

# The Moral Economy and Political Ecology of Land Ownership

*Alexander Mather*

Department of Geography, University of Aberdeen, Scotland  
October 1999

*This paper was presented to the Land Reform in Scotland Conference organised by the School of Planning and Housing, Edinburgh College of Art/Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1999.*

## **Contents**

- Contrasting attitudes to land
- The prevailing notion of (economic) justice
- What are the factors driving change?
- The private and community dimensions of discordance
- The political dimensions of environmental issues
- The concept of sustainability offers a framework for integration
- Adding the moral dimension to the sustainability trilogy
- References

## **Contrasting attitudes to land**

For many centuries, there have been two main concepts of land in relation to its ownership. In the Bible, 1 Kings 21, we read of an encounter between Ahab and Naboth that illustrates a fundamental contrast in attitudes to land. Ahab, in coveting Naboth's vineyard, sees land simply as an object or commodity that can be bought and sold: "..... *I will give thee the worth of it in money*". But to Naboth, land is not just a tradable commodity: "*The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my father unto thee*". Land to Naboth was an inheritance over which he had stewardship and not something that could simply be bought and sold.

One view sees land simply as a commodity, as something that can be bought and sold just like any other object. The other view sees land as different and special, and as something that is regarded as heritage. The first view correlates with private ownership, whereas the second relates more to communal ownership – the notion that land is the common heritage of humankind.

The prominence and extent of acceptance of these two concepts have varied through time. In effect the pendulum can swing from the private to the communal to the private. In practice, a compromise has been reached in Scotland: neither concept prevails completely. Instead we have a system of regulated private ownership, where

public controls are imposed through legislative instruments such as the planning system, tree felling licences and discharge consents.

### **The prevailing notion of (economic) justice**

This compromise, however, is not static, and at present it seems that the pendulum is swinging towards the '*heritage*' pole. Such swings, it seems stem from changes in the prevailing moral economy. This phrase was first used by James Scott in relation to agrarian change in south-east Asia some 25 years ago. He defined it simply as the prevailing '*notion of (economic) justice*' (Scott, 1976). More recently, it has been seen simply as '*a community's working definition of what is fair and unfair*' (Lowe et al, 1997).

Broadly speaking, the phrase relates to what is the prevailing collective perception of morality in the economic sphere. In passing, we may note the acceptance of the notion of a changing moral economy does not necessarily imply that all morality is relative and that absolutes do not exist. The phrase simply relates to the commonly accepted view.

The fact that we are having this conference today reflects the fact that land ownership is currently on the agenda. And there is ample evidence around us that a shift has occurred over the last year or two. And the level of interest generated by the events in Assynt, Bhaltois, Eigg and Knoydart would suggest that the issue is popular as well as political.

### **What are the factors driving change?**

Why has this change occurred? No doubt various factors have contributed. One may simply be that the limitations of the current compromise achieved through regulation have been reached. A related one may be the recognition that state ownership can be as unsatisfactory as private ownership. In parts of the Scottish Highlands in particular, both state and private ownership have been associated with what can only be described as '*colonial*' control: *capital, decision-making and management have come from out with the region.*

Local people have been sidelined in decision-making, and there has been extensive dislocation in the relationship between land and people. Perhaps to some extent the drivers of devolution have also been the drivers for change in the agrarian moral economy. Nevertheless, the change itself is surprising when the link between land and bread, so powerful in the past, has for practical purposes in the minds of the population at large been broken. That some implied link between land and freedom remains is also perhaps somewhat surprising, when we reflect that most of Scotland's population is urban. The fact that land reform and issues of land ownership can generate so much interest even in a post-material urban culture surely confirms to us that land is indeed special – that it is not just an object or commodity.

Perhaps, therefore, the symbolic function of land is a significant factor in the dissatisfaction with the status quo. The whole notion of (individual) human ownership of land can seem incongruous, as we are reminded by the poet Norman MacCaig in *A Man in Assynt*:

*“ Who possesses this landscape?  
The man who bought it or  
the poacher staggering downhill in the early morning  
with a deer on his back?*

*Who possesses this landscape?  
the man who bought it or  
I who am possessed by it?  
False questions, for  
this landscape is masterless  
and intractable in any terms  
that are human.”*

### **The private and community dimensions of discordance**

But perhaps the feeling of alienation between land and people stems from external control and feelings of local powerlessness is also significant. At the heart of this alienation lies a discordance in the aspirations and objectives of the (external) land owner and the people living in the locality. In some parts of the country, this discordance has several dimensions, including that of heritage-commodity. Table 1 illustrates some of the key dimensions.

**Table 1: Land Ownership – private and community dimensions of discordance**

Dimensions of discordance	Private	Community
Concept of land	commodity (mine)	heritage (ours)
Objective	sport/recreation (play)	livelihood (work)
Construct	away (other)	Home
Spatial characteristic	absentee	Resident

The extent of discordance, of course, varies from place to place and estate to estate. Marked contrasts between different kinds of Highland estates were found by Armstrong and Mather (1983). ‘Livelihood’ estates, where the principal objective of the owner is to make a living, are obviously less discordant than sporting estates, for example. This is illustrated in Tables 2a and 2b below.

**Table 2a: Some Characteristics of Sporting and Livelihood Estates**

<b>Key Characteristics</b>	<b>Sporting Estates</b>	<b>Livelihood Estates</b>
Number of land-use enterprises	2.2	3.4
Duration of ownership:		
Personal	11 years	16 years
Family	45 years	240 years
Spatial characteristic of owner (residence)	4 months per year	11 months per year
Age of owner	58 years	48 years
Land-use trends	Static (no change in the last 10 years)	Progressive (change in at least two land enterprises)

**Table 2b: Summary of Some Characteristics of Sporting and Livelihood Estates**

<b>Key Characteristics</b>	<b>Sporting Estates</b>	<b>Livelihood Estates</b>
Land-use mix	Less diverse	More diverse
Ownership	Frequent changes	Family continuity
Spatial characteristics of owner	Absentee	Resident
Age of owner	Old	Less old
Land-use trends	Static	Progressive

**Source:** derived from Armstrong and Mather (1983)

It is significant that several of the high profile cases over the last few years have been in the north-west Highlands, where absenteeism and external control have been greatest. Frequent changes of ownership can mean instability and inconsistency of management objectives. The owner's age can also be significant in general terms, older decision makers are more conservative and have less propensity for change. Again, in general terms, absenteeism is associated in the literature with low intensity of land use and with conservatism: American evidence, for example, is provided by Gaffney (1977) and Wunderlich (1975). The empirical evidence for the Highlands ties in with that from the general literature in the sense that in terms of adjustment of land use to changing socio-economic conditions, the sporting estates were found to be more static and the *livelihood* estates more dynamic or progressive.

Further, it can be added that the influence of incentives such as government grants is generally less on sporting estates, where economic objectives are almost by definition not paramount. The means by which public influence can be exerted on the private owner's decisions on such estates are therefore limited.

As an aside, we may note a further aspect of discordance or dislocation. Loud opposition is voiced by sporting proprietors against any suggestion that local authority rates (taxes) on sporting subjects should be re-introduced. One hundred years ago, sporting subjects contributed as much as one-quarter of the local revenue in some parishes. It is quite incredible in this day and age that they should contribute nothing, but yet continue to benefit from local services. This is surely one focus of unfairness. But there are also others. If we return to the theme of absenteeism, we recall both general and specific evidence of problems on many absentee estates. To be sure, a similar problem exists in crofting (smallholder) areas: absenteeism is not a phenomenon peculiar to large estates. Its significance, however, is obviously greater on large estates than on crofts. Why the government's consultation papers see the issue as problematic on crofts (smallholdings) but not on estates is therefore a mystery (The Scottish Office, 1998a, 1999a). Again, this is a focus of perceived unfairness.

Overall, however, there is little doubt that there has been some movement in the moral economy of land ownership in recent years: the pendulum has moved towards the '*heritage*' pole. For example last year the Scottish Office in its consultation paper on conservation designations asserted that '*the natural heritage, of which land forms a large part, is a public good*' (The Scottish Office, 1998b). Such an assertion by a government department even two years earlier would have been almost unthinkable.

### **The political dimensions of environmental issues**

Paralleling this movement is a growth in awareness of the political dimensions of environmental issues. Agreed simple definitions of political ecology as are at least as elusive as those of moral economy, but at the core of the concept lies an awareness of the significance of power relations and tenure structures in environmental management (Wolf, 1972).

If it is true that there are elements of colonialism in land ownership and land use, in the sense of external control and management, there is a sense also in which we can speak of the '*colonial*' nature of the Highlands: the dominant perceptions and constructions of the Highland environment – of nature in the Highlands – have been external. These may be inconsistent in some respects to the point of being contradictory: the Highlands have been seen both as the '*last wilderness*' and a '*devastated landscape*'. The viewpoint has been largely consistent, however, even if the view has not varied: it has been essentially external. To some extent the classic Highland protected area can be likened to the forest plantation as a '*colonial*' entity subject to external control and management. To a greater or lesser degree, there is dislocation of the land from the local community. Again there is the possibility, and in some instances the reality, of alienation of people from the land. It is therefore encouraging to see signs of change here in the 1998 consultation paper on *People and Nature* and the government response early in 1999 (The Scottish Office, 1998b, 1999a).

For too long the sectoralism that characterised rural policy for much of the present century, and land use policy in particular, separated environmental management from economic and social development. In the wider world, however, it is clear that environmental and socio-economic malaises are neither separate nor unrelated. For example apartheid had serious environmental consequences resulting from the segregation and crowding of one group of people on very limited land resources. Another example would be the slave-based plantation system of parts of the American South, which abusively exploited land and people alike (Jacoby, 1971).

