

Controversy over public land makes tallying common rents controversial, too.

CHAPTER 32

MODERN ENCLOSERS HINDER COUNTING THE RENT

My shotgun terrified every picnicker in the park; guess the place is mine now.

FIEFDOMS FOR FREEHOLD ONLY

Countrysides are where the fewest people own the most land for the least money. Some billionaires in the wide-open West own spreads the size of small East Coast states. Their holdings make for an incredible overall concentration. The USDA figures 3% (not a typo) of Americans own 95% of the privately held land (“Land Rush” by Peter Meyer in *Harper’s*, January 1979). That’s a far cry from the ideal of proto-geonomist Thomas Jefferson, who thought America should be a nation of small farmers.

Other ranchers would like to own more and set their sights on public lands. Some have christened themselves the Sagebrush Rebellion. Opposing them are the democrats (lower case – those who favor group participation in decisions), who resist losing public property, even if they’re unaware of the public nature of rent.

Angry proprietarians focus on land, not on rent, since rent is the source of their fortunes; who wants others poking that deep into their business? By making their claims strident, they make tallying the worth of Earth in America awkward. Not just because the claimants are rich and powerful; they also have the myth of rugged individualism – now a customary defense mechanism – on their side.

LAND SANS DUTY

While militating against paying the public for their land, sagebrush rebels and other rural corporations are not shy about taking public dollars. Agri-business gets most of the federal billions, but also lining the trough are ranchers, loggers, and miners. States and localities also chip in in their own way, with roads and tax breaks.

Land-grabbing gentry cast themselves as working ranchers defending the freedom to be a cowboy. In actuality, they tend to be absentee owners with multiple homes, one a fashionable address in town. And if the land is only rural, for sure their lawyers are urban.

Cities are where opposition to landlords is most strident, given unaffordable housing and gentrification. Many of those who hang on to their apartments demand rent control. Aspen, Colorado-ites won a tiny land tax to fund public housing. Less conventional people are resettling in land trusts, more every year.

While proclaiming their exclusive right (actually, privilege; rights are inclusive) to own any and all, land grabbers reject any requirement to be good stewards. Their straw-villain is the environmental movement. Now that many citizens, mostly city dwellers, want to protect the environment are these “allodials” (owners owing nothing) bitter.

The propertarians picked a winnable fight. As audacious are the allodials about taking over the earth, that’s how timid environmentalists are about sharing the earth or her worth. Since most of the latter are home(site)owners in metro America, they too benefit from the current system inflating site values.

Despite that tactical advantage, the belligerence of propertarians makes sense, since claims to land are tenuous. Legal experts acknowledge that titles to land are never thoroughly clear. As they say, go back far enough and you’ll find that all titles are based on force or fraud.

SHARED SPACES – ZILCH

The more extreme rentiers agitate to abolish all public property and any vestige of the commons. Their ideal is reached when private individuals owns the roads, national monuments, beaches, *et al.* Sidewalks would be gated – if any were to remain and not be ceded to automobiles. Ultimately, would the 1% own the rivers? The lakes? The atmosphere? All are for sale.

No shared spaces at all? If we are left in shock and awe at their audacity, know that this stance of the wealthy anti-communitarians runs gratefully against the grain of normalcy. However individualistic people may think they are, most citizens enjoy parks and the wilderness.

The loss of commons would likely accelerate the loss of community, further atomize humans into dust motes in a cloud, detached from all others. Lacking trustworthy relationships, when troubles arises, it’d be Hobbes’s war of all-against-all.

That may be farfetched, but the loss of civility and tolerance is not. Community is the context for morality. We learn our ethical lessons from the family, friends, and residents around us. The less community, the less common morality.

Some of those who have benefited the most from what civilization has to offer oppose not just commons but society itself. During the 1980s a certain politician across the pond claimed, *“there is no society”* (may she RIP). On this side of the Atlantic, a TV actor/politician concurred with conservative gadfly, Grover Norquist, who aimed to *“drown it in the bathtub”* (may he RIP).

NO SHARED POWER, EITHER, THANK YOU

Government agencies themselves can share the same philosophy. Rather than meet their mandate, they outsource their services to corporations, such as private penitentiaries and banks. Supposedly it’s to cut costs and control the economy.

Those who oppose government take aim mainly at public goods and social programs, not the police or military. However, if government lacked the force of arms, it’d hardly matter what laws they passed or what rulings judges gave or what fines the IRS levied. They’d have no way to enforce them.

Meanwhile, contracting out the tasks of government has not downsized government. The state has not been withering away but expanding, whether beneficial or not. This expanding government sometimes oversteps its bounds:

- the IRS hounding people who owe nothing into bankruptcy,
- a neighborhood losing its very existence to a city-backed developer,
- a judge with “black robe disease” finding innocents in contempt of court.

Not exactly user-unfriendly.

Not surprisingly, victims of such abuse find appealing the ideas of shrinking and privatizing the role of bureaucrats and politicians in their lives. OTOH, citizens who’ve never experienced mistreatment and/or need their government jobs, equate government with social cooperation. They see anti-governmentism as anti-social madness.

Those opposed to government had better beware of what they wish for. It could be what the last gasp of the gentry looks like. Because the part

of the state expanding is incarceration, law enforcement, and the military, opposition to policy could become hazardous.

Rural rentiers typically lack respect for “eggheads.” Perhaps the rift can be employed to win for gadflies some recognition from academics, as long as their rules are followed. Using their conventional definitions and methods, not corrected by reason or deep analysis, then what would a total for the worth of Earth in America look like?