Seize It Back
Land Reform in Britain

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In this 1996 Schumacher society lecture George Monbiot commences by illustrating how indigenous peoples in SE Asia, East Africa and the Amazon are being dispossessed of their livelihoods, land rights and cultures by multi-national corporations, private businesses, large proprietors and corrupt state bureaucracies. He goes on to illustrate how similar forces which are at work overseas causing devastation, misery and impoverishment are also at work in Britain. He makes the case that vast numbers of British people have no rights, whatsoever, to land and argues that the time has come to liberate land from developers, big farmers and large commercial companies. He concludes by advocating that the land must start to serve all people rather than simply those who control it and that development must become the tool of those who need development most – the homeless and the dispossessed – rather than benefiting only the developers. He unfurls a triple land reform policy banner – ***land for homes; land for livelihoods; and land for living****.*

One October morning bailiffs dragged me out of the splintered wood and rubble of London's only sustainable village. Even as we were being removed, the earthmovers were moving in. They destroyed the wooden houses and the gardens we'd made and returned the site to the dereliction we'd discovered when we first arrived. Sitting on the pavement in Wandsworth, London, nursing a bruised head, this seemed to me a rather odd place for someone with a special interest in rainforest ecology to end up.

Nine years ago, as a rather naïve natural historian, I went to work in the far east of Indonesia, in the annexed province of Irian Jaya. Until just a few years before, the forests there, and the tree kangaroos, birds of paradise and bird-wing butterflies, had been more or less left alone. But now the forests were being pushed back fast, and I wanted to find out why. The answer weren't slow in coming.

The government was trying to integrate Irian Jaya into the rest of the nation. To this end it was flying tens of thousands of Javanese people in, establishing settlements for them and giving them the lands of the native Papuan people. The Papuans were being moved into prefabricated model villages and used as labour for logging and planting oil palms. The forests they had used to supply all their needs – food, fuel, shelter and medicine – were seen by the government as sources of single commodities: timber, for example, or land for planting oil palms. Control of the forests had been taken over

by bureaucrats and army officers who lived far away and were not likely to suffer the consequence of their disappearance.

I became interested in who was pulling the levers of rainforest destruction and, with that in mind, I moved to Brazil when my work in Indonesia had finished. At the time, in 1989, the received wisdom was that the Amazon's forests were disappearing because the colonists moving into them believed that they could enrich themselves there. Ignorant of rainforest ecology, they were, we were told, convinced that moving to the Amazon and farming or mining the forests was a better economic option than staying at home.

My findings were rather different. First, I found that a rapacious trade in mahogany, driven by consumer demand in Britain and the United States, was laying down the infrastructure and providing much of the economic incentive for further exploitation. Then I found that many of the people moving down the roads the mahogany cutters were opening up had been pushed out of their homes. I went back to the places they were coming from and found that, backed by armed police and hired gunmen, the big landowners were expanding their properties by tearing down the peasant villages, killing anyone who resisted, and seizing the land the peasant held in common. Many of those who moved into the Amazon left their home states because they had no choice. Destruction took place at both ends – where they came from, as absentee landlords destroyed all the different resources they had relied on, and replaced them with just one resource, grazing for cattle – and where they arrived, as the peasants found themselves with little choice but to do to the Amazon's indigenous people what the landlords had done to them.

In East Africa, I came across a rather similar situation. Through government policy and massive institutional fraud, the land held in common by pastoral peoples such as the Maasai and Samburu was being divided up and moved swiftly into the hands of businessmen. The woods, scrub, grasslands and flowering sward of the savannah were being ripped up to produce wheat. The remaining herders were concentrating in the hills too steep to plough, leading to soil compaction, flooding and drought.

The situation was exacerbated by East Africa's conservation policies, which excluded herding people from many of their best lands, ostensibly to protect the game, but in truth to avoid offending tourists. The herders were forced to overuse their remaining resources, while tourists and corrupt state bureaucracies inflicted, in some cases, far greater damage on this protected land than its inhabitants had done.

Painfully slowly, the penny began to drop. All over the tropics I had seen environmental destruction following land alienation. When traditional landholders are dispossessed and private businesses, large proprietors or state bureaucracies take over, then people's natural habitats are destroyed. I came to see that rural communities are often constrained to look after their land well, as it is the only thing they have, and they need to protect a diversity of resources in order to meet their diverse needs. When their commons are privatised, they pass into the hands of people whose priority is to make money, and the most efficient way of doing that is to select the most profitable product and concentrate on producing it.

I saw that, without security of tenure and autonomy of decision-making, people have no chance of defending the environment they depend on for their livelihoods. What Brazil needed was land reform; what Kenya and Indonesia needed was recognition and protection of traditional land rights. By themselves, these policies wouldn't guarantee environmental protection, but without them you could guarantee environmental destruction.

