).

It was the new ethic of private property in land which turned brother against brother, and suspended the biosocial constraints which inhibited groups from coveting their neighbour's territories. It was in immediate need of correction from the moment that John Locke gave it philosophical respectability. And yet, apart from the remarkable efforts made by Henry George in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the idea that it was legitimate to own land despite the needs of others has gone substantially unquestioned.

Hitherto, the challenges to the ethic of private property in land have been founded on religion (which in this scientific age is for many people an unacceptable basis for implementing drastic reforms) or on the overkill dogma of socialism.

The past twenty years, however, have seen the accumulation of a vast store of new knowledge, pieced together by archaeologists, anthropologists, biologists, ethologists and other scientists. This information enables us to launch a devastating attack on the sanctity of private property in land—an attack scientific in approach and marshalling the history of all territorial species (not just man) behind it.



Unfortunately, the scientific evidence has not been used to best effect because the interpretation of the results have been ethnocentric—seen through the

eyes of men conditioned by European culture. Note, for example, this passage from Wynne-Edwards' book

#### *Animal Dispersion:*

"It can be surmised that, as the society increases in size and complexity, with the growth of personal and family wealth in servants, cattle, land, domestic equipment, robes, jewels and gold, and with the consequent widening of range in social standing between the richest and the poorest, the noblest and



humblest, the principle of heritable possessions becomes firmly established. It follows, necessarily in a simplified and largely sex-limited manner, the natural course of inheritance of genetic factors from parent to offspring, and has grown out of the general custom in animal societies that property held by the social unit is retained in their possession by each succeeding generation."

Wynne-Edwards here uses biological and ethological evidence to justify private ownership of land. In doing so, he makes some fundamental mistakes in his interpretation of the evidence.

First, he fails to distinguish between the private ownership of artifacts and of land. The former, created by the effort of individual labour, may claim validation from the evidence of history: the most primitive societies have recognised individual property in tools and clothes. But no such warrant could be claimed for the private ownership of land.

(2) He makes the indefensible leap from the historical experience of *group* inheritance (based on territoriality, with all the constraints and opportunities which that implies for the individual and the group of which he is—or ought to be—an organic member) to the modern experience of *individual* inheritance. He assumes that the former somehow validates the latter, when qualitatively they are different (individual ownership has no basis in man's biological history, and the dynamics of the two systems are dichotomous).

(3) Wynne-Edwards accepts without question the consequences for society of the transformation of rights to land. Yet group dynamics—as even a superficial study of territorial behaviour shows—are crucial for the survival of a species. For example, cohesion within the group is of paramount importance. This cohesion has been maintained because rights to natural resources have been multi-dimensional: groups of human beings have ventured through time and

space as unified wholes, which has been possible because of the cooperative approach based on sharing material resources. The right to alienate land split up societies, creating classes with distinct experiences which could not identify with each other. The ensuing disharmony is more than just a danger for the social and political future: it also constitutes a serious threat to man's genetic future.

The European interpretation of the evidence of territoriality blocks any attempt at deriving the crucial lessons about the role played by group property rights in integrating human social systems. At the

risk of repeating ourselves, we emphasise that man's genetically-based territorial behaviour, and the cultural variants which he developed in sympathy with it, have ensured both internal (social) and external (ecological) harmony. The anti-evolutionary switch to individual ownership certainly simplified the structure of rights; but it also struck a deadly blow at the foundation principles of human societies.

1. A. R. Vinogradov, *The Ait Ndhir of Morocco*, Michigan U.P., 1976.
2. A. Sharman, Land Tenure and 'room for manoeuvre', in: *Choice and Change* (ed: J. Davis), Athlone Press, 1974.
3. W. D. Hamilton, Innate Social Aptitudes of Man: an Approach from Evolutionary Genetics, in *Biosocial Anthropology* (ed: R. Fox), Malaby Press, 1975.