

LAND GRABBING

ENCLOSURE ON THE GRAND SCALE

"The labourers are first driven from the land, and then come the sheep. Landgrabbing on a great scale, such as was perpetrated in England, is the first step in creating a field for the establishment of agriculture on a great scale." Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Chapter 15 (5)

When Karl Marx (or rather his translators) coined the term “land-grabbing” in 1867, it was in reference to the English enclosure movement. In a chapter of *Das Kapital* entitled “The Expropriation of the Agricultural Population from the Land” Marx describes how, from the 15th century to the 19th century, “the systematic theft of communal property was of great assistance in swelling large farms and in ‘setting free’ the agricultural population as a proletariat for the needs of industry.” The land grabs perpetrated through enclosure enabled England to become the pioneering industrial nation; they are the reason why Britain has the largest farms in Europe; and they explain why Britain is “running Brazil a close second for the title of most unequal land distribution on earth” (in Marx’s opinion this has nothing to do with the Norman yoke).

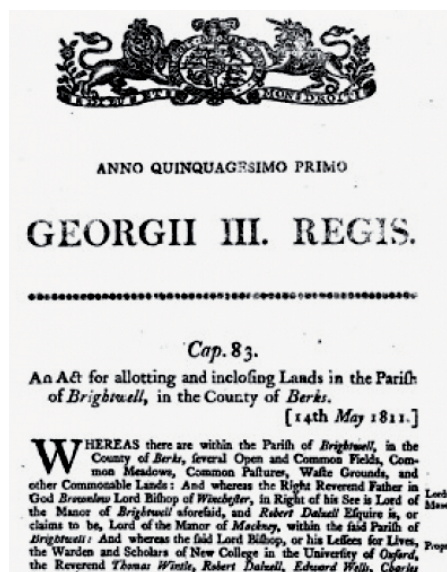
Over the last four years, interest in “land-grabbing” has had a revival. There have been reports in the press of countries such as China and Saudi Arabia buying up vast acreages of land in Africa and South East Asia to ensure continuing supplies of food. NGOs such as Oxfam, Action Aid, IIED, Friends of the Earth, and GRAIN have published reports criticising land grabbing, while the World Bank has published reports explaining how to go about it. Development academics have become intensely preoccupied with the matter. Issues 1 to 4 of the 2012 volume of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* were entirely devoted to articles on land grabs. When Cornell University invited papers for its Global Landgrabbing Conference 2012, it received 300 submissions, “the majority of very high quality.”¹

Why the sudden interest? Empire-builders and neo-colonialists have been involved in land grabs in less-developed countries

for hundreds of years, from the brutal conquest of America in the 16th century, to the shambolic ground nut scheme in Tanganyika in the early 1950s. Corporations and investors have been gobbling up land for palm-oil, for sugar, for paper, for soya, at a steady pace for the last five decades. What's new?

There is, by all accounts, a surge of interest from investors in acquiring large amounts of cheap and allegedly “underutilised” land in poorer nations — what some commentators (including Tania Murray Li on page 20) call a “land rush”. The most obvious trigger for this activity has been the rise in food and commodity prices since 2007, coupled with the slump in house prices. As demand for food, fibre and biofuels rises, marginal land that was formerly rent-free starts to promise a rental return attractive to investors. But the surge in land-grabbing hardly seems sufficient to account for the rush of academics and NGOs writing about it. One explanation might be that a critical threshold has been reached, analogous to that which faced England’s peasantry at the end of the 18th century.

In England throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, the issue of enclosure was frequently debated, but for the most part its perpetrators were viewed as deviants from the accepted order — the bulk of Tudor and Stuart legislation on the matter was designed to check their excesses. But by the end of the 18th century it became apparent that enclosure reflected the now dominant paradigm of *laissez faire* liberalism; the capitalist social relations that enclosure catalysed — dispossession and proletarianisation of the peasantry, the commodification of land and the concentration of landownership — were becoming the accepted norm. It is possible that a similar moment is now being reached on the global stage, where a peasantry weakened by two decades of structural adjustment, exposed to a climate of doctrinaire neo-liberalism, and enticed by the attractions of urban consumerism looks poised to capitulate to market forces and lose its one secure asset: access to land.