All this, as well as the appalling social consequence of land alienation, shouldn't be very hard to see. Liberal-minded people in the North have, for a long time, supported calls for land reform in the South. But, like nearly everyone else, throughout these travels I could not see the relevance that these ideas might have for European countries. In Britain, had anyone asked me, I would have said that land alienation was a done deal, and what we had to concentrate on was urging the government to keep its promises and enforce environmental standards. That was until Twyford Down.

At first, I didn't really understand what was going on or how it related to me. It took a lot of persuasion by some insistent friends to get me down there. But when I arrived, it blew me away. I began to see that this was far more than just a struggle over transport policy.

Building the road through Twyford Down was not just bad transport decision-making, but bad land use decision-making. It was only possible because of a suspension of democratic accountability so profound that the decision to build the road was taken before the public enquiry began. What the protesters were fighting was exactly the same sort of remote decision-making, by people who didn't have to suffer the consequences that I had seen in Indonesia, Kenya and Brazil.

What had foxed me was that, in Britain, land passed into the hands of a tiny minority of owners and decision-makers centuries ago. The enclosures and the clearances were the culmination of a thousand years of land alienation, but they were as traumatic as those confronting the peasants of north-eastern Brazil today.

In England tens of thousands of people were forced into vagrancy and destination. In Scotland people were packed onto ships at the point of a gun and transported across the ocean to the Americas in conditions worse than those of the slave ships. Others crowded into the cities. It is no coincidence that London was the world's first city with more than a million inhabitants. Now London's population is 10 million.

It is so long since we had a grip on land use that these struggles, scarcely recorded in mainstream history books, have passed out of our consciousness. What happens to the land, we imagine, the transactions and changes it suffers, is no longer our concern. It's a matter for the tiny number of people who control it.

Yet it is for the very reason that these changes took place so long ago that they are so important. Their significance has seeped into every corner of our lives. The issue has been invisible to us not because it is so small, but because it is so big. We simply can't step far enough back to see it.

Let's look at it, to begin with, from the environmental point of view. Environmental quality is a function of development. In the world's wilderness areas it depends on the

absence of development. In managed landscapes like Britain's it depends on the balance of built and non-built development, and the quality and character of both categories. This quality and character rest in turn on who is making the development decisions.

If a decision arises from an informed consensus of the views of local people and anyone else the development might affect, then we are likely to see people's vested interest in the quality of their surroundings, and hence the quality of their lives, reflected in that decision. If, on the other hand, a decision emerges from an impenetrable cabal of landowners, developers and government officials, accountable to no one but shareholders and the head of department, who don't have to suffer the adverse consequences of the development they choose, it is likely to have a far more negative impact on the environment and its inhabitants.

What I want to show you is how the second way of doing things has prevailed in Britain, how we are all the poorer for it, and what we might be able to do to correct it.

The land a group of us occupied in London was scheduled for the ninth major superstore within one-and-a-half miles. Local people were adamantly opposed to it, as it would destroy small shops, increase the traffic burden and make their part of the world more like every other part of the world. They wanted the land, which had been left derelict for 7-years, to be used instead for what the borough desperately needed: green spaces for their children to play in, community projects to replace the ones that Wandsworth Borough Council had destroyed, and affordable housing. The landowners' proposal was rejected by the local government, but that, unfortunately, is not the end of it. Developers in Britain have the most extraordinary legal powers to subvert the democratic process and impose their projects on even the most reluctant population.

If ordinary people don't like a local authority decision to approve a development, there's nothing whatsoever that they can do about it. If a developer doesn't like the local council's decision to reject his proposed development, he can appeal to the Secretary of State for the Environment (central government). The developer knows that an appeal will cost the local council hundreds of thousands of pounds to contest. Time and again developers use the threat of appeal as a stick to wave over the local council's head and as often as not, the blackmail works.

If the local council has enough money to fight an appeal, however, and if at appeal the Secretary of State rejects the developer's plans, all the developer needs to do is submit another, almost identical, planning application, and the whole process starts again. This can go on until both the money and the willpower of the local council and local people are exhausted and the developers get what they want.

If the blackmail and extortion still don't work, however, the developers have yet another weapon in their armoury. Planners call it *offsite planning gain*. You and I would recognise it as bribery. Developers can offer as much money as they like to a local authority, to persuade it to accept their plans. *"You don't like my high-rise multiplex hypermarket ziggurat? Here's UK£1 million pounds – what do you think of it now?"*

The results of this democratic deficit are visible all over our cities. Where we need affordable, inclusive housing, we get luxury, exclusive estates; where we need open spaces, we get more and more empty office blocks; where we need local trade, we get superstores (and I can confidently predict that in 10-year's time there'll be as much surplus superstore space as there is surplus office space today). These developments characteristically generate huge amounts of traffic. Affordable housing is pushed out into the countryside. Communities lose the resources which hold them together.

