

WAVES OF CHANGE

Movements for land reform in the British Isles have ebbed and flowed for centuries. Each new wave can seek to learn from the past - or be destined to repeat its mistakes. *The Land* senses that the past year has seen a fresh flowering of public interest in land issues - sparked by the ongoing housing crisis, the Grenfell Tower disaster, debates about farming post-Brexit, and other factors. It's a good time to take stock, so this section brings together voices, new and established, to make sense of the current moment and lend momentum to a new, rising land movement. It features veteran land rights campaigners George Monbiot, Marion Shoard, and Andy Wightman, includes a graphic history of UK land movements, and an assessment of land value capture as a mechanism for economic fairness, before introducing a representative of the Other Side, and some of the activists and organisations of today's land movement.

RECLAIMING THE COMMONS

GUY SHRUBSOLE interviews veteran land rights campaigner GEORGE MONBIOT.

GS: What first got you interested in land and land rights?

GM: I was working in Brazil in the late 1980s, and I was interested in why so many people were moving into the Amazon, often with quite damaging impacts on the rainforests. It didn't take me long to see that people were being effectively forced to go because their own land was being stolen from them in their home states. A group of very violent businesspeople supported by the Government were seizing the land owned by peasant communities. People with indigenous roots often going back millennia, but who didn't have written, legal title to their land; rather it had been held by them in common for a very long time. There were people being killed left, right and centre; there was a bishop who was murdered. I spent long enough there to get beaten up myself by the military police.

Then after six years of working in Brazil, West Papua and East Africa, I returned to Britain, and was persuaded by some of my friends to go along to Twyford Down, where there was this huge dispute over a road being driven through beautiful chalk downland and Iron Age remains. And as soon as I got there I thought, this is what I've been seeing in Brazil. This is a land dispute over land massively valued by local people, being taken from them by an outside force - in this case, government combined with a huge construction company, and everything that people value here being destroyed.

I started reading the poems of John Clare, and saw how his early poetry documented the rich life of the community in which he was brought up, and the way their lives were granted meaning by the land, spiritually, ceremonially, economically, socially - and then his later poems, like *The Fallen Elm*, documenting the destruction of that entire system through enclosure. And I realised that this was exactly the same process that I'd seen happening amongst indigenous people in the three continents in which I'd worked.

Alienation and anomie leading to psychic rupture. And then I realised that what I'd witnessed there is still with us here, in Britain today.

GS: In 1995 you wrote A Land Reform Manifesto, in which you criticised a huge landowning estate for selling off its land for the Newbury bypass to be built. At the time you said a landed estate's "power to treat its property as it wishes is scarcely restrained. It is this that lies at the heart of our environmental crisis". Do you still believe that?

GM: Well, I would take it further. Land as an issue has to be painfully uncovered, because it's so successfully hidden from us. Hidden in a thousand ways - hidden by the media, obviously; hidden by economics, which discusses land as if it were any other form of capital, a great methodological mistake; hidden by the power of patrimonial capital. It's not just the power of the great estates to do as they will; my thinking's gone way beyond that - it's the conversion of broad possession into narrow property in general. It's the almost complete closure of a whole sector of the economy, the commons, and its replacement by both state and market.

GS: In the 1990s you were integral to setting up the activist group The Land Is Ours - can you tell us a bit about where that came from and your experience of doing so?

GM: I became heavily involved in the roads protests in the 1990s, primarily at Solsbury Hill outside Bath in 1994, where this beautiful hill with an Iron Age fort on top was being mauled by a dual carriageway. This was part of a £23 billion road building programme, which the Government boasted was "the biggest road building programme since the Romans". And it was just a whole series of desecrations of our



Nick Hayes

natural and cultural heritage. It was almost as if in planning these roads they were joining up the dots between Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Scheduled Ancient Monuments. It was clear to me that there was no democratic consent for what was being done, that a lot of these roadbuilding programmes' primary aims seemed to be to provide contracts for developers. And then I thought, if this is happening with roads, obviously it's happening in all sorts of other ways too.

I was influenced at the time by a special edition of *The Ecologist* magazine about enclosure. They took the concept of enclosure and said, originally it's been applied to land, but actually it's being applied across the board, in all sorts of ways – think of genes, plant varieties, academic papers, the privatised utilities. And so in a way this describes the history of the world – the enclosure of common resources and turning them into nationalised or privatised resources.

So I thought, this is a conversation we need to have – because you can't understand politics in this country unless we understand not only the history but the continuing practice of land alienation and enclosure. So we held a big meeting where we talked about enclosure and land, and we were contextualising the roads protests but trying to broaden it much further from that, and at that meeting we decided to set up an organisation – and I think there and then we gave it the name, The Land Is Ours (TLIO). It was also strongly influenced by Marion Shoard's book *This Land Is Our Land*.