A pictorial history of land grabs. From left to right: an enclosure Act for Brightwell, Berks, dated 1811; the seizure of Indian lands in the US; the Colossus of Cecil Rhodes astride Africa . . .

The terminology of some of those writing currently on land-grabbing reflects the language of the 18th and 19th centuries, not least in the increasingly frequent use of the word enclosure as a metaphor for land-grabbing. It is an analogy worth pursuing as there are several parallels between the English landgrabbers of two centuries ago and the global grabbers of today.

Improvement

The advocates of enclosure in the 18th century advanced two main arguments. The first of these was that small peasant farmers were holding back agricultural “improvement”: the use of common land prevented innovation from individuals, and the “wastes” where commoners grazed livestock and collected fuel could be far more productive if taken in hand by modern farmers. The President of the Board of Agriculture, writing in 1803 at the height of the Napoleonic Wars, saw the colonisation of the commons around London as a patriotic duty:

“Let us not be satisfied with the liberation of Egypt or the subjugation of Malta, but let us subdue Finchley Common, let us conquer Hounslow Heath; let us compel Epping Forest to submit to the yoke of improvement.”²

Substitute “development” for “improvement”, “underutilised land” for “wastes”, “land assembly” for “engrossment” and you have the rhetoric of the modern landgrabber. The World Bank tables listing the spare land available in developing countries and its potential for yield increases (see p. 20) are today’s equivalent of the County Reports commissioned by William Pitt’s Board of Agriculture in 1793 which “are almost monotonous in their reiteration of the point that agricultural improvement has come through enclosure, and more enclosure must take place.”³

The counter-arguments are also familiar. Opponents of enclosure maintained that the wastelands and commons, far from being underutilised, supported countless families, many of whom would lose their livelihood and have to be supported by the parish. William Cobbett put it in these words:

“Those who are so eager for the new inclosure seem to argue as if the wasteland in its present state produced nothing at all. But is this the fact? Can anyone point out a single inch of it which does not produce something and the produce of which is made use of . . . It helps to rear in health and vigour,

numerous families of the children of the labourers, which children, were it not for these wastes, must be crammed into the stinking suburbs of towns.”⁴

Much the same applies today. Palm oil plantations in the Sambas district of Kalimantan employ one person for every hundred hectares, whereas smallholdings on adjoining land provide livelihoods for one working adult per hectare. A sugar cane producer in Zambia can earn six times more money on a one hectare smallholding than s/he could earn in wages working on the same crop.⁵ The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter argues that investment should be directed towards smaller farms which are often more productive than large:

“At present, the vast majority of foreign investments in agriculture go to the creation of large plantations. Yet the multiplier effects of increased incomes that stimulate demand for goods and services from local sellers and service providers are significantly higher when growth is triggered by higher incomes for smallholders: when large estates increase their revenue, much of it is spent on imported inputs and machinery, and much less trickles down to local traders.”⁶

Unfortunately capitalist investors are not interested in productivity per se, or in the multiplier effect — it is rent they are after. 150 years ago Richard Bacon explained why 100 acres of land providing a livelihood for 20 smallholders yields less rent than if it is farmed less productively by one mechanised farmer: more of the surplus value goes into paying the workers’ subsistence.⁷ The incentive for capitalist investors will always be to remove as many people from the land as possible.

(ii) Proletarianisation

These concerns about the impoverishment and dispossession of commoners carried weight in a pre-industrial moral economy. But advocates of enclosure followed up with another argument which became increasingly acceptable under the emerging climate of free-trade liberalism propagated by Smith and Malthus: it didn’t matter if peasants were dispossessed, in fact it was a jolly good thing; they were not only poor, but also lazy, and they ought to be put to work for the good of the nation. In the words of John Clark “the inclosure of the wastes would increase the number of hands for labour by removing the means



. . . A tractor graveyard, legacy of the disastrous groundnut scheme in Tanganyika in the 1950s; mass demonstration in India against land grabs for Special Economic Zones 2009; poster distributed worldwide for the Day of Action against land grabs, April 17 2012.

of subsisting in idleness.”⁸ The commoner who “used to bask himself all day in the sun holding a cow by a line to feed on a balk”⁹ would have no balk, and no cow, and instead have to “betake himself to the pickaxe and the spade”, building railway embankments for example.

