

Community chest

In supporting the 1909 land reform bill, Winston Churchill called land “by far the greatest of monopolies”, being the source of all wealth, strictly limited and fixed. One hundred and ten years later, land usage is again under scrutiny.

Land underlies everything we do as a society. Regardless of where in the world you are, the economy and political systems that surround you have been largely determined by the way land has been owned, distributed and used.

Land use is one of those issues that easily hides in plain sight. Every farmer knows how private property is governed, taxed and regulated, while every homeowner experiences the policies that determine the cost of having a roof over their head. And yet, political discussions are not framed on ‘land use’, but on proxy issues such as housing prices, urban and suburban growth, or agricultural policy. Discussions over environmental protection get framed in terms of their cost. Nuance is too frequently ignored when considering the most effective use of land for the common good.

In 1797, Thomas Paine published *Agrarian Justice* in which he explored the fact that there would never be enough productive land for everybody in a society to own some. He proposed charging ‘ground rents’ from property owners and redistributing that income to every person in society — what we now call a ‘universal basic income’. Conversely, just over 50 years ago, ecologist Garrett Hardin detailed the argument for private landownership in the article ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’ (*Science* **162**, 1243–1248; 1968); his analysis is much disputed by historians, anthropologists and sociologists who point out numerous examples of societies that managed to maintain their commons through social norms, codified legal systems and a conceptually different view of the use value and incentives of land management in the first place. More recently still, Hannah Holleman, in her book *Dust Bowls of Empire*, proposes that the American Dust Bowl of the 1930s, along with similar degradation throughout the British Empire, was an inevitable result of an agro-economic system that prioritized crop yields over the health of the soil. As she lays out in convincing detail, scientists of the time were well aware of the degradation caused by the latest practices but argued that indigenous peoples who had been farming in affected areas for centuries could not be trusted to deal with the degradation, and that only more private ownership was the answer.

In his 2016 book, *Half Earth*, Edward O. Wilson launched the idea of setting aside half of the planet’s ecosystem to restore itself. In the past year, this notion has taken flight with interest from environmental commentators, such as George Monbiot, who likened *Half Earth* to another conceptual political idea: the ‘Green New Deal’. Both invoke a cohesive and concrete outcome but their underlying frameworks remain abstract, with all of the details left to be hammered out by whichever governments might attempt to implement them.

Nonetheless, the basic concept that half of the earth should be set aside for overall planetary health is being debated at academic conferences, such as the Global Land Programme meeting in Bern, Switzerland, this past April. Also, the recent EAT-Lancet Commission report (*The Lancet* **393**, 447–492; 2019) into healthy diets supported by sustainable food systems recommended adopting a Half Earth strategy, as it would “have multiple co-benefits, such as maintaining functional diversity in ecosystems, reducing greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, forestry and other land use”. But which half gets set aside, how will peoples who rely on that half be accommodated, and how will humanity’s needs be met without the resources that will have been made ‘off limits’?

In similar vein, the ecological organization Rewilding Britain brought out a report in May (<http://bit.ly/2X3US4t>) focussing on how returning vast tracts of British land to a ‘wild’ state could help the country reduce its carbon footprint. Rewilding Britain criticizes both the effectiveness of existing voluntary schemes to incentivize farmers and companies to offset carbon emissions as well as increase biodiversity on the part of farmers and companies, and the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union. They call for policies geared towards ‘public goods’ that put nature-based outcomes front and centre, with farmers and land managers paid through government subsidies and carbon price mechanisms to preserve and restore land types such as peat bogs, woodlands and grasslands that are species-rich and unsuitable for agriculture.

May also saw publication of Guy Shrubsole’s book *Who Owns England?*. This

is no rhetorical question, but something that Shrubsole has spent years trying to determine through various means (including repeated instances of trespassing) to try and quantify who the actual landowners of England are — information that has only been known on a limited and occasional basis since the Domesday Book of 1085. Shrubsole details the landholdings of the monarchy (and how much agricultural subsidy it takes in), the 22,000 empty flats and mansions in London while thousands of people remain homeless in the same city, and the seemingly endless expanse of grouse moors across the country to serve up hunting targets to a very rich minority of the population. Half of all the rural land in England and Wales, comprising tens of millions of hectares, is owned by just 36,000 landowners, equating to 0.06% of the population; even this number remains at best a conservative estimate, as the UK’s Land Registry lacks records for 17% of the land area of England and Wales.

If this were not enough, June saw the release of an extensive report, *Land for the Many* (<http://bit.ly/2FvmUeb>), commissioned by Britain’s Labour Party, focused on a holistic approach to land use in the UK, which advocates some of the most sweeping land reform policies in an industrialized country in recent memory. Among the proposals are the creation of a publicly-owned trust to buy the land underneath homes, stabilizing land values; the creation of a land value tax that could be applied to agricultural land as well as business property; expanding public access to the land through an updated ‘right to roam’ for hiking and camping; and more allotments and community gardens for urban residents.

By their very existence, these reports and books indicate that the UK in particular, and the world more generally, is undergoing a reassessment of land usage. To make constructive decisions will require not only relevant and timely research, but also a realization that the only thing stopping us from solving the problems facing the ‘greatest monopoly’ is thinking that we can’t. □

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