It is not implied that conditions in Scotland have been the same as in these examples, but these extreme examples are useful in illustrating the general principle of the inter-relatedness of environmental and socio-economic problems. For example, the exclusive management of a sporting estate for deer or grouse can give rise to both environmental and socio-economic problems. The maintenance of excessive deer numbers or the persecution of raptors (birds of prey) have their obvious environmental consequences, while restrictions on access and (at best) limited job opportunities and developmental prospects are their socio-economic counterparts. Over-arching both realms may be a feeling of marginalisation or even alienation of local people from the land.

To be sure, the inter-relationship of socio-economic and environmental problems is not new: it is in the Old Testament of the Bible, for example. It is a principle, however, that became almost completely submerged by the reductionism of approaches and policies throughout most of the present century.

### **The concept of sustainability offers a framework for integration**

Sustainable development can easily be dismissed as empty rhetoric. It is a concept that does not lend itself to dissection or precise definition. Even if it is not an oxymoron, it is not a concept that is easily operationalised as a precise goal. As a guide to thinking, however, it is much more helpful. In the context of land and land reform, and perhaps especially in the Highlands, its conventional three-dimensional structure (economic, social and environmental) is an invaluable guide to our thinking and, it is to be hoped, to our formation of policies. A note of caution is in order, however. There is little doubt that environmental considerations are sometimes used as an excuse to impede socio-economic activity. Some estates, for example, try to restrict hill walking on the grounds of unsupported assertions of unsustainability. Perhaps this is a novel slant on C S Lewis' celebrated dictum that: "*Man's power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument*". Nevertheless, at least the concept of sustainability offers a framework within which the economic, the social and the environmental can be considered.

### **Adding the moral dimension to the sustainability trilogy**

Perhaps, though, the biggest obstacles to its achievement are moral and political. Inter-generational equity may be a concept to which most people would readily sign up, at least in principle: it fits fairly comfortably into our current moral economy. Intra-generational equity, however, is more problematic: fairness may be fine as an abstract principle, but in practice our personal attitude to it is another matter. But this

is where we come back to moral economy, and the prevailing view of what is fair and what is not fair in relation to the ownership of land. Perhaps a fourth dimension – a moral dimension – needs to be added to the conventional trilogy of the economic, social and environmental.

Is the concept of land as object or commodity, subject solely to private ownership and to the vagaries of the market, an adequate basis for sustainable development? Can it provide a basis for stewardship – a sense of responsibility for the welfare of land and people, now and in the future? Or is the ‘*heritage*’ concept of land a prerequisite for its attainment? If so, recent trends in this direction in the moral economy of land ownership are welcome, even if further shifts are still required. We referred in passing earlier to the relationship between the relativism implied in the notion of a changing moral economy of land ownership, and moral absolutes. It is to be hoped that the former is rooted in the latter, rather than being incompatible with it. Perhaps at the simplest level the prerequisite is a simultaneous respect for people, land and nature. As a prerequisite for stewardship – and hence for sustainability – how about an awareness shared with the biblical Psalmist that ‘*The Earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof?*’

If my understanding is correct, land ownership under our current feudal system in theory derives from God as the Ultimate Superior via the Crown as Paramount Superior. In theory, even if not in practice, our current legal system shares the view of the Psalmist. While the need for law reform is widely recognised, perhaps we should be careful about creating a situation in which land in the legal sense is seen simply as an object or a commodity, and where all the trappings of the feudal system of ‘*superiority*’ are swept away. How ironic it would be if at the same time as the pendulum was swinging towards the ‘*heritage*’ concept of land in the prevailing moral economy, it should shift in the other direction in terms of the law.

## References

Armstrong, A M and Mather, A S (1983) *Land ownership and land use in the Scottish Highlands*, University of Aberdeen O’Dell Memorial Monograph No 13.

Gaffney, M (1977) *Social and economic aspects of foreign investment in United States land*, Natural Resources Journal 17, pp377-93.

Jacoby, E H (1971) *Man and land: the fundamental issue in development*, London, Deutsch.

Leopold, A (1949) *A Sand County Almanac*, New York, Oxford University Press.

Lewis, C S (1947) *The Abolition of Man*, New York, MacMillan.

Libby, LW (1974) *Land use policy: implications for commercial agriculture*, American Journal of Agricultural Economics 56: pp1143-52.

Lowe, P, Clark, J, Seymour, S and Ward, N (1997) *Moralising the environment: countryside change, farming and pollution*, London, University College London Press.

MacCaig, N (1985) *Collected Poems*, London, Chatto & Windus

Scott, J C (1976) *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

The Scottish Office (1998a) Land Reform Policy Group: *Identifying the Solutions*, Edinburgh, HMSO.

The Scottish Office (1998b) *People and Nature: A new approach to SSSI designations in Scotland*, Edinburgh, HMSO

The Scottish Office (1999a) Land Reform Policy Group: *Recommendations for Action*, Edinburgh, HMSO

The Scottish Office (1999b) Secretary of State's speech on natural heritage policy, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1999.

Wolf. E (1972) *Ownership and political ecology*, Anthropological Quarterly 45, pp201-5.

Wunderlich, G (1975) *Land along the Blue Ridge: ownership and use of land in Rappahannock County, Virginia*, US Department of Agriculture Economic Report No229.