Some commentators objected to the way livelihoods were being destroyed in order to create a cheap and dispensable proletariat. The Rev David Davies complains: “An amazing number of people have been reduced from a comfortable state of partial independence to the precarious condition of hirelings.”¹⁰ But this concern was not one that resonated with anyone in a position of power.

Advocates of today’s enclosures cannot afford to be so frank about third world smallholders. The World Bank “for some years has juggled politically correct messages about the need to support small farmers with policy and financial support for agribusiness.” Accusations of “idleness” and references to the “lazy native” are no longer appropriate; instead the Bank in its 2008 report on agriculture talks of “the deep inertia in people’s occupational transformation as economies restructure.”¹¹ Without articulating the word proletariat, or examining the precarity that results from dispossession, the Bank proposes transition out of agriculture for peasants whose labour is surplus to the requirement of a more efficient agricultural sector. “Preparing people to move out of agriculture is the flip side of the economy’s structural transformation as agriculture grows.”¹² Precisely where these waves of dispossessed peasants are going to find jobs is not clear, since urban unemployment is already a widespread problem. As one author discussing landgrabs in Mozambique writes:

“There are clear signs that the Mozambican enclosures could produce the same result as their predecessors in Europe — a dispossessed rural majority and migration to towns. Yet, unlike Europe, this will be in a country that is not about to embark on a labour-intensive industrial revolution generating thousands of new jobs for the dispossessed peasant farmers and their families.”¹³

(iii) Dispossession from Below

Associated with the process of enclosure, is the creation of a commodity market for land. This was not an explicit objective of the English enclosure movement, but it is one of the results of privatising common land. In the enclosures that were settled through an Act of Parliament, small farmers who held legal rights to the common often received parcels of private land as compensation. However, many of them soon found themselves under pressure to sell their parcel to a larger landowner. The costs of fencing the land (obligatory), the lack of common grazing necessary to support a smallholding, and the requirement for landowners to contribute to the parish poor rate all conspired to make ownership of a small plot uneconomical.¹⁴

This kind of transfer is apparently the process that the World Bank wants to encourage when it writes, under the heading “Supporting Smallholder Competitiveness” that “secure and unambiguous property rights allow markets to transfer land to more productive uses and users”.¹⁵ But as the UN Rapporteur points out “in the real world land sales do not favour those who need the land most, nor do they lead to land being allocated



to those who can use it most efficiently: instead they favour those who have access to capital and whose ability to purchase land is the greatest.”¹⁶ It is for this reason that land reform schemes in many countries have had only limited success. The redistribution of land to smallholders in South Africa occurred within the policy context of the liberalisation of agriculture and over a 12 year period when the numbers of commercial farmers dropped dramatically from 60,000 to 45,000.¹⁷ Under such conditions “smallholder competitiveness” is an internecine fight for survival.

Or as Kojo Amanor has put it:

“The World Bank’s dominant policy vision of the future of agriculture is not of an egalitarian structure of autonomous smallholders with secure rights in family farms. It is rather of an increasingly competitive but leaner commercial smallholder sector which is expanding to displace less competitive smallholders and convert their land to more profitable uses. This ushers in a gradual process of dispossession from below, in which the pressures of market competitiveness lead to the exit of independent farm production by the rural poor, and the increasing concentration of farm property.”¹⁸

Michael Levien in his article on page 28 describes how a land grab for a Special Economic Zone in Rajasthan created a speculative market for land over a wide radius. These effects are more pronounced with a land grab that is for development, rather than purely agricultural. But the large agricultural land grabs focus on areas where the rental value of land is low or non-existent, with a specific objective of enhancing land value, and their effect will doubtless be to contaminate the land market for some distance around.

In the long run, the effect of the current wave of land grabs will not simply be to take large tracts of land out of the reach of local people, but to initiate and reinforce speculative land markets, that ultimately result in the concentration of land in fewer and fewer hands through a process of piecemeal accumulation. Such a process is not irreversible. The grotesque levels of land concentration in England that were the legacy of 19th century enclosure, were to some degree dissipated by the taxes on landowners introduced by Lloyd George’s government after the First World War. But this can only happen if the current neoliberal climate is replaced by a moral economy that places the welfare of people and of the land they live on above the need for economic growth.

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7. See S Fairlie, “A Short History of Enclosure in Britain”, *The Land* 7, 2009, p27.
8. Cited in Neeson, op cit 2, p 28.
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