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## New Enclosure Review

### The New Enclosure: The Appropriation of Public Land in Neoliberal Britain

Brett Christophers

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Brett Christophers' *The New Enclosure: The Appropriation of Public Land in Neoliberal Britain* is destined for seminal status, or ought to be. I apply the latter clause because, as Christophers observes, contemporary land privatisation in Britain, with a few notable exceptions, has been remarkably under-studied given its social-economic significance. *The New Enclosure* addresses this lacuna decisively, opening up multiple potential research agendas in relation to the political economy of land. The gravity and relevance of land privatisation is given striking resonance in several startling statistics: since 1979, around 10% of the entire British land mass, worth around £400 billion, has been privatised (p.2); land is estimated to account for around 70% of the sale price of residential housing in England, compared to around 2% in the 1930s (p.32); land accounted for over half of all UK net worth (£5 trillion) in 2017 (p.33). Land, as Christophers shows, has seen far more privatisation than any other sector in Britain since 1979.

The book's structure focuses on why landownership matters (Chapter 1); the intertwining of law, politics, economics and power in the historical land question (Chapter 2); the 'why' of land privatisation, including a rich discussion of the discursive offensive behind the appropriation of public land in Britain (Chapter 3); the 'how' of land privatisation, incorporating a fastidious anatomy of the "structural conditions of possibility" propelling land privatisation [p.21] (Chapter 4); the socially unjust outcomes of land privatisation (Chapter 5). Here, I focus on Chapters 3 and 4, which I found to be the most compelling. The principal concerns of these chapters are pre-empted in Chapter 2, where Christophers connects the ideological discourse of 'waste', which legitimised the historical enclosure of common land, with the discourse of 'surplus' accompanying the 'new enclosure' of public land since the late 1970s.

As Christophers shows, contrasting contemporary narratives around public or common land (bad, inefficient) and private ownership (good, efficient) are part of a concerted ideological offensive from both public and private agencies (whose identities and *raison d'être* Christophers itemises meticulously). According to the unwavering "macro-logic of disposal" favoured by public and private institutions alike, public sector landownership is inherently inefficient and thus readily designated as 'surplus' according to market efficiency criteria (p.130). Christophers cites three principal pro-surplus arguments: 1) tautologically, public ownership is inefficient because public ownership is *inherently* inefficient; 2) economic efficiency must extract more from less [thus actively producing 'surplus']; 3) 'bad surplus' is derived from public inefficiencies and 'good surplus' is derived from private efficiencies. Reappraising the seminal research of Doreen Massey and others on landownership, Christophers shows why public sector land is ill-suited to the criteria of market efficiency.

Yet, public sector landowners have been subject to severe doses of benchmarking efficiency criteria while private landownership remains shrouded in an “opaque veil of secrecy”, despite holding more ‘surplus’ land than the public sector (p.188). The ideologically loaded selectivity of such bureaucratic rationalisation is punctured expertly by Christophers.

Despite the social-economic significance of ‘surplus’ discourse there is no clear definition of the term. The issue with this ambiguity is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the designation of public housing estates as ‘brownfield’ land, suitable for redevelopment as ‘surplus’ land because of allegedly inherent public sector inefficiency (pp.160-161). Moreover, what is characterised as ‘surplus’ land appears for multiple reasons unrelated to efficiency, not least the hollowing out of the state via state shrinkage. Market rationale also obfuscates land need for strategic planning and future proofing. As Christophers observes, what is considered ‘surplus’ one year may be strategically vital the next; for instance, the utilisation of land for transport infrastructure, social housing needs or a school/hospital extension. Approving such projects following land privatisation and fragmentation becomes an onerously expensive undertaking that is far from ‘efficient’ in terms of public good.

For this reviewer, Christophers’ focus on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of land privatisation, in relation to discourses of market efficiency and the designation of ‘surplus’ land, gets to the heart of the critical project required to contest land privatisation. As Heather Whiteside (2019) stresses in relation to Canada’s public estate, the debate over ‘surplus’ land provides a privileged window onto the devaluation and revaluation of public land and wider processes of land privatisation. An emphasis on the devaluation of the ‘state’s estate’ through ‘surplus’ discourse offers significant potential to connect, for instance, debates around surplus with interdisciplinary studies of uneven development, the rent gap, territorial stigmatisation and state shrinkage. There is also significant scope for more comparative research on the discourse of ‘surplus’ beyond Britain and Canada.

Those legitimising land privatisation promise value for public money, community benefits, new jobs/homes and more efficient land use allocation. But Christophers makes it abundantly clear that the reality more typically involves below-value land sale, limited and haphazard community benefits, unaffordable private housing, scarce job creation, private sector land banking and an extractive rentier economy. Crucially, ceding ownership and control of public land also means less control of planning and development for the public good. Despite the development rhetoric of ‘planning constraint’, Christophers exposes land-banking and an abundance of undeveloped sites (with planning permission already granted by local authorities) as emblematic signifiers of private sector inefficiencies with regard to the public good.

Why then, Christophers asks, has there been so little contestation over land privatisation? His answers are multiple: public ownership has not always been a panacea for privatisation, especially under conditions of fiscal retrenchment; the 1980 Right to Buy housing policy had considerable success entrenching the ideology of private ownership; minimum contestation at the level of public policy and academic scholarship has permitted unchallenged land privatisation; the piecemeal and fragmented process of land privatisation makes it difficult to trace and resist land appropriation. Crucially, a lack of data about land ownership has perhaps been the most significant obstacle to transparency and scrutiny. One important

measure that Christophers and others recommend is the establishment of a full land registry in Britain so that public land can be defended more robustly. Progress has been made in this direction, but more is required.

One area of research that might be developed is the forms of contestation that prevent or mediate land privatisation. Christophers cites a few examples of local land campaigns and assesses potentially progressive models such as Land Value Tax (LVT), Community Land Trusts (CLTs) and the Scottish Land Commission. However, there is significant scope for more studies documenting the alliances and practices that make possible the contestation of land privatisation. Interdisciplinary scholars might also seek to expose the limits placed on planning for public good following land privatisation and fragmentation. Finally, Christophers' strict focus on Britain offers an exceptional fine-grained reading of an exemplar nation in terms of land privatisation, but this work might be developed in conjunction with post-colonial scholarship, for instance the work of Glen Coulthard (2014) and others on the centrality of indigenous land struggle within settler colonial states such as Canada and Australia. Yet, it is redundant to criticise this deeply researched and necessary book for what it is not. *The New Enclosure* convincingly makes the case for more critical popular and academic scrutiny of land privatisation and should henceforth be essential reading for those contesting uneven land ownership in Britain and beyond.

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