A lot of the people involved were from the roads movement – but also a wider group of people who'd come to similar conclusions by different routes. Some of them were interested in land value taxation, some in the planning system, some in rights of access. Some were interested in the ways in which new legislation was excluding more and more people from the land, the classic example being the 1994 Criminal Justice Act, which effectively banned people from being mobile travellers or gypsies.

So we set up this group TLIO, and we thought if you just talk about these things, no-one's going to pay any attention, we have to demonstrate it. So our first decision was to occupy St George's Hill in Surrey. It might seem like an odd place to start, because it's a golf course surrounded by luxury housing developments, but this was where the Diggers staged their famous occupation in 1649, seeking to turn the land back into an active commons which they would cultivate together. We felt that by recognising that, by marking it with an occupation of our own in the same place, we would bring that back into the national conversation – a recognition of a radical chapter in our history that to most people is hidden. We got a lot of coverage for it and it triggered off a lot of very interesting debates. The next step was even more ambitious, an occupation of 13 acres of prime real estate in the

middle of London, the Guinness Estate, which we managed to hold onto for six months, and built an eco-village on the banks of the Thames. It was in Wandsworth, a borough with a council somewhere to the right of Attila the Hun and very strongly associated with the then Conservative Government, so we couldn't have put the issue more centrally than we did. We realised that most people think that land is 'out there', in the countryside, and that nowhere else is 'land', as if people living in cities aren't also affected by issues of landownership. There were huge numbers of visitors – we gave up counting after 10,000. People were absolutely fascinated by it.

GS: More recently your interest in land has focused on rewilding landscapes. How does land ownership, and its huge concentration in the UK in the hands of a few, affect rewilding efforts?

GM: In this case it's not so much the ownership of land itself, it's that wider issue of how land is used. Farm subsidies have created a landowning class which has become wholly dependent on them, and though they're living at public expense, they're not prepared to adjust their landholding patterns in response to public views. A classic example of this is upland livestock keeping. It's hard to think of any industry on Earth with a higher ratio of destruction to production. On my estimates, for sheep alone, there are four million hectares of the uplands where they're grazed – roughly the same area as all our arable and horticultural land put together, or two-and-a-half times the urban footprint. So this is a massive, massive amount of land. And yet all sheep combined produce one percent of our diet. It's not enough to make a living from, so they're dependent on subsidies. The interesting question is, why in most other parts of Europe are trees and wildlife returning to the uplands? People have given up this highly unproductive activity, whereas they haven't in the UK. And because in the UK we have such a high concentration of land ownership, you can make your living exclusively by harvesting subsidies.

GS: Well that takes us neatly onto Brexit. Brexit would appear to have very few silver linings, but can you see anything good coming from it in relation to reform of farm subsidies?



Protestors occupying the Bailey Bridge at Twyford Down, 1993



Standoff at the Third Battle of Newbury, January 1996. Shortly before the photo was taken, a long line of defenders on the near side of the ditch held up a massive banner saying these words. Sadly, it didn't work.

GM: Well, I voted Remain, with certain misgivings. But I recognise and have done for a long time that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is a system which is simply not amenable to democratic governance and persuasion. It's often portrayed as being the French who are responsible for this, but it's actually a toxic combination of the French, the Germans and the British.

The British, for example, always demanded that the total amount that any one landowner could receive would not be subjected to a mandatory cap. In the last round of CAP reform in 2013, Britain lobbied successfully for this, in the same month that it introduced a benefit cap for ordinary recipients of social security. It's so grotesque.

With Brexit we now have an opportunity within the UK for a wholly new system. What I would like to see is more employment on the land, more income from the land, but not by trashing the land. At the moment, there are completely unproductive parts of the UK where it is just crazy to be farming, because you produce so little at such massive environmental costs. What I'd like to see that replaced with is a system that incentivises a new economy built around environmental values; that if you're to receive money, you'd do it for real environmental protection and restoration, and that basically means taking it out of production. The key thing is that people are paid to deliver environmental goods, rather than paid to deliver environmental harms, which is the current case.

Gove is interesting. He's really surprised me, by saying a lot of things that I really didn't expect. If he's prepared to take on the farming lobby, which he should be, then he might just help rather than hinder this process. But the NFU remains a very powerful lobby, and civil servants within DEFRA are entirely under their influence, so who knows what's going to happen.

GS: I'm struck by how in many other countries there have been some very successful land reform movements and instances of revolutionary land redistribution. Yet in England we've not really had anything, unless you count the Allotments Act. Why do you think that is?

GM: Well, we've never had a proper revolution, that's one of our problems! And so we've never had a moment at which we could overthrow the patrimonial power of the landed class. Obviously the dissolution of the monasteries and the English Civil War created a rather different landowning class, but it didn't destroy the institution of major landowners. We also have a very weak and confused sense of Englishness. Anthony Barnett has pointed out that we've never had to define ourselves except by our dominance over other people.

GS: In your most recent book, Out of the Wreckage, you argue that we need to rekindle a politics of the commons. But is that realistic when only about three percent of land in England remains common land?

GM: If it were confined to existing commons, then it wouldn't get us very far! But I believe we have to reclaim the commons from both market and state. We talk about the economy as if it has just two sectors, the market and the state, and we position ourselves on an axis that has just those two sectors – if you're on the left, you say you want more state; if you're on the right, you say you want more market. But in fact there are four sectors: there's the market and the state, and they're both important, but there's also the household and the commons. What I want to see is land transferred back from the private sector into the commons. Not all the land, but significant parts of it.

My cunning plan goes as follows: first of all, you have a significant land value tax on expensive property, which would primarily be in cities. When you pay an extortionate rent to live somewhere, you are paying primarily for the land on which the bricks and mortar have been placed, and the value of that land has been created largely by society but is harvested solely by the landowner. I know someone who does three jobs, works twelve hours a day, in order to afford her rent, which is paid to someone who literally lives on a beach.

So you impose this land value tax, big enough to break the power of patrimonial capital. That causes the value of the land to come down, because it's no longer such a valuable speculative asset. So then the state's got all this money, what does it do

with it? Well, some of that money should be spent on public services, both nationally and locally. But the residue should be distributed evenly between communities, at the borough or district level. People would be encouraged to set up a trust into which this money would be put and a democratic structure formed for managing its dispersal. Now the community can do what it wants with it, as long as this element which is crucial to the commons applies: that the product of the resource is shared on an equal basis among all members of the community.

A Commons Land Trust might decide that it wants to buy land for social housing. The price of land will have come down thanks to the land value tax, but that alone isn't enough. You need a community right to buy, too – like they have in Scotland – and a community right of land assembly, so that you can create a package of land that's going to be useful for building a new housing estate.

Imagine a Trust buys up some land destined to become a casino and instead decides to build a mixture of social and private rental housing on it. You then bring together the people who've accepted the invitation to be social tenants with the people who have put down a deposit. And then you say: we're not going to plan this estate – you're going to plan this estate. And what you find, all over the world, is that when people plan the estates in which they're going to live, they are so much better than when some outside force like a volume housing developer comes along and says 'here you are, this is where you're going to live, like it or lump it'. Instead you greatly empower people and allow their natural creativity to flourish, and you create your community before anyone even moves onto it, because you have to work together to plan it. What you're doing here is

At Lammas, in West Wales, where the people have planned their own 'estate', they have chosen to give priority to the land itself, much of which is held in common. An entire village of ingenious, self-built, low-impact housing is almost invisible in this landscape, but provides homes for a numerous and diverse community.

Working together, they have created "an economy which is neither state nor market". Who knows what other groups might invent, given the opportunity? Really, all anyone needs is the land.

The Land Is Ours, TLIO, is once again active and now has an excellent website with up-to-date reports on land campaigns, planning issues and related matters.
www.tlio.org.uk

creating an economy that is neither state nor market. It's in this different sector, you've greatly expanded the commons.

GS: The founder of the Diggers, Gerard Winstanley, famously once wrote, "thoughts run in me that words and writing were all nothing and must die, for action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing" What actions can readers of The Land take to help bring about serious land reform?

GM: For a start, we have to have change at a national level, and that means land value tax. We're fortunate at the moment that we have a Labour Party that's potentially sympathetic to that – in fact it's sympathetic to new thinking in general right now. So there's a real opportunity to start feeding into that process, and mobilise within the Labour party for this issue.

It's also really important to start rebuilding community, so that if and when such changes do occur, we're really ready to start taking advantage of them. By acting much more coherently and cohesively than we are currently able to do in our very fragmented state. And we can do that through all sorts of community projects.

So we need to act both at the local and national level, and the thing that brings them together very effectively is this political campaigning technique called Big Organising, which creates a political community around particular political demands. That can be a demand for a change of government – it was pioneered by the Bernie Sanders campaign – but it can be around particular causes as well. And making common cause is the first step to creating a commons.