But, if this suspension of accountability is onerous in the towns, it is perhaps even more poignant in the countryside. There the message, with few exceptions, is clear: *"It's my land, and I can do what I want with it."*

Over the centuries, the concept of property has changed dramatically. Property was a matter of possessing rights in land or its resources, and there were few areas of land in which rights of some kind were not shared. Today it is the land itself which is called property, and the words for the rights we possessed have all but disappeared. *Estovers* (the right to collect firewood), *pannage* (the right to put your pigs out in the woods), *turbary* (the right to cut turf), *pescary* (the commoners' right to catch fish) have passed out of our vocabulary. Now, on nearly all the land in Britain, we no longer even have the right of access. The landowners' rights' are almost absolute. Peoples' rights are, effectively non-existent.

This means the landowners can get away with some terrible things. Every year throughout the 1990s country landowners have overseen the loss of 18,000 kilometres of hedgerow. Since the Second World War (1945) they have destroyed nearly 50 percent of ancient British woodlands and this century they have ploughed over 70 percent of our downlands. Heaths, wetlands, water-meadows and ponds have been hit even harder.

Most distressingly across huge areas they have erased the historical record. The dense peppering of long-harrows, tumuli, dykes and hill forts in what are now the arable lands of southern England have all but disappeared since the Second World War. In response to landowners lobbying, the government continues to grant special permission – the Class Consents – to plough out even scheduled ancient monuments. Features that persisted for thousands of years, that place us in our land, are destroyed in a matter of moments for the sake of crops that nobody wants. Our sense of belonging, our sense of continuity, our sense of place, is erased.

It doesn't matter how well loved these places were. Even if people had for centuries walked and played in the water-meadows, if those meadows are not a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), the landowner can simply move in without consulting anyone and plough them out, destroying everything local people value. Even where they are SSSIs, this seems in practice to make little difference, as these places are constantly being eroded and destroyed, in some cases with the support of taxpayers' money.

Agriculture and forestry are perversely not classed as development and are therefore exempt from public control of any form. Even the erection of farm buildings requires no more than a nod and a wink from the local authority. By contrast, if people such as gypsies, travellers and low-impact settlers, people from somewhat less elevated

classes than those to which many country landowners belong, try to get a foothold in the countryside, they find they haven't a hope. It doesn't matter how discreet their homes are; it doesn't matter whether, like Tinkers' Bubble, they actually enhance environmental quality, rather than destroy it – they are told the countryside is not for them. You can throw up a barn for 1,000 pigs with very little trouble, but try living in a hole in the ground in the middle of the woods and you'll find all the hounds of hell unleashed upon you.

What we're getting in the countryside is not just a biological monoculture, but a social monoculture as well. Just as in Kenya, only one product is being optimised and that is profit. The costs to the wider community count for nothing. This accounts for mile upon mile of agricultural land, empty of human beings. It's hardly surprising. Britain now has fewer people employed in farming than any other Western nation. In the city of Hong Kong, twice the percentage of the population works in agriculture as in the green garden of Britain. Yet, though farmers' incomes are rising, we continue to shed farm labour at the rate of 20,000 a year.

These problems are aggravated by our physical exclusion from the land. People fought so hard for Twyford Down because they had a stake in it: they had a right to walk over it and saw it as their own. When excluded from the land, we have less interest in its protection: it is someone else's business, not ours, so we let the landowner get on with it.

The exclusive use of land is perhaps the most manifest of class barriers. We are, quite literally, pushed to the margins of society. If we enter the countryside, we must sneak round it like fugitives, outlaws in the nation in which we all once had a stake. It is, in truth, not we who are the trespassers but the landlords. They are trespassing against our right to enjoy the gifts of Nature bequeathed to all of us.

So what are we going to do about it? Well, it's time we began to see that the picture of Britain as a Western liberal democracy is no longer relevant. What I have been describing are Third World politics, Third World economics. We need Third World tactics to confront them. And this is what the direct activists, whom I first came across on Twyford Down, saw before anyone else. They saw that we had to take our lead not from our own recent traditions of letter-writing and banner-waving, but from the anti-apartheid movement and the Brazilian land reform campaigns. Direct action is not the whole answer, nor is it an end in itself; but it is an unparalleled means of drawing attention to issues which have languished in obscurity to the cost of us all.

We need:

Land for Homes: *low-cost and self-built housing in cities, places for travellers and low-impact settlers in the countryside.*

Land for Livelihoods: *subsidies and planning to support small-scale, high-employment, low-consumption farming.*

Land for Living: *the protection and reclamation of common spaces, reform of the planning and public enquiry processes, mandatory land registration and a right to roam.*

The land, in other words, must start to serve all people, rather than simply those who control it. Development must become the tool of those who need development most – the homeless and the dispossessed – rather than benefiting only the developers.

For the land we tread is not theirs, it is ours. It is the duty of all responsible people to seize it back.

Further Information

Visit ***The Land is Ours*** website http://www.tlio.org.uk

George Monbiot works with the ***The Land is Ours*** movement and writes regularly in *The Guardian